

THE ANECDOTE AND CLASSIC HOLLYWOOD

By

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For my parents, who always supported my dreams and aspirations; and for Denise, who makes every day an adventure worth living

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When I was younger and reading academic books for the first time, I would always scratch my head at the way many acknowledgements pages leaned toward a dispersion of authorial personality, with their insistence that “I am not the sole author of this book,” or “this book was a collaboration across many times and places,” etc.; it seemed like so much mystical self-indulgence, a twisted parody of the “death of the author,” a self-abnegation that was really a reification of writerly ego.

Now, of course, I realize what a callow fool I was, and the impossible goal is to thank everyone who deserves thanking. A dissertation is such a lengthy and ever-changing process of growing and taming the baggy beast that I am sure I will forget someone. If I leave anyone out, please know it is only because of space and my occasionally sieve-like memory, and that those people really are in these pages, and very much appreciated.

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This work explores the role that anecdotes can play as a way of thinking about film theory and film history, specifically the history of Classic Hollywood between 1927 and 1960. Anecdotes are often used as sources of information in articles and books, but the potential of the anecdote as a vehicle for writing—to write history itself anecdotally—remains an underdeveloped notion in film studies. Following such theoretical models as the New Historicists, Roland Barthes and Walter Benjamin, this work organizes itself around such anecdotal writing, each chapter centering on a different decade and a different set of films and filmmakers. Moving across Hollywood history in this way, the work traces the way in which the anecdote opens up film history to questions about gossip, fandom, creative personality, the economics of the movie industry, the pervasiveness of falsehoods, and the intersections of art and politics. The work concludes by thinking analogically about the relationship between anecdotal writing and pop music, in order to suggest future research and pedagogical uses for such an anecdotal method.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

The only great problem with cinema seems to me more and more with each film when and why to start a shot and when and why to end it.

—Jean-Luc Godard, *Godard on Godard* (214)

What form do you suppose a life would take that was determined at a decisive moment precisely by the street song last on everyone's lips?

—Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism" (182)

How do we seize the foreign past? We read, we learn, we ask, we remember, we are humble; and then a casual detail shifts everything.

—Julian Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot* (90)

The movie trailer, it is sometimes said, gives everything away, to the point where an audience is bored when they finally see the actual film. For a dissertation with the title, *Coming Attractions*, then, how do I begin? Like a Classic Hollywood trailer, which actually ran at the end of screenings, I write this introduction towards the middle of my project, so I already have a sense of what is coming. But I do not want to tell you everything right away.

A trailer offers a summary of its product, but does so through ellipses—short bursts of dialogue, color, and music. The best trailers tell their audiences just enough to lure them into the theater--- they present, in other words, not the plots of their films, but a sense of their tones and styles. Perhaps the best way to begin an introduction to a dissertation on Classic Hollywood anecdotes, then, is to tell one. What follows is a story about Metro-Goldwyn Mayer director W.S. "Woody" Van Dyke (recounted in the collection *Hollywood Anecdotes*, Paul F. Boller, Jr. and Ronald L. Davis eds., and credited to actor Keenan Wynn).

Van Dyke is filming *The Thin Man*, the studio's glossy adaptation of Dashiell Hammett's detective comedy. Van Dyke is known for his speed, able to complete even the most complex shots with ease and efficiency. On this day, cast and crew are filming a long tracking shot.

The camera moves around and down a long table, at which sit a variety of MGM character actors. One of the older character actors gives a long speech as the camera moves down the table, the shot concluding with his final line: “That’s all I’ve got to say.” And it really is all he has to say—quite unexpectedly, the actor sits down and actually dies on set. A worried assistant calls the studio doctor, who confirms the crew’s concerns—the actor has indeed passed away, and the doctor orders him taken away. There is a hierarchy on studio sets, however, and one man is not quite ready to have the body removed: Van Dyke takes out his viewfinder, moves behind the corpse, and ponders a possible over-the-shoulder shot. After a moment, Van Dyke approves the removal of the body, but orders the crew to leave the coat he is wearing. Without missing a beat, Van Dyke returns to work.

In 1936, two years after *The Thin Man*’s release, poet, novelist and journalist Blaise Cendrars walked Hollywood’s streets, on assignment for *Paris-Soir* to give his impressions of what he termed “The Forbidden City” at the height of its power and influence, dispatches that were later transformed into a book, *Hollywood: Mecca of the Movies*. In an extraordinary chapter titled “The Forbidden City,” Cendrars makes his textual entrance into this city by means of a series of anecdotes. The first is a newspaper story on a recent robbery in New York City (which almost reads like an outtake from a Hammett adaptation):

A burglar enters a business at night. Thanks to the keys he lifted from the doorman’s desk on the way in, he breaks into all sorts of offices. He cracks open desks and file drawers on various floors. Surprised by the night watchman making his rounds, he strikes him down with one shot from his revolver. The police, once informed, search the premises in vain. The murderous thief has disappeared. (35)

To Cendrars (who subtitles this section “A News Item Magnified By A Thousand,” itself not a bad definition of the anecdote), the popularity of this story is a sign of the gullibility of readers. He calls it a *trompe l’oeil*, an example of America’s willingness to deceive and distract itself. (36) And yet the structure of the rest of the chapter belies this high-minded dismissal.

Cendrars shifts from this story of a break-in to a more general discussion of America's economic and political future; he implies the story of the burglar's escalating effects on one office building is an example of how the small, random gesture can throw the best-laid, technocratic plans out of order. The next anecdote tells of his train ride from Chicago to California with Harold Loeb, one-time literary editor, friend of the Surrealists, and, at that moment in 1936, a "technocrat" whose book *Chart of Plenty*, has given him a voice in the Roosevelt Administration. (Cendrars 46) Cendrars calls Loeb's economic work the latest "dada" project, and what follows is an essay written in collage form. The text moves from the "space" of the train, where Loeb puts forth his systematic proposals for economic reform, to a story of Cendrars' difficulty in walking around Hollywood (52-53), to ruminations on the great wall of China and American immigration policies (55-56), and back to the train, where now Cendrars compares Loeb's economic utopia to the Soviet Union's Five-Year Plan. (63) He dismisses both plans as ignorant of art, dreams, and invention, and hence unworkable. Finally, as they pull into a train station in New Mexico, Cendrars' ruminations, which throughout have been linked to a series of landscapes (the window views from their train compartment, the remembered streets of Los Angeles, the halls of Congress where he imagines Loeb hobnobbing with government officials), come into focus through a cinematic analogy: "Loeb, my dear," I said to him, "like all of your compatriots, you are a victim of set design. Here, take a look" (72)

In the train station, which "resembled one of those inns in Montmartre with a decorative stucco entry leading to a stylized garden" (72), Cendrars points to a cowboy, who "holding a stack of handbills waited for confused customers on the platform of this huge adobe station, where no one stepped off the train" (73), and claims that it is precisely this sense of confusion

and artifice, “the last cowboy in a pasteboard set planted in the New Mexico desert” (73), that is missing from Loeb’s economic plans, full of statistics.

The reader might fairly ask of Blaise Cendrars—what does this have to do with Hollywood, presumably the “Forbidden City” of his title? Los Angeles is the destination of their train, and two of Cendrars’ anecdotes do touch on California, but aside from a reference to the “wall” of glamour and security which surrounds Hollywood studios, and the witty story of being trapped on foot in a Hollywood which runs on car power, the only tangible connections between the movie industry and Cendrars’ dispatch are the drawings of movie stars and Hollywood eccentrics, by Cendrars’ friend Jean Guerin, that accompany the text. The illustrations run throughout the book, but with few exceptions, rarely do they “illustrate” figures or events referenced in Cendrars’ writing. Instead, they act like the photographs in a book by Cendrars’ contemporary Andre Breton: like *Nadja*, Cendrars’ attempt to map an urban space works through juxtaposition, montage of word and image, coincidence and association (Cendrars moves from the a discussion of Loeb’s economic theory to the story of walking through Hollywood by noting that the name of his hotel was the Roosevelt), and utilization of the anecdote. In *Nadja*, it is through the titular figure that Breton can fully narrativize his passion and obsession for Paris and all it represents to him. For Cendrars, “Hollywood” comes to be represented by a certain absence: closed off from many of the major studio heads and stars, he constructs, at least in prose, an “alternative” Hollywood, of makeup men, jazz musicians, agents, story department readers—important figures, to be sure, but with the exception of Ernst Lubitsch, probably not as well-known to his readers as Greta Garbo, James Cagney, or the Marx Brothers.

Still, as Cendrars notes in his preface, it is “...this astonishing daily improvisation that constitutes the greatest charm of life in Hollywood, a spectacle from which you never leave, for

in Hollywood, cinema is on the streets.” (12) In that sense, “Hollywood” is in his writing, his style and form, as much as his subject matter. In one spectacular passage, Cendrars recalls visiting a soundstage:

The studio was jammed with jazz—pianos, violins, flutes, saxophones, the clangs of a gong, brass, drums. Thousands of clustered lamps sparkled, hundreds of spotlights heaved, capsized in the distance. Above the innumerable heads of the costumed actors and extras, the giant lever for panoramic shots moved about the battens in the loft, swinging Robert Z. Leonard, director of this admirable production honoring the cinema, his cameramen, and his team of helpers and electricians in tubs suspended in midair. (Cendrars 140)

How better to capture that sense of “tubs suspended in midair,” jazz band in tow, than by writing in a “jazzy” way, using a set of stories as the “scores” from which to improvise a series of riffs on filmmaking, politics, and trans-Atlantic relations? Like the thief in his initial anecdote, Cendrars is an outsider, randomly “breaking in” to the world of Hollywood and, like the burglar rifling through file cabinets and desk drawers, poking his nose into whatever parts of the Forbidden City interest him.

For Cendrars, Hollywood is “on the streets,” but for a scholar looking back at this period several decades later, Hollywood is in the archives. In that sense, an academic writing on this moment is even closer to the thief of the anecdote, for our jobs take us to offices and libraries full of bookcases, reading rooms, and file cabinets in which to poke around. Robert Darnton touches on this point in *The Great Cat Massacre*. Explaining the job of the historian, he notes the almost sensual way in which history comes alive through a process of discovery that relies on the underrated value of *strangeness*, the almost physical way some stories leap off the page and remake a period the scholar thought he already knew.

“There is no better way, I believe,” he writes, “then to wander through the archives”:

One can hardly read a letter from the Old Regime without coming up against surprises—anything from the constant dread of toothaches, which existed everywhere, to the obsession with braiding dung for display on manure heaps,

which remained confined to certain villages. What was proverbial wisdom to our ancestors is completely opaque to us By picking at a document where it is most opaque, we may be able to unravel an alien system of meaning. The thread might even lead into a strange and wonderful world view. (4-5)

Jacques Derrida writes in *Archive Fever* that the concept of the archive, and the desire that both motivates its creation and its utilization is a *spectral* one, “neither present nor absent ‘in the flesh,’ neither visible nor invisible, a trace always referring to another whose eyes can never be met, no more than those of Hamlet’s father, thanks to the possibility of a visor.” (84)

Speaking of Freud’s reading of *Gradiva*, he notes that Freud wishes to use the text to explore and explain the logic of repression, in relation to memory, history and culture, but even more, to

be an archivist who is more of an archeologist than the archeologist. . . . He wants to exhume a more archaic *impression*, he wants to exhibit a more archaic *imprint*, than the one the other archaeologists of all kinds bustle around. . . . an impression that is almost no longer an archive but almost confuses itself with the pressure of a the footstep that leaves its still-living mark on a substrate, a surface, a place of origin. . . . An archive without archive, where, suddenly, indiscernible from the impression of its imprint, Gradiva’s footprint speaks by itself! (97)

What Derrida recognizes, like Hamlet recognizing his father’s ghost, is a paradox—that “[Freud] wants to explain and reduce the belief in the phantom” (94), to account for its power and explain in a more rational fashion, even while it is belief “properly hallucinatory” (94), that sets such an action in motion, a gesture which activates and exorcises in the same moment. (95)

What fascinates Derrida in this moment (and, in turn, fascinates me), as Derrida analyzes Freud analyzing *Gradiva*, is Freud’s reliance on stories, “*coup de theatre*” (89): “He wants to demonstrate while illustrating. With the art of manipulating its suspense, like a narrator or like the author of a fiction, he tells us, in turn, a story.” (88) Derrida speaks of Freud’s “nearly ecstatic instant” (92) when he imagines “the *arkhe* appears in the nude, without archive. . . . The archeologist has succeeded in making the archive no longer serve any function. It comes to efface itself, it becomes transparent or unessential so as to let the origin present itself in person.”

(92-93) He knows, Derrida writes, that this cannot be, yet at the same time, allows himself to be “duped by the hallucination.” (85)

There are, obviously, already layers of sediment here (I am sifting through Derrida sifting through Freud, who himself sifts through novels and case histories), suggesting both the appropriateness of Freud’s archeological metaphor in relation to memory and analysis, as well as the ways, as Derrida himself notes in *Archive Fever*, that writing and research intersect with questions of digging and desire, the quest for the secret (which both remains secret and is already revealed). (50) We might say there are a lot of specters hanging about. Returning one more time to Freud, quoted thus by Derrida:

If his work is crowned with success, the discoveries are self-explanatory: the ruined walls are part of the ramparts of a palace or a treasure house; the fragments of columns can be filled out into a temple; the numerous inscriptions, which, by good luck, may be bilingual, reveal an alphabet and a language, and, when they have been deciphered and translated, yield undreamed-of information about the events of the remote past, to commemorate which the monuments were built. (qtd. in Derrida, 93)

Writing of psychoanalysis by moving to the figure of the archeologist, and in turn through the form of a story (as Derrida notes, “he prolongs it under the pretext of pedagogy or rhetoric” (93): if we were to follow Freud/Derrida’s lead, might we not think of the above passage in relation to Classic Hollywood, itself a “remote past” (at once present and absent in popular imagination), but one which has certainly left an impression on viewers and readers of its films and its history? And might not we, too, utilize the form of the story, the anecdote, to “manipulate its suspense”?

Roland Barthes puts it more succinctly: “Knowledge must be made to appear where it is not expected.” (*Rustle* 242) Within academic film studies, anecdotes have often been a marginalized, undertheorized form. This is certainly not for want of material—various collections of anecdotes abound, and anecdotes appear in innumerable popular histories, biographies, interview collections with famous filmmakers, trivia books and oversized photo

collections. This does not even take into account film magazines and trade papers like *Photoplay* and *Variety*, gossip columns of the period like those of Hedda Hopper and Louella Parsons, and documentaries about Classic Hollywood. Classic Hollywood, both in its prime and in the memories constructed about it, thrives on the anecdote, which remains the best vehicle by which to circulate its glamour, humor, mystery, and absurdity.

Critical studies on Classic Hollywood will often incorporate anecdotes into their analysis, but the form of the anecdote itself has not been talked about nearly as much as it has in other parts of the humanities, nor have such analyses always thought about the *form of the anecdote itself* as a potential vehicle for criticism. The wave of New Historicism that controversially swept through literature over the last twenty years seems to have receded before reaching the shores of film studies. In this study, I would like to think of the anecdote in just this way, as a form that acts like the street song noted by Walter Benjamin in my epigraph, and has the potential to make us think about Classic Hollywood and film theory in an imaginative and exciting way. It might allow us to think of the footprints outside of Grauman's Chinese Theater the way Jensen, Freud and Derrida think of the footprints in Pompeii.

Before I continue, I would like to make two points clear. First, this is an anecdotal history, not a history of the anecdote: While I will, in this introduction and several of the other chapters, trace certain antecedents and theoretical precursors for my project, I do not pretend to be a historian of the anecdote (nor would I want to be); I am interested in how the form itself can be utilized as a writing and research vehicle in relation to this very specific subdiscipline (film studies) and this very specific historical and cultural space (Classic Hollywood). I see the anecdotes as points around which questions regarding Classic Hollywood cluster, facilitating what Roland Barthes describes as an *aesthetic discourse*: “subjecting this old category to a

gradual torsion which will alienate it from its regressive, idealist background and bring it closer to the body, to the *drift*.” (Barthes 84) Such a discourse exploits the anecdote’s ambivalence and attention to textual detail, acting as a writing and research methodology that allows its user to reconnect with a cinematic past that is sometimes distant and opaque. Writing of the photographs of Eugene Atget, Walter Benjamin describes them as evidence of historical occurrence, and notes that their mysterious opacity means, “For the first time, captions have become obligatory.” (“The Work of Art,” 226) If the major insights of critical theory over the last 35 years have acted as the “captions” that have offered essential guidance for understanding Hollywood history, I would like to argue that the anecdote might function as a “photograph”; zeroing in on the anecdote, then, allows us another way of looking at film history and theory that, like Atget’s photos, returns us to the scene of the crime, in all of its everyday and contradictory fullness.

Those “captions” lead me to my second point. Often, the nature of academic work, particularly in the crowded disciplines of the humanities, requires one to loudly proclaim one’s difference from (which most often takes the form of “opposition to”) competing theories, forms, and ideologies. As I hope the various citations thus far have made clear, this is not my intent. My interest in the “photograph” of the anecdote does not preclude my appreciation of, and indebtedness to, those “captions” which have helped to illuminate film history and theory in crucial ways over the last thirty-five years. My desire is not to eradicate or ignore the insights of (to name only a few) Marxism, feminism, psychoanalysis or deconstruction, but to think about the ways in which the anecdote creates a new context within which to think about film history and theory. In the chapters which follow, I hope to show the form’s inclusive nature, its ability, not to close off those theoretical approaches, but to remap the coordinates of history and criticism in order to reexamine Hollywood with a careful curiosity.

It was curiosity—intense if not yet “careful”—that first spurred my interest in Hollywood anecdotes as a teenager. My experience was similar to the one described by Christian Keathley: “As an adolescent, I spent much more time reading about movies than actually watching them. To learn about film history, I scoured the library shelves and bookstores for volumes devoted to those great films that I half-guessed I would never see.” (22) I have vivid memories of large picture books with stills from a whole variety of Hollywood films from the 30s and 40s, from the well-known (*King Kong*, *A Night At The Opera*) to the relatively obscure (Ruth Chatterton in *Female*). I have since seen many of these films, but at the time, that almost wasn’t important; what counted was the atmosphere of glamour and otherworldliness that these stills, full of art deco sets and soft-focus light, created in my mind. Anecdotes had a similar effect, except that, suddenly, the images spoke: if the photographs in those oversized volumes called up a cinematic world that seemed fascinatingly alien and opaque, the tales in books like David Niven’s *Bring On The Empty Horses* or the aforementioned *Hollywood Anecdotes* volume made many of the stars in those photos seem simultaneously cozy in their sudden “accessibility,” and larger than life in their wit and sophistication. It was the studied nostalgia that fascinated and captivated me. The hum of these anecdotal voices led me to see many of those films, and to eventually discover film criticism and film studies.

Why confess this personal, anecdotal history? First, to point out the ubiquity of Classic Hollywood anecdotes; the form is deeply lodged in the history of Hollywood cinema and its reception, and while the strong pull of the anecdotal might make analysis tricky, its constant presence also means that it is worth theorizing.

Second, in relating my own history with the anecdote and its pull, I hope to highlight and discuss one of the dangers of an anecdotal history. This variety of sources offers a rich set of

stories to tell, but the danger is to properly deploy such stories. Rather than take the anecdotes at face value, I see them as a point around which various problems and questions regarding Hollywood cluster. They are not endpoints, but starting points, which offer the opportunity, as Stephen Greenblatt and Catherine Gallagher put it, to craft a “counterhistory . . . a vehement and cryptic particularity that would make one pause or even stumble on the threshold of history.”

(51) The constant circulation of certain cinematic anecdotes—sometimes long after they have been disproved— and their power to shape or at least impact on one’s reading of a film or figure indicates that the kinds of messy commingling of cultural impulses that New Historicism has investigated in other fields also exists in film history, especially the Classic Hollywood history I will explore in this project. The compact nature of the anecdote, its offering (like a hypertext link) of a more metonymic discourse, means that each anecdote acts as what Greenblatt and Gallagher call “a luminous detail” (15), which can shine in any number of directions and illuminate any number of paths outward for the scholar. The history that results has the possibility of surprise, as Greil Marcus notes when writing about the Sex Pistols:

If one can stop looking at the past and start listening to it, one might hear echoes of a new conversation; then the task of the critic would be to lead speakers and listeners unaware of each other’s existence to talk to one another. The job of the critic would be to maintain the ability to be surprised at how the conversation goes, and to communicate that sense of surprise to other people, because a life infused with surprise is better than a life that is not. (23)

New Historicism will be a touchstone in the history I sketch here, but there are some earlier figures whose work is equally important for my project. The critical writings of Walter Benjamin and the Surrealists in the 1920s and 30s, and the later writing of Roland Barthes figure significantly for me in this work. What ties these figures together is their recognition that short forms, particularly those related to stories and anecdotes, offer one answer to the dilemma of balancing politics and aesthetics in mid-20th century culture.

In his essay, "Conversations with Brecht," Benjamin quotes Bertolt Brecht on this balancing act:

"I often imagine being interrogated by a tribunal. 'Now tell us, Mr. Brecht, are you really in earnest?' I would have to admit that no, I'm not completely in earnest. I think too much about artistic problems, you know, about what is good for the theatre, to be completely in earnest. But have said 'no' to that important question, I would add something still more important: namely, that my attitude is *permissible*.'" (87)

Benjamin notes that Brecht contextualized this remark by "expressing doubt, not as to whether his attitude was permissible, but whether it was effective" (87), a cautionary note to anyone working on an anecdotal history. The anecdotal structure of Benjamin's essay, however, belies this concern—the reader learns much about both men and their times in a form which seems to balance Brecht's division of the artist (or text) "who is in earnest, and the cool-headed, thinking man, who is not completely in earnest." (87-88)

In "The Storyteller," Benjamin builds on this concern about the form's role in social life: "Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly. More and more often there is embarrassment all around when the wish to hear a story is expressed. It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences." ("The Storyteller" 83) He marks the shock and horror of World War I as one reason for this loss (84), that what becomes lost within the vast, systematized, strategic horror of war is the passing on of stories "from mouth to mouth." (84) Benjamin is using the work of Nikolai Leskov as his starting point for this theorization, and what he realizes is the artisan nature of the oral storytelling enterprise that has been lost: "It does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report. It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again. Thus traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel." (91-92)

Unsurprisingly, to readers of Benjamin's essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (published in the same year), the loss of the oral, artisan methods transforms the nature of the story: "We have witnessed the evolution of the "short story," which has removed itself from oral tradition and no longer permits that slow piling one on top of the other of thin, transparent layers which constitutes the most appropriate picture of the way in which the perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of a variety of retellings." (93)

For Benjamin, this desire to recuperate lost storytelling traditions finds its outlet in the work of Leskov, and in the words of Paul Valery, on artistic observation:

"Artistic observation," he says in reflections on a woman artist whose work consisted in the silk embroidery of figures, "can attain an almost mystical depth. The objects on which it falls lose their names. Light and shade form very particular systems, present very individual questions which depend upon no knowledge and are derived from no practice, but get their existence and value exclusively from a certain accord of the soul, the eye, and the hand of someone who was born to perceive them and evoke them in his own inner self." (108)

Benjamin, in fact, does see a practice in what Valery suggests in the above passage. It is a practice that, in fact, makes the storyteller a valued social figure:

That old coordination of the soul, the eye, and the hand which emerges in Valery's words is that of the artisan...In fact, one can go on and ask oneself whether the relationship of the storyteller to his material, human life, is not in itself a craftsman's relationship, whether or not it is not his very task to fashion the raw material of experience, his own and that of others, in a solid, useful and unique way. (108)

Several of Benjamin's most important writings utilize the anecdotal form in significant ways.

Both "A Berlin Chronicle" and "One-Way Street" are composed almost entirely of such stories, the former opening with a kind of incantation—"Now let me call back those who introduced me to the city" (3)—that echoes Valery's "mystical depths," and foresees the ability of stories to retain what Stephen Greenblatt will later call "the touch of the real." A series of stories—by

turns prosaic, nostalgic, rueful and shocking—follows, all enacting the cartography of Berlin that Benjamin promises:

I have long, indeed for years, played with the idea of setting out the sphere of life—bios—graphically on a map. First I envisaged an ordinary map, but would now incline to a general staff's map of a city center . . . I have evolved a system of signs, and on the gray background of such maps they would make a colorful show I clearly marked in the houses of my friends and girl friends, the assembly halls of various collectives, from the "debating chambers" of the Youth Movement to the gathering places of the Communist youth, the hotel and brothel rooms that I knew for one night, the decisive benches in the Tiergarten, the ways to different schools and the graves that I saw filled, the sites of prestigious cafes whose long-forgotten names daily crossed our lips . . . (5)

"All of these pictures I've preserved," Benjamin writes (7), highlighting the link between the anecdote and the photograph. For him, the stories become a way of recovering memory, which, continuing the metaphor, he describes in photographic terms: "It is not, therefore, due to insufficient exposure time if no image appears on the plate of remembrance. More frequent, perhaps, are the cases when the half-light of habit denies the plate the necessary light for years, until one day from an alien source it flashes as if from burning magnesium powder . . ." (56)

"One-Way Street" functions even more like a connection of snapshots, a set of fragments whose playful captions enhance their ambiguity. Some of the fragments are aphoristic, but many utilize the anecdotal form of "Berlin Chronicle," such as "No. 113," which recounts a series of strange dreams:

A visit to Goethe's house. I cannot recall having seen rooms in the dream. It was a perspective of whitewashed corridors like those in a school. Two elderly English lady visitors and a curator are the dream's extras. The curator requests us to sign the visitor's book lying open on a desk at the farthest end of a passage. On reaching it, I find as I turn the pages my name already entered in big, unruly, childish characters. (63)

The fragmented form of the writing, as well as its dream-like subject matter, enhances the opacity of many of these tales; in striking contrast to the explicit social purpose Benjamin assigns to the artesian storyteller in his later essay, these passages written in the mid-1920s

reflect the influence of the Surrealists on Benjamin's writing, both in their form (like random advertisements and parodies of slogans) and in the author's willingness to let them linger unexplained—"To convince is to conquer without conception," he writes in one. (63)

That the anecdote is one form such Surrealist influence should take is not surprising.

Consider this passage from one of the key Surrealist texts, Andre Breton's *Nadja*:

Consider this anecdote: Hugo, toward the end of his life, took the same ride with Juliette Drouet every day, always interrupting his wordless meditation when their carriage passed an estate with two gates, one large, one small; pointing to the large gate, Hugo, for perhaps the thousandth time, would say: "Bridle gate, Madame," to which Juliette, pointing to the small gate, would reply: "Pedestrian gate, Monsieur"; then, a little farther on, passing two trees with intertwining branches, Hugo would remark: "Philemon and Baucis," knowing that Juliette would not answer; we have reason to believe that this marvelous, poignant ritual was repeated daily for years on end; yet how could the best possible study of Hugo's work give us a comparable awareness, the astonishing sense of what he was, of what he is? (13-14)

The first half of *Nadja* is made up of this sort of merging of the essayistic and the anecdotal, as tales of coincidental meetings at the theater or wandering through the city (guided only by the word "BOIS-CHARBONS"), act as links that open up to a more philosophical connection or aesthetic evaluation. The second half tells a longer, more coherent story of the titular character, but does so through a series of anecdotes, the most famous a tale of mixing up the names of two restaurants, the Ile Saint Louis and the Place Dauphine. (80) "You know, that's how I talk to myself when I'm alone, I tell myself all kinds of stories," Nadja tells Breton at one point. (74) "And not only silly stories: actually, I live this way altogether." (74) Whether the story of "Nadja" is true or not seems beside the point, for what all these tales allow Breton is access to his primary texts—Paris and philosophy—in a way that feels fresh and original, and that, as he says in one passage, makes the world a space of mystery:

Perhaps life needs to be deciphered like a cryptogram. Secret staircases, frames from which the paintings quickly slip aside and vanish (giving way to an archeangel bearing a sword or to those who must forever advance), buttons which

must be indirectly pressed to make an entire room move sideways or vertically, or immediately change all of its furnishings; we may imagine the mind's greatest adventure as a journey of this sort to the paradise of pitfalls. (112)

In "Theses on the Philosophy of History," the final piece published in his lifetime, Benjamin writes of his own archeangel, "the angel of history" (257), "face turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet." (257) It is a bleak image, and a bleak text, but even here, at his least opaque and playful, Benjamin still uses the form of the anecdote.

He begins his argument by imagining an automaton, constructed to win every game of chess, against every opponent, by utilizing a series of mirrors and a tiny hunchback who controls the automaton's movements. (253) Such a puppet is "called 'historical materialism,'" Benjamin writes, and "it can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology, which today, as we know, is wizened and has to keep out of sight." (253) In this essay, Benjamin distinguishes between "historicism" and "historical materialism," and comes down in favor of the latter: "Universal history has no theoretical armature. Its method is addictive; it musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time. Materialistic historiography, on the other hand, is based on a constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest, as well." (262) Within such a materialist history, "The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again." (253)

Benjamin's unfinished *Arcades Project* is his most ambitious attempt to frame and record these instances. As Susan Buck-Morss writes about Benjamin's conception, "Academia was 'outmoded.' The long-slumbering truth of metaphysics that Benjamin as author felt himself competent to 'awaken' would have to appear otherwise than in the forbidden academic gown. Was it really so preposterous to search in a shopping mall for more appropriate attire?" (22)

Buck-Morss notes, too, the influence of Benjamin's radio programs for children (broadcast from 1927-33) on the shape of the Arcades Project: "But the programs are totally free of an authoritarian voice. Rather, the didactic message emerges effortlessly and disarmingly out of historical anecdotes, adventure stories, and biographies of literary figures." (35) The radio programs were very successful, and Benjamin's take on the form hints at both the future Arcades Project and the power of the anecdote in general (and perhaps especially for an anecdotal study on film): "It is the voice, the diction and the language—in a word, the formal and technical side of the broadcast—that so frequently make the most desirable programs unbearable for the listener. Conversely, for the same reason but very rarely, programs that might seem totally irrelevant can hold the listener spellbound." ("Reflections on Radio," 544)

How to hold the reader spellbound on the page? "I need not explain, only show," Benjamin would write of his project's goal, which was no less than a massive history of the nineteenth century, as explored in a study of the shopping arcades and popular culture of Paris. "The eternal is in every case far more the ruffle on a dress than an idea," he wrote (Buck-Morss 23), linking together fashion and philosophy in a way that disturbed colleagues like Theodor Adorno. The project remained unfinished, although its various parts—a series of fragments, quotations, photographs and occasional, longer philosophical musings—was saved by Benjamin's friend Georges Bataille, and published in an English translation at the end of the 20th century; ironically, Benjamin's project, which worked so hard to understand his own time by looking back at an earlier epoch, finds its usefulness in retrospect, at the dawn of a new millennium. The text that remains for the contemporary reader seems to answer Benjamin's earlier call – "The typical work of work of modern scholarship is intended to be read like a catalogue. But when shall we actually write books like catalogues?" ("One-Way Street" 79) To

read the volume straight through is not impossible, but perhaps slightly foolish—better to dip in and call up lines or passages at random, most of which tantalize with their opacity and unanswered questions: “In 1893 the arcades were closed to cocottes” (834); “Rage for tortoises in 1839. Tempo of flanerie in the arcades” (834); “In 1851 there was still a regular stagecoach line between Paris and Venice.” (429) There are also longer passages and quotations.

There are quotations from letters, for instance, which offer abbreviated, anecdotal views of their authors, such as this passage from Egon Friedell:

“When the first German railway line was about to be constructed in Bavaria, the medical faculty at Erlangen published an expert opinion...: the rapid movement would cause...cerebral disorders (the mere sight of a train rushing by could already do this), and it was therefore necessary, at the least, to build a wooden barrier five feet high on both sides of the track.” (428, ellipses in original text)

Here at last is the city-as-dreamscape form that Benjamin longs for in his “Berlin Chronicle.” By shifting his focus from Berlin to Paris, and from his own experiences to those in earlier centuries, he is able to call up a past in a vibrant way that allows the past to cast light on the present.

In his essay at the end of the published Arcades Project, original editor Rolf Tiedemann notes the ways in which the Arcades Project has been fetishized by scholars as the great, lost opportunity of 20th century philosophy and criticism:

There are books whose fate has been settled long before they even exist as books. Benjamin’s unfinished *Passagen-Werk* is just such a case. Many such legends have been woven around it since Adorno first mentioned it in an essay published in 1950...The answer that the fragments of the *Passagen-Werk* give to its readers instead follows Mephisto’s retort, “Many a riddle is made here,” with Faust’s “many a riddle must be solved here.” (929)

Indeed, the unfinished nature of the project is its saving grace—a more structured book might lack the incomplete volume’s sense of mystery, solving riddles that tell us more by remaining, to steal Breton’s earlier phrase, in the form of cryptograms.

Tiedemann's mention of Adorno highlights how the Arcades Project, full of anecdotes, is itself often framed by two anecdotes. The first deals with its genesis and development, and involves Adorno. The second centers on a wartime journey, and the death of Benjamin in Spain. The combined effect of both anecdotes is to render Walter Benjamin as a tragic figure, akin to the leading actor in a Hollywood melodrama, and to make him far more glamorous in death than life, like a Marxist James Dean.

Adorno's suspicion of The Arcades Project is well-known, and its best recounting is in Ronald Taylor's introduction to the Adorno-Benjamin correspondence in *Aesthetics and Politics*. Taylor sketches out the backgrounds of the two men—Benjamin's interest in "Jewish mysticism" and Surrealism, the impact of World War I on his studies, his travels to the Soviet Union, and the centrality of literature to his worldview; conversely, Adorno's passion for music over literature, his "more tenuous" political affiliations, and the centrality of Weimar Germany to his intellectual views (Taylor 102). By the time of the Arcades Project's genesis, in 1928, Adorno, despite his youth, is in a far greater position of power within intellectual circles than Benjamin, and it is to the former that the latter must turn for publication possibilities. Adorno harshly critiques the Arcades Project, and turns down Benjamin's request to have it published in the journal of the Institute for Social Research, *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* (he does publish two related pieces, "On Some Motifs In Baudelaire," and "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"). (Taylor 101)

It is this refusal that lies at the heart of the legend to which Tiedmann refers, a refusal that Adorno later regrets. Adorno finds Benjamin's use of Marx to be improper, his definitions of terms like "fetish" and "commodity" to be inexact, and remains suspicious of Benjamin's attraction to the sheen of the Arcades: the whole project, in Adorno's mind, runs the risk of being

unsystematic (Taylor 102-104), or to use Brecht's earlier phrase, not properly earnest. Taylor notes a "disturbing note of willed insistence on certain of Adorno's ideas" here. (104)

Although he is sympathetic to many of Adorno's criticisms, Taylor comes down harshly on Adorno's refusal of publication:

Much more seriously, the refusal of the Institute of Social Research to publish the Baudelaire texts, for which Adorno was inevitably in large measure responsible, was a heavy and heedless blow to inflict on Benjamin. The correct course for the *Zeitschrift*, was, surely, to publish the manuscript and then proceed to a critical discussion of it in the journal... Benjamin's own response to Adorno's criticism, which had obviously shaken him, was precisely to plead for the necessity of free discussion in print of his work—a plea which his personal conditions of acute isolation and distress in Paris rendered all the more poignant. (105)

By 1940, Benjamin's position of "distress" in Paris becomes untenable—the Nazi takeover of the city means that Benjamin—Jewish, intellectual, Marxist—must flee. This is the beginning of the second anecdote, that of Benjamin's attempt to join his friend in New York.

I remember waking up in that narrow room under the roof where I had gone to sleep a few hours earlier. Someone was knocking at the door. It had to be the little girl from downstairs; I got out of bed and opened the door. But it wasn't the child. I rubbed my half closed eyes. It was one of our friends, Walter Benjamin—one of the many who had poured into Marseilles when the Germans overran France. Old Benjamin, as I usually referred to him, I am not sure why—he was about forty-eight. Now, how did he get here?

"*Gnadige Frau*," he said, "please accept my apologies for this inconvenience." The world was coming apart, I thought, but not Benjamin's *politesse*. "*Ihr Herr Gemahl*," he continued, "told me how to find you. He said you would take me across the border into Spain." He said *what*? Oh well, yes, "*mein Herr Gemahl*"—my husband would say that. He would assume that I could do it, whatever "it" might be.

Benjamin was still standing in the open door because there was no room for a second person between the bed and the wall. Quickly I told him to wait for me in the bistro on the village square. (Fittko 946)

So begins an extraordinary addendum to the English edition of the Arcades Project, "The Story of Old Benjamin," in which Lisa Fittko remembers her journeys with Benjamin across the Pyrenees to the border of France and Spain. Immediately, she highlights her uncertainty over her

memories: “I do remember everything that happened; I think I do. That is, I remember the facts. But can I re-live those days?” (947)

I quote the passage above at considerable length to give a sense of the tone and detail of the tale that follows, which casts the story of Benjamin’s escape as a kind of wartime *noir*, full of nighttime rendezvous, secret meetings, close shaves with violence, and, eventually, the tragic ending of most *noir* heroes. Fearful that the constant changes in visa rules would prevent their crossing the border, Benjamin takes his own life in the Spanish town of Port-Bou. (953)

In the anecdote above, he comes alive again. It attention to detail—the shape of the room, the time of day, the luminous detail of Benjamin’s “*politesse*” —contextualizes and humanizes the figure behind the more abstract philosophical writings, and reminds the reader of the extraordinary political pressures and life and death situations within which the Arcades Project was begun. Surely, Fitkko achieves here the play of light and shade, the connection of the material and the human, which Benjamin calls for in “The Storyteller,” and in doing so, adds to the legend and mystique of her subject.

In his review of *Practicing New Historicism*, David Simpson recognizes the connection between the New Historicists and Walter Benjamin: “Responding to Benjamin’s fragmentary account of Baudelaire’s Paris, Adorno found himself resenting feeling he’d been stranded ‘at the crossroads of magic and positivism.’ These authors convince us that this is no bad place to be, as they nudge us toward the sorts of connection that can never be fully exposed or confidently proven.” (26) There is ambivalence in that passage; the final clause, with its use of a weak word like “nudge,” and its final assertion that the insights of the method “can never be fully exposed or confidently proven,” functions like one of the “magic tricks” Simpson admiringly observes Greenblatt performing in the book, making its approval disappear just as it has arrived.

Simpson touches on many of these more critical responses to New Historicism in his review:

New historicism's opponents have not been slow to find fault with this commitment to particularities, seeing in it a symptom of leftist disillusionment, an evasion of the challenges posed by feminism and the women's movement, and a head-in-the-sand attitude to the movement's own historical identity as, for example, the purveyor of a history of the early British empire (Shakespeare and all) which has remained incurious about the doings of the American empire of the present day. New historicism's preference for Foucault over Marx, discourse over class and ideology (the latter again criticized here by Catherine Gallagher as a sort of fetish), metaphors of circulation and exchange—'social energies'—over those of cause and effect, and almost anything over Derrida and the challenge to radical deconstruction, seemed to many to be a rather too comfortable rehabilitation of old pleasures in the face of what came to be known as Theory. (25)

Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, for instance, is sympathetic to the notion that "as with any fledgling enterprise, the new historicists, in all their diversity, have worked piecemeal, borrowing from the materials that lie to hand" (Fox-Genovese 216), but also insists that "History cannot simply be reduced—or elevated—to a collection, theory, and practice of reading texts." (216)

She continues:

It is possible to classify price series or coin deposits or hog weights or railroad lines as texts—possible, but ultimately useful only as an abstraction that flattens historically and theoretically significant distinctions. If, notwithstanding occasional fantasies, the nature of history differentiates historians from "hard" social scientists, it also differentiates them from "pure" literary critics. For historians, the text exists as a function, or articulation, of context. In this sense historians work at the juncture of the symbiosis between text and context, with context understood to mean the very conditions of textual production and dissemination.

In fairness, many literary critics or theorists seem also to be working at this juncture But only in rare instances have new historicists embraced the full implications of this project. (216-217)

H. Aram Vesser, editor of a collection entitled *The New Historicism*, notes in his introduction to the volume that such divisions reify "a classic *trahison des clercs*...New

Historicism has given scholars new opportunities to cross the boundaries separating history, anthropology, art, politics, literature, and economics...New Historicism threatens this quasi-monastic order.” (ix) In *Practicing New Historicism*, Greenblatt and Gallagher put it more succinctly: “We became rather good at slipping out of theoretical nooses.” (3) In another passage, their description of their “methodology” (a word which, because it implies a systematizing, they do not feel entirely comfortable with) echoes Benjamin’s passage on the ruffle of the dress: “We had, as it were, been complacently dressing ourselves in each other’s cast-off clothes, until, looking around the room, we erupted in laughter.” (3)

Vesser notes that, in fact, the attacks do not just come from those on the left. He writes, “Accusations of canon-bashing and ‘the lunge toward barbarism,’ reiterated in *The Wall Street Journal*, *NYRB*, the *New York Times*, *Newsweek* and *Harper’s*, have projected a New Historicism unambiguously Left in its goals, subversive in its critique, and destructive in its impact.” (x) Canonical or non-canonical, overly historical or overly textual, right or left, Vesser concludes that “These conflicting readings prove if nothing else that far from a hostile united front or a single politics, ‘the New Historicism’ remains a phrase without an adequate referent” (x), save, perhaps that of “heterogeneity and contention.” (Vesser x) Perhaps ironically, Vesser follows this insistence of difference with an attempt to map out the coordinates of the movement: that expression is embedded in material practice; that acts of “unmasking” and critique must be self-reflexive; that the literary circulates with the “non-literary”; that discourse is always reflective of a certain period, rather than being unchanging; and that critical methods and critical language participate within the economies they describe. (xi) In such coordinates, one can certainly see the mixture of viewpoints associated with both the left and the right, as well as noting how false such binaries can sometimes be. One also suspects—particularly in the concentration on the

slipperiness of language and the need to be self-reflexive in critique—the hand of deconstruction, despite Simpson’s reading of the history of New Historicism’s critical reception.

In *Practicing New Historicism*, Greenblatt and Gallagher admit that such confusions may have arisen out of their very unwillingness to write a manifesto for the the method.

Appropriately, they make such an admission in the form of an anecdote:

When years ago we first noticed in the annual job listing of the Modern Language Association that an English department was advertising for a specialist in new historicism, our response was incredulity. How could something that didn’t really exist, that was only a few words gesturing toward a new interpretive practice, have become a “field”? When did it happen and how could we not have noticed?...Surely, we of all people should know something of the history and principles of new historicism, but what we knew above all was that it (or perhaps we) resisted systematization. We had never formulated a set of theoretical propositions or articulated a program...we would not be able to say to someone in haughty disapproval, “You are not an authentic new historicist.” (1-2)

In *Practicing New Historicism*, Greenblatt and Gallagher trace some of their influences and begin to systematize New Historicism, although they continue to insist that its central aspect is an enduring looseness: “to continue the inquiry but not to conduct a system.” (4) Key antecedents include anthropologists Clifford Geertz, with his utilization of the anecdote, as a mode of “thick description” (Greenblatt and Gallagher 20-23); Erich Auerbach, whose *Mimesis* is read as a model for moving from “pointillist textual detail . . .to a huge vista” (Greenblatt and Gallagher 32); Raymond Williams, with his insistence on the role of “lived experience” within cultural critiques (Greenblatt and Gallagher 60); and Roland Barthes, whose reading of anecdotes as “work against the historical grain” (Greenblatt and Gallagher 51) will be an important rallying point for New Historicism.

In an earlier essay, “Marxism and the New Historicism,” Gallagher notes that the method, while coming out of a strand of Marxist tradition that includes Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin and “even Marx himself,” resists what she defines as a synthesizing tradition: “The

new historicist, unlike the Marxist, is under no nominal compulsion to achieve consistency. She may even insist that historical curiosity can develop independently of political concerns; there may be no political desire impulse whatsoever behind her desire to historicize literature.” (46) In his essay, “Towards a Poetics of Culture,” Greenblatt is more ambivalent in his relationship to past theoretical traditions—““It’s true that I’m still more uneasy with a politics and a literary perspective that is untouched by Marxist thought, but that doesn’t lead me to endorse propositions or embrace a particular philosophy, politics or rhetoric, *faute de mieux*” (2)-- but echoes some of Gallagher’s concerns. Despite this ambivalence, however, I would argue that New Historicism-- which Greenblatt, after all, states is “a practice rather than a doctrine” (“Towards a Poetics of Culture” 1)-- does offer a way of thinking about historical and theoretical concerns which are not alien to Marxism or other theoretical practices which have crucially shaped academic film studies (such as structuralism, feminism, or psychoanalysis, for instance), by, as Veeseer writes, “demonstrating that social and cultural events commingle messily, by rigorously exposing the innumerable trades-offs, the competing bids and exchanges of culture.” (xiii)

That Greenblatt and Gallagher would cite Roland Barthes as an influence is not surprising, as their own ambivalence toward systematization reflects his; perhaps one way of reading the seeming “contradictions” or fissures in responses to New Historicism can be found in this passage from Barthes’ inaugural address to the College de France:

For what can be oppressive in our teaching is not, finally, the knowledge or culture it conveys, but the discursive forms through which we propose them...I should there like the speaking and the listening that will be interwoven here to resemble the comings and goings of a child playing beside his mother, leaving her, returning to bring her a pebble, a piece of string, and thereby tracing around a calm center a whole locus of play within which the pebble, the string come to matter less than the enthusiastic giving of them. (“Inaugural Lecture” 476-77)

In such comings and goings lies both an interest in the fragment and a desire to stretch one's disciplinary boundaries, rather than be held back by a systematized, never-changing authorial identity. The shifts in Barthes' career—from structuralist to post-structuralist and finally, to a kind of dandy of the essay form, utterly unclassifiable—demonstrate that the ability to slip one's theoretical nooses remains perhaps the most subversive gesture in the apparent “conflict” between aesthetics and politics.

Right from the beginning, Barthes found the anecdote a useful form for critiquing cultural objects: “Gide was reading Bossuet while going down the Congo” (29), begins the essay “The Writer on Holiday,” which appears in Barthes' first collection, *Mythologies*. Barthes goes on to note the “mythologizing” quality of such a description, how it provides us with an image of the writer “which gives us, without cheating, information on the idea which our bourgeoisie entertains about its writers.” (29) Barthes' project in *Mythologies*, as he notes in the second preface, is to apply Saussurean structuralism to the “sign-systems” of everyday life: “one might hope to go further than the pious show of unmasking them and account in detail for the mystification which transforms petit-bourgeois cultures into a universal nature.” (9) This wish to undermine the seeming “naturalness” of culture would inspire both the New Historicists and their critics (again suggesting how false some of the critical binaries erected around the anecdote truly are).

There is something of a split personality in *Mythologies*; on the one hand, Barthes' unmaskings are impeccably correct and on point, but there appears—in footnotes and asides—a more digressive, playful personality, which seems as fascinated as he is repulsed by the cultural objects he's critiquing, and can't resist puns and Groucho Marx-style one-liners: “Yes, I know [tautology is] an ugly word. But so is the thing.” (152) In “The Myth Today,” the theoretical

framework which, in true dandy style, *follows* the texts it is meant to frame, Barthes notes that “in myth, there are two semiological systems” (115)—one is the “*language-object*, because it is the language which myth gets hold of in order to build its own system” (115), and the other is “*metalanguage*...in which one speaks about the first.” (115) It is this second language, that of the “global sign” (115), that allows one to talk about—and deconstruct—the myth, and it is this second language within which the anecdote might talk about its object. For Barthes, as for the New Historicists, such analysis should always be self-reflexive-- “In other words, is there a mythology of the mythologist?” (12)—and such self-reflexivity allows Barthes, as he puts it, “to live to the full the contradiction of my time, which may well make sarcasm the condition of truth.” (12)

Barthes wrote that in 1957, the tail end of the “Classic Hollywood” period I will be exploring in this study, and concurrent with the rise of cinephilia at *Cahiers du Cinema* (a magazine which would interview Barthes in the ensuing decade). This seems more than coincidental, and perhaps allows us to shape the arguments about the anecdotal and the relationship between politics and aesthetics in a slightly different way. Politics for *Cahiers*, at least in this initial moment, took the form of *la politique des auteurs*, an insistence that looking for the luminous details in a director’s style could allow the viewer to read the film, a director’s body of work, and even the history of Hollywood in a different way. I will return to the *Cahiers* position—and the French New Wave movement it spawned—in my Conclusion; what I would like to begin to suggest here are the affinities between the dandyish position of Barthes and the magazine’s critics, and how both read *mise-en-scene* as central to meaning (the connections between *mise-en-scene* and the anecdotal become even more apparent if we remember the

former's literal translation as "staging an action"). In 1957, Jean- Luc Godard writes of Nicholas

Ray's *Hot Blood*:

The plot itself, although badly handled, carries Ray's stamp...No reservations are necessary, however, in praising the deliberate and systematic use of the gaudiest colours to be seen in the cinema: barley-sugar orange shirts, acid-green dresses, violet cars, blue and pink carpets...Nothing but cinema may not be the whole cinema. ("Nothing But Cinema" 117)

Such a passage seems to parallel what Barthes would later write in *The Pleasure of the*

Text:

Why do some people, including myself, enjoy in certain novels, biographies, and historical works the representation of the "daily life" of an epoch, of a character? Why this curiosity about petty details: schedules, habits, meals, lodging, clothing, etc.? Is it the hallucinatory relish of "reality" (the very materiality of "that once existed")? And is it not the fantasy itself which invokes the "detail," the tiny private scene, in which I can easily take my place? ...

Thus, impossible to imagine a more tenuous, a more insignificant notation than that of "today's weather" (or yesterday's); and yet, the other day, reading, trying to read Amiel, irritation that the well-meaning editor (another person foreclosing pleasure) had seen fit to omit from this Journal the everyday details, what the weather was like on the shores of Lake Geneva, and retain only insipid musing: yet it is this weather that had not aged, not Amiel's philosophy. (53-54)

Here is Barthes fully embracing the "contradictions" to which he alluded fifteen years earlier, and recognizing the centrality of the anecdotal detail to meaning. Such an approach would become even more apparent two years later, in Roland Barthes, made up almost entirely of fragments, many of them anecdotal. Barthes looks to Brecht for justification:

In Brecht, an ideological critique is not made directly (or else it would have once more produced a repetitive, tautological, militant discourse); it passes through aesthetic relays; counter-ideology creeps in by means of a fiction—not realistic but *accurate*. This is perhaps the role of the aesthetic in our society; to provide the rules of an *indirect and transitive* discourse (it can transform language, but does not display its domination, its good conscience). (104)

The anecdotal for Barthes becomes this indirect and transitive discourse, a way of interrogating his image-repertoire, and his relationship to his environment, his work, and his body: "Hence,

this work proceeds by conceptual infatuations, successive enthusiasms, perishable manias. Discourse advances by little fates, by amorous fits.” (110) Barthes was famously suspicious of the cinema--“The Third Meaning” and *Camera Lucida* found their genesis in such suspicions—and yet the “montage” structure of Roland Barthes, and its intense concentration on the sensual make it the kind of “panoramic” history that Christian Keathley says is central to cinephilia: “Whether it is the gesture of a hand, the odd rhythm of a horse’s gait, or the sudden change of expression on a face, these moments are experienced by the viewer who beholds them as nothing less than an epiphany, a revelation.” (39)

The language of New Historicism’s critics enhances such a proposition. I should emphasize that I do not consider the study that follows to be, strictly, a “New Historicist” history of Hollywood; I am obliged to cite the influence, and feel a kinship with the desires of its “members” to slip loose from systematicization, but I consider my utilization of such works (as well as those of Barthes, Benjamin, and the Surrealists) closer to Brecht’s conception of the scrap-collector, who finds the trumpet at the flea market useful, not as a trumpet, but as metal which can be redeployed for other purposes.

It is notable, though, how many of David Simpson’s comments invoke cinema and photography: “...new historicism, in its early essays, emphasized the cinematic bringing to life of the past” (26); “The critics associated with new historicism have been exceptionally unwilling to stand together for a group photograph” (25); “Like a slice of movie footage, the new historicist past was wholly there and yet not there.” (26) Such a language offers support for the view of the anecdote as a written snapshot, and suggests how appropriate it might be as a form for thinking about film and film studies.

Classic Hollywood (marked here as beginning in 1930, with the vertical integration of the major studios, and persisting into the 1960s, as the studios adjusted to the Supreme Court's *Paramount* decision, which ordered the dismantling of that system) now seems like a "foreign past" of the sort that Julian Barnes' narrator attributes to the age of Flaubert in the epigraph above, but it looms over much of film studies' critical methodology and interests; to use a musical analogy, it is to film and film studies what Louis Armstrong is to jazz—not the first purveyor of the form, nor the last, but one whose technical innovation, artistic imagination, synthesizing power, and commercial reach were such that everything that followed, even that which defined itself in opposition to Classic Hollywood forms and models, lived in its shadow. How one remembers and writes about this period, then, has a ripple effect on a variety of cinemas and areas related to film studies. I would like to argue that the anecdote's fetishization of such moments—intensely concentrateing on the luminous detail—makes it an ideal form for thinking about Classic Hollywood.

In the study that follows, I will look at this thirty-year period through the use of anecdotes related to each decade. Chapter 2 examines the 1930s, the decade in which the studio system consolidated its power, by examining the uncanny intersections between three apparently disparate figures: Billie Dove, a star of the silent era who is largely forgotten today; David O. Selznick, one of the industry's prodigal sons, whose name lives on through the classic films he either produced (*Gone With The Wind*, *Rebecca*) or approved (*King Kong*) as a producer at MGM and a production chief at RKO and his own Selznick International Pictures; and Hal Riddle, whose name is probably completely unfamiliar, but who floats like a living anecdote through Classic Hollywood history. Thinking about the way these figures circulate allows us to ponder the symbiotic relationships between the studio system and independent production, fan

culture and stardom, and the ways in which history is framed by both the photograph and the anecdote.

Chapter 3 ponders the concept of the “false anecdote,” a story that continues to circulate in the discourse despite being discredited. Hollywood histories are full of such anecdotes, which, far from being discarded, seem to acquire an even greater fascination in the face of refuting evidence. Such a mode of cognitive dissonance seems appropriate for thinking about Hollywood in the mid-1940s, when wartime profits and a close relationship with the U.S. government belied the political and economic problems the industry would face by the end of the decade (Thomas Schatz has appropriately described this divided decade in Hollywood history as “boom and bust”). All of these threads come into play through an infamous anecdote about *The Big Sleep*, which opens Chapter 3.

Chapter 4 focuses on the 1950s, the decade during which the studio system finally collapses, by thinking about the anecdote as political weapon. What happens when the gossip and myth-making that fuels the dream of “Hollywood” suddenly turns on its makers? By relating an anecdote involving MGM and a melting ice-cream lion, I will think about Hollywood in the age of HUAC, when “anecdotes” become transformed into “testimony” that destroys careers.

Fading stars, murdered chauffeurs and melting lions—what can stories about these three items tell us about film history and theory? A more formal, more academic way of posing the question might be to ask, per Barthes’ challenge above, what sort of knowledge is being generated here? It’s fair to ask what might be added to an already voluminous critical canon. Is the Hollywood anecdote, like the burglar of Cendrars’ “Forbidden City,” merely the *trompe l’oeil* of film history, there to distract us from the larger questions at hand?

One of film studies' first great subjects was Alfred Hitchcock, and of his many maxims on cinema, those related to storyboarding seem to most parallel traditional modes of writing and research:

I'm full of fears and I do my best to avoid difficulties and any kind of complications. I like everything around me to be clear as crystal and completely calm. I don't want clouds overhead. I get a feeling of inner peace from a well-organized desk...I've always dreamed of the day I wouldn't have to see the rushes at all! (Truffaut 260)

The anecdote seems more like the interrogative, improvisational method suggested by the Godard epigraph above. In reformulating his aesthetic as one akin to crafting snapshots along a continuum of action and theme, as cinematic moments wrenched from time, Godard offered a challenge to older and more ordered relations between part and structure. I earlier offered the suggestion that anecdotes are a sort of photograph, reframing historical evidence in such a way that new details might be noted, and new analysis generated. Siegfried Kracauer offers a way of thinking about photographs that is useful here, claiming that they "stir up the elements of nature...reminiscent of *dreams* in which the fragments of daily life become jumbled," thus revealing "the *provisional status* of all given configurations." (62-63)

Such a description would seem to fit the anecdote, as well. The anecdote offers the gift of interruption; by beginning with an initially unframed story, I hope to create a sensation of *in medias res* that is not unlike coming into a theater after the film has started. This study comes long after the film called "Hollywood" began to unreel, and long after so many other crucial "versions" of that tale by film scholars began their runs in libraries and classrooms. It will, of course, draw on and consider many of those past versions, but in a manner similar to the definition of *photogenie* offered by Leo Charney, who writes that critic Jean Epstein's definition of *photogenie* was "change and variation. Its essence lay in its inability to be pinned down to the

graspability of a concrete definition. It is dis-placed.” (Charney 286) Like the anecdote, then, *photogenicie* defamiliarizes and displaces traditional figures or events in history.

So, what does that initial anecdote about *The Thin Man* tell us about Classic Hollywood? I’ll admit that it is the story’s opacity—the eerie serendipity between the speech and the collapse, the fact that a movie studio could work its employee to death, and the tale’s darkly comic twist at the end—that draws me to it. To take it apart almost feels counter-productive.

Still, there are points about the era that can be teased out. Speed and efficiency are central to the assembly line system the studios established (Remembering “One-Take Woody” Van Dyke years later, MGM executive Eddie Mannix recalled, “God, he was fast!”), and what matters most to those in charge is to keep a steady flow of product moving through theaters. Van Dyke’s apparently callous response to the dead actor then, seems less alien in the context of such demanding working conditions. Van Dyke’s response to the real-life death also seems to parallel the ways in which the murders and mysteries in the film are treated by the characters—as mere distractions from the main goal of creating witty and sophisticated moments between stars (the “thin man” of the title—actually the inventor whose disappearance kickstarts the narrative—becomes displaced by the charismatic Nick Charles (William Powell), who many filmgoers believe is the titular figure). Van Dyke’s insistence that the actor’s costume remain, even as his body is being removed from the set, highlights the importance of *mise-en-scene* in relation to plot, the latter playing such a primary role that the man occupying the coat becomes less important than the coat itself.

And in that image—the stylish costume, literally emptied of life, and draped to the back of a studio-made chair—we have perhaps our ultimate snapshot of Classic Hollywood, in all of its glamour, glory and strangeness. Earlier critics might have latched onto that story as the

clearest example of Hollywood's ideological blind spots; according to such an argument, Van Dyke looking through the view-finder, searching out a useful shot, exemplifies Jean-Louis Baudry's point about the bourgeois nature of the camera: "It is an apparatus destined to obtain a precise ideological effect, necessary to the dominant ideology: creating a phantasmization of the subject, it collaborates with a marked efficacy in the maintenance of idealism" (354).

I would like to suggest a slightly different reading: the lifeless costume instead becomes, a symbol of the split and the shock that cinema, particularly that of Classic Hollywood, played such a role in establishing in the first half of the twentieth century. Leo Charney links *photogenie* to Benjamin's conception of the "shock" in modernity, and thus to the larger philosophical breaks of modernism in the first half of the twentieth century: "the evacuation of stable presence by movement and the resulting split between sensation, which feels the moment in the moment, and cognition, which recognizes the moment only after the moment." (279) This particular costume has been evacuated in the most extreme sense, but Charney's reading of modernity suggests that it might also stand in for various modes of cinematic writing, many of which have also struggled with the split between sensation and cognition, peering over the corpse of Classic Hollywood, and wrestling with which bits of its fabric to frame. The abandoned dinner jacket, through an anecdotal lens, might act in a manner similar to the fetishization of decor described by Louis Aragon, in what seems like a list of "luminous details" (and one, that appropriately enough, contains references to mystery films): "All of our emotion exists for those dear old adventure films that speak of daily life, and manage to raise to a dramatic level a banknote on which our attention is riveted, a table with a revolver on it, a bottle that on occasion becomes a weapon, a handkerchief that reveals a crime" (51) Aragon's recognition of the power of the lens to transform the "ordinary" object into something strange

and beautiful is not dissimilar to the anecdote's power to displace and reframe our understanding of films or periods that have, through familiarity and repetition, taken on a similarly ordinary quality—like the tuxedo, they are the glamorous object intersecting with shock and change of the real. The image of the revolver in Aragon's writing, meanwhile, returns us to Blaise Cendrars, and the "trompe l'oeil" of the thief in the night, so it seems oddly appropriate that Aragon chooses to open this piece, "On Décor," with a reading of how cinema transforms normal critical terminology:

On the screen the great demon with white teeth, bare arms, speaks an extraordinary language, the language of love. People of all nations hear it and are more moved by the drama enacted before a wall decorated poetically with posters than by the tragedy we bid the subtlest actor perform before the showiest set. *Here trompe l'oeil fails*: naked sentiment triumphs, and the setting must equal it in poetic power to touch our hearts. (50) (emphasis mine)

As the following chapters will show, the anecdote potentially has the power to craft such a setting, to refocus attention on certain luminous details of Classic Hollywood history, and to return -- an at least poetic-- life to that long-abandoned costume on the soundstage.

CHAPTER 2 SHIMMY

1939

“The filming of *Gone With the Wind* was like a party on the set that [David O.] Selznick was giving each day,” actress Evelyn Keyes remembers. “Especially since the dialogue was always being handed to us at the last minute as if he was thinking of some charade to play.” (Zollo 134) One of the more infamous stories about Selznick comes from his screenwriter on *Gone With The Wind*, Sidney Howard, who arrived in Hollywood in 1937 to begin work on adapting Margaret Mitchell’s novel. Instead, he was roped into rewrites on Selznick’s current project, *The Prisoner of Zenda*. Howard agreed to help, and asked how Selznick wanted a scene rewritten. “I don’t know,” Selznick replied. “I haven’t read it yet.” (*Showman* 233-234)

1861

One of the more famous moments in *Gone With The Wind* depicts the day of a picnic in a mythical antebellum American South. The scene opens on a shot of Scarlett's rear, an apt beginning for a scene that is designed to show off bustles of every kind. It is an ostentatious arrangement of figure, color, set and costume design, and movement. As the camera moves from the carriage to the interior of the Wilkes' "Twelve Oaks" plantation, it stays centered on Scarlett, her lilting southern belle voice slightly disembodied as we see only the back of her head, her wavy brown curls covered by the enormous hat which holds our attention in the middle of the screen. Scarlett turns in profile to say hello to Virginia Wilkes-- "What a lovely dress, I just can't take my eyes off it!" It is a compliment that the camera twice reveals as a lie: Scarlett's not even looking at the dress as she says it, her eyes already darting about the entrance to see who's there, to make sure the path inside is cleared. Although Virginia moves to the foreground of the screen, the camera soon darts around her to stay focused on Scarlett, whose stark white dress

with green sash leaps out amidst the pastel outfits that surround her. Everything is symmetrical: the pillars on either side of the doorway she walks through, the staircase that snakes its way up either side of the screen to frame her indoors, even the more loosely arranged figures that mill about on either side of the room. It is a lovely visual invocation of the order about to be torn asunder, and Scarlett's literal place at the middle of it all. A tracking shot to the right is suddenly interrupted by an awkward cut to a medium shot: what could possibly disarray Scarlett's space like this, her very red lipstick mouth forming a desperate "O"?

Her next word is "Ashley!" and there is a cut to her object of desire. Not her love—the audience senses that before she does, because the camera doesn't move towards him: framed in a long shot, this wan southern gentleman is forced to come to it, lacking the power to move the image forward. As he comes downscreen, the camera dollies a bit closer, but only because Scarlett enters the frame; the camera longs to follow her-- she has a cinephiliac power he does not. But even as she looks up at him with rapt attention, he never looks at the camera, choosing to frame himself in noble profile (even when he turns his head, he looks off-camera, afraid to look the lens in the eye). He tries to pull Scarlett downstage right, to meet Melanie, which might mean pulling Scarlett out of the center of the frame. Like any good movie star, Scarlett is perturbed at having to go off-camera: pouting, she mews, "Ooh, do we have to?" The camera cuts to Melanie, and she too must move forward to make her "close-up." What kind of world is this, where "gentlemen can always fight better than a Yankee!" but lack the charisma to control the new technological force that has entered American society in the mid-19th century: photography? Clearly, there is a more powerful cinephiliac counterpart for Scarlett waiting in the wings, someone who can drag the camera to *him*.

1932

In 1932, seven years before Scarlett O'Hara will make her screen debut, another fictional young woman alighted from the sky, and spoke of "the world from an airplane I knew," the "sense of that rip between coast and coast" where "it was vaguely like a swanky restaurant at that twilight time between the meals." (Fitzgerald 4-5) Her name is Celia Brady, and as one of the "narrators" of *The Love of the Last Tycoon* (1940) (the other is a more omniscient voice), she acts as the reader's eyes and ears on a tour of Classic Hollywood in the 1930s: "At the worst, I accepted Hollywood with the resignation of a ghost assigned to a haunted house. I knew what you were supposed to think about it but I was obstinately unhorrorified." (3) She is the daughter of a studio head (based on MGM boss Louis B. Mayer), but her real fascination is Monroe Stahr (based on MGM production chief Irving Thalberg, who in real life collapsed from a heart attack in 1932). Very much a man of the modern age which photography helps to usher in, Monroe Stahr controls the camera from behind the scenes as forcefully as Scarlett controls it on-screen; he is one of the bright men who can, Celia Brady claims, "keep the whole equation of pictures in their heads." (3)

The most fascinating sections of *The Love of the Last Tycoon* take the reader on a virtual walking tour of Hollywood, showing Stahr at work at the studio and eventually falling in love, but it is notable that this book, the best novel about filmmaking in this period, begins on an airplane. It was a form of travel that, in the 1920s and 1930s, was as exotic and distant as the movies themselves; Brady observes, "In the big transcontinental planes we were the coastal rich, who casually alighted from our cloud in mid-America." (8) Fitzgerald finally makes flight a metaphor for Hollywood itself, and Celia's description of the plane's descent is full of evocative detail: "I could see a line of lights for the Long Beach Naval Station ahead and to the left, and on

the right a twinkling blur for Santa Monica. The California moon was out, huge and orange over the Pacific.” (21)

Before it reaches California, the plane lands in Nashville, where Fitzgerald’s descriptions of the nearly empty airport give them the feel of a movie set, virtual markers of a world, rather than the world itself: “The old red-brick depots were built right into the towns they marked—people didn’t get off at those isolated stations unless they lived there. But airports lead you way back in history like oases, like the stops on great trade routes.” (7) The passengers—including Celia, a director, a writer, a producer, and Stahr himself—are grounded for a few hours. Celia, the writer Wylie White, and the producer Mr. Schwartz, decide to visit Andrew Jackson’s home, the Hermitage. They drive out in the dark, “over a bright level countryside, just a road and a tree and a shack and a tree” (9), as Celia’s observations of the people and landscape mix with memories of childhood, more virtual markers: Bennington, Hollywood.

She tells Wylie about Bennington, he tells her about being a writer in Hollywood, and they flirt, “and presently the taxi turned down a long lane fragrant with honeysuckle and narcissus and stopped beside the great grey hulk of the Andrew Jackson house.” (11) It is dark and the house is closed, so Celia and Wylie sit on the porch as Schwartz sleeps in the car. They continue to talk about Hollywood and its parties and hierarchies, and how alienating it is for a writer; in Wylie’s words, “You can’t flunk out of pictures unless you’re a dope or a drunk.” (11) Celia feels defensive, but also ambivalent: she knows “such things could happen.” (11) When they get back to the car, Schwartz announces that he’s not continuing on the journey, and asks Wylie to give a note to “Mr. Smith.” “Smith” is Monroe Stahr, although the reader doesn’t know that yet: in his life as in his filmmaking practices, Stahr derives his power from keeping his name

off-screen. As the car returns to the airport, and Wylie, Celia and Stahr ascend once more, Schwartze wanders the grounds of the Hermitage, pulls a gun, and shoots himself. (13)

1927

In 1927, five years before the 1932 of *The Love of the Last Tycoon*, F. Scott Fitzgerald is a writer at Metro-Goldwyn Mayer. One day, he sits in the studio commissary and listens to studio chief Irving Thalberg speak of what it meant to run a movie factory:

We sat in the old commissary at Metro and he said, “Scottie, supposing there’s got to be a road through a mountain—a railroad and two or three surveyors and people come to you and you believe some of them and some of them you don’t believe, but in all, there seem to be half a dozen possible roads through those mountains, each one of which, so far as you can determine, is as good as the other. Now suppose you happen to be the top man, there’s a point where you don’t exercise the faculty of judgment in the ordinary way, but simply the faculty of arbitrary decision. You say, ‘Well, I think we will put the road there and you trace it with your finger and you know in your secret heart and no one else knows, that you have no reason for putting the road there rather than in several other different courses, but you’re the only person that knows you don’t know why you’re doing it and you’ve got to stick to that and you’ve got to pretend that you know and that you did it for specific reasons, even though you’re utterly assailed by doubt at times as to the wisdom of your decision because all these other possible decisions keep echoing in your ear” (Fitzgerald viii)

Fitzgerald’s 1927 trip to Hollywood was unsuccessful—his script for a movie called *Lipstick* was rejected, he did a screen test that went nowhere, and he and his wife Zelda fought constantly over his fascination with an actress named Lois Moran. (Prigozy 90) He drank heavily, spent more than he earned, and eventually left town, not by plane but by train, as Zelda, in a rage, threw a platinum watch out the window. (Prigozy 93)

In 1927, Billie Dove is an actress at Metro-Goldwyn Mayer, and she is one of the biggest stars in Hollywood. In July of that year alone, she receives 27,000 fan letters. She is a beloved screen goddess, and the paramour of Howard Hughes, with whom she has a tempestuous affair (finally broken off because of his constant womanizing). Like Hughes, she is also an airplane pilot. In 1931, she stars with Marion Davies in *Blondie of the Follies*. Davies is, famously,

attached to another powerful man in Hollywood: William Randolph Hearst. Hearst looks at a rough cut of *Blondie* and knows that Billie Dove is stealing the picture from Davies. He orders the film re-cut, changing the narrative in order to make Billie's character seem like "the heavy." Dove takes one look at the picture and says she's had enough. In 1933, at the age of 32, she marries a wealthy real estate developer and disappears from Hollywood. (Zollo 145-46)

In 1927, David Selznick is a story reader at Metro-Goldwyn Mayer. He bombards the studio executives with memos about story ideas, actors, and studio efficiency. (Schatz 50) He is wildly ambitious, and is soon put in charge of the writers' department. Soon after, he is made a production assistant, then an associate story editor. (Schatz 51) While he admires the young man's talent, Louis B. Mayer doesn't trust him, regrets ever hiring the "son of a Selznick." He remembers David's father, Louis Selznick, as a rival and schemer, an undisciplined charlatan who got his comeuppance when the once-thriving Selznick film company went belly-up. MGM's production chief, Irving Thalberg, is a less biased, more astute observer; he admires David's drive and ambition, but thinks he is overstepping his bounds. Selznick's fast rise through the company will soon meet a formidable obstacle: an offbeat project called *White Shadows in the South Seas*, which mixes ethnographic observation and romantic melodrama. (Schatz 55) It is the project of documentarian Robert Flaherty, but he is taking a long time to finish it. Actually, he is taking a long time to start it: before shooting even begins, Flaherty spends six months living in the South Seas, studying the living patterns and culture of the people there in order to gain a sense of realism for the work. (Schatz 55-56) Thalberg assigns Selznick and another director, Woody Van Dyke, to the film. Hunt Stromberg, the producer initially assigned to the film, finds David overly ambitious, and tells Thalberg he wants Flaherty to remain on the project under his supervision. Thalberg explains the situation to Selznick; in what Selznick will later admit was

“the rather strong language of youth” (Schatz 57), he tells Thalberg he is wrong. Thalberg fires Selznick.

In 1927, Hal Riddle is far from Metro-Goldwyn Mayer, just a twelve-year old boy in Kentucky-- shy, unathletic, and struck with movie-love. He spends his after-school afternoons at the local picture house, dreaming of stardom. One day is particularly fortuitous—Hal Riddle falls in love. He returns home and makes this grand pronouncement to his mother. Mrs. Riddle indulgently asks Hal the object of his desire. Billie Dove, he declares, and, finding the star’s MGM address in a fan magazine, composes his first love letter. (Zollo 145)

Any study of “Classic Hollywood” must begin in the late twenties and early thirties. The classical Hollywood studio system of the 1930s was organized vertically, meaning that the major studios controlled both the production facilities on the West Coast and the theater chains that would distribute the movies throughout the country. Through such closely intertwined systems, and by organizing their film production according to Taylorist/Fordist models of assembly-line regimentation, the majors were able to hold down costs, turn out more films, and keep the lion’s share of the profits. Marcus Loew, heads of Loews, Inc. (MGM’s parent company), famously stated in this period that they were selling seats in theaters, not films. It was an efficient system, and it meant a remarkable degree of stylistic coherence within a given studio’s product (Warners, for instance, became known for gritty, hard-lit crime dramas, while Paramount favored the softly-lit, “European” decadence epitomized by Marlene Dietrich and Joseph Von Sternberg).

The consolidation of several studios and theater chains, the coming of sound (which required massively expensive refurbishing of both production facilities and theaters), the effects of the Depression on production and distribution, and the increasing centralization of executive control (most famously illustrated by Thalberg’s seizing control of Erich von Stroheim’s

sprawling *Greed*), solidified the studio system's stranglehold on American mainstream cinema. By the mid-thirties, the process had become so standardized that the movies had undergone a conceptual shift that was equally regimented: a "movie" would have stars, enacting a narrative in which their characters are, to use David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's term, "causal agents" moving the plot along. (70) Happy endings are preferred, but not necessary. The studios fed such dreams, and as Thomas Schatz notes, "what's most remarkable about the classical Hollywood, finally, is that such varied and contradictory forces were held in equilibrium for so long." (12) Like the Wilkes mansion that Scarlett floats through so triumphantly, it is a combination of loose arrangements and heavy aesthetic and economic symmetry, a triumph of order based on an economic arrangement that cannot last. An anecdotal study of the period might be especially useful for several reasons.

One obvious reason is the sheer amount of anecdotal evidence produced in the late 1920s and 1930s. The explosion of fan culture, documented in the recent study *Movie Crazy*, suggests an attachment to movie stars and their films that other media could not replicate. Even in 1933, in the depths of the Depression, Americans were, on average, attending the movies twice a week. Studios, even as they held stars to five-and-seven-year contracts, encouraged this obsession, carefully crafting personas for their biggest stars through repetitive parts and publicity stills. Gossip columnists like Walter Winchell, Hedda Hopper and Louella Parsons stoked the flames by giving readers an "inside look" at studio politics and star scandals. The result is a plethora of stories about the period's biggest figures that shine as brightly—and, in some cases, brighter—than the films of which they were a part.

Another reason is that the wealth of anecdotes about this period is nearly matched by the number of academic and critical studies about it. From the auteurist writings of *Cahiers du*

Cinema to Thomas Schatz's more studio-centered *The Genius of the System*, histories of '30s Hollywood abound, as do more theoretical writings and arguments from such canonical figures as Laura Mulvey, Tania Modeleski, Andre Bazin, and Noel Burch. An anecdotal view, while drawing on and recognizing the insights these writers have provided, might also re-route those standard histories.

In Chapter 2, I will attempt one such re-routing, by zeroing in on the now-obscure figure of Billie Dove. This story—full of sexual tension, power struggles, eager fans, abrupt departures, and star glamour—seems to encapsulate much of the popular mythology about the period. In the Introduction, I suggested that Classic Hollywood has become somewhat remote, despite the fact that its collapse remains within living memory for many. One way to gauge such remoteness is to observe the contemporary reputations of once-renowned figures like Dove (her obscurity is somewhat self-imposed, of course, because of her retirement in 1933-- a key year, I will argue for the standardization of studio practice described above). Another gauge is contemporary response to narrative and cinematic convention, and here is the signal importance of David O. Selznick and F. Scott Fitzgerald to the narrative of Classic Hollywood. David Thomson goes so far as to challenge Fitzgerald when it comes to the legends of the decade's key producers: "for all Scott Fitzgerald's comparison of Thalberg with Monroe Stahr, is Selznick really not the more heroic and talented figure?" ("David O. Selznick" 797) Fitzgerald and Selznick worked together, influenced one another, and ultimately fell out of collaboration with one another; between the two of them, they delineate and develop many of the mythologies about Hollywood that will color the tone and detail of anecdotes about 1930s American filmmaking.

Billie Dove's disappearing act is a reversal of one such mythology, that of the young rising star. Selznick loved this tale so much he told it twice, first as *What Price Hollywood?*

(made in 1932, one year before Dove's departure), and then as *A Star Is Born* (1937, produced just as Selznick was gearing up for *Gone With The Wind*). As the story of Billie Dove unfolds, it almost strains credulity, its twists and turns like those of a Hollywood screen romance. And yet, it is the very straining of the narrative, its remoteness to more contemporary narrative conventions, and its intersections with what Andre Breton might call the "marvelous" within the everyday, that make it an exemplary opening legend.

How does one read the Sidney Howard and Evelyn Keyes stories that opened Chapter 2? They are funny, of course, the kind of anecdotes that are told time and again because they fit a popular image of Hollywood charm, excess and vulgarity. For more serious scholars, they can also be dismissed for the same reason, as a slightly outdated, slightly elitist view of studio production in the 1930s. It might be helpful to think of them as potentially all of these things at once, neither dismissing them outright nor endorsing one singular theoretical view of their meaning. Like the camera following Scarlett's bustle around Twelve Oaks, the anecdotal form can help guide the scholar through these various and sometimes contradictory viewpoints, as if the viewpoints were guests at the party; it means reading the anecdotes not allegorically, but as more of a dolly shot, allowing a reader to indulge his curiosity by looking at history in a close-up.

Nothing's more important than land, Mr. O'Hara reminds his daughter, as they stand silhouetted on a Tara hillside, because land is the only thing that *lasts*. As a first-generation immigrant to the New World of the United States, land is literally Mr. O'Hara's *stake* in this space, and it offers him a sense of permanence. In the evolving, then-new world of the studio system, David Selznick's identity was defined not through the stasis of the land, but circulation around it. He explored much of the studio system's prime real estate in the 1930s. He worked

for three of the major five studios—MGM (twice, in 1926 and again in 1933), Paramount and RKO—before beginning his own independent production company, David O. Selznick Productions in 1935, whose films would be distributed primarily through UA. In his travels, he cut horizontally across vertical integration, like Sherman through Atlanta, or like the anecdote in relation to more traditional modes of history. Mayer and the older moguls would eye him with mixed feelings—noting his talent and success, while being wary of his methods and ambition—and they wouldn't be entirely wrong. Selznick successfully worked for several majors, and took Thalberg as a model (Vertrees 186), but more than any of the other studio heads of the Classical period, his films—and the working methods that produced them—would predict the more chaotic, decentralized models of post-Classic Hollywood. Depending on one's feelings about that later Hollywood, Selznick can be seen as either an elixir or a virus, but by moving among so many studios (and having a hand in various later studio productions through package deals with Selznick Productions), what is undeniable is that he spread this influence over three decades of Hollywood cinema. An anecdotal history, with its slow accumulation of detail and ferreting out of hidden connections, might capture that spread quite effectively. It might also allow readers to think about the stakes an anecdotal history raises (in all senses), and the stakes film studies has in looking back at the 1930s.

“Provided you ignore what you are reviewing, you can successfully devote yourself to false literary criticism,” Andre Breton tantalizingly wrote (*Manifestos of Surrealism* 32), and Selznick's work, often dealing in adaptation, balanced between a faith in words (both written and spoken) and a passionate desire for cinematic excess which words cannot properly convey, offers an interesting litmus test for how one understands movies. Five years after Selznick is fired from *White Sands in the South Seas*, he is production chief at RKO, where he finds himself saddled

with a similarly difficult project called *Bird of Paradise*. The film's narrative (about a sailor and an island native who fall in love) is so disjointed that Selznick can't even be bothered to read the script, eventually telling director King Vidor, "Just give me three wonderful love scenes...I don't care what you use so long as we call it *Bird of Paradise* and [Dolores] Del Rio jumps into a volcano at the finish." (*Showman* 132)

In Chapter 2, I have gone Selznick and Vidor one better, offering four "love scenes" about Hollywood in the thirties, captured in dolly shots that alternate from close-up to long shot and back again. They star David Selznick, Billie Dove, Hal Riddle, Howard Hughes, and a giant ape, among others. They will be book-ended by two years—the aforementioned 1927 (a year not only crucial to Selznick and Dove, but to Hollywood in general, for it introduces two things that will play a decisive role in film production: sound and the Academy Awards), and 1995, when the studio system, which perhaps felt invulnerable in 1927, had long since passed into history. In between will be crucial stops at 1933 (when the system stands on the cusp of several important codifications) and 1939 (when it is at its peak). At the center of these scenes are two films that Selznick had a hand in—*King Kong* (1933) and *Gone With the Wind* (1939). At first glance, Billie Dove and Hal Riddle don't have a lot to do with such productions. But Classic Hollywood, as will be shown, is full of surprises.

Love Scene One: 1927

In 1927, Howard Hughes begins production on *Hell's Angels*, a World War I adventure film about two brothers who are rivals in flying and in love. It is an epic production, and Hughes—himself a pilot—is determined to make it as exciting and realistic as possible. His micromanaging style on set causes two directors to quit, and Hughes takes over the direction himself. (Thomas 36) The film utilizes seventy-nine planes from Hughes' own collection, and is the first film to mount cameras inside the cockpit. (Hack 69) The effect of such shots is

dazzling, but often dangerous: while filming the climactic battle, one pilot has to bail out when the propeller drops off his engine. Film historian Tony Thomas notes: “[The pilot] was flying in heavy fog at the time and assumed he was near the coast. He was actually directly over Hollywood. The propeller fell into Hollywood Boulevard, where fortunately it hit no one, and the plane fell, somewhat ironically, only two blocks from Grauman’s Chinese Theatre, where the film would have its premiere.” (Thomas 42)

1927 is also the year when Hughes falls for Billie Dove. According to Hughes biographer Richard Hack, Hughes and the actress dubbed “The American Beauty” (the title of one of her films released that year) (Slide 114) cross paths at the Starlight Ballroom. Marion Davies introduces them, but the painfully shy Hughes can barely say a word. (Hack 74) The next night, they meet again, and this time Dove tries to engage him in talk. Again, he is tongue-tied. Dove mistakes it for quiet confidence. (Hack 74) For the next six months—despite the fact that they are both married—they date one another, and Dove eventually moves in with him.

Pause the dollying camera on that shot of Hughes and Dove at the Starlight Ballroom, and ask: why do some movie stars remain in the public consciousness while others fade away? A publicity still of Billie Dove—probably quite similar to the one Hal Riddle received as a boy, right down to the “Best Wishes” written in white ink across her right shoulder—is reprinted in Anthony Slide’s *Silent Players*. She looks a bit like Mary Pickford (the large brown eyes), and a bit like Lillian Gish (the long, curled dark hair), and the soft focus gives her face a slightly hazy, ethereal quality. She is beautiful, but not striking, in the sense of a Garbo or a Dietrich (or, in the sound era, Katharine Hepburn): she has none of Garbo’s mysterious opacity, Dietrich’s playful decadence, or Hepburn’s charisma. David Selznick will later say of Katharine Hepburn’s debut in *A Bill of Divorcement*, “Very early in picture, there was a scene in which Hepburn just

walked across the room, stretched her arms, and then lay on the floor before the fireplace. It sounds very simple, but you could almost feel, and you could definitely hear, the excitement in the audience.” (*Showman* 142) There must have been a similar sense of excitement in Dove’s movement, given its ability to transfix both the young Hal Riddle and the tongue-tied Howard Hughes, but the rhetoric of the image preserved in *Silent Players* speaks in a register that now feels lost.

Hepburn herself would eventually take Hughes as a lover, and in 1933, she also took to the air, playing “aviatrix” Lady Cynthia Darrington, in *Christopher Strong*. The film was produced by Selznick and directed by Dorothy Arzner, an ambulance driver in World War I who worked her way from typist at Paramount Pictures to become one of the few female directors of the studio era. It captures the excitement Hepburn generated in that period quite well. The film is set primarily in England, and intertwines its melodramatic narrative of love, class and duty with striking moments of visual daring; unlike that year’s best picture winner, *Cavalcade* (to which I will return shortly), also set in London and dealing with some of the same issues, this is not a tale told in staid, “tradition of quality”-style, but one which challenges its narrative conventions through *mise-en-scene* and camera movement.

Take the opening scene: after a credits sequence whose still images of Big Ben, the Thames and Parliament call to mind clichés and conventional wisdoms about “Old England” (reinforced by the dark waltz on the soundtrack, which ends with Big Ben’s chimes), the music fades into jazz, as, in a long shot, a black limousine pulls up to late-night party on a crowded street. There is a cut to revelers pouring out of the car—a man in a top hat and tails holding a goat on a leash, a woman in a print dress laughing, another man in tails behind her—captured in a tracking shot as they move into the house. They are quickly followed by a white Rolls-Royce

pulling up to the same party, and a repetition of the same tracking shot as before, as this time a young woman in furs holds a rifle, and grabs the cap of a bobby as she laughingly walks into the house: “Sorry old man!,” she laughs, “I need this!” They are wealthy young people at a treasure hunt party, and this opening scene seems to predict the “Forgotten Man” scavenger hunt that opens 1936’s *My Man Godfrey* (a connection reinforced by a bobby’s comments to a passerby about the party—“The idea bein’ that these ladies and gentlemen have nothin’ better to do, ransacks the streets for a number of things that’s hard to find”—that are later echoed by Lombard’s definition of “scavenging” in *Godfrey*). In its quick cutting and kinetic movement, it feels like a rebuke to the staid images of England in the credits, and it also feels like a party scene out of a Fitzgerald story.

As the bobby’s voice defines treasure hunting in Jazz Age England, the image fades to another tracking shot (vertical, rather than horizontal, as in the earlier two shots) showing the loot the partygoers have collected: a wedding cake, a ship’s motor, a large clock sign with roman numerals, and best of all, a ship’s buoy with the words “S.S. Venture” printed on it, as nice a description of Arzner’s roving camera as any. The last item seen is a newspaper, picked up by a young couple, who discover Lady Cynthia’s picture on the front page, along with a detailed recounting of her latest win in an airplane race.

There are four photos of Cynthia/Hepburn on the page: one of her looking at the camera from the cockpit of her plane, one (cut off by the frame of the screen) of her in a beret, another a portrait of her in her flight jacket and cap, and the final image (inserted into the portrait’s frame) of her in a white dress. Introducing Cynthia in this way both emphasizes her role as a media image, and also—in offering four pictures—lays out in advance her many looks in the film, and how they do and don’t conform to the gender roles of the period. It also acts as a meta-

commentary on Hepburn—the pictures, particularly the portrait, resemble the movie star photos sent out to fans in the period, even as her dress and confident stare at the camera (as if her eyes want to devour the lens) give a sense of that radical difference Selznick noticed in *Bill of Divorcement*, so different from the ethereality of Dove.

When Cynthia appears in the next scene (wearing the beret of the newspaper photo), she is racing another tuxedoed man, she in a car and he on a motorcycle. She is determined to win: the film frames them together in a medium shot, but her car and concentrated facial expression nudge him to the margins of the screen. As she runs him off the road, we discover he is another party guest, one who wants to claim her as a unique treasure (a woman over 21 who has never had a love affair) and take her back to the party. When she arrives at the party, though, the centered framing of Hepburn suggests that it is she who owns the space, especially as her more casual driving outfit makes her stand out among the formally dressed supporting characters.

Throughout the film, this power of the camera to frame tension of style, gender and narrative around the figure of Cynthia is maintained, as Arzner and Hepburn both acknowledge the character as a symbol of difference in her world, and celebrate her for those same qualities. The title *Christopher Strong* is representative of this doubled perspective—it is the name of Cynthia's male lover, an important (and married) member of Parliament. Christopher Strong is a far less central figure than Cynthia, and Colin Clive a far more withdrawn screen presence than the electric Hepburn (he is the Ashley to her Scarlett). Two scenes after the treasure hunt party, two of Cynthia's young friends come to visit her, and they are framed from behind as Hepburn occupies the center of the screen; her right hand is in a jutting horizontal as it supports her angular chin, another example of how the actress could transform a dull bit of exposition with a

single gesture. There is nothing as visually striking from Clive, making the title—also that of the novel from which the film is adapted—seems like a misnomer.

Despite the centrality of flying to Cynthia's identity, there are relatively few shots of this activity in the film (perhaps another way it both honors Cynthia's difference and also "shackles" it). There are a handful of moments when Cynthia walks to the plane, or when one sees the plane take off (as in her first meeting with Strong, when she takes him up for a night flight), but not as many that actually show the plane flying. There are two notable exceptions. Near the halfway point in the film, Cynthia attempts an around-the-world flight as England's representative in a worldwide race. There is a montage combining newspaper headlines, images of radio announcers speaking into microphones, and Hepburn—dominating the medium framing in her heavy flight gear—in her cockpit, as well as the same kinds of roving overhead shots seen in the party scene, except now the camera zooms over mountains, trees and water rather than party treasures. The kineticism of Arzner's camera—which previously took the viewer into parties and drawing rooms, and linked in the narrative to the sexual relationships of the characters—is redeployed here to capture Cynthia's joy and release in flight, as well as that activity's potential peril: the montage ends with Cynthia in her cockpit, reading a note about another pilot's fatal crash, just before the screen goes to black, then fades in on extremely shaky overhead aerial views of San Francisco. In fact, this signifies a break in Cynthia's flying career: she will soon give up flying at Strong's request. A much briefer montage—of cheering crowds, another radio announcer, and a newspaper headline announcing her triumph—takes Cynthia into a hotel room, where she collapses horizontally across the vertically arranged bed. The telephone rings, and for Cynthia, flying is lost. It is Strong, and he will meet her in New York, where she agrees to stop risking her life in flight.

The scene where she agrees is worth lingering on because it feels very *photogenic* in its framing and effect. “Lingering” is the key word for the scene, which, like the scene noted above, utilizes Cynthia’s hand for its effects. Throughout the film, Arzner’s slow dollies, fades and tracking shots, lingering close-ups on faces, shimmers of light across the water, or pauses on elements seemingly extraneous to the narrative (such as the Spanish guitar music at a nightclub in Cannes) suggest an interest in suspending the story (and, by extension perhaps, its dominant meanings) and creating a sort of oasis of style and *mise-en-scene*. This scene is the extreme end of that interest, and it leads to the most riveting moment in the movie.

After flying around the world, she has arrived in New York, and is in bed with Christopher Strong. In the tired drawl of the half-awake, Cynthia notes both the time and her lovely new bracelet (“now I’m shackled,” she jokes) and Christopher once again implores her to give up flying. Out of love, perhaps, or perhaps because she is sleepy, she agrees to his request.

That is what happens on the level of dialogue and story, but there’s another story occurring at the visual level, one about the power of opacity and *mise-en-scene*, and the different ways of holding the attention of the camera. All of the dialogue noted above is in voice-over, and what the viewer sees is a hand, perhaps not even Hepburn’s hand, in a close-up. Before the hand, even, what the viewer sees is a tiny travel clock against a pitch-black background, the clock itself half-obscured in shadow. The aforementioned woman’s hand reaches over and turns on a light, creating a triangular glow, within which we see the lamp, the clock, and her bejeweled wrist and finger. The angle of her forearm and hand creates another triangular shape within the triangle of light. Her bracelet’s white pearls jump out against the shadow of her arm. Her fingers play with the small clock, caressing its glass face, and then her hand turns toward the camera, as if showing off her bracelet and ring like a model. The fingers stretch out and up, moving from the shadow

into the light; the hand freezes for a moment, and then moves back down into the shadow, towards the clock. It moves back to the lamp, turns off the light, and the screen falls once more into darkness.

How should one read this scene? It lasts only a minute, but it is riveting, and utterly unlike anything else in the film. Even when the film's *mise-en-scene* is outré, there is still a tie to narrative in its visual patterns, no matter how tenuous; even when Cynthia stands out or plays with gender conventions, the film comments on, or frames such transgressions. This one-minute moment of the hand is quite different: the dialogue placed over it places the scene within the film's narrative, but its play of light and shadow, the gestures of the hand, the intense concentration on the objects in the close-up, takes it away from the rest of the film. It is an image out of Bunuel, a fragment from a different cinema, and a visualization of Louis Aragon's cinematic décor, "the magnification of the kinds of objects that, without artifice, our feeble minds can raise up to the superior life of poetry." (Aragon 51) Watched without the sound, it feels like second-unit footage, an insert that became magical. The hesitation of the hand is a visual stand-in for Cynthia's own uncertainty about Strong, and flying—it lingers in the air like a plane before descending—but why not show Hepburn's face, already illuminated in several close-ups earlier, and always full of emotion? Is the hand Arzner's own signature, a woman's hand that controls the light, plays with the shadow and the duration of the shot (represented by the clock that the fingers caress)? Either of these readings is valid, but, as the hand flips on the light, stops in the air, then turns it off again, meanings in this scene come to us in flashes, and I am mostly fascinated with the almost anecdotal quality of the shot-- all its complex lighting effects are put at the service of merely showing the audience a woman's hand, and the jewels

upon it, a brief moment carved out of narrative time. Hardly anything happens, but the scene's atmosphere is dense, and it seems to say volumes while seemingly saying nothing outright.

But this kind of opacity—even with Arzner's other visual flourishes—remains an extreme aberration within the film's *mise-en-scene*. According to the conventions of the period, Cynthia's independence must be both visually and narratively contained, and in another of the film's paradoxes, her final containment comes when she takes flight, taking part in an altitude test even as her life crashes around her. Her affair with Strong has damaged his marriage, just as his daughter is having a child and Cynthia discovers she herself is pregnant. In order to spare everyone social embarrassment (and perhaps, the film suggests, to assuage her own guilt), she takes on the flight test as a sort of early morning suicide run. In the most dramatic of Arzner's tracking shots, the camera follows the plane down the grass runway, as it speeds up to, then past the camera, eventually cutting diagonally, from lower right foreground to upper right background, across the grey dawn mist of the movie screen. A cut to her worried ground crew is followed by a long shot of Cynthia's plane zooming into the frame from below, a tiny black shape against the heavy white of clouds and black of the sky. In a close-up on her cockpit, Cynthia closes her window, and looks out one more time. Another cut repeats the earlier image of the plane against the white clouds, and a fade superimposes the plane's altimeter on the sky, moving the audience visually from the freedom of the outdoors to the claustrophobic interior. A cramped medium shot shows Cynthia—bundled in thick, fur-collared flying gear, preparing for the test: she puts on goggles and helmet, removes her gloves, and puts on her oxygen mask. Another insert shot of Cynthia's hand is shown, but in contrast to the bedroom scene's playfulness, this shot is all business as her fingers adjust the oxygen tank's knobs. Her body completely covered by flying gear, Cynthia's appearance is very androgynous, the only marker

of Hepburn's personality visible being her quick, darting brown eyes that peer out from behind her goggles. There is a slight break in the claustrophobic framing when an elaborate optical effect superimposes the altimeter on a montage of flashbacks to earlier moments in the film, and Cynthia's memory flashes for every 1000 feet the plane ascends. The scene cuts between such effects and extreme close-ups of Hepburn's goggled eyes. Eventually, Cynthia rips off her goggles and oxygen mask, and crying and clutching the mask to her chest, allows the plane to fall back down through the clouds, long shots of the plane's descent intercut with shots of the altimeter, and of Hepburn looking out the window. An aerial shot of the landscape below quickly cuts to a long-shot of the plane crashing in flames.

It is not the conservative denouement that one remembers, however, but Hepburn's energy and visual wit in the earlier moments of the film. Against the heavy-curtained, book-lined libraries and drawing rooms of upper-class London—and in comparison to the more conventional blonde of co-star Billie Burke—Hepburn seems strikingly modern, even futuristic, as if her plane just landed from another film. At no point is this clearer than when Clive arrives to take her to another party. Again, he is dressed in a tuxedo, but Hepburn makes her entrance in silver-lame moth costume, whose metallic shimmer leaps off the screen against the darkly shadowed wood of her drawing room. Its moth antennae and cape make Cynthia look like a figure out of *Flash Gordon*, or a Surrealist short, in the ultimate example of how Arzner and Selznick want to make a different kind of melodrama—like Cynthia herself, the outfit seems alien to its surroundings, but also exactly right (in another play on gender, this is capped by Hepburn lighting Clive's cigarette, a reversal of the cinematic conventions of the period).

Arzner's roving camera rests on Hepburn on this costume, as transfixed as Howard Hughes staring at Billie Dove. Looking again at Dove's publicity photo, the silent star appears

slightly generic in contrast with Hepburn's Deco futurism. What fascinates about Dove's appearance is its *lack* of fascination, its relative ordinariness as a movie star image. Perhaps it is unfair to judge from a still photo the effect of a star on an audience, but these sorts of publicity stills were crucial to building fan consciousness in the 1920s and 1930s.

In *Movie Crazy*, Samantha Barbas traces out the strands of that consciousness in the first half of the twentieth century. Noting that the passion for movie stars far outstripped earlier passions for stage actors, Barbas suggests that, while "all theater fans made a ritual out of attending their favorite star's latest performance, where they sat in the front row . . . and waved and cheered in hopes of catching his attention" (22), theater fans

were never gripped by the questions of reality and authenticity that played such a central role in film fandom. Unlike film actors, who appeared as images, stage stars were obviously real, living humans. In addition, the very nature of the theater made questions about actors' real selves less important. Enticed by cinema's illusions of intimacy, moviegoers were encouraged to probe into stars' personal lives; theatergoers, however, generally cared far less about actors' offscreen characteristics. (Barbas 22-23)

If, initially, newspapers, magazines, and film studios were reluctant to give out such information, by the 1928, the situation had changed dramatically: responding to burgeoning movie star fan clubs, Hollywood "spent an average of nearly two million dollars on postage, photographs, and salaries for fan mail departments" (Barbas 138), in response to, in that year alone, 32,250,000 fan letters. (Barbas 138)

The rise of such an intense fan culture—which only grew in the 1930s and 1940s—confirms Walter Benjamin's observation in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" that "It is inherent in the technique of the film as well as that of sports that everybody who witness its accomplishments is somewhat of an expert." (231) Barbas notes that, of the studio heads, David Selznick was the most interested in what fans wrote, and some of the passages quoted from his studio's fan mail offer interesting glimpses of the expertise of which

Benjamin writes. One fan wrote of *The Garden of Allah* that it contained “a fatal break in unity that could not happen.” (139) Barbas observes one fan’s insights that Joan Fontaine’s “graceful movements, exquisite expression and extremely sincere acting would fit wonderfully in a religious picture.” (139) Still another asked, “When is Jennifer Jones going to play opposite a man her own age?” (138) Reading through such comments, one realizes that Benjamin also intuitively grasps a crucial aspect of star appeal for fans: “For the film, what matters primarily is that the actor represents himself to the public before the camera, rather than representing someone else.” (229)

Remembrances of Billie Dove often return to her “sultry” qualities; the Starlight Ballroom anecdote observes that, in a room full of people “all trying to capture their own share of a scattered spotlight . . . she demanded the spotlight come to her.” (Hack 73) Another story tells of Mary Pickford, the star Dove’s publicity photo so resembles, standing in for her in certain scenes of the Douglas Fairbanks film *The Black Pirate* because “[Pickford] did not want her husband too close to the sultry Billie Dove.” (Slide 113) Dove began her career as a dancer in the Ziegfield Follies of 1917, and another dancer, Kathryn Perry, remembers the relationships the dancers became involved in: “I went to this one man’s house alone one night for dinner. He didn’t get fresh with me, but he asked me if I’d like to stay there overnight . . . I said I didn’t think so and never went back. So he went from me to Billie Dove, and he put her in a terrific apartment with gorgeous furniture.” (Slide 197) The stories of her initial meeting with Hughes also contain a bit of this vampish quality, and suggest that Hollywood was sometimes like the screwball comedies and romantic melodramas it was so good at producing in the 1930s.

Roland Barthes famously observed that the face of Dove’s MGM contemporary, Greta Garbo, “reconciles two iconographic ages, it assures the passage from awe to charm.”

(*Mythologies* 57) Dove's face can carry none of this philosophical heft, but her slightly pursed lips and knowing expression suggest a woman on the cusp of the sound era—if Dove does not leap out from other stars of the silent era, or herald the brash future that Hepburn does, she does at least have the advantage, in 1927, of appearing very much of the her own urban age.

It is that leap into the future that is frustrating Howard Hughes when she meets him. After two years and millions of dollars already spent, the popularity of the new “talking pictures” threatens to make *Hell's Angels* antiquated. Hughes decides he must reshoot parts of the picture for sound, and recasts a key role—that of the female lead. Norwegian actress Greta Nissen is replaced by a new actress named Jean Harlow. (Hack 75) When she first meets *Hell's Angels'* production team, Harlow has none of the electricity of Dove at the Starlight Ballroom—she appearing, in the words of one writer, like “the shape of a dustpan” (Hack 75), and she is coached, without enthusiasm, by director James Whale. (Hack 75-76) When she appears on the screen, however, she electrifies audiences, and is immediately a star. (Hack 82) As Hollywood enters the 1930s, Harlow offers a new image of sexuality—tough, funny, and blonde.

Love Scene Two: 1933

“‘You will have the tallest, darkest, leading man in Hollywood.’ Those were the first words I heard about *King Kong*,” another blonde star of the 1930s, Fay Wray, would recall in 1969. (Gottesman and Geduld 223) She went on to say, “Although I knew the producer, Merian C. Cooper, was something of a practical joker, my thoughts immediately rushed to the image of Clark Gable.” (Gottesman and Geduld 223)

In 1927, Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack two veterans of the World War that *Hell's Angels* so melodramatically frames, are finishing a film for Paramount entitled *Chang*. Their first film, *Grass* (1925), was inspired by their admiration for the work of Robert Flaherty (Goldner and Turner 27), and used documentary footage of the Middle East to tell an

adventurous story of nomadic tribes surviving rough land, dangerous mountain crossings, and scorching heat. (Goldner and Turner 27-28) Their new film follows a similar recipe; this time, it takes place in Thailand (then called Siam), and depicts conflicts between hunters and big-game animals. Three scenes in *Chang* particularly stand out. Two parallel one another: an overhead shot of a leopard trapped in a pit, the sticks around him forming a triangle, while the film's protagonists, a family, escape from danger in a boat; and later, another overhead shot, this time of another trap, with a similar triangular shape, a fort to corral elephants ("BLOCK THAT GATE!" the title card states in capital letters). The final shot, like a Civil War photo in motion, gives an overhead view of men walking with tree branches in front of them, like soldiers moving bushes on a battlefield.

Traps, forts, and battlefields are central to the anecdotes surrounding these filmmakers. Cooper and Schoedsack met during the war—Cooper was a pilot and Schoedsack a cameraman for the U.S. Army Signal Corps. Their postwar exploits seem like something out of a Howard Hughes adventure tale, and are told as such near the beginning of Orville Goldner and George E. Turner's *The Making of King Kong*, an authoritative history of the film. Both Cooper and Schoedsack became involved in the Polish independence movement: Schoedsack, after leaving the corps, decided to join the Red Cross and help Poles escape the advancing Red Army. (Goldner 23) He managed to get some of them to Vienna, where he first met Cooper, just released from a German prison camp after his plane was shot down on a bombing mission. (Goldner and Turner 24) They became firm friends, but went their separate ways, Schoedsack to continue relief efforts, Cooper to join a special American Air Force battalion attached to the Polish Air Force. Cooper was again captured in combat, this time by Cossacks, and after nearly two years of being transferred from prison camp to prison camp, broke out with two Polish

officers, with whom he followed the railroad tracks at night as a guide (Goldner and Turner 26), a dark twist on the railroad anecdote Irving Thalberg will later relay to F. Scott Fitzgerald.

After two weeks of running and hiding and dealing with smugglers, Cooper and his fellow officers made it to Warsaw, and from there to London, where he once again bumped into Schoedsack, who had been filming the more dramatic moments of the relief effort, including the retreat of Polish forces from Kiev. (Goldner and Turner 25) The two men talked of making a film together—the kinds of adventure films they made for Paramount—but neither, at that point, had the resources for such a project. Schoedsack returned to relief work—this time in Greece and Turkey—while Cooper became a reporter for *The New York Times*. (Goldner and Turner 26) The following year, they began production on *Grass*.

Again, one notices the importance of the anecdote in framing a film's history: *King Kong* seems even more exciting and surreally self-reflexive with the knowledge of the adventurous lives of its creators. By beginning their book on *Kong* this way, Goldner and Turner offer a stirring introduction to Cooper and Schoedsack, and also remind readers of the impact of the First World War on filmmaking and popular culture—not only Cooper and Schoedsack's interest in blending documentary and fiction (or, to be more precise, anecdotally framing “reality,” much as the triangular traps and forts in *Chang* frame the animals), which arose from Schoedsack's wartime filming, but also the crucial role that air power would play in coming years. In 1927, as Howard Hughes films *Hell's Angels* and Cooper and Schoedsack make *Chang*, Charles Lindbergh crosses the Atlantic by plane, landing in Paris on May 21, becoming, as Gerald Leinwand notes, “the first superstar of the media.” (243) Lindbergh's accomplishment, in part, is motivated by a \$25,000 prize offered by Frenchman Raymond Orteig, who hoped such a transatlantic crossing would spur more general interest in air travel. (Leinwand 243) Merian

Cooper has a similar interest in the future of air travel, and he invests his share of the profits from *Grass* and *Chang* in aviation stocks; by 1931, he owns sizable shares in Pan American, Western Air Express, General Aviation, and National Aviation. (Goldner and Turner 40)

In 1928, Cooper and Schoedsack meet David Selznick, who has bounced back from his ignominious departure from MGM by taking a supervisory position at Paramount. He is assigned to oversee their production of *The Four Feathers*, Cooper and Schoedsack's first attempt to blend fictional source material and African location footage. (Goldner and Turner 34-35) It is a long and arduous location shoot, but the studio filming with the actors introduces Cooper and Schoedsack to Fay Wray, with whom they establish a lifelong bond. They are both charmed and frustrated by Selznick, feeling he has marred the naturalism of their location footage with awkward, pointless title cards, and shot additional scenes with another director. (Goldner and Turner 35) Still, the film is a hit, and Cooper admits that he likes working with the young producer. (*Showman* 92) Following the success of the film, Schoedsack continues to make films for Paramount, while Cooper concentrates on his business interests, filling his spare time by sketching out the occasional story idea, including one about a giant ape which even he thinks is far-fetched. (Goldner and Turner 37) Six years after Charles Lindbergh returns—by boat—to the United States, an ape will reach the shores of Manhattan (also by boat), and stand on top of the world's largest skyscraper, batting away the attacking bi-planes in an iconic image that offers a different play on anthropomorphism and surreal modernity than Hepburn's shimmering moth-dress. Merian Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack will fly one of the bi-planes at which Kong swats.

Boats and planes will also shape the dissolution of the romance between Howard Hughes and Billie Dove. In 1929, a chartered yacht called the *Hilda* departs L.A. for Catalina Island to

celebrate the legal divorce of Dove from her first husband, director Irvin Willat. (Hack 83-84) Hughes and Dove are now free to be together, but the good times do not last: devoted to making a successful career as a producer in Hollywood, Hughes throws himself into work on multiple pictures. It is rumored he will buy the five major studios. (Hack 85) He casts Dove in some of his films, and they do not do well. (Hack 86) These commercial failures, combined with Hughes' constant affairs, cause Dove to depart. (Hack 88) Hughes deals with grief, in part, by becoming a part-time airline pilot, and in late 1932 and early 1933, he pilots passenger planes between Los Angeles and New York (Hack 92).

His name arises in David Selznick's arguments, late in 1931, with Paramount production chief B.P. Schulberg (Selznick had noted in a memo to studio boss Jesse Lasky that "[Schulberg] said Howard Hughes was crazy to let Milestone make *The Front Page*." (*Showman* 116) Selznick felt his numerous producing successes at Paramount meant he should be better compensated, and he began to get offers from RKO Pictures to take over as their production chief. (*Showman* 115) Another possibility was striking out on his own. In 1931, Selznick is in New York, arranging potential finance for such an independent company, and he meets again with Merian Cooper. They attend a party at the home of David K. Bruce, whose wife is the daughter of the Secretary of the Treasury. (*Showman* 120) Cooper tells Selznick his story about the giant gorilla he has been doodling in his off-hours. Selznick is intrigued, but wonders if it wouldn't be a good idea to just adapt a Tarzan novel; they check, and discover the rights to the Burroughs books have been purchased by David's old boss, Irving Thalberg. Cooper, Schoedsack, and Selznick further develop their own giant ape story, and name the creature "Kong." (*Showman* 121)

Selznick, too, had recently spent time aboard ship—a honeymoon cruise to Europe with new wife Irene (the daughter of powerful film executive Louis B. Mayer)—and very much wanted to make his own mark as head of a studio. He abandons plans for independent production, takes the RKO job, and puts out feelers to Merian Cooper, who joins the company as David’s assistant, in charge of sorting through the studio’s piles of scripts and film proposals, and to handle RKO’s cost controls. (*Showman* 130) As Selznick oversees the studio’s production slate, Cooper meets with special effects man Willis O’Brien, and begins to plan *King Kong* in greater detail.

In *Tracking King Kong*, film scholar Cynthia Erb relates the story of the first test reels on O’Brien’s model work: Fay Wray was asked to look terrified in front of O’Brien’s rear projected animation work, but she was placed too close to the screen. Wray recalled that

From [Cooper’s] vantage point behind the camera, he had perspective and detailed clarity. From my position, all I could see were large blurry shadowy movements on the screen. It was like having the worst seat in the house, too close to define what the shadows were. But I kept moving, kept reacting as though I really could see the fearsome creatures, and would scream when Cooper said, “Scream! Scream for your life, Fay!” (Erb 39)

A film scholar exploring the anecdotes of the 1930s might sometimes feel the same way, reacting to the flickering shadows of the glamorous figures while occasionally losing perspective; as Benjamin says of the close-up, “space expands.” (“Work of Art” 236) It is fair to say that my first two scenes have mainly been shot in close-up, fascinated with the details, so let me pull back a bit and give a longer view.

I have mentioned air travel several times in the last few pages—it acts as a common thread between many of the figures and films I have discussed thus far, and is also a major part of *Kong*’s key image, that of the ape on top of the Empire State Building, swatting at the bi-planes that swarm; another RKO film from 1933, *Flying Down To Rio*, will feature rows of

Follies-like dancing girls doing high kicks on the wings of bi-planes, as if Billie Dove and *Christopher Strong* suddenly merged (the movie will also introduce another blonde star, Ginger Rogers, to the 30s pantheon, and pair her with rising hooper Fred Astaire). In *The Love of the Last Tycoon*, Scott Fitzgerald reads Hollywood's brightest lights through the lens of Icarus—"while he was up there he had looked on all the kingdoms, with the kind of eyes that can stare straight into the sun" (20)—but another way to think of flight is simply in terms of *movement* and *circulation*. In that same passage from *Tycoon*, Monroe Stahr discusses railroads with a pilot, echoing the speech Thalberg gave to Fitzgerald in 1927: "You have to send a train through somewhere. Well, you get your surveyors' reports, and you find there's three or four or half a dozen gaps, and no one is better than the other. You've got to decide—on what basis? You can't test the best way—except by doing it. So you just do it." (20) The railroad could act as a metaphor for vertical integration, a regimented line that occasionally diverges from its path (or crosses lines with other styles), but, generally, once its tracks are set, only changes course at great labor and expense. It is efficient and impressive: but it is also set on one path, with little room for adjustment (one would have to be as quick, as debonair and agile, as Fred Astaire in *Swing Time*, leaping from one train car to the next to avoid being tied down by unwanted relationships; Astaire astride a train car in his striped pants and tails is one of the most playfully surreal of all Classic Hollywood images). More independent-minded producers and directors like Selznick, Cooper and Schoedsack might not have had Astaire's physical grace, but they were interested in leaping into a new kind of production. This kind of work seems closer to flight paths, which have the freedom to change course more rapidly (and run the risk of crashing).

It is in veering off-course that flying seems closest to the anecdotal method I am exploring in this project, and what I have hoped to suggest in these first two scenes is the sense

in which Classic Hollywood, for all its literal and aesthetic investment in the “railroad” model of vertical integration, *depends* on such changes of course, on the tension between hyper-order and something far less organized. The anecdote can exploit this tension, this sense of whim and circulation, in a manner similar to that of the camera’s effect as described by Benjamin in his “Work of Art” essay: “Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of a tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling.” (236)

Travel and circulation are essential when thinking about King Kong, a figure, as Cynthia Erb notes, that is “repeatedly activated in art and mass culture, both in the United States and abroad” (13), and whose presence is central to 20th century narratives of exploration. (15) She goes on to note that Kong has appeared in a variety of texts—political cartoons, magazine covers, dramatic parodies, advertisements—since 1933, and that his meaning can shift depending on the context. (18) Contemporary audiences often regard *Kong* as a horror film, but Erb believes a far more available reference for audiences in the 1930s was the jungle movie, films like *Tarzan* and *Trader Horn*, an association enhanced by Cooper and Schoedsack’s earlier films, and a promotional campaign that included a “jungle production number” at the film’s Radio City Hall premiere. (Erb 56-57) Cooper and Schoedsack’s work had already intersected with one famous musical number, one that highlights both the film’s modernity and modernity’s intersection with more problematic cultural imagery. The film’s second-unit footage shows a marquee displaying *Chang*’s title appears in *The Jazz Singer*, just before the film cuts to an interior where Al Jolson sings “Mammy.”

Erb also traces out what a pastiche *Kong* is, how Cooper very self-consciously mixes a variety of generic forms—horror movie, jungle adventure, romance, anthropological study. (49-50) *Kong*, she believes, survives as an icon and evades any final theoretical resting place, precisely because this layering creates a profound ambivalence in our responses to the monster and the film. (17) Cooper’s collaborators are sometimes consternated by this sort of layering: one screenwriter, James Creelman, lashed out with a tirade that also reads as a warning for an anecdotal history: “I haven’t got forever to dig around for a line which combines everything and frankly, I am a little dubious over whether such a line can be found...[T]here is certainly such a thing as reaching a limit to the number of elements a story can contain and make sense.” (qtd. in Erb 50)

This layering, blending and potential narrative confusion was further impacted by the production overlap between *Kong* and Cooper and Schoedsack’s other film for RKO, an adaptation of Richard Connell’s *The Most Dangerous Game*. It tells the story of a shipwrecked crew who wind up on a jungle island, pursued as “game” by the crazed hunter who lives there, and it is an eerie movie; its set design and tone suggest a strange mixture of a Universal horror film and a stylish Paramount comedy (the latter enhanced by the casting of future Paramount star Joel McCrea in the lead), a blend at once frightening and rather witty. To economize and cope with the production overlap, several of the same sets (the interiors of the ship, the “jungle” set) are used for both *Kong* and *Game*, making the link with earlier jungle films even more explicit (Erb 40). Fay Wray also stars in both films, but she is a brunette in *Game*, and a blonde in *Kong*, and therefore finds herself constantly changing wigs for different scenes. Schoedsack becomes so frustrated by the delays this causes that he and Cooper finally decide to use stand-ins and, intriguingly, a cut-out figure of Wray for certain scenes. (Goldner and Turner 68)

If Dove's publicity photo offers insights (however frustrated by the passage of time) into the rhetoric of the silent star, and the pause on Hepburn's moth costume in *Christopher Strong* suggests a "still image" of space-aged modernity, what does this third still image of a star suggest? For me, reading of the cut-out creates that bumping up against surprise that Darnton writes of in *The Great Cat Massacre*. Of course, it was an economizing measure, and Hollywood has always used dummies to create a sense of scale (one of the most famous examples being the crane shot of the Confederate wounded—a mixture of extras and dummies—that would be used seven years later in *Gone With The Wind*), but it still seems rather surprising that the star would be replaced in such a way, by a flat reproduction, even for only a few scenes. What Benjamin says of the actor on screen—"the reflected image has become separable, transportable" (231)—seems literalized here, the still photo so crucial to building up star persona outside of the studio suddenly infecting the film itself. Wray, despite her friendship with the filmmakers, was not the first choice for the role of Ann in *King Kong*—Jean Harlow was considered, before Cooper and Schoedsack decided a blonde wig would allow them to use Wray. (Goldner and Turner 68) Wray's in-between status—as both blonde and brunette, depending on the need—suggests the malleability of star persona, a straddling of the silent period's brunettes and the brassy blondes of the sound era, and adds one more tiny detail to *King Kong*'s mixing of seemingly unstable and contradictory elements.

Those contradictions, which so frustrated James Creelman, have also shaped academic responses to the film. In her introduction, Cynthia Erb admits that one reason she was attracted to writing about *King Kong* was that, despite the wealth of work on the film, it was still seen as "trivial" by colleagues. (13) She notes that such trivialization "has become a kind of censorship that prevents us from looking at the figure's cultural stakes." (13) Might something similar not be

occurring with responses to the anecdote? Despite the fact that, to use Fitzgerald's phrase, the anecdote holds "the whole equation of pictures"—between business and dreams, analysis and hallucination—in equilibrium, it remains a term of disparagement, something untrustworthy and slightly disreputable in relationship to broader discourses, the academic equivalent of simultaneously being both a blonde and brunette. Like a star, it can hold the camera's gaze, without necessarily giving up all of its secrets.

In 1933, rather than make *King Kong*, Jean Harlow filmed *Bombshell* for MGM. It is the darkly comic story of a star—her image based on Harlow's own persona—who, feeling overwhelmed and abused by voracious fans, crude studio flacks and greedy family members, flees her life in Hollywood. Her attempts to establish a new life, however, are constantly thwarted by the studio's publicity man. Again, Benjamin gives us insight into the star-fan relationship: "The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the phony spell of a commodity." ("Work of Art" 231) Harlow's character is, eventually, tricked into returning to the studio, but her real-life equivalent, Billie Dove, says farewell in 1933, marrying developer Bob Kenaston, moving to Palm Beach and, unlike Harlow in *Bombshell*, staying away from moviemaking.

1933 is also the year Selznick says farewell to RKO, reluctantly accepting a job as a producer at MGM when his old boss Irving Thalberg falls ill. His first film there—*Dinner at Eight*-- stars Harlow, among many others, and is a tremendous success. It loses the Best Picture Oscar to *Cavalcade*, an adaptation of Noel Coward's stage success (*King Kong* is not even nominated). The Academy Awards had begun in 1927, as the brainchild of Louis B. Mayer, an attempt to thwart the growing unionism in Hollywood; according to one version of the story, relayed in Mason Wiley and Damien Bona's *Inside Oscar*, Mayer was upset that the studio

laborers working on his new home were costing too much, and this was the spur that made him realize the increased power of such unions. (2) The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (or, as one typographical error initially put it, “Motion Picture Arts and/or Sciences”) (Wiley and Bona 2) was designed to act as a negotiating board between unions and studios, as well as a body that would support technical advances and promote a noble image of Hollywood to rest of the country (Wiley and Bona 2). In order to increase membership in such a body—and to confer prestige on studio product—they would also give out awards at an annual banquet. MGM art director Cedric Gibbons designed the statues. (Wiley and Bona 5)

I have gone on about this Oscar because the “prestige” associated with the Academy Awards is central to Selznick’s image as a producer. In the mid-1920s, before starting at MGM, Selznick began to write his own tell-all book about the movies. Encouraged by his friend Ben Hecht and book publisher Arthur Bretano, he drafted only an outline and worked on it off and on for years, but nothing came of it; shortly after he started, and following his family’s failed bid to start a film company and resort town in central Florida, Selznick gave in to cinematic temptation, leaving New York to take the reader’s job at Metro mentioned in the beginning of Chapter 2. A few fragments of the imagined book still survive, describing Hollywood as an abnormal “game,” which would remain so until “a better class of men replace the hacks in production, the cut-throats in distribution, and the illiterates in exhibition.” (*Showman* 60)

This is partially the bitter response of a young man who felt his father was destroyed by such figures. It also speaks to more general desires among studio executives in Hollywood in the 1930s. These desires are linked, as Neal Gabler notes, to responses to anti-Semitism, and seem reminiscent of what Mr. O’Hara will later say about the stakes of the land in *Gone With The Wind*:

Their own lives became a kind of art, and the process affected every aspect of Hollywood. They lived in large, palatial homes that imitated (some would say “vulgarized”) the estates of the eastern establishment. They became members of a lavish new country club called Hillcrest that mimicked the genteel clubs that barred them. They subscribed to a cultural life, centered around the Hollywood Bowl, that simulated the cultural life of the eastern aristocracy. For their social life, they organized a system of estates, a rigid hierarchy, that could easily have been modeled after the court of Louis XIV. (6)

The Academy Awards were only the most ostentatious and public display of this desire to improve Hollywood’s image. Before continuing, then, it’s worth returning to that 1933 Best Picture winner, *Cavalcade*, in greater detail, if only to understand how “prestige” was defined in 1933, and how such a definition would affect Selznick’s later work on *Gone With The Wind*.

1933 was something of a watershed year in Classic Hollywood. There were corporate shake-ups, with Thalberg taking time off from MGM, Selznick arriving at that studio, and Darryl Zanuck leaving Warner Brothers to create what would become 20th Century Fox (Schatz 155); there were creative breakthroughs, particularly in musicals, as Busby Berkeley established his abstract style in *42nd Street* and (as mentioned earlier) Astaire and Rogers made their debut as a couple in *Flying Down To Rio* (it was Selznick who first cast Astaire in a film, giving him a number that year as “Fred” in MGM’s *Dancing Lady*); Cary Grant first caught the public’s eye in *She Done Him Wrong* and the Marx Brothers made their final film for Paramount, *Duck Soup*; Clark Gable got false teeth; and it was the last year before the Production Code was finally enforced, the last year audiences could enjoy such risqué pleasures as *Female*, *Baby Face*, and the aforementioned *Bombshell*.

In the midst of such dramatic change, *Cavalcade* seems slightly antiquated, a talky stage drama (adapted from Noel Coward’s play) that looks back with nostalgia to pre-war British class hierarchies. There is none of the visual wit of *Kong* or *Christopher Strong* in *Cavalcade*’s *mise-en-scene*, with the exception of one sequence near the beginning, the death of a little girl,

which utilizes the cramped space and echo of the soundstage street to create real delirium (it is notable that such “cinematic” effects are associated in *Cavalcade* with danger and destruction). It is a prime American example of what Francois Truffaut would later criticize in French cinema as “the tradition of quality,” an observation borne out by the statement of *Cavalcade*’s director, Frank Lloyd: “The director is essentially an interpreter. To him is given the task of making logical and understandable, pictorially, what the author and the continuity writers have set down...He must be a barometer of public opinion.” (Thomson, *Biographical Dictionary*, 79) As the following year’s Best Picture winner, *Mutiny on the Bounty*, would prove, Lloyd was not a bad director, but his statement seems tailor-made for the Academy, particularly his last remark about public opinion. The Academy was only one institutionalization of what would come to be known as “middle-brow” taste in the 1920s (the Book of the Month Club—for which *Gone With The Wind* would be a selection in 1936-- was another), and *Cavalcade*, with its yearning for a lost order, reflects this middle-brow taste perfectly. *Gone With The Wind* would reflect a similar nostalgia for a supposedly “lost” past, and would also be adapted from a successful “pre-sold” property, but its ostentatious *mise-en-scene*, quivering on the line between “propriety” and “vulgarity,” places it between *Kong*’s surreal fever dreams, and *Cavalcade*’s heavy-handed history—like Fay Wray, like the anecdote, it is both an old-fashioned brunette and a platinum blonde.

Film historian Tino Balio notes the importance of “prestige pictures” to Hollywood in the 1930s: “Compared to the total output of the majors, prestige pictures accounted for a small percentage, but compared to the total production budgets, they accounted for a lion’s share. Moreover, prestige pictures played a crucial role in defining the public image of a company.” (179) He notes that “prestige pictures” are less a genre (as they can encompass historical,

biographical, romantic, and swashbuckling stories) than a style that depends on pre-sold properties, stars, elegant *mise-en-scene*, and heavy promotion. (179-180)

Selznick found that such “prestige” could be created by “unit” production, which, as Alan David Vertrees notes, “allowed individual producers to devote full attention to a limited number of film projects and to perfect their own work.” (6) *Kong* had been such a unit production at RKO, and Vertrees quotes Budd Schulberg’s evocative description of such production: “a ‘system of creative decontrol’.” (7) I would be hard-pressed to come up with a better, more compact definition of an anecdotal method, which offers an ordered system while also offering the possibility of tangents, distractions, and an absorption in detail.

Love Scene Three: 1939

Where Gardner and his workers photographed the bodies of dead soldiers, as they did after the Battle of Gettysburg in 1863, Brady and his team arrived a few days later to make an elegiac view of the famous battlefield. Doubtless, Brady’s audience could easily fill the image with vivid associations, but without knowing the story to which it refers, modern audiences see only a picturesque image of a fence, pond and field. (Panzer 14)

It would not have been called anything so quotidian as “fan culture,” but the cult of personality Stephanie Barbas describes in *Movie Crazy*, centered on and generated by a series of photographic images, can partially be traced back to the mid-nineteenth century, and the groundbreaking work of photographer Mathew Brady. In Brady’s work, too, one finds the roots of the ambitions (and obsessions with “Americanness”) would be echoed in the early 20th century by the men who ran the Hollywood studio system. In her thoughtful monograph on Brady, historian Mary Panzer discusses the relationship of Brady’s methodology to the changing culture of the United States in the 1850s and 1860s:

But unlike other modern artists, he created no single masterpiece, nor can he be assigned full credit for a body of work, for he rarely operated a camera, or printed a negative. Brady used photographs in the way a director uses film, or a conductor uses an orchestra—to create a work through the labour of others, in his case,

camera operators and darkroom technicians. His contribution to the medium, and to the history of mass culture, is embedded in the way in which we use and perceive photographic images. The modern institution of celebrity, for example, has its origins in Brady's ability to turn famous names into famous faces, and to place them before an audience far larger than any single auditorium or parade ground could hold. (Panzer 3)

Like many of the figures Chapter 2—David Selznick, Billie Dove, and even Walter Benjamin—Mathew Brady is a figure of transition, occupying and acting as the visual chronicler of an historical border between peacetime and wartime. Several aspects of his work prefigure the methods and goals of Classic Hollywood. As Panzer goes on to note, “Whether motivated by genius, ambition or simple greed, Brady's career was distinguished by an ability to exploit new technology to reach the largest possible audience. His flair for publicity rivaled that of P.T. Barnum, his colleague and close neighbour on Broadway.” (4) Panzer's description of Brady's studio—a large, multi-staffed organization of workers with specific duties (plate polishers, chemical technicians, finishers), all overseen by Brady (7)—resembles a prototype of the future Classic Hollywood studio, overseen by a central producer. Brady's true gift, Panzer's suggests, was to give American photography a greater prestige by taking portraits of many of the most important politicians, artists, writers, actors, and military figures of the day, an ambitious play for cultural significance that would find its apogee in Brady's ambitious photographic documentation of the Civil War. “Brady and the Cooper Union Speech made me president!” Abraham Lincoln would declare of Brady's 1860 portrait of him. (Pritzker 6) In these ambitions, Brady was both the chronicler and the personification of what Panzer describes as a new national narrative for America. (Panzer 11) As Rachel Cohen notes, “It was fashionable, and it was American, to sit for Brady.” (5)

Such a description would seem to match what In her anecdotal history of American arts and letters, *A Chance Meeting*, Rachel Cohen describes as Mathew Brady's “recording fury”

during the Civil War, “pushing, pushing to get people into his collection before they went to the grave.” (28) Like a prestige producer examining images of his stars, Brady’s field portraits, Cohen notes, were “suffused with the faith that their subjects were justly celebrated.” (27) And like a prestige producer, his work often took on a supervisory role: Brady sent teams of photographers out into the field, equipped with wagons full of equipment, and many of the most famous battlefield pictures, such as those taken at Antietam in 1862, were actually photographed by Brady’s assistant, Alexander Gardner, whose grittier, more “realistic” work led to fights with the more romantic Brady, and to Gardner’s eventual departure from Brady’s studio. (Panzer 106)

Decades later, Selznick and his cinematographer on *Gone With The Wind*, Lee Garmes, would reach a similar impasse regarding the latter’s “neutral” use of Technicolor. A big part of the debate between producer and cameraman centered on the way Garmes shot the Twelve Oaks scene I noted at the beginning of Chapter 2. In his recounting of the film’s production, Gavin Lambert interviewed Garmes about this impasse, for which Garmes was removed from the film:

“We were using a new type of film,” Garmes has explained, “with softer tones, softer quality, but David had been accustomed to working with picture postcard colors. He tried to blame me because the picture was looking too quiet in texture. I liked the look; I thought it was wonderful.” In the first half hour of the picture, above all the scenes at the Wilkes barbecue, Garmes’s images subtly blend tones and shades, rather than primary colors, and are far ahead of anything else being done at the time; yet it was the Twelve Oaks sequence that Selznick particularly complained about in a memo to [Victor] Fleming and [Ray] Klune: “We should have seen beautiful reds and blues and yellows and greens in costumes so designed that the audience would’ve gasped at their beauty.” (Lambert 105)

The Technicolor processes Selznick and his cinematographers utilized were pioneered, in part, due to the efforts of Selznick’s former business partner, Merian Cooper. The initial two-color strip process was first shown at a meeting of the American Institute of Miners in February 1917 (Vaz 265), two months before America’s entry into World War I. Its inventors, Daniel F. Comstock and Herbert T. Kalmus, saw an early interest in their new invention, but technical

difficulties and commercial failures forced them, by the early 1930s, to develop a more “realistic” three-strip process. But they needed cash. Cooper, who was fascinated by any technology that allowed a more “realistic” cinematic vision of the world—and who was hoping to make *King Kong* in color—convinced Jock Whitney to form a partnership, Pioneer, which would invest in the process. *King Kong* was not made in color, but Pioneer had some early successes, like the Oscar-winning short *La Cucaracha* (1934). Knowing Selznick, by this time, was thinking about forming an independent production company, Cooper suggested partnering SIP and Pioneer, convincing all parties that they would be good for each other—Selznick could help Technicolor and their partner Eastman Kodak by offering financial assistance and prestige pictures using the process, while Selznick could create an event by filming some of his projects in the still-new three-strip process. (Vaz 267-273) In 1936, the year Selznick purchased the film rights to *Gone With the Wind*, Pioneer merged with Selznick Productions, with the hopes of shooting the Civil War epic in color. Cooper would also produce his own films under Selznick’s banner.

Within a year, Cooper was gone: he had made a deal with director John Ford to adapt a story called “Stage To Lordsburg.” Under his deal, Selznick still had story approval (Vaz 274) and the producer thought it was a bad idea. Despite the fact that Cooper had signed Ford to a deal, despite the fact that Claire Trevor and John Wayne had committed to the project, Selznick scuttled it. (Vaz 274) Feeling a loyalty to Ford, and still wanting to make the project, Cooper left Pioneer and Selznick Productions, formed Argosy Pictures with Ford, and would have a long and successful career working with the director (Vaz 275), starting with the “Lordsburg” adaptation that they re-titled *Stagecoach* in 1939.

A decade later, Cooper and Ford would make their own film about Civil War veterans, *She Wore A Yellow Ribbon*; it contains a striking scene of John Wayne mourning at his wife's grave that seems to capture exactly the drenched color Selznick asked of Garmes, but deploys it for a less celebratory purpose than a party at Twelve Oaks. Consisting of remarkably baroque, almost perfumed medium and long shots of Wayne kneeling in front of a studio sky of pink and orange that wouldn't be out-of-place in *The Band Wagon*'s "Girl Hunt" ballet, Wayne's voice cracks and breaks and squeaks around the dialogue, his arms hang in an upside-down "U," almost like Kong on the top of the Empire State Building. It is a different sort of star-image-in-repose than those discussed earlier in Chapter 2: male, rather than female; exhausted rather than playful or charismatic; highly stylized, but for the purposes of showing (through those hung arms and cracked voice) a star body breaking down rather than coming together. In *Stagecoach*, Wayne's body draws the camera toward him, and he spins his gun with confidence; now, his arms look like he could barely hold one. His body against the imposing rocks and blackened trees branches makes a potentially maudlin scene a hypnotic, eerie dreamscape, like the moody bookend to shots of Rhett and Scarlett kissing in front of an orange-red sky.

What Selznick desired from Garmes in the late 1930s was the cinematic, Technicolor equivalent of the *cartes de visite*. This was a stylish form of announcement imported to the U.S. from France in 1859 and used by Matthew Brady's clientele in Washington before the war. A new camera used four lenses, creating four small reproductions of the image instead of just two, and the smaller images were cut and placed on greeting cards. (Panzer 11-12) As Walter Benjamin would later observe, the image, even near photography's beginning, was displacing other forms of identification, including the name; it was becoming *proof* of one's actions and identity.

In Hollywood, the publicity portrait, or the star introduction (Wayne in the desert, Hepburn on a chaise lounge, Vivien Leigh on the steps at Tara) would act as a *carte de visite* for audiences, but the power of portraiture was not lost on mid-century cultural figures. Looking back at the period, Alan Trachtenberg writes of the daguerreotype's unsettling power over its subjects:

Freud's insight into the way the psyche allows itself pleasurable terrors of the uncanny in order to reinforce its defensive repressions suggests a role for the daguerreotype, particularly with its overtones of alchemy, in initiating Americans into a new age of science and industrial technology, in which railroads, telegraphs, and steam-powered machinery also seemed driven by magical, perhaps demonic, forces. (23)

In a time of war and uncertainty, those uncanny intersections became even more acute. In a remarkable extended passage in *A Chance Meeting*, Rachel Cohen traces out the history and import of Matthew Brady's 1864 battlefield portrait of Ulysses S. Grant. Noting the political importance of such portraiture, Cohen finds in Brady and Grant's manipulation of the smallest detail—a movement of the hand, the wings of a tent in the background, or a refocusing of the subject's attention (Cohen 32)—a pathway into thinking about the American military effort during the Civil War. "Grant and Brady...would have appreciated each other's immediate apparent organizational capability, which was, in both of them, akin to a visual sense," she writes. "They marshaled equipment and supplies, they kept assistants and telegrams moving back and forth between the front, their field headquarters, and Washington, and, somehow, they kept the map of the whole country and its battles in mind." (30) No general of the period understood the importance of modern technology to this effort better than Grant, and the "alchemy" of which Trachtenberg writes about photography and new technologies—its "demonic force"—would find its military embodiment in Grant.

Wolfgang Schivelbusch observes that the Civil War was one of “total warfare,” one “driven by mass media and mass democracy.” (28) Such warfare “readily adapted modern industrial methods to the conduct of war” (57), a methodology reflected in *Gone With The Wind*’s drawing-room scene at Twelve Oaks, where Rhett Butler will respond to the sputtering claim that “gentlemen a-always fight better than... Yankees!” by noting that good breeding is no match for factories and munitions. It was strategy built around tools of the modern age: Ulysses Grant’s complete visual recall of any battlefield—ability enhanced by his sketching talents (Cohen 30)—dovetailed with his utilization of engineers (to build bridges and tunnels), photographers (not just for publicity, but for aerial reconnaissance from hot-air balloons), and even something as simple as the watch (to synchronize the movement of troop regiments) (Cohen 30). As Cohen notes (in phrasing reflective of both the speed of battle and the fast-moving mechanical progress of the 1860s), “Victory was on the side of motion.” (30)

Decades later, David Selznick also marshaled an enormous amount of manpower, money and technology to “fight” a Civil War battle; but in this war, victory would rely, not on motion, but on slowing the action down. Selznick, as Sidney Howard’s anecdote suggests, had a tendency to get lost in details, and an epic prestige production like *Gone With The Wind* offered him plenty of chances. The search for Scarlett O’Hara alone took nearly two years, \$92,000, and 162,000 feet of film for screen tests (for a total running time of more than 24 hours (Lambert 36); the famous crane shot of Confederate wounded at the Atlanta train station utilized 1,500 extras and 1,000 specially rigged dummies (Lambert 104); production designer William Cameron Menzies created 3,000 sketches for the film, which were used to design 200 sets (90 of which were actually built). (Lambert 137) 59 leading cast members and 2,500 extras would wear 5,500 items of costuming, ride 1,100 horses and utilize 450 vehicles (Lambert 137); and the

production would shoot 449, 512 feet of film, cut to 20,300 feet to create a 222 minute movie (Lambert 137) whose budget would swell over the course of three years from \$1.5 million to \$4.25 million (*Showman* 319).

“Photography still required a long exposure; it remained impossible to take pictures of the active battlefield,” Cohen writes of Brady (29), and her description might also describe Selznick’s slow-moving super-epic. Alan Trachtenberg notes that the problems the Civil War presented “to comprehension in all manner of word and picture” (73) was compounded by practical difficulties of shooting in the field in the mid-19th century:

Large cameras on tripods, lenses designed for landscape views, the necessity of preparing the glass plate in a portable darkroom, then rushing with it to the camera—all these physical barriers to spontaneous pictures of action encouraged a resort to easily applied conventions of historical painting, casual sketches and even studio portraits. “The photographer who follows in the wake of modern armies,” noted the London *Times* in December 1862, “must be content with conditions of repose, and with the still life which remains when the fighting is over . . . When the artist essays to represent motion, he bewilders the plate and makes chaos.” (Trachtenberg 73)

Such phrasing evokes historical models, and the challenge of the anecdotal history, which, as I have already suggested, works to undo such conditions of repose (with the anecdote, as Cohen wrote of Grant, victory is on the side of motion). To write of *Gone With The Wind* in this way might seem counterintuitive, for the *Times* description Trachtenberg quotes of Civil War photographs is also an apt description of the film’s working methods and visual style, weighted down by the thousands of elements listed earlier in a manner similar to the “physical barriers” Trachtenberg speaks of with regard to Civil War battlefield shots. And yet the bewilderment that the anecdote can bring to the plate might preserve something important.

Reading histories of *Gone With The Wind*, one often encounters narrative arcs that read the movie’s eventual triumph as inevitable: all the back-and-forth between studios, the fights over casting, the shifts in directors, etc., are just amusing speed bumps on the road to

immortality. It is important to remember that in the late 1930s, *none of that is settled*. In 1936, David O. Selznick is still trying to figure out what the shape of his future will be. He delays constantly, doing screen test after screen test of stars and starlets ranging from Paulette Goddard to a young Lana Turner (one infamous story has a breathless Katharine Hepburn pushing Selznick for a reason why she should not star as Scarlett O’Hara, causing the producer to finally tell his one-time protégé that he just can’t picture Rhett Butler pursuing her across space and time); pushing Sidney Howard on rewrites (and bringing in everyone from Ben Hecht to, as will be discussed in greater detail later, F. Scott Fitzgerald to do further work on the script); and by the time shooting begins, writing memo after memo calling into question every aspect of the production.

There are tensions between stars, directors, and production staff. The look Selznick wanted from Lee Garmes—the bright colors, opulently displayed costumes, and ability to make the audience gasp—he got from Garmes’ replacement, Ernest Haller, who had never shot a Technicolor film before. (Lambert 105) Initial director George Cukor was well known for his skill with actresses, and took tremendous care with Vivien Leigh’s performance, but he worked very slowly, and the sheer scale of the enterprise (and Selznick’s micromanaging) eventually demanded multiple directors. In Civil War terms, Cukor was, in the slowness and halting movement of his direction, the George McClellan of *Gone With the Wind*—brilliant, admired, and eventually overwhelmed by the needs of the job. Selznick desperately needed a Ulysses Grant, and found him in brash, foul-mouthed, hard-drinking Victor Fleming, disliked by Leigh, but loved by Gable, and capable of shooting footage at a much quicker rate. Like Merian Cooper, Fleming had been a fighter pilot and big-game hunter (while Cooper and Schoedsack were filming *The Most Dangerous Game*, Fleming was shooting his own “jungle picture,” *Red Dust*,

with Gable and Jean Harlow), and he exuded what Gavin Lambert describes as “super-virile exterior.” (91) Production pushed on: supposedly, Leigh still conferred secretly with Cukor about her role (Lambert 92), while Sam Wood eventually came on board when Fleming got sick, and even William Cameron Menzies directed a few sequences (including the famous crane shot of the dead Confederates in the Atlanta train station). At the end of the long production, an exhausted Gable and Fleming pledged over a bottle of Scotch never to work for Selznick again. (Harris 205)

Set against this constant motion and chaos, Selznick’s seemingly fussy complaints about Garmes’ work take on a different color: as the party he is throwing on the set every day spins out of control, that longing for images that “pop” takes on the quality of a fetish, both pathological *and* a generator of useful creativity. Selznick’s greatest advantage in 1939 in comparison to Matthew Brady in 1863 was also his potential Achilles’ heel—he shot on sets, not battlefields, and could keep re-shooting as long as the money was there. But as the scene described at the beginning of Chapter 2 attests, there is a genius in fetishistic excess: the bustle of garish and color and light as Scarlet enters Twelve Oaks is absolutely necessary in order to make the darkness of the film’s second half carry the necessary thematic resonance. As the second half of *Gone With The Wind* deals with the aftermath of its chaotic first half, the memories of those earlier party scenes take on an almost tragic quality.

When Selznick begins production on *Wind*, he is using the most advanced storytelling technology ever devised to translate a novel about a long-gone (and in many ways, never-was) world to an audience on the verge of World War II, and the endless future it will bring; his delays and “creative decontrol” operates less around the logic of a business model (“Always be broke,” David Selznick’s father supposedly told his sons), than a cinematic logic of the image, where the

bustle of a tracking shot means as much as dialogue (as F. Scott Fitzgerald would note to Selznick during the film's production, there is an excess of dialogue in the film, but aside from the famous closing line, it is often the epic images that are remembered).

What this more cinematic logic suggests is that, far from being a criticism of Hollywood excess, the anecdotes from Keyes and Howard at the top of Chapter 2—and, particularly, Selznick's final line—might be keys to comprehending Hollywood in the 1930s (or, at least, David Selznick's Hollywood, but I hope the slow spread of anecdotes across these pages suggests just how much landscape that covers). In this model of working, distraction—a zeroing in on details at the expense of a larger whole, swerving off-course—becomes a viable working method for Classic Hollywood production (even if it can only occur against the set pattern of vertical integration). By 1939, the year of *Gone With The Wind's* release, the studio system is arguably at its peak. In the 1940s, as Hollywood undergoes tremendous shifts, this balance between order and improvisation, detail and whole, will become even more tenuous and important. An anecdotal history, then, with its immersion in descriptive detail, might maintain the bewilderment, the sense of history perpetually on the verge, while also giving the details an order and color that make them pop.

In his extensive study of *Gone With The Wind's* production, Alan David Vertrees writes of the impact production designer William Cameron Menzies had on this logic. Menzies' credo as an art director dovetails perfectly with the tension in Selznick's aesthetic between an immersion in slow visual details set against melodramatic narrative: "I am interested," Menzies said, "in the photoplay as a series of pictures—as a series of fixed and moving patterns—as a fluid compositionWhen the art director receives the finished scenario, he begins to

transpose the written words into a series of mental pictures . . .collecting in his mind the opportunities for interesting compositions.” (Vertrees 57)

Vertrees challenges the legends of how closely the film follows Menzies’ storyboards—using the burning of Atlanta as a test case, he documents the ways in which storyboard and film differ (69)—but still respects Menzies’ tremendous impact on the film, and the ways in which his artistic and fiscal goals dovetailed with David Selznick’s desires for a “pre-cut picture.” (60) Menzies’ description of a film as a “series of pictures”—discrete visual episodes that alternate in patterns of static and dynamic compositions—echoes what David Thomson calls Selznick’s life-long quest for “perfect stills.” (*Showman* 414) Moments of spectacular, dynamic movement in *Wind* are rare: the race out of burning Atlanta, of course (interestingly, the first scene filmed, shot on the old sets of *King Kong*, and supervised primarily by Menzies); Bonnie’s fall off the horse in the second half of the film, which leads to her death, and Rhett’s shoving of Scarlett down the grand staircase, which causes her miscarriage; Ashley’s frantic run home to meet Melanie after the war’s end; and the tracking shots that follow Mr. O’Hara as he races his horse through the Georgia countryside. Vertrees notes that at one point, there were plans to shoot passages in *Wind* with a wide-screen process designed and utilized by Fred Waller for the 1939-40 World’s Fair (a fair at which a copy of the Margaret Mitchell novel was placed in a time capsule (Taylor 2), a notion referred to in certain passages of the screenplay as “Grandeur Screen.” (Vertrees 73-74) Thomson (writing of *Since You Went Away*, but the passage also applies to *Wind*) describes this tug-and-pull perfectly as Selznick’s “attempt to contain all of Americana but the determination to do it all on a studio soundstage.” (403)

One of the more interesting recruits to Selznick’s army—and one who would attempt to address some of the contradictions and paradoxes noted above-- was F. Scott Fitzgerald, then

floating on waves of alcohol through a troubled Hollywood career. He was loaned from MGM to Selznick Productions on January 6, 1939, and stayed on the project until January 24. (Behlmer 190) Selznick wanted him to brush up the dialogue, perhaps write “some ‘funny’ lines for Aunt Pittypat.” (Lambert 72) It was not a happy tenure—as noted earlier, one of Fitzgerald’s primary contribution was to suggest to Selznick how repetitious the film’s dialogue was, how much stronger was Mitchell’s original dialogue in the novel compared to the additions and rewrites of scriptwriters—and Selznick soon fired him (it was during this time that Fitzgerald began writing *The Last Tycoon*) (Lambert 72).

Fitzgerald had been one of the heroes of Selznick’s youth—“I am such a Scott Fitzgerald fan,” he would write in a memo about *Tender Is The Night* in 1934 (Behlmer 74)—and the differences between the men suggest the different ways in which a cinematic logic could be defined in 1930s Hollywood. For all his difficulty in establishing a name for himself in Hollywood (his only on-screen credit would be 1938’s *Three Comrades*), Fitzgerald’s evocative descriptive voice—on display throughout *The Love of The Last Tycoon* and most famously captured in the images of the light at the end of the dock in *The Great Gatsby*—allowed him to intuit the balance between seeing and saying that Selznick was improvising during the production of *Wind*. Gavin Lambert recounts:

Instructed like the others to use only Margaret Mitchell’s dialogue, Fitzgerald seems to have been the first to caution Selznick that there was already too much of it. He reminded him that in movies “it’s dull and false for one character to describe another,” and recommended that long speeches—such as Ashley’s account to Scarlett of the desperate state of the Confederate army—should be reduced to a minimum, because the audience had already been shown what he was talking about. Fitzgerald would indicate, too, how an image or expression on an actor’s face could frequently replace dialogue....Fitzgerald’s “rewrite” was a cutting of most of the lines, explaining in a note to Selznick, “It seems stronger to me in silence.” (Lambert 72)

Fitzgerald's preference for silence over sound may have had something to do with coming of age artistically in the 1920s, the age of Billie Dove and the peak of silent Hollywood, but it zeroes in on the difficulties Selznick faced in adapting a large, popular novel. Despite his dismissal of Fitzgerald, Selznick seemed to realize there was some truth in the novelist's remarks; towards the middle of filming, he wrote about adding some scenes of Rhett blockade-running and Ashley in combat: "I feel it is important. . .to see both of these characters who stand around during most of the picture doing so much talking in action scenes." (Bridges 193) Such scenes never made it into the film. In an evocative passage, Lambert sums up Selznick's immersion in detail: "He seemed infatuated with the physical creation of a world." (73)

Among the many details in creating that world was casting, and in addition to fulfilling the fans' requests for Clark Gable as Rhett, Selznick had one brilliant showman's brainstorm when casting prostitute Belle Watling—why not see if Billie Dove would come out of retirement? Dove politely declined his offer, choosing to remain at home with her family (Drew).¹ That left Selznick still searching for his Scarlett. It is at the shoot for the burning of Atlanta—a process that necessitated, among many technical decisions, the utilization of all seven Technicolor cameras then in existence (Lambert 54)-- that what is perhaps the most famous of all the film's anecdotes was staged: the introduction to Selznick of Vivien Leigh.

I use the word "staged" deliberately, for in many recountings of this tale, David's brother Myron plots to surprise David by presenting Leigh to him like a *carte de visite* of a character not yet made flesh: "As the fire began to wane and the shooting ended, Myron arrived, slightly drunk, with his dinner guests. He led them up to the platform, ignoring David's reproaches and

¹ Dove would have one final on-screen appearance following her 1933 retirement. In 1962, as a lark, she entered a contest to write a jingle for the film *Gidget Goes Hawaiian*. Quite to her surprise, she won, and made a walk-on appearance in a little-seen film called *Diamond Head* (Slide 117).

excitedly seizing his arm. "I want you to meet your Scarlett O'Hara!" he said loudly, causing everybody to turn around." (Lambert 55) The drama of this story, and its dovetail with so many myths of unknowns discovered in drugstores or on city sidewalks and transformed into stars, obscures the reality that Leigh was already a known quantity to Selznick: her name had come up in the search for Scarlett, and Selznick had looked at two of her British films. (Lambert 56) Still, it was not until that night, according to legend, that Selznick, seeing Leigh in the dying embers of "blazing fragments soared into darkness" (Lambert 55), was struck by her presence; in a phrase that echoes both the awestruck tone of movie magazines and the analytical language of Walter Benjamin, Selznick recalled, "If you have a picture of someone in mind and then suddenly you see that person, no more evidence is necessary . . . I'll never recover from that first look." (Lambert 56)

Selznick's shudder of recognition finds its counterpart in Scarlett's introduction to Rhett Butler at Twelve Oaks. "He looks like he's seen me without my shimmy!" Scarlett exclaims upon seeing her roguish future husband for the first time. She has escaped from the earlier medium-shot prison of Ashley and Melanie, who crowd the space with their smothering goodness and diminish the camera's view of Scarlett to the edge of her hat that juts defiantly in from the right (cut by the frame, its curves resemble those of a film reel). Scarlett flirts with other girls' beaux, then returns to her rightful home: the center of a long shot, the center of a crane shot that will carry her up the steps in a grand manner. She teases the Trelton twins, before they are pulled away by angry dates. As the camera follows her up the stairs, she is shot at a kind of diagonal, the railing providing visual balance for the wind that is about to sweep through her world.

It is a great introduction: "Kathy, who's that?" she says, her brow furrowed and lips puckered as she looks offscreen, the audience longing to know what she sees (an audience in 1939 would have known already-- *Gone With The Wind* was a literary smash-- but savored the anticipation anyway). And then the camera that Scarlett has controlled from the first shot offers us her perspective-- and is seduced away by what it sees.

It is a tease at first-- a quick glance at the star waiting at the bottom of the staircase (the camera tilts a bit, as if nodding in respect), and then a cut back to Scarlett's raised eyebrows and deeply curious glances, as Kathy fills her in: "That's Rhett Butler! He's from Charleston!" As if the city is a signifier of desire, the camera cuts back, and it is now that viewers get the most dramatic shot in the film, a quick dolly in that takes them close to Rhett-- but stops just short, repelled by the force of Clark Gable's wolfish grin. Viewers know immediately that he is Scarlett's destiny-- like her, he is cinephilia embodied-- but while he is a fetishized object of desire, he is not helpless: he turns and leans against the post of the railing, very comfortable, and very much in control. The camera wants to move closer, but pauses, out of respect, fear, or desire for control; unlike Scarlett, Rhett doesn't invite its attentions, but it has them just the same.

Writing of early daguerreotypes, Alan Trachtenberg notes Brady's particular skill in evoking the proper expression from his nervous subjects: "The look was all-important...Sitters were encouraged and cajoled to will themselves, as it were, into a desired expression—in short, a role and a mask which accord with one's self-image." (26) "The term 'expression,'" he writes, "came to represent the chief goal of the portrait: a look of animation, intelligence, inner character." (27) The unsettling quality of the daguerreotype derived, he notes, from its specific technical processes:

A copper plate coated with highly polished silver, bearing a floating image developed in fumes of mercury and toned in gold, the daguerreotype contained

within itself the alchemical hierarchy of metals, from low to high, from base to noble. It also resembled a looking glass, another object charged with magical associations. By a slight shift of focus from the image to the surface on which it appears, beholders see their own reflections... The effect was apparitional in another sense as well: at the merest tilt of the plate, the photographic image flickers away, fades into a shadowed negative of itself while still entangled in the living image of the beholder. (13)

Such a process, and the end result—“that the image flickered” (23)—created, Trachtenberg writes, “a moment of shudder and refusal” (23) in its subjects.

It would be through portraiture that photography would gain commercial, then artistic, legitimacy, and Trachtenberg’s quotation from Mathew Brady’s 1853 “Address to the Public” predicts many of the concerns that would obsess Hollywood’s “prestige producers” in the 1930s, particularly David Selznick: “I wish to vindicate true art, and leave the community to decide whether it is best to encourage real excellence or its opposite: to preserve and perfect an art, or permit it to degenerate by inferiority or materials which must correspond with the meanness of the price.” (26) In so doing, Trachtenberg notes, photography acted as one means of meeting the “antebellum crisis of social confidence” (27) engendered by the rise of cities, the fears of crime, and the economic crash of 1837. (Trachtenberg 21) By 1853, Brady’s New York studio had become, “a meeting place where people of all classes and grades of cultivation mingled freely” (Trachtenberg 39), and, as the fictional Twelve Oaks would be onscreen all those years later, “*a theater of desire...devoted to performance: the making of oneself over into a social image.*” (Trachtenberg 40, emphasis mine)

Such a space anticipates the effects of the studio system and its products, particularly movie stars. Vivien Leigh would later, like the camera dolly and then pausing at Rhett, shudder and refuse the role to which she was so closely linked—“I never liked Scarlett. I knew it was a marvelous part, but I never cared for her” (Lambert 59)—but it clung to her for the remainder of her film career. As Paul McDonald notes, “The image is therefore always liable to

escape the individual control of the star.” (14) Despite the tremendous mechanisms of management that existed in Classic Hollywood—from typecasting and long-term contracts to tightly controlled publicity and studio security—it was also liable to escape the control of the studio in charge of a star’s career. Richard Dyer, while noting the power that Hollywood has in creating and shaping star images, also observes that “this is to present the process of star making as uniform and oneway. Hollywood, even within its boundaries, was much more complex and contradictory than this. . . .If the drift of the image emanates from Hollywood, and with some consistency within Hollywood, still the whole image-making process within and without Hollywood allows for variation, inflection, and contradiction.” (4-5)

"Variation, inflection, and contradiction": the star portrait—the kind young Hal Riddle received of Billie Dove in 1927, or the hundreds of publicity stills that would be used to sell *Gone With The Wind*--- would shape not only its subjects, but also its audience. One of the more interesting books on *Gone With the Wind*, *Scarlett’s Women*, offers the reading and viewing remembrances of women between 1939 and 1989, and shares the story of one such still—set at the Wilkes barbeque—“being used as the basis for true-and-false questions and extended comprehension in an education textbook.” (Taylor 5) In fact, the book suggests that one’s response to the film is entirely shaped by such circumstantial occurrences, as author Helen Taylor notes in her first sentence: “Over the last few years, when I have told people at work, on trains or at parties that I was writing a book about *Gone With The Wind*, almost always they offered me an anecdote.” (1) Taylor is interested in “the process of personal, intimate and yet also collective relationship with a book and film which we call ‘readership’ or ‘viewership’how *GWTW* lives in the imaginations, memories and experiences of individuals and groups” (17), especially (but not exclusively) those in her native England. In 1986, she

wrote to a number of popular magazines and newspapers, asking for fans' recollections of their own experiences with the book and the film, and received 427 letters in response. (18)

Such a small sampling certainly cannot be read as in any way comprehensive of fan response to either the book or film, but the letters still reveal a wide range of responses and interesting stories: the young girl who, reading the book while caring for her sick mother, burned the family meal because "I was helping Scarlett to deliver Melanie's baby" (23); the American woman who named her triplets "Gone, With and Wind" (30); the many stories about how the film, in the words of one respondent, helped strengthen mother-daughter bonds: "it was the one thing we could talk about during those difficult teenage years." (32) Others note changing responses over the years, as initial delight gives way to shock, dismay and disgust at the film's treatment of history: "It is racist, sexist and twee." (40) Still others find their feelings transformed by technology, as "Grandeur Screens" give way to home video, and Selznick's old concerns about cinematography resurface: "the dialogue seemed corny, the colour wasn't bright, the sounds were 'tinny'." (41) The historical and the visual come together in Taylor's recounting of her own shifting feelings: seeing the film after years of researching antebellum history, she notes her dismay at the film's distortions, "Yet, offended as I too was by the political argument, I enjoyed virtually every minute of it, and felt myself swept along by its extraordinary power."

(14)

She continues:

The colour, music, costumes spectacular effects—not to mention Clark Gable's devastating sexiness—moved and haunted me for days to come. In my dreams (a rerun of adolescence) I was carried upstairs by Clark-Rhett's masterful arms. Together we rode through Atlanta in flames and kissed passionately against a vivid red sunset . . . however much I know of Hollywood's historical distortions, nevertheless I still derive great visual pleasure from this brilliant recreation of a mythic American past with its red sunsets, white cotton bolls, and extravagant rural plantation homes and vulgar town houses. In swallowing whole this long and

emotionally demanding film, I absorb an interpretation of America's real and legendary past, more vivid to me than any verbal re-creations I have read in my researches into American history and literature. (14-15)

Taylor's work forces the question: what's the line between the "cinematic logic" described earlier, and the world outside of studios and star portraits that it depicts and shapes? Herb Bridges' photographic history of the film, *The Filming of Gone With The Wind*, includes a series of stills snapped by Selznick's research team prior to the film's production. Described by Bridges as "three unusual photographs of landscape near Jonesboro, Georgia in 1936" (2), supposedly five miles from where the fictional Tara would have been, they depict empty, even desolate dirt roads, tiny lakes, and forests whose trees are often bereft of leaves. Like Mary Panzer's description of Brady's Gettysburg photos that I quoted at the beginning of this section (or like the Atget photos, referenced in the introduction, of which Walter Benjamin wrote), they are photos which require audience participation and association to give them meaning; as Panzer says of Brady's work, an "audience could easily fill the image with vivid associations, but without knowing the story to which it refers, modern audiences see only a picturesque image of a fence, pond and field." (Panzer 14) The "unusualness" Bridges notes partially derives from the fact that nothing in *Wind* looks like these photos, but also from the "vivid associations" with Hollywood style viewers familiar with the movie bring to the images, and the tension between the Hollywood style and the American history it shapes and effaces.

Wolfgang Schivelbusch traces out the beginnings of the cult of the "Lost Cause" into which *Wind* fits (and which Taylor acknowledges above): "The romantic plantation of the Old South, which, if indeed it ever existed, became extinct with the North's victory, was recreated in the 1880s by New York publicists and theater producers for Yankee literary and dramatic audiences." (26) He writes of the Lost Cause as a "loser myth," a way a defeated nation copes with its trauma, and says the Lost Cause of the South is the most oblique of these—"all deny

that the nation has been defeated and postpone the settling of accounts. . .to an indefinite, messianic future.” (26) The myth of “Lost Cause,” he writes, grew out of the South’s surrender at Appomattox, after which the “South may have disappeared as a political entity, but it lived on as a kind of national religion or community of faith for which the moment of defeat was as foundational and consecrating as the Crucifixion.” (58) Popularized by historian Edward A. Pollard in his 1866 book *The Lost Cause*, and drawing on a romantic, Walter Scott-like image of the South as a land of brave cavaliers, it posited that Southern secession had been necessary to preserve a “nobler” way of life, and its very hopelessness (in the face of the superior numbers and “dirty,” such as technological warfare of the North) made it all the more valiant (Schivelbusch 58-60): a gentleman will always fight better than a Yankee. To maintain one’s dignity in the face of such humiliation, then, it became necessary, as Pollard described it, to preserve “a social and intellectual South” after the death of the political South. (Schivelbusch 59)

Such a set of beliefs, Schivelbusch points out, formed the rhetorical basis for groups like the Ku Klux Klan. (76) More than a decade later, at the end of the Reconstruction period, some elements of this image of the South merged with a more modern agenda of economic and industrial reform that would come to be known as “the New South,” and find a ready audience among Northerners who decided, “in the fight against social disorder and radicalism of every sort, the South was seen as a welcome ally.” (Schivelbusch 77) The rollbacks of Reconstruction reforms, rising conservatism in the North, and a return to the general economic and racial conditions of the pre-war South created the conditions for a cultural “reconciliation” between South and North in which popular culture would play a major role. (Schivelbusch 77-80)

In their attempts to bring the South up-to-date economically while still preserving older traditions, New South propagandists found themselves synthesizing opposing viewpoints and ideals: “Like other vanquished societies, the New South hoped to modernize by imitating the superior technological model of its former enemy—but preserving its cultural identity in the process and even establishing its superiority to that of the ‘uncultured’ victors/” (Schivelbusch 85) Plantation novels, songs, plays, and, eventually, cinema, would all take a hand in this process:

In this way, the plantation legend, taken over by the emerging culture industry, ceased to be exclusively a myth of the South. Instead, it became a part of the escapist dream factory that would ultimately appropriate all periods of human history and would later be known as Hollywood. The Hollywood version of the plantation no longer articulated a distinct Southern self-conception and cultural identity but merely exploited it as raw material—“local color”—to provide the audience with entertainment, diversion, enchantment and melodrama. (Schivelbusch 97)

There was an earlier visual model for such a process: the Civil War collection of Mathew Brady. By 1865, Brady and his photographers had amassed more than 10,000 negatives from the war, only to find out that they were unwanted: “Before the war, his visitors had commended his collection for its historic associations; now, the same faces seemed sad and stale.” (Panzer 14) Brady was stuck with thousands of photographs he could not sell, and faced bankruptcy. In 1875, he sold the photos to the U.S. War Department, and began his studio business again. (15) Panzer notes that it was only with the rise of New South/Lost Cause nostalgia that Brady’s photographs gained widespread popularity. (15) This culture provided what Trachtenberg refers to, speaking of Brady and Alexander Gardner’s photographic “narratives,” an “encompassing structure”; he writes, “Publishers like Brady and Gardner understood that, without an encompassing structure, individual images remained dangerously isolated and misleading Organized into a catalogue or sequence, single images can be viewed as part of a presumed

pattern, an order, a historical totality” (87-88), or, as William Cameron Menzies might put it, a series of fixed and moving patterns.

The seemingly unused Jonesboro photos Selznick gathered remain “dangerously isolated,” and in that sense retain a fascination, but, rather than misleading, they lead to a different narrative of the “New South,” one which recognizes what Schivelbusch refers to the area’s economic reality in the late nineteenth century, “condemned to the role of providing low-wage, low-tech labor and more controlled by and dependent on the North than ever before.” (84) Even into the twentieth century²—and especially in the Depression era—this economic dependence continued, strengthening the Lost Cause mythology, while, ironically, utilizing the plantation myth as a space of national reconciliation: “The plantation Tara was America, with its own golden age, crisis, and ultimately—American optimism being indefatigable—reconstruction.” (Schivelbusch 99) Brady and Selznick’s work serves to center a national image during a time of crisis, but this is also the dark side of Selznick’s “creative de-control,” how the open-ended immersion in detail at the occasional expense of the whole finds its unintentional and ironic historical echo in the Lost Cause’s postponing of the settling of accounts, and immersion in a myth of, as the film’s title cards at the beginning put it “a land of cavaliers and cotton.”³ The Jonesboro photos function differently. These are not “perfect stills,” but their

² In 1915, as *Birth Of A Nation* is offering its own epic vision of the Civil War (and its own innovations of cinematic logic) the lynching of Leo Frank in Atlanta (after being convicted on little evidence for the murder of Mary Phagen) suggested that the anti-Semitism feared by the rising studio heads was also part of the intersection of New and Old Souths. Frank’s case would find its own prestige production in 1998’s *Parade*, a musical collaboration between composer Jason Robert Brown and director Harold Prince that would gain considerable critical attention, but not the box office success of so many of the Lost Cause plays and films.

³ The lack of intentionality here is important to note—Selznick’s own acute sensitivity about anti-Semitism and concern about the rising tide of fascism in Europe, and his linking of these concerns with his desire to eliminate some of the more offensive racial stereotypes from Margaret Mitchell’s novel, are well-documented in both his published memos and more recent sources like the film *Birth of A Legend: The Making of Gone With The Wind*. In fact, that tension between Selznick’s own liberalism (relative to the late 30s) and the more racist imagery of the film is yet another tension that makes *Wind* such a fascinating, conflicted text.

very difference from Selznick's "series of pictures" (to repeat Menzies' description) forces one to question what counts as a "perfect still" in the first place.

By December 1939, the film's premiere is scheduled in Atlanta, and Clark Gable—who refuses to fly down with Selznick—arrives in a DC-3 with "MGM's *Gone With The Wind*" stenciled on its side. He has never flown before, and wife Carole Lombard holds his hand, joking "if we're going to crash, we might as well go down together." (Harris 211) It was a sadly prescient joke—Lombard would die in a plane crash three years later. Today, however, they arrive safely, just after the arrival of Vivien Leigh, who hears the band playing "Dixie," and declares in all earnestness that it is a "good omen" for the film's success that its theme music is already so popular. (Chadwick 184) Her plane had to circle for hours, like one of the bi-planes swatted by Kong, because the flowers that were to be presented to her by Atlanta's mayor had not yet arrived (Chadwick 183). Selznick was so nervous about how it would all go that he doctored an important photo: the famous publicity still of the cast in front of the theater for the premiere is actually a composite, created in Hollywood because Selznick was afraid he would not get good shots with all the large crowds sure to gather (Chadwick 185). Gable gets bored during the movie, so he chooses not to return to the theater after intermission, instead consuming two bottles of Chivas Regal with Lombard, Raoul Walsh, and Billie Dove's old friend/rival Marion Davies. (Harris 215) It was clear that Selznick had a "blockbuster" on his hands, even though that word would not come into use until the world war that had been precipitated on the day of *Wind*'s first preview: it was a term would be coined by British pilots for the aerial bombs dropped on German cities. Like Lombard's joke, the historical connection would be laced with tragedy. One of the stars of *Gone With the Wind*, Leslie Howard, would return to England soon after *Wind*'s premiere, and throw himself into propaganda efforts for the

Allies. He made films, gave speeches, and wrote articles for the war effort, until he was killed in 1943, when a plane returning to London from Lisbon was shot down by the Nazis; according to *Wind* historian Herb Bridges, “It was speculated that either they thought Churchill was aboard, or they knew the actor was on a secret intelligence mission for the Allies.” (244)

Five months before the *Wind* blows through Atlanta, another film has its premiere in Paris, the place of Lindbergh’s triumphant touch-down in 1927; but *Rules of the Game* is much more of a crash landing than *Wind*: the film is a commercial and critical disaster, its look at the foibles of French society finding a resistant audience in France in 1939, just as Matthew Brady’s Civil War photography had in America in 1865. The reasons might be similar: Renoir said he wanted the film to depict a group of people “dancing on a volcano” (*Paris* 152), a form of social critique whose juggling of tones its French audience found difficult in 1939, while Brady’s audience had no desire, in its immediate aftermath, to remember their own recent dance. Wolfgang Schivelbusch writes of the role dancing plays in times of trauma and war, particularly for the losing side, citing numerous outbreaks of “a manic, even feverish epidemic of dancing” (12) in these moments: “It is dancing to forget...Compulsive dancing...was both a symptom of a hysterical disruption of motor coordination...resulting from a collective trauma and an unconscious therapeutic response to that condition.” (Schivelbusch 12) In *Gone With The Wind*, the dance is embodied in Scarlett and Rhett, the former’s mourning widow’s dress both a visual example of the trauma of which Schivelbusch writes and a way of standing out amidst her bright Technicolor surroundings. Gable was not a good dancer, so the filmmakers crafted movable floor beneath his feet to make his appearance smoother. (*The Making of a Legend*) In *Rules of the Game*, the most “dance-like” moment is the one described by Andrew Sarris: Octave “gallops up the stairs, turns to his right with a lurching movement, stops in hoplike uncertainty

when his name is called by a coquettish maid, and, then, with marvelous postreflex continuity, resumes his bearishly shambling journey.” (Sarris 563) It is, Sarris writes, a “musical grace note of that momentary suspension” (563), and in the difference between those “dances” lies the aesthetic gap between the two films.

Peter Wollen notes that Renoir “was often fairly ambivalent toward modernity” (*Paris* 153), but that *Rules* is a very modern film, and that one expression of its modernity is its use of aviation, “which had a direct relationship with film.” (Wollen 154) He quotes Fernand Leger’s observation (made in 1933, as *King Kong* faces the airplanes, and *Christopher Strong*’s Cynthia crashes to her doom) that “Cinema and aviation go arm in arm through life” (Wollen 156), and traces out the ways in which Andre Jurieu, the aviator hero of the story, both upholds and critiques the thirties cult of the pilot. (156-158) Like Merian Cooper, Renoir was a World War I pilot, and Wollen notes *Rules*’ “ethnographic” quality, its desire to “capture an impression of the way life as it is lived.” (161) In fact, just before filming began, Renoir met Robert Flaherty, the director whose delays on *White Sands in the South Seas* had caused David Selznick so much trouble a decade earlier, and the men became close friends. (*Paris* 161) Like *Gone With The Wind*, *Rules* is, in Renoir’s own words, “a war film, and yet there is no reference to the war” (*Paris* 152), but its juggling of form and history is the inverse of Selznick’s: Selznick uses the most advanced technological forms to invoke a nostalgic history, while Renoir uses an earlier form—that of the *commedia dell’arte*—to make a stinging critique about contemporary life. (*Paris* 153) Both films are arguably improvised to a significant degree—the rewrites, reshoots and directorial changes on *Wind* are well-documented, while Renoir called *Rules* “my most improvised film” (*Paris* 161)--but only the latter *appears* improvised. Renoir is shooting in part on sets, with highly choreographed camera movements, but to a looser effect than Selznick;

Renoir's reading of the landscape stands in striking contrast to the highly controlled mise-en-scene of *Wind*: "Nothing is more mysterious than a countryside emerging from fog. In that cotton-wool atmosphere the sound of gunshots is deadened. It is a perfect setting for a tale by Andersen. One expects to see will-o'-the-wisps emerging from every pool, or even the King of the Marshes himself." (Renoir 170) It is, in fact, very difficult to grab a "perfect still" from *Rules of the Game*, since so much of its effect comes from the movement of the frame or the movement within the frame: like the camera moving through Twelve Oaks, Renoir's aesthetic is one of encounter and shudder, but it is extended through the whole film, not just in discrete set-pieces. Indeed, it is when the movement stops, and characters are framed (by Christine's binoculars on the hunt, or Schumacher's visual misreading of Octave/Andre by the greenhouse) that trouble ensues. For Renoir, victory is on the side of motion.

In the film, that motion—as intrusion and disruption—is embodied by Andre, but between 1927 and 1939, between *Hell's Angels* and *Rules of the Game*, the image of the pilot takes on a more critical edge: where Hughes' film celebrates the exploits of its daredevil heroes, Renoir's film finds the pilot grounded, in literal and figurative senses (his triumphant flight does nothing to lift his spirits over his doomed love for Christine). He is killed outside a greenhouse, the very sort of space, legend suggests, that some of Mathew Brady's Civil War glass plates were used to build. (Panzer 15) Charles Lindbergh, Andre's real-life, American doppelganger also encounters grief in 1939. His troubles come not through photography, but the newer technology of radio.

Lindbergh had already visited Germany, and received the Service Cross of the German Eagle from Goering (Berg 378); he is impressed with German airpower; and, at best, naïve about Nazi politics—writing to Joseph Kennedy three weeks after receiving his medal, he states,

“I am extremely anxious to learn more about Germany and I believe a few months spent in that country would be interesting from many standpoints.” (Berg 379) That night is *Kristallnacht*, as one hundred synagogues and thousands of businesses were destroyed, and thousands of Jews arrested or killed. Lindbergh is disturbed, but does not give back his medal. (Berg 381)

His romantic life is becoming a triangle, although he does not know it: his wife Anne has fallen in love with Antoine Saint-Exupery, the French aviator hero, close friend of Jean Renoir, and possible model for Andre in *Rules of the Game*. (Paris 157-158) She is asked to write the preface to his book, *Listen! The Wind*, and he, in turn, writes her a nine-page letter praising her own writing. When he comes to New York, Charles is away, and she invites Saint-Exupery to their home. (Berg 391) The relationship is never consummated, but Anne says it changed her life forever. (Berg 392)

Against this swirl of the political and the personal, Lindbergh gives a series of radio addresses in September 1939 (just as *Wind* is previewing before audiences nostalgic about an earlier war), urging the United States to stay out of the war in Europe. *Rules of the Game* opens with a jostling tracking shot that begins on the box of a radio operator and follows the machinery’s cables and wires to a microphone held by a reporter. As she moves through the bustling crowd, the reporter is the center of the camera’s gaze, but unlike Scarlett at Twelve Oaks, she does not feel like the center of its attention; the camera never takes her point-of-view (as it occasionally does Scarlett’s), choosing instead to film from a flatter, more objective position that seems as interested in the crowds behind her as in whatever she is saying. Like *Wind*’s Twelve Oaks sequence, it is a setpiece that perfectly previews the rest of the film’s aesthetic: a balance of organization and improvisation, drama filmed in an occasionally documentary style, and

depicting social relations that are deeply tenuous (the camera eventually rests on Andre, but it is a moment of deflation when he discovers his love is not at the airfield to greet him).

When Lindbergh speaks on the radio from a room in the Carlton Hotel, carried out on all three major radio networks, and speaking in what A. Scott Berg describes as a “high-pitched and flat delivery” (397), it is a balance of *Wind* and *Rules*’ logics: a star turn that disperses the image rather than solidifying it. “These wars in Europe are not wars in which our civilization is defending itself against some Asiatic intruder,” he says in the first speech, continuing on, “as long as America does not decay within, we need fear no invasion of this country.” (Berg 396) The first speech gets a mixed response, as does the second, which discussed the economic impacts of war and neutrality. (Berg 398) Lindbergh is hailed as level-headed, and pilloried as a patsy—or worse. Dorothy Thompson suggests Lindbergh “has a notion to be the American Fuher” (Berg 397). By 1941, heavily involved in the America First movement, Lindbergh gives a speech at a rally for the group in Des Moines, Iowa. A. Scott Berg notes that, at first, the speakers did not work, and others had to warm up the crowd until the technology could be fixed. When Lindbergh eventually went on, he gave a speech in which he attacked what he called “pro-war” Jews, stating, “History shows that it cannot survive war and devastation. A few far-sighted Jewish people realized this, and stand opposed to intervention. But the majority still do not. Their greatest danger to this country lies in their large ownership and influence in our motion pictures, our press, our radio, and our Government.” (Berg 427) Peter Wollen, writing of the use of radio in *Rules of the Game*, recognizes that it was “the medium of a public sphere which, as is made clear in the film, intruded into every private space” (*Paris* 154), continuing, “Public speech is the vehicle for truth, private speech the vehicle for lies. It is truth which is the intruder, which disrupts the old order, and artifice (falsehood) which restores its equilibrium.” (*Paris* 156)

The radio arguably shaped Lindbergh's image as much as newspapers and newsreels, and like the plane, allowed him to be carried, *circulated*, through the air. And yet, his isolationist, casually anti-Semitic speeches suggest the ways, like the photograph, that this modern medium can be utilized for more reactionary purposes—in a reversal of Wollen's reading of Renoir, to uphold rather than attack the old order. When touring the country after his famous flight in 1927, "Lindbergh never failed to put on his best face" (Berg 168), but by the time America enters the war, he is anathema to many, not least of all FDR, who refuses to allow him to serve. (Berg 437) He tours military bases, works for the Ford motor aviation company (Berg 439), volunteers as a guinea pig for the Mayo clinic testing high-altitude emergency oxygen equipment (Berg 446), resembles Lady Cynthia in her cockpit at the end of *Christopher Strong*.

It is another suggestion of the power of cinematic logic to, per Trachtenberg's description of early photography, provide proof of one's actions and identity. Outside of the cinema, carried over the radio, Lindbergh cannot hold his image together, cannot blend the contradictions—between the private and the personal, the reactionary and the modern, the involved and the isolationist—in a manner that will allow his star persona to continue to shine as brightly as in 1927. In that way, he is so much different than Clark Gable's Rhett Butler, standing at the foot of the staircase in *Twelve Oaks*. So many of the contradictions in the film can be read through Gable's performance: he is a Northerner playing a Southerner; a financial guarantee and an employee who despised his employer; a contract star from the most prestigious studio in Hollywood, whose persona is to stand in opposition to all forms of pretension; a sex symbol with whiskey breath. No wonder Scarlett (and the camera) is both drawn to and repulsed by him: in a film that is all about visualizing a past and romanticizing a backwards glimpse, he is the one thing in this scene that causes Scarlett (and the camera) to stop their constant movement forward,

in order to glance back at what they've passed. Like a daguerrotype, he stops time, makes it tilt and shudder a little. He bewilders Scarlett (and Selznick's film) and creates chaos; he is the ultimate *carte de visite*; he literally makes the camera *shimmy*.

Love Scene Four: 1995

In 1927, Hal Riddle still sits in Kentucky, waiting for a reply from his true love. One day, it arrives. It is a standard studio still-- a publicity photo of Dove at her most glamorous-- but to Riddle, it becomes a prized possession, especially the inscription: "Love, Billie." Riddle becomes determined to make it as a star in Hollywood. "I admit it," he says years later. "I wanted to be the next Clark Gable." (Zollo 144)

World War II sidetracks him. After serving in the Navy, he attends college on the G.I. Bill, taking theater classes and doing summer stock (where his roommate is a young Jack Lemmon). The summer stock performances earn Riddle his Equity card, and he starts to get small parts on Broadway. His break comes in 1951, when he gets a minor speaking role opposite Henry Fonda in *Mr. Roberts*. He is signed to a studio contract, and works steadily throughout the fifties and sixties. He never achieves stardom. Riddle admits, "With the exception of going to the same barber, Gable and I had only one thing in common. Our big ears." (Zollo 144) He is not a star, but he is constantly within stardom's orbit: in the fifties, he auditions for the television show *Beat the Clock*, with a young actor named James Dean. One of the challenges on the show was to stick pins into a balloon without popping it, and Riddle remembers his friend "had an *aura* about him, just like Brando. And he stuck those pins in there so carefully, and he didn't take his eyes off that balloon." (Zollo 147) The friendship with Dean brings him into contact with Humphrey Bogart, which in turn leads to an association with the later Sinatra Rat Pack. He takes supporting roles in *Live a Little, Love a Little* and *Speedway* in the mid-sixties, hangs out

with Elvis and the Memphis Mafia: “He [Elvis] was still playing little Coca-Cola games with his Memphis Mafia friends, where they would shake it up and squirt Coca-Cola on each other.”

(Zollo 149) His best roles come on television, in soaps like *Days of Our Lives*, and dramas like *The FBI Story*. (Zollo 148)

By the late 1980s, Riddle’s career is coming to a close. He moves into the Motion Picture Country Home, a retirement community for film professionals. One night, he and some friends attend a movie. Standing on the sidewalk under the marquee, the former actors, writers, and technicians exchange stories about their roots. Why did they come to Hollywood? Riddle shyly shares the story of his childhood fervor for Billie Dove. Hearing the name, a friend turns to Riddle and asks if he would like to meet Dove. It turns out she lives in a cottage close to Riddle’s at the retirement home. Riddle hesitates; his knees quake at the thought. A few weeks later, he works up the courage to speak with her. He finds her in bed, very sick, but happy to have company. Riddle shows her the publicity still he’s carried with him all these years. “I remember that,” she says, noticeably perking up at its appearance. “I remember that beret.” (Zollo 149)

It is the start of a close friendship. Riddle visits Dove regularly, wheels her around on walks, answers the fan mail she still receives, 60 years after her retirement. On New Year’s Eve 1997, Riddle goes to see her. They chat, and then he tells her he has to leave: he has another commitment, a small party he promised to attend. She makes him promise he will return at the end of the night. He says he will. A few hours later, the party has ended, and Riddle returns to Dove’s room. The nurse informs him that Dove has just passed away in her sleep, slipped into her final image of repose. He is left with the memory of her last words, “You will come back, won’t you?” (Zollo 150)

CHAPTER 3 SHUFFLE

I think it's kind of boring to lead you into all of the details right away, because then you know what's going to happen and the scene where it comes off is no good. But it can start with a perfectly good scene and then go back later and explain the story.

—Howard Hawks, *Who The Devil Made It* (336)

I went upstairs again and sat in my chair thinking about Harry Jones and his story. It seemed a little too pat. It had the austere simplicity of fiction rather than the tangled woof of fact.

—Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep* (169)

In the Introduction, I wrote of Benjamin's observation that Eugene Atget's photographs could act as evidence of historical occurrence, and that their opacity meant, "For the first time, captions are obligatory" ("Work of Art," 226). I argued that, in relation to the "captions" of film theory, the anecdote might act as a "photograph," one that returns readers to the scene of the crime. In what follows, I want to offer five such "snapshots" of Hollywood in the 1940s, in order to think about *The Big Sleep*, a film whose detective story trappings and narrative opacity have generated any number of different historical and theoretical "captions" in the sixty-four years since its release. Think of them as crime scene photographs scattered across the desk of a policeman's office, pictures of an unsolved case from another era. And remember, too, one of the insights photography eventually produced: that its images were not just evidence of what was *known*, but also had the power to overturn conventional wisdom and find details that might generate *new* stories.

Snapshot One: Exquisite Corpse

It is 1945. World War II is close to its end. On a Warner Brothers soundstage, Howard Hawks is busy directing *The Big Sleep*, a glossy adaptation of the gritty Raymond Chandler detective novel. Hawks is the consummate Hollywood pro, able not only to turn out such critical and commercial successes as *Only Angels Have Wings*, *Sergeant York* and *Scarface*, but often

working as his own producer and even screenwriter (a true triple-threat in the days of the studio system assembly line). Hawks has had a varied career, working not only in films but also as a pilot, a race car driver, and an engineer; it is this last profession which, as biographer Todd McCarthy notes, perhaps most influenced Hawks' directing style: films were products, built in collaboration with actors, set designers, and editors, in order to achieve maximum commercial efficiency. (10) If, along the way, one re-thought a genre (as with *Scarface* or *Bringing Up Baby*) or discovered a star (as with Lauren Bacall in Hawks' just-completed *To Have and Have Not*), that was a gratifying windfall of the task at hand.

So here is the engineer at work, smoothly manipulating such glamorous cinematic equipment as Bacall and Humphrey Bogart. But *The Big Sleep*, despite its many charms, has at least one cog that doesn't slip so easily into place.

"Who killed the chauffeur?" Bogart asks one day, the gravelly timbre of his voice giving an added urgency to the query. It is a reasonable question, seeing as the death of chauffeur Owen Taylor is a major plot point (and Bogart is, after all, playing the detective on the case). Hawks-the-engineer admits to his star that, well, you see-- I have no idea. But remember, film is collaboration, so if Hawks does not know, he will go to those collaborators who should: screenwriters Leigh Brackett and William Faulkner. But this is proving a tough nut to crack-- they don't know either.

Enough-- go to the source. After all, Raymond Chandler lives in Hollywood, even writes for the movies on occasion (his *Double Indemnity* was recently a big hit). Surely, he will be able to help. Chandler, like his alter ego Phillip Marlowe, does not mince words: "I don't know," he wires back in response to the filmmakers' query.

And there is the problem-- at the heart of the mystery in a movie mystery, there lies a gaping hole. Even more surprisingly, this does not matter-- *The Big Sleep* remains an enjoyable piece of commercial cinema, perhaps the most purely enjoyable (and certainly the sexiest) movie Humphrey Bogart ever made. And, like most of Hawks' output at the time, it was a big hit with critics and audiences.

Snapshot Two: In A Jam

The anecdote related above is one of the most famous in Classic Hollywood history, told again and again in countless textbooks, case studies, biographies, and popular histories, to the extent that even those who have not seen *The Big Sleep* may still know this story. It is told in auteurist studies of Hawks, as an example of the way he transcends narrative and genre constraints to put a personal stamp on the work (a film's story might not make sense, but one knows it is "Hawksian"). Conversely, it is also recounted in histories of the studio system, as an example of the efficiency of the factory method (a film's story might not make sense, but that does not slow down production). It is registered in studies of audience reception, as an example of camp knowingness (a film's story might not make sense, but viewers are sophisticated enough to enjoy it). It is a funny, playful anecdote, one that seems to confirm the later statement of screenwriter William Goldman that, when it comes to Hollywood, "No one knows anything."

Everyone loves this anecdote. It is witty and colorful, and it has been repeated so many times that it speaks to in a confident, authoritative voice. But this anecdote is not true.

The producers of *The Big Sleep* knew who killed the chauffeur. When the film was re-released in 1996, it came in two versions—one, the 1946 print that everyone knew, with its playful banter superseding narrative clarity (the version that inspired the anecdote above), and the other a 1945 print tested for G.I.'s overseas. This version contained a scene in which detective Phillip Marlowe explains his theory of who killed the chauffeur Taylor. Supposedly,

the scene was cut from the final release print because the soldiers felt it slowed down the action, and they demanded more of Bogart and Bacall. Another scene with Bogart and Bacall in a nightclub was shot, and replaced the cut footage (but, that was not the end of the story, and there are many versions of this story to be unraveled).

Novelist and critic Richard Dyer has this to say about photography in *But Beautiful: A Book About Jazz*:

Photographs sometimes work on you strangely and simply: at first glance you see things you subsequently discover are not there. Or rather, when you look again you notice things you initially didn't realize were there. In Milt Hinton's photograph of Ben Webster, Red Allen, and Pee Wee Russell, for example, I thought that Allen's foot was resting on the chair in front of him, that Russell was actually drawing on his cigarette. . . . The fact that it is not as you remember it is one of the strengths of Hinton's photograph (or any other for that matter), for although it depicts only a split second the *felt duration* of the picture extends several seconds either side of that frozen moment to include—or so it seems—what has just happened, or is about to happen: Ben tilting back his hat and blowing his nose, Red reaching over to take a cigarette from Pee Wee. . . . Oil paintings leave even the Battle of Britain or Trafalger strangely silent. Photography, on the other hand, can be as sensitive to sound as it is to light. Good photographs are there to be listened to as well as looked at: the better the photograph, the more there is to hear. (ix-x)

What if one reads what Dyer says here of the photograph as an extension of the Chapter 2 meditations on cinematic logic and the way a picture frames a moment? What matters in the case of Hinton's work, then, is not just how the photograph weaves together contradictory elements, or the pose of a figure in the shot (those elements one might read as the theme or the narrative of the photographic image, respectively); what matters even more is how the photo sounds, or to borrow an appropriately musical term, that photo's *timbre*.

Sensitive to the sounds of his test audience, Howard Hawks swapped what they felt was a dull scene for something more in tune with the tone of his picture. The most famous scene in *The Big Sleep*, then, is a replacement-- an improvisation on an already written text, jammed after-hours. Appropriately, it is scored on-screen by a small jazz combo. Captured in a long

tracking shot, Vivian Sternwood (Lauren Bacall) walks into the nightclub to meet with Phillip Marlowe (Bogart), accompanied by the jazz band's rendition of "I Guess I'll Have to Change My Plans," composed in 1929 by Howard Dietz and Arthur Schwartz.

It is a song that has, like the scene in which it appears, an interesting backstory. Schwartz was trained as a lawyer and composed music on the side, eventually drifting, like *The Big Sleep*, from a strict interest in legal affairs to a more intense interest in stylish, witty entertainment. He initially wrote the melody to a lyric by Lorenz Hart, and its redeployment by Howard Dietz with new lyric seems to match *The Big Sleep's* "rewriting" of Chandler's initial "melody." While "Plans" remained a pop standard (reappearing even as late as 1953 in *The Band Wagon*), the quotation of a song from Prohibition days-- the height of gangster glamour and, just as important, the beginning of cinema's sound period, and the modern gangster movies through which Bogart would become a star-- works to remind the audience of that earlier era, even as the film's radical deviations from that tough guy tradition suggest how much the timbre of that cinematic world has changed.

Vivian finds Marlowe at the bar, captured in a *plain american* shot, but before cutting to a two-shot of the couple together, Hawks places a group of mysterious-looking, grim-faced young people in the foreground of the shot. They complicate the shot's timbre, giving this otherwise purely functional moment (an establishing shot designed to link Vivian visually with Marlowe) a surreal air of menace. None of the teens look directly at the camera, choosing instead to toss one another conspiratorial glances, and in the midst of the bar's glamour and relaxed elegance, it is notable that none of them smile, or seem particularly relaxed. It is almost as if the extras from a Hitchcock film had somehow stumbled onto the wrong set. As with the Hinton photograph of which Dyer writes, the presence of these teens (despite their foregrounding

in the shot) is generally forgotten in memories of the scene, but once one notices it there, it lingers and opens up the film to different readings. The teens in the foreground and the jazz band noodling on Schwartz/Dietz in the background act in visual and sonic tandem with one another, become the frame within which Vivian and Marlowe sit; like “I Guess I’ll Have to Change My Plans,” those kids are reminders of an earlier, grittier style of crime film, and while the quick cut to the shot of Bogart and Bacall indicates the film’s desire to push into other, more screwball realms, even the couple’s cinephiliac allure can’t quite erase their strangeness.

After an exchange at the bar, a tracking shot carries Vivian and Marlowe to a small table, and a slight reframing once again captures them together in a medium shot (unlike many *noirs*, *The Big Sleep* is not interested in visually isolating its characters—even the shot-reverse shots that follow allow for more of the figures’ frames to remain in the shot than is common, the camera shooting from the side rather than over the shoulder). They banter, the smoke from their cigarettes curling like steam heat around their bodies. Their exchange is at once foreplay and self-reflexive commentary on the replacement scene’s lack of narrative utility:

Vivian: Tell me, uh, what do you usually do when you’re not working?

Marlowe: Oh, play the horses, fool around...

Vivian: No women?

Marlowe: Oh, I’m generally working on something most of the time.

Vivian: Could that be stretched to include me?

Marlowe: Oh, I like you—I told you that before.

The dialogue, with its double entendres about horse-racing and seeing whether or not jockeys “come from behind,” continues, until, realizing they have to end the scene somehow, the filmmakers take a sharp turn back to the narrative—Marlowe accuses Vivian of “sugaring” him off the case, she becomes indignant, and they get up to leave. As it was in the beginning of the

scene with the surly teens, the importance of framing the stars against extras in the shot is emphasized as the scene closes—a man accidentally bumps Vivian into Marlowe’s arms, they smile and say their goodbyes, and Marlowe goes to make a phone call. There is a dissolve to the next scene.

So many elements of this scene--the Dietz/Schwartz song’s title, the banter, the “accidental” bumping of Vivian and Marlowe at the end, as if the cut scene was still hanging around, pestering the new one-- comment wittily on the filmmakers’ forced reworking of their text in light of the previews and studio pressure. Even the lyrics of “Plans” seem like a great intertextual joke about the film’s many plot threads, dead bodies and cut footage: “I guess I’ll have to change my plans/I should have realized there’d be another man./I overlooked that point completely/before the big affair began./Before I knew where I was at/I found myself up on the shelf/And that was that.”

What interests me is the way in which the famous anecdote I related at the top of this snapshot “changes the plans” of scholarship in relation to this film, particularly when juxtaposed with the unearthed “explanatory” scene which proves the anecdote false. Despite such evidence, the anecdote about chauffeur Owen Taylor remains in play, and perhaps acts as its own “explanatory scene” of both the film itself and Hollywood in the 1940s. What I would like to do in this chapter is examine this phenomenon of the *false* anecdote, as well as the *well-known* anecdote. Why is it so ubiquitous, even after being proved false? How does one interpret this story, knowing now what the initial audience for this anecdote did not? Does the anecdote become more, or less interesting, when one knows it is not true? Why is the false anecdote repeated long after it has been disproved? What does it say about Hollywood during the war, historical study, and the power of the anecdote to *loop*?

Otto Friedrich posits the question right away in his study of Hollywood in the 1940s, *City of Nets*:

There remains a basic question about the mountain of Hollywood's reminiscences: Are they true? Well, perhaps partly true. Remember that Hollywood people lived and still live in a world of fantasy, and they are accustomed to making things up, to fibbing and exaggerating, and to believing all their own fibs and exaggerations. Remember, too, that they all had press agents who made things up, and that fan-magazine writers made things up, and that ghostwriters still make things up, and that the celebrities who sign these concoctions no longer remember very well what really happened long ago. (xiii)

"All I'm doing is telling a story," Howard Hawks once said (McCarthy 9), and Todd McCarthy notes that "Many people have taken Hawks' beguiling stories at face value. . . It remains impossible to know why Hawks felt compelled to insist that he was the one who told Josef Von Sternberg how to dress Marlene Dietrich or that he instructed his friend Victor Fleming how to direct *Gone With The Wind*, or that he was once asked by TWA to take the controls of a commercial airliner when the pilot took ill mid-flight." (5) Hawks' loquaciousness stands in contrast to the taciturn gruffness of John Ford (his doppelganger in the *Cahiers* battles over auteurism), and his willingness, as McCarthy notes, to utilize the interview as "the ideal means to relate his anecdotes and embody his legend" (16), makes him both a superb candidate for an anecdotal study and the ultimate challenge. How to separate fact from fiction in the face of beguilement that the timbre of Hawks' storytelling creates?

One of the central questions that the cinematic *Big Sleep* raises regards the relationship, in Classic Hollywood, between *order* and *improvisation*. It is a variation on some of the issues raised in Chapter Two: Selznick's balance of these elements was achieved by escaping into his own studio and creating a symbiotic relationship between major and independent production; The test case of *The Big Sleep* asks how these elements function within assembly-line processes of the major studio itself. How much freedom one had within the studio system, and how far

genres, star images, and conventional morality could be stretched, was constantly being redefined, particularly in the 1940s. (Schatz 341) This is the very issue—finding one’s voice within in the factory—that would be developed by Hawks’ acolytes at *Cahiers* a decade later. It is no accident that so much of the film is enlivened by small combo jazz (even Bacall sings at one point): like a jazz group, the filmmakers have to figure out just how much they can stretch out—cutting and altering Chandler’s text, which he himself had already stretched by blending earlier stories into a single novel—without losing the threads that tie everything together. As the initial anecdote suggests, losing a thread was very easy for Hawks, and his audience, but it also suggests something else: *losing that thread doesn’t matter*, at least not as much as one might think. Call it a balance between two kinds of “Taylorism”: that of Frederick Winslow Taylor, whose “scientific” planning and ordered business manifestos shaped early 20th century capitalism (and, mediated by Henry Ford’s development of Taylorist ideas into the assembly line, became Hollywood’s own production model); and that of Owen Taylor, the fictional body at the bottom of the ocean, whose opacity represents something messier, tangled and no less crucial to Classic Hollywood nostalgia.

The Big Sleep was published in 1939, at the height of the studio system that propelled Classic Hollywood. David Selznick had completed *Gone With The Wind*, which re-imagines the city of Atlanta as a space of melodrama, opportunity, and nostalgia, and he did it without ever once visiting the real city until the film’s premiere. His cinematic vision was merely the grandest example of a wider trend in late 30s American popular culture, one which saw popular culture as a mediator of definitions about “America” in a fraught and conflicted period. Two of the most popular were the rural and small-town visions of “Americana,” and the more urban and

conflicted visions being developed by the pulps and the detective stories gaining popularity throughout the decade. Ted Sennett observes that

By 1939, the film pioneers, who had forged empires out of fragments of dreams, had reached the peak of their powers. For over two decades, they had been creating an industry that, film by film, would offer an idealized vision of their country. . . America had given them material success, and now they felt compelled to pay tribute to it with images of a beautiful, expansive land imbued with strong family values and unswerving patriotism, and inhabited by a proud, handsome, courageous people. (xii-xiii)

Such a world view—the apogee of which might be the Andy Hardy films championed by Louis B. Mayer-- was not the exclusive provenance of film moguls; Jody Rosen observes that Hollywood was but one purveyor of “Americana” in the late 1930s, a period when, with the country slowly stumbling out of the Depression and fascism on the rise in Europe, many Americans looked backwards, at a mythologized, nostalgic past:

Depictions of small-town simplicity and a utopian yesteryear became staples of popular culture...The search for the ‘American way of life’—a phrase that, the cultural historian Warren Susman points out, first came into common use in the 1930s, along with such other telltale terms as ‘the American dream’ and ‘the grass roots’—linked scholarly works like Constance Rourke’s *American Humor: A Study in National Character* and Van Wyck Brook’s *The Flowering of New England* with grandiose projects like the Rockefeller-funded restoration of Colonial Williamsburg. (52-53)

Just as in *The Big Sleep*’s replacement scene, music plays an important role in the movement. It is in this environment that, Rosen notes, Irving Berlin began to rework his melancholy ballad, “White Christmas” (Rosen 54)—a song that, like Hollywood’s cinematic product, was born in the bright urbanity of Los Angeles it rejects in favor of a small-town idyll—and that the New York World’s Fair adopted the design of “an overgrown county fair.” (Rosen 55)

Throughout this rural revival, running like parallel track to its idealization of small-town folk and their manners, came the hard-boiled fiction of Dashiell Hammett, James M. Cain, and Raymond Chandler. On the surface, nothing could seem in starker contrast to the search for

American identity described above: Americana is set in small towns or on rural farms, while hard-boiled fiction requires the paved streets and rain-swept alleys of the big city; Americana centers on honest, hard-working characters who strive to do the right thing, even in the face of overwhelming obstacles, while hard-boiled fiction is often centered on ironic tough guys facing off against crooked businessmen and wily *femme fatales*; Americana adores happy endings, while hard-boiled fiction thrives on tragedy, ambiguity and loose ends, where the only happiness derived is that of the existential variety.¹ In place of the sunshine and shiny soundstages of Metro-Goldwyn Mayer, a novel like *The Big Sleep* offers rotting oil fields, pornographic bordellos, and the slow curdling of romanticism into cynicism, as in this passage, which peeks into the darker shadows of Americana's squeaky facades:

Frame houses were spaced far back from a wide main street, then a sudden knot of stores, the lights of a drug store behind fogged glass, the fly-cluster of cars in front of the movie theater, a dark bank on a corner with a clock sticking out over the sidewalk and a group of people standing in the rain looking at its windows, as if they were some kind of a show. I went on. Empty fields closed in again. (*The Big Sleep* 182)

It is worth remembering Rosen's point, however, that, for all of Americana's fascination with nostalgia and escape, some of its most powerful artifacts have their genesis in a more radical purpose, one with its own musical heroes: "The movement's torch-bearer, Woody Guthrie, championed 'people's ballads' as the earthy alternative to the Hit Parade's "sissy-voiced" crooners...Guthrie and his fellow acoustic-guitar-wielding folkies stood for grit, homespun verities, unflinching realism; at the bottom of his "This Land Is Your Land" lyric sheet, Guthrie noted: 'All you can write is what you see'" (53).

¹ The most fascinating threading of these strands is, appropriately, an Andy Hardy movie: *Life Begins for Andy Hardy* (1941) takes the title character from the small town to the Big Apple, and so successfully delineates Andy's darkly humorous struggles amidst *noir* surroundings and characters that the series has a hard time recovering its small town idealism in future installments (a failure foreshadowed by Andy's crashing of his jalopy at the end, as he wails, "I'll never grow up!").

This “unflinching realism,” despite its different subject matter, is not that far from the goals of the original hard-boiled writers, who, as Gene D. Phillips observes, forced the detective story to “shed its refined manners” (2), and strove to write of the postwar city in its own modern vernacular (and, as the reference to “sissy-voiced” singers suggests, both Guthrie and the hard-boiled writers put forth a very precise conception of what a “masculine” voice might sound like). In so doing, as Raymond Chandler himself famously put it, these writers “took murder out of the Venetian vase and dropped it into the alley.” (“Simple” 16) Chandler’s hard-boiled vision of L.A. is at once nihilistic and sentimental, its dual nature reflecting Mike Davis’s observation in *City of Quartz* that Los Angeles “has come to play the double role of utopia *and* dystopia for advanced capitalism.” (Davis 18) “This is a big town now, Eddie,” Phillip Marlowe informs a character in *The Big Sleep*. “Some very tough people have moved in. The penalty of growth.” (73)

Seen in this light, noir and Americana are less opposites than two sides of the same nostalgic coin, attempting, in a nation dislocated by war, economic depression, and the rising tide of fascism, to locate some sort of truthful, “authentic” character around which to rally, if only for the period of a pop song or pulp novel. Chandler’s own description of his dark knight detective² has that air of purpose:

But down these mean streets a man must go who is himself not mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective in this kind of story must be such a man. He is the hero; he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor, by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it. He must be the best man in his world, and a good enough man for any world. . . .He talks as the man of his age talks—that is, with rude wit, a lively sense of the grotesque, a disgust for sham, and a contempt for pettiness (“Simple” 21).

² Notably, another mysterious hero of the night, Batman, also debuts in 1939.

The figure of the detective, then, offers a model of “clarity” in its combination of black wit and tough-guy earnestness, and the mystery narrative a model of readability in a world wrenched by confusion and multiplicity. (Ray 32) In this famous passage from Chandler’s seminal essay, “The Simple Art of Murder,” however, one already sees the hand of style and artifice shaping this cry for a more “realistic” detective story. The hypothetical character described above is an impossible, contradictory ideal, and a rather adolescent one, a *Boys’ Own* vision of manhood and honor achievable only in fiction.

To write of Chandler within the genre of hard-boiled fiction, then, makes clear another of the paradoxes surrounding his work: for all of hard-boiled fiction’s interest in offering a “clear-eyed” view of the world, Chandler is far less interested in narrative than in character and mood. “The solution of the mystery is only the olive in the martini,” he once stated. (Phillips 2) Gene D. Phillips notes, “Chandler found it difficult to fashion the kind of long, intricate plot required for a novel-length mystery story. Indeed, he freely admitted that it was hard for him to maneuver a large group of characters throughout a long, complicated novel.” (19) *The Big Sleep* is a merging of two earlier novellas, *Killer in the Rain* and *The Curtain*, with the hero’s name changed from the earlier Ted Carmady to Philip Marlowe; the connecting point, as Phillips notes, is precisely the moment which will cause Hawks and his crew such trouble later: the shift from the first mystery (the blackmailing of Carmen Sternwood, called “Carmen Dravec” in the earlier story) to the second (the search for Rusty Regan). (Phillips 49) Phillips goes on to observe “It is in the newly written portions of the novel that Chandler really distinguished himself from the average writer of pulp detective fiction, especially by adding depth to the characterization of Marlowe.” (52)

I will return to the details of the novel later, but what interests me here is precisely the way in which this recycling of plot and concentration on style replaces clear narrative throughlines with a more anecdotal pattern for the book, punctuated by the sorts of atmospheric detail and vulgar slang noted in the passages above, and carried by the timbre of Chandler's voice. Like a jazz artist, Chandler's signature lies less in the original tunes he's writing than in the way his jamming on the chords of old standards creates new songs for a receptive audience. Even more pertinently, this style of writing seems to mimic the working methods of Howard Hawks, particularly in the case of the director's adaptation of *The Big Sleep*.

"Yeah. If I make five good scenes in this picture, and don't annoy the audience, I think I'll be good," Hawks declared in interviews (Wollen 2), stating another time to William Faulkner, "The first thing I want is a story. The next thing I want is a character. Then I jump to anything I think is interesting." (Wollen 2) As Peter Wollen notes, Hawks frequently borrowed from past works (Wollen 2), much like the pulp novelists, and was far less concerned with narrative clarity than speed, making the latter's importance clear through an automotive analogy that seems to sum up the cinematic version of *The Big Sleep* in a nutshell: "It's like a great mechanic who builds racing cars and one man is killed and then another man is killed and you keep on going—you're not going to stop because of that." (Bogdanovich 51)

Decades earlier, in a very different context, Friedrich Nietzsche foresaw the textual forms within which *The Big Sleep* would fit: "A book such as this is not made for reading straight through or reading aloud but for dipping into, especially when walking on a journey; you must be able to stick your head into it and out of it again and again and discover nothing familiar around you." (*The Dawn*, sec. 454)³ Return for a moment to the image of the jazz band in the

³ Intriguingly, writing of Hawks' *To Have and Have Not*, James Agee will describe Humphrey Bogart's character Harry Morgan as "Nietzsche in dungarees." (21)

replacement scene, or the musicians in the Hinton photograph that so obsesses Dyer. If a central plot point in *The Big Sleep* remains unknown, and therefore the film is unreadable according to conventional patterns, then new ways of understanding the film must be invented on the fly, like musicians on the bandstand; sticking with what the sheet music tells one to play would place one in the position of Dorothy Malone's bookstore clerk in the film, searching for a familiar melody the way she looks for a "Chevalier Audubon 1840" when one doesn't exist.

Andre Breton offers one more clue towards a new methodology in his comment on Surrealist film going habits, which, like Nietzsche's remark, also centers on the power of the walk:

I agreed wholeheartedly with Jacques Vache in appreciating nothing so much as dropping into the cinema when whatever was playing was playing, at any point in the show, and leaving at the first hint of boredom—of surfeit—to rush off to another cinema where we behaved in the same way, and so on (obviously, this practice would be too much of a luxury today). I have never known anything more *magnetizing*: it goes without saying that more often than not we left our seats without even knowing the title of the film which was of no importance to us anyway. On a Sunday several hours sufficed to exhaust all that Nantes could offer us: the important thing is that one came out "charged" for a few days; as there had been nothing deliberate about our actions, qualitative judgments were forbidden.
(73)

Another potential response to the film version of *The Big Sleep*, then, is to run a slight change on Dyer's notion of "felt duration" by concentrating attention on the "split second" intensity of a given moment, dipping in and out of the narrative, and in the meantime enjoying the characters' own movement through the film's fractured narrative. David Thomson observes of Bogart, in a description that takes one back to that replacement scene, "In *The Big Sleep*, there are numerous shots of Bogart simply walking across rooms: they draw us to the resilient alertness of his screen personality as surely as the acid dialogue." (Thomson, "Fred Astaire," 29) How might one walk across the theoretical, aesthetic and historical "rooms" *The Big Sleep* offers for investigation?

Snapshot Three: Alibis

As noted at the beginning of Chapter 3, these theoretical snapshots I am offering are photos scattered on a desk, their meaning determined by not only by what is in the frame, but by the order in which one chooses to look at each image, what in musical terms one might think of as a “set list” of ideas. I would like to shuffle them around the desk once more, change the running order. Having established my plot (the anecdote, *The Big Sleep*, and the timbre of the image), introduced several of my characters (Hawks, Bogart, Bacall, Hollywood and Los Angeles), and given a sense of my style (balanced between *order* and *improvisation*) I would now like, in best Hawksian fashion, to jump to something else that interests me, an earlier Bogart film called *Passage To Marseille* (1944). The film, utilizing many of the cast, crew, and story elements of the earlier Bogart picture *Casablanca*, was not a commercial or critical success (Sperber and Lax 220), but it fascinates me because of its extensive use of an anecdotal structure.

The film begins with a reporter visiting a Free French air camp. There, he notices one pilot (Bogart) who seems particularly focused and determined. He asks the commander of the camp (Claude Rains), who the man is. Rains begins to tell the man’s story: Bogart was a newspaper publisher who attacked the Munich settlement, and was therefore framed for murder by the government and sent to a South American penal colony. Eventually, he and some fellow prisoners broke free and became determined to return home to loved ones, and to fight for a free France. They set sail in small boat and faced starvation until a military convoy picked them up. Eventually, they took on a part of the German navy and made it to free France.

That is the Bogart’s story, and the story of the film, but such a description does not really give one a sense of the movie’s structure, which is crafted as a dense series of flashbacks. Within Rains’ initial story comes another moment when a character says, “Let me tell you story about that”; within that man’s story comes the beginning of yet another anecdote; within that anecdote

comes yet another. As one set of narrative images gives way to another, like jazz musicians embroidering on one another's riffs, it eventually becomes difficult to keep track of who is telling what tale, and how reliable such narrations are. But this uncertainty only adds to the film's allure: as the layers of character and motivation are slowly peeled back, and each story comments on another, the characters take on a complexity and resonance they might not have had within a more chronological narrative.

This layering of stories and anecdotes, versions and counter-versions, is precisely how one should think about the issues surrounding *The Big Sleep*, as the history of the film becomes a Russian doll of stories within stories. One of the best single analyses of the *Sleep* anecdote I told at the outset is Gene D. Phillips' chapter on the film in *Creatures of Darkness*; his reading is useful for giving an overview of all the versions of "who killed the chauffeur?" as well as the differences between the novellas, the novel and the film on this issue. Another good resource is the documentary on the film's lost scenes that was issued on the DVD copy of the film. Taken together, these resources begin to sketch out and explain some of the paradoxes embodied in David Thomson's observation that "however open in design, Hawks was a precisionist in shooting." (*The Big Sleep* 64) They also hint at why this extremely well worn anecdote remains worth telling.

Earlier, I noted that *The Big Sleep*, and this false anecdote I am exploring, offer one way of thinking about Classic Hollywood: as a constant series of attempts to master the balance between order and improvisation (Thomson's quote above about the film observes this split). Like the shipmates in *Passage to Marseille*, what course of action one takes depends on which story one chooses to believe.

The first story is that of order, and it has three potential narrators: the film studio, the film genre and the auteur. Jack Warner, production chief of the studio that bore his name, stated in the late thirties, “I’m running a factory. Making movies is like any other kind of factory production requiring discipline and order rather than temperament and talent.” (Sperling and Milner 226) A variation on Warner’s blunt definition is Thomas Schatz’s extensive, book-length survey of Classic Hollywood, *The Genius of the System*. Schatz’s phrasing hints that the studios can be understood as functioning not only as assembly-line systems, but in the manner of a big band, where musicians blend individual talents into a brilliant whole: “The quality and artistry of all of these [studio] films,” Schatz writes, “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.” (Schatz 6) Schatz notes Warner Brothers’ transition from a low-budget, predominantly genre-driven output in the early thirties to a more “upscale,” star vehicle output by the late thirties and early forties, simultaneous with the shift in emphasis on first-run theatrical release. (227) During the war, Warners pulled even with MGM and 20th Century-Fox, consolidating the studio’s rise to major status. At the center of the transition from one period to another, Schatz notes, was Humphrey Bogart; read through the musical lens, Bogart sounds almost like the be-bop musicians transforming post-war jazz in the same moment as *The Big Sleep*’s 1946 release:

In fact, Bogart’s rise in the early forties confirmed the continued viability of Warners’ house style and its generic traditions, and the flexibility of that style when it came into contact with new elements. . . .But [the films] were somehow different, distinguished by the vulnerability and odd romantic appeal of Bogart’s persona, by a curious blend of cynicism and inner resolve that brought an offbeat, almost existential quality to the Warners hero. (303)

At the tail end of the war, as Warner Brothers was reaching a commercial and artistic peak, what mattered was exploiting this persona and its appeal as much as possible. Bogart had a job to do, one that, however unique his style of play, functioned against a set pattern of narrative and genre (melody and harmony), and was as set as any technician's. It was so developed by 1945 that it could be achieved in spite of plot glitches.

Nothing in *The Big Sleep* makes this transition from one "house style" to another (and Bogart's role in that transition) clearer than the contrast between the nightclub scene described earlier and the sequence it replaced, set in a police car and at the D.A.'s office. The D.A. sequence begins as Marlowe sits in the back of a police car with Bernie Ohls, his pal on the force. Framed in a medium shot, the "city" rear projected through the car's back window, it is a moment straight out of several low-budget noirs (right down to the sharing of the cigarettes). The scene dissolves to door that says "District Attorney", as Marlowe and Ohls enter the shot, then enter the room (this acts as a slight variation on the film's opening shot, which showed the door to the Sternwood mansion, then Marlowe's finger entering the shot to ring the bell; in both cases, the doorway signals the audience that exposition will occur).

A short tracking shot takes viewers into the D.A.'s office, where Marlowe will discuss the facts of the case thus far. The accoutrements of the room are practical, yet elegant—a polished, thickly wooden desk, comfortable leather chairs, thin carpeting, and half-closed blinds on the windows, their centered framing dominating the shot. A cut to a *plain american* introduces viewers to Captain Kronjager, whose flat-brimmed fedora and sullen expression remind one of the supposed seriousness of this scene (and the murder mystery in general), even as a cut to Marlowe—stretched out in a small chair and tugging with insouciance at his ear—belies such self-seriousness. Like the nightclub scene that will replace it, these scenes in the car

and the office will utilize a mixture of tracking shots, medium shots and *plans americain*, but will re-order them like a jazz solo, creating a different tone.

Captain Kronjager catches the audience up—Joe Brody has been found “with two slugs in him,” Carmen Sternwood was found on the premises; she has been brought in for questioning and claims to know nothing. Tugging on his ear again and lighting a cigarette, Marlowe sits quietly, as Ohls takes over: Marlowe has found Brody’s murderer, and solved two other killings as well. The men’s contrasting body positions—Kronjager fidgeting on the edge of the D.A.’s desk, Bogart lounging in the leather chair, Ohls sitting upright, practically bursting out of his medium shot—helps one to understand the stories as much as the occasionally confusing dialogue.

Chauffeur Owen Taylor killed Geiger, who was running a pornographic book ring of which Kronjager wasn’t aware. Here, Bogart takes over the exposition, but, notably, there is a dissolve to the next shot as he begins to speak, and the audience sees a close-up of a hand jotting notes in short-hand. After informing the authorities of the relationship between Geiger, Brody, and Brody’s secretary Agnes, Bogart is asked if his story is complete. He says he’s “left out a few personal details,” in order to protect the Sternwoods. Kronjager threatens to take away Marlowe’s license, but the D.A. cuts him off, claiming that two murders have been solved, and there’s no use in poking around further. As the police officers leave the office, the D.A. looks over the stenographer’s shorthand, while asking Marlowe (who now replicates Kronjager’s earlier body language, sitting on the edge of the desk and looking at the carpet rather than the D.A.) if he thinks he can “keep the two murders separate” (perhaps an in-joke about the way the novel merged two different novellas). A series of shots reveals the D.A.’s suspicion that Regan is involved in the Sternwood case. A cut to a still another *plain americain* takes Bogart out of the

office. He meets Bernie by the elevator, where Bogart tells him he will investigate this strange spiral of events further, including the disappearance of Regan and Eddie Mars' wife.

In its verbal and visual economy, this scene is a good representation of the Warners' style. There is nothing ostentatious in the camerawork, mostly a series of medium shots, long shots and *plain americains*, the only tracking shots those needed to carry viewers from one space to another. Unlike the "European" elegance of Paramount or the art deco ostentation of MGM, the mise-en-scene is pared down, pragmatic, offering enough to suggest place and rank, but no more. Even the dissolve to the shorthand, compressing Bogart's long explanation, suggests a desire to cut the fat from a scene whenever possible.

If the studio system offers one story of order, genre offers another. The early thirties saw Warner Brothers developing the gangster film and the social problem film, both genres a result of Warners' liberal politics and their tighter budgeting in comparison to rival studios:

Warners kept making gangster movies, but not simply because stories of tough guys and machine-gun wars were popular. Making socially-conscious films—films that dealt with problems from a moralistic perspective, exposing injustices, and suggesting some type of action that would improve the social system—was their forte. (Sperling and Milner 185)

Read in this way, the sequence at the D.A.'s office conforms to the stock characters and narrative tropes of the crime films Warners spent a decade developing: the ride to the station, the gruff cop in fedora, the paternal district attorney, the sarcastic detective. A larger budget may allow for a slight upgrade in those elements—more polished sets or stars, for instance—but their basic forms remains the same. Like the pulps that Chandler drew on, genre films recycle characters, plot lines, and visual elements in a way that creates a comfortable familiarity (or, in the hands of the Surrealists, allows for a high degree of fetishization). Film scholar Barry Keith Grant writes of genre through an analogy to cars and guns, two elements central to *The Big Sleep*'s disparate narrative patterns:

Stated simply, genre movies are those commercial feature films which, through repetition and variation, tell familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar situations. They also encourage expectations and experiences similar to those of similar films we have already seen. . . .Genre movies are the Model T's or the Colt revolvers with interchangeable parts. (xv)

Other moments in *The Big Sleep* that conform to the detective/procedural model include the aforementioned meeting at General Sternwood's mansion, when Marlowe takes the case; the gunfights at the Laverne Terrace house early in the film, and the gunfights at the end; the shady crowds at Eddie Mars' club, with their drinking and gambling; and the tail job in the cab. Many of these scenes appear, with slight variations, in the original novel. These set generic elements arguably make improvisation easier—the familiarity of the detective film (and the Bogart/Bacall pairing, established in *To Have and Have Not*), means the filmmakers can run changes on the material without completely losing the audience.

Such variations suggest the third ordering concept, the auteur. Peter Wollen's structuralist reading of Hawks suggests some overlaps with the kinds of genre readings noted above (and, like the definition of genre offered above, overlaps nicely with the language of *crime*):

Hawks's work was structured synchronically by a contrast between his adventure dramas (which always had a comic subtext) and his comedies (which always parodied his dramas). . . .At the same time, within each series, drama and comedy, Hawks built up a diachronic structure over time by repetition and variation film by film. . . .In the terms which Hawks himself repeatedly used, 'I stole from myself.' But he did it differently each time. (2)

It is notable just how much of the auteurist criticism on Hawks fits this sort of reading, choosing to read Hawks as the engineer McCarthy will later remind readers he was. It is the language of functionality, of order, perhaps a critical analogue to the stripped-down "simplicity" of the Woody Guthrie folk songs noted earlier. As early as 1928, Jean-George Auriol will describe Hawks as a director doing "everything we know he should be given to do with the same

simplicity, the same comforting sureness.” (13) Decades later, recalling the “Modernity of Howard Hawks,” Henri Langlois will remember the initial impact of the film Auriol wrote about,

A Girl In Every Port :

With the coming of the sound film, the problem arose of cinematic construction in terms of speech, of the editing of dialogue in terms of movement. A new dramaturgy was about to be born: it had to be discovered, explored, established. . . . From *The Dawn Patrol* to *Ceiling Zero*, Hawks was totally preoccupied with this construction. As a result, he became the Le Corbusier of the sound film, in the way he handles lines and volume. . . .

The essential. The truth of the dialogue, the truth of the situations, the truth of subjects, of the millieux, of the characters: a dramaturgy derived from an agglomeration of facts, words, noises, movements, situation, as a motor is assembled. (73-74)

Andrew Sarris, bringing the auteur theory to America in the early 1960s, will also note that “the same lines and basic situations pop up in film after film with surprisingly little variation” (102), observing that Hawks’ professionalism extends to his characters’ worldviews, and conclude “This is good, clean, direct, functional cinema, perhaps the most distinctively American cinema of all.” (104) Even the most explicitly philosophical of the early auteur critics of Hawks, Jacques Rivette, will posit that “the comedies show another side of this principle of monotony. Forward action is replaced by repetition, like the rhetoric of Raymond Roussel replacing Peguy’s; the same actions, endlessly recurring, which Hawks builds up with the persistence of a maniac and the patience of a man obsessed.” (29)

And yet, even within this critical insistence that “functionality,” “the same lines and basic situations,” and “repetition” act as shibboleths around the canonization of Hawks, there is enough fissure to suggest other readings; after all it is “*surprisingly little variation*” for Sarris, and “doing it *different* every time” according to Wollen. And Rivette’s description of Hawks’ “endlessly recurring” actions brings to mind a musician working endless variations on the same

riff, what Langlois notes as an agglomeration of noises (but doing it differently every time).

What does an emphasis on “clean functionality” therefore obscure?

Within the ordering concept of auteurism, it is worth thinking again about the two scenes (the nightclub and the DA’s office) described thus far. In Hawks’ films, the sense of repetition that Rivette notes occurs not only on the narrative level, but also the visual one. Hawks uses the close-up sparingly, often preferring a long shot or medium framing that allows one to see characters moving against the landscape, or brought together in the frame. Frequently, the characters in *The Big Sleep* are linked in a *plain americain* (the “American shot”), a framing from the knees up that was so named by French critics because of its constant recurrence in American cinema; for them, it was a style of shooting that took on the quality of a cinematic national identity. This phrasing, with its suggestion of “plains,” also carries in it a pun: deployed constantly within *Sleep*’s witty, urban entertainment, it links not only characters in a single shot, but also literally *embodies* a blending of those seemingly opposite poles of city and country that Americana and *noir* are often read as separating. In doing so, its elegant unfussiness both reinforces the concept of the “plain American” that the hard-boiled detective supposedly represents, and also begins to suggest that such a character is not innate, but a series of stylistic choices and contradictions papered over by a timbre that also blends the seemingly disparate (rough and gentle, straightforward and screwball, clean functionality and endless, manic repetition).

What all three of these ordering concepts (studio, genre, auteur) have in common is the creation of familiarity, offering readers of a film a set of patterns or frameworks through which to read, as Langlois puts it, the agglomerations of facts, noises, and movements. To say “Warner Brothers,” “crime film,” “Hawks,” “pulp,” or, indeed, “Hollywood,” is to suggest that one knows

how this movie is going to end. Speaking of the film in this manner enacts a search for clarity, a desire for what Stephen Greenblatt calls the *grands recits*, or what might also be called a *method*. Despite the usefulness of such methodologies, the end result often has the effect of Harry Jones' story, described in the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter, the rhetorical order taking on the pat simplicity of fiction, rather than the tangled woof, the timbre, of the real. The anecdote about the chauffeur suggests something else: it generates the possibility of crafting a different kind of theoretical/historical "movie," the possibility of humming a new tune.

Snapshot Four: Scenes of the Crime

Shuffle the photos on the desk once more. The first story was about order; the second story is that of improvisation. The jazz trio in *The Big Sleep's* nightclub scene offers a hint: this is not just the kinds of stretching and cutting of narrative or genre I mentioned earlier, but how, for Classic Hollywood (and especially this film), the more elusive chords of *harmony* (color, tone, effects, jamming on the spot, making changes) counts as much as the structuring role played by *melody* (storyline, genre, form, assembly line). In writing about detective fiction's relationship to photography, Tom Gunning offers a potential bridge from order to improvisation:

Photography operates as one of the most ambiguous emblems of modern experience. Modernity (and particularly modern capitalism) contains a tension between forces which undo older forms of stability in order to increase the ease and rapidity of circulation and of those forces which seek to control and make such circulation predictable and, therefore, profitable. . . . In both the legal process of detection and its fantasy elaborations in detective fiction, the body reemerges as something to grab hold of, and the photograph supplies one means of gaining a purchase on a fugitive physicality. . . . *The narrative form of the detective story, rather than serve simply as an exercise in puzzle-solving, depends explicitly upon the modern experience of circulation.* (19-20, emphasis mine)

The tension Gunning describes here certainly exists (perhaps finds its emblematic form) in the film version of *The Big Sleep*, which introduces a new wrinkle: what happens when that body goes missing?

On the one hand, as an adaptation of a successful novel, crafted by experienced screenwriters, director and technical staff, and starring two box-office draws, *The Big Sleep* is geared for maximum commercial efficiency and predictability. Before *To Have and Have Not* had even been released, Jack Warner knew he wanted to team Bogart and Bacall again, and, on the way home from the film's preview, demanded of Hawks that he think of something. Despite the book's more salacious qualities, which had already branded it unfilmable by Joseph Breen and the Production Code, Hawks suggested *The Big Sleep*, convincing Warner with his usual verbal skill that he had already figured out a way to lick the potential plot problems. (McCarthy 379)

Hawks had, in fact, had already started discussions with William Faulkner on how to adapt the book, but McCarthy's description of Hawks' back-of-the-limo assertion to Warner as "glib" (379) suggests that on-the-spot improvisation is already creeping in to clog the cogs of studio efficiency, and will play a key role in *The Big Sleep's* creation. David Thomson describes Hawks' on-set methods in a manner that undercuts the ordered models' desire for purposiveness and efficiency, returning one to a jazz aesthetic:

Hawks liked to imply the extent of his own authority and terrain by talking of scripts as the necessary, rather broad and hasty instruments that provoked and inspired improvisation on the set. . . Time and again over the years, Hawks would start a day's work less by rehearsing a scene than by 'kicking it around': the actors would do a read-through and Hawks would encourage the notion that this was all really rather dull and how the hell could they make some 'fun' out of it? It was an offshoot of that way of working that, at some moment amid the mayhem of *The Big Sleep*, more to make conversation than in search of meaning, Bogart asked who had done one of the killings in the story (*The Big Sleep* 34, emphasis mine).

The improvisatory methods used on-set, in combination with the novel's already murky plot twists and the kinds of circulatory powers Gunning notes as inherent in the photographic medium, work to undo the clarity and order, the "puzzle-solving" the detective story is meant to

represent⁴. One sees here the outlines here of the auteur myth: Hawks' power comes from an image of giving up that power to his actors, to "fun." Hawks, according to most accounts, was not even that concerned with his story's structure: "I'm learning more about characters and how to let them handle the plot, rather than let the plot move them," he admitted (McCarthy 381), a stance which, again, suggests that the film embodies the kinds of tensions between control and circulation Gunning notes above.

For critic Geoffrey O'Brien, this lack of an ordering concept is crucial to pulp fiction: "Worse yet, at the heart of it all, there is an implied lack of meaning. Unlike the settling of the West or the Second World War, the events transcribed by hard-boiled fiction serve no particular purpose; they just happen." (16-17) David Thomson finds the existentialism in such a stance, an emotional undercurrent to the film's almost anecdotal structure: "The steady supply of new characters, or even bits, is life-enhancing: you feel the way Hawks cultivated those bits, if only to kid himself away from worrying about the fragile whole." (*The Big Sleep* 46) I would also highlight such a stance's surreal qualities, the ways in which the film, and its valorizing of details, exemplifies Walter Benjamin's reading of the power of film: "by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring commonplace milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film, on the one hand, extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action." (236) It's a very American plain--or, as Woody Guthrie might say, you can only write/film what you see.

⁴ My favorite circulation of the "real" was pointed out by undergraduates in a Fall 2002 film analysis seminar at the University of Florida: as Marlowe's finger rings the bell of the Sternwood mansion in the film's opening, a wedding band can be spotted. It is possible this is a stock shot added after shooting, or the hand of an extra, but the knowledge that Bogart and Bacall were married during *The Big Sleep's* shooting, and that this might be the real wedding ring of a Hollywood star, lends it a "fugitive physicality" of the sort described by Gunning.

I have twice mentioned Surrealism as one way of reading the film, but it might also be a useful roadmap for thinking about the film's production. Ironically, given the Surrealist creeds, it is not in spite, but precisely because of the bourgeois, business-minded production system of Hollywood, with its emphasis on speed and product, that a certain Surrealist unpredictability and unconsciousness thrives in the 1930s and 40s. Consider, not only Hawks' on-set behavior, but the collaboration of Faulkner and Leigh Brackett on the script, which sounds like nothing so much as a Surrealist game of Exquisite Corpse:

The morning that she checked in at Warners, Faulkner handed [Brackett] a copy of the novel and said, "We will do alternate sets of chapters. I have them marked. I will do these and you will those." And so it went. The two screenwriters labored alone in their separate offices; Brackett never saw what Faulkner wrote, and he never saw what she wrote. "Everything went in direct to Mr. Hawks," Brackett recalled. "Beyond a couple of conferences, we never saw him." (Phillips 55)

With this kind of working relationship, is it any wonder the death of Owen Taylor supposedly remained a mystery to all involved, that the secret of Owen Taylor's fictional body got lost in the textual bodies of production?

Of course, it did not get lost. At this point, after the seductive, siren song qualities of the various stories and production histories I have been recounting, it is important to remember that the tale told at the beginning of the chapter is a *false* anecdote, with as many contradictory parts as any Exquisite Corpse drawing produced in a Paris apartment. Phillips' recounting of the famous anecdote reveals that, not only were the writers aware of who killed Owen Taylor, they had even written it into an earlier draft of the script:

The exposition contained in this scene neatly settled the question of who killed Owen Taylor. . . In it, [D.A.]Wilde sums up the case to this point in the following manner: "So Taylor killed Geiger because he was in love with the Sternwood girl. And Brody followed Taylor, sapped him and took the photograph, and pushed Taylor into the ocean. And the punk killed Brody. (64)

Phillips notes that this scene was never filmed as written (65-66); indeed, the scene in the D.A.'s office, while clarifying many confusing plot points, never does explicitly state who killed Owen (unless, perhaps, one can read shorthand). The director's choice to ignore Faulkner and Brackett's improvisation on Chandler's text (Phillips notes that their solution seems like a reasonable extrapolation of the implied suggestion in Chandler's novel (65), led one actress on set to pin the murder of Taylor squarely on Howard Hawks himself. (Phillips 65)

The Taylor anecdote itself, then, becomes a part of this play between order and improvisation: on the one hand, it functions like the details Gunning describes above, offering, in its details of director, star and writer confused on the set, a "fugitive physicality," a means of circulation, a "touch of the real" within the regimented factory; on the other hand, the continued focus on this particular anecdote grants it the status of an ordering device, simultaneously narrowing and broadening the field of action, to borrow Benjamin's phrase.

For instance, the extras on the DVD of *The Big Sleep* remind audiences that, in fact, there is not just one cut, revised, or added scene, but several: changes were made in seven of the film's twelve reels, adding up to fifteen minutes of new footage in the 1946 release version. Some of the changes are quite minor: cutting a short scene of Marlowe investigating Geiger's house after his death (taken from the novel), and another of Marlowe bringing Carmen home in the rain (derived from the novel, but transposing the gender of the Sternwood staff member, from a maid to a butler); a bit of dialogue overdubbed in an exchange between Marlowe and Vivian in his office; a reshuffling of the order of some scenes. Some changes are much larger: the aforementioned scene at the D.A.'s office, and a more somber meeting between a veiled Vivian and Marlowe, again at his office, both cut; a reshoot of the film's climax—Marlowe tied up against the couch at the hideaway—in which a different actress plays Eddie Mars' wife Agnes,

and the dialogue is much harsher than in the release version. Other bits of dialogue were re-recorded, and other scenes re-shot (as UCLA Preservation Officer Robert Gitt points out in a commentary track, a scene between Marlowe and Ohls keeps half of one version of the scene, and half of a later version, meaning that the actors look a year older halfway through, giving the scene an unintended “fugitive physicality”). Of course, the nightclub scene was added. In light of all these changes, Marlowe’s question to Vivian at the end (“What’s wrong with you?”) and her response (“Nothing you can’t fix”) take on an added, self-reflexive resonance.

One reason for these changes has already been stated: the mixed response from preview audiences. The other, as Phillips, Thomson, and the DVD archival footage make clear, was the intervention of Bacall’s agent, Charles Feldman, who feared that fewer scenes of Bacall in the sultry style of *To Have and Have Not* would lead *The Big Sleep* to flop as badly as *Confidential Agent*, the film she made to disastrous effect in-between. (Phillips 63, Thomson 44)⁵ These changes offer crucial evidence of the filmmakers’ ability to improvise under pressure. They also offer crucial evidence of the false anecdote’s power and allure: the nightclub and D.A. scenes are foremost in one’s mind not only because of their link to the enigma of Owen Taylor, but because they link more easily to the false anecdote than the rest of the revised footage.

It is notable though, that the cut scenes, in addition to offering narrative clarity, are precisely those which seem the most “noir-like” in their framing, lighting, and tone—they are full of shadows, veiled women, tough cops and bitter sarcasm. The added scene in the nightclub, by contrast, is almost screwball in tone; its banter, light jazz and barroom setting suggest a wartime version of *The Thin Man*. In an ironic twist, the film version of *The Big Sleep* partially

⁵ As a producer in the 1960s, Feldman would take this improvisatory Exquisite Corpse game to its logically illogical endpoint with *Casino Royale*, an episodic spy spoof with five directors, several screenwriters, and many actors playing James Bond. It was not a success.

reverses the flow that Chandler praises hard-boiled fiction for initiating: in the nightclub scene, at least (and also in the bookstore scene with Dorothy Malone), the Venetian vase seem far more mysterious and appealing than the dark alley. That this could be so, and yet the film retains the generic marking of film noir suggests the accuracy of James Naremore's observation that "critics often use adjectives like *underground* or *B* quite loosely, in reference to a great many things that were not in fact inferior or disreputable...In both economic and cultural terms, therefore, they are best described as liminal products." (139)

The more one looks at *The Big Sleep*, the more one begins to understand the way its contradictions ceaselessly generate more dilemmas, more crime scenes to explore: it is noir, but it is not; some of the stories that circulate like smoke around it feel true, but are false; a touch of the real is offered that turns out to be a fabrication. And all of it, to paraphrase Thomson's line about Bogart's question, feels less like "meaning" than "conversation." Writing of the film's production (and subsequent production of and dispersion of meaning), one begins to understand Geoffrey O'Brien's despair in the earlier quote, which I would like to return to as a structuring chorus: "the events transcribed by hard-boiled fiction serve no particular purpose; they just happen." (16-17) It is true that attempts to pin down meaning can be like grabbing at that smoke, leaving one a frustrated Captain Kronjager to the film's insouciant Phillip Marlowe.

So, critics will look squint past the smoke in order to look at the name on the cigarette package, the names I have been offering throughout this chapter: genre (detective film), star (Bogart or Bacall), writer (Chandler), and director (Hawks). It gives one something to focus on while one's eyes tear up and clear out, but it also becomes an act of possession, one more dramatic than Bogart and Bacall bantering about racehorses in that nightclub scene. As Gilbert Adair writes in *Flickers*, "[Hawks'] example was absolutely crucial to the history of auteurism,

not because his authorial style screamed at one from the screen but *precisely because it didn't.*" (88, emphasis mine) In transforming the director into the *auteur*, the critic doesn't just celebrate the name: he rewrites the meaning of a body of work through naming and identifying that body attached to it ("who are the artists" becoming the equivalent of "who killed the chauffeur?" and the three circle of Andrew Sarris' "Notes on The Auteur Theory in 1962" the equivalent of Marlowe roaming the rare bookstores).

The shift of meaning becomes an act of possession. An auteurist critic examining a corpus is pitched somewhere between Raymond Chandler splicing together earlier stories to make one coherent novel named *The Big Sleep*, and Howard Hawks, doing all he can to undo that piecemeal logic, and open up a space of aesthetic play. The auteurist must find a balance between order and improvisation: like Hawks, he must replace the scenes that aren't working with something jazzier, find the chemistry between work and interpretation that will shift the emphasis on that old term for Hollywood from the word "factory" to the word "dream." The anecdote is working a similar groove, but its investigation of even this crime scene is a reminder that dreams are often less logical than any systematic reading can convey. The mise-en-scene of the anecdote creates an atmosphere where the methodologies and replications of standardized readings are revealed as another magic trick: after all, no one signs their signature exactly the same way twice.

Snapshot Five: Signatures and Staging An Action

"Early on the morning of 2 August [1942], Jose Diaz was found unconscious on a dirt road near the Delgadillo house and was taken to Los Angeles General Hospital, where he died without regaining consciousness." (Starr 101) The details surrounding Diaz's death were murky: the press stories of the time noted that there had been a scuffle between young Mexican-American men at a swimming hole called Sleepy Lagoon in East Los Angeles, and that one of

the men, Henry Leyvas, had gone searching for the men who had harassed his girlfriend earlier in the evening; finding the swimming hole deserted, Leyvas and his friends entered a party at the nearby Delgadillo home, a party that included Diaz. The press and the police followed and promoted this story to the public, leading to the conviction of Leyvas and the “38th Street Gang,” as they came to be called, for the murder of Jose Diaz. (Starr 101)

Autopsy evidence suggested that Diaz’s cause of death was not as clear-cut: a high blood alcohol level, bruises on the hands and face, and his body found on a back road offered the possibility of being hit by an automobile, or getting in a drunken altercation with a different person or persons after the scuffle at the party. The witnesses who supposedly left the party with Diaz were not even called to testify before the grand jury. (Starr 102) The ambiguities and multiple interpretations were drowned out by the melodramatic reporting of the press and the appearance of the defendants at the trial: “Superior Court Judge Charles W. Fricke, already notorious for his vindictiveness against Mexican defendants. . .refused to allow the young men to groom themselves or dress properly for court. Day in, day out, they sat together in their soiled clothes, their dark faces and unkempt appearance proof positive, Judge Fricke intended, of their guilt.” (Starr 102)

In his history of 1940s Hollywood, Thomas Schatz notes the widespread concern regarding teen activities during the war:

During the war, teenage violence and vandalism were a problem in virtually every major city, particularly the war centers with their urban crowding, unchecked prosperity, late-night revelry, and general lack of parental supervision due to work schedules. Movie theater owners were among the more vocal critics of the situation, complaining about raucous disruptions of screenings, slashed theater seats, and the like. Nighttime curfews were imposed on teenagers in many cities, while the media constantly challenged parents to assume greater responsibility for their children’s behavior. (*Boom and Bust* 138)

A photo accompanying Schatz's text comes from a 1944 *March of Time* newsreel entitled "Youth in Crisis," and the sullen young people smoking and drinking in the picture bear a striking resemblance to that young group in the foreground of the nightclub scene in *The Big Sleep*.

The Sleepy Lagoon murders were just a preview of the violence that would soon hit the Mexican-American community of Los Angeles. The "Zoot Suit Riots," as they came to be called, would escalate the tensions between young Mexicans and Mexican-Americans and the Los Angeles authorities, and would do so with the same degree of ambiguity, and similar patterns of rumor and gossip, as the Sleepy Lagoon murders. Kevin Starr, in his history of wartime L.A., *Embattled Dreams*, notes that the zoot suiters, also known as *pachucos*, had already been targeted by Los Angeles police for their style, dress, and race, and refers to the surveillance as "a pattern of symbolic clash between the two groups, zoot suiters and servicemen. . . .The Zoot Suit Riots would soon prove themselves as stylized as the zoot suit itself." (106)

The zoot suit, derived from the styles of African-American jazz musicians, became a statement of gaudy excess in the midst of wartime shortages; against the standardized uniforms of the period, it took on a timbre of aesthetic rebellion. There was a symbolism for many of its wearers, as ethnomusicologist Charles Sharp observes:

This self-definition becomes apparent in examining the musical style of the Pachucos. Many elements were borrowed from African-American jazz musicians, who were involved in a similar project of self-definition through style. Steven Loza documents the music and style associated with these original zoot-suiters in his book *Barrio Rhythm* (1993:161-3). He writes that during the 1940s, the widespread popularity of swing music among Mexican Americans, along with traditional Mexican American music and Caribbean music was symbolic of the changes occurring in their adaptation to an urban environment (Loza 1993:80). He goes on to note the close affiliation between African Americans and Mexican Americans in Los Angeles. Both groups lived in roughly the same neighborhoods and in approximately the same economic conditions (Loza 1993:80-3). (Sharp)

In a documentary on the riots, Arthur Areneas remembers the look in a manner that highlights its fetish qualities:

They went to extreme. They went to extreme, you know? Man, they wore a big hat and feather and a chain hanging down there, ankle chokers, and a long—they used to call it fingertip, below the fingers, you know, way down, you know? That was it, and you says, man, that guy is wearing an expensive, you know. . . .They would always double sole their shoes. They never walked out with a regular, you know, they'd walk out with those shoes and right away they would dye them black, and shine them and keep shining them, and then the grain would disappear, and all you'd see is a plain, beautiful shine, and then you'd get your argyle socks in there. . . . (*American Experience*)

Starr also notes the way in which the zoot suit becomes an improvisation within the dominant order, one which had a strong circulatory power: “the wearing of the zoot suit held multiple layers of identity, pro and con, for Mexican-Americans and their enemies. . . .for it was not confined exclusively to the Mexican-American community, and it eventually made its way, with modifications, into mainstream fashion. . . .The zoot suit declared style, independence, and a level of personal control. . . .” (104)

It was the circulatory power (or, for some, threat) that the zoot suit embodied that lay at the heart of the riots that began on June 3, 1943. What started as a pair of scuffles between eleven sailors and a group of young Mexican-American males quickly took on the quality of legend: false anecdotes circulated of two hundred sailors hitting the Alpine club, where one such scuffle had reportedly taken place, and of retaliatory strikes by Mexican-Americans against naval personnel. The LAPD quickly latched onto such reports as justification for forming a “Vengeance Squad” to protect the sailors from mythical Mexican-American attacks. (Starr 106-107) What Starr describes as the normal “well-rehearsed movements” between roaming officers and Mexican-American youth (104) would become something much larger and more violent.

The next day, twenty-nine taxicabs full of sailors entered East Los Angeles, and began a four-day strike against the zoot suitors, in retaliation for the supposed (but false) attacks they

were reading about in the papers. The attacks could be violent, but were rarely fatal; Starr describes their ritualized quality: “Encountering a zoot suiter, they submitted him to pantsing, which is to say, they stripped their victim of his pants and shredded the rest of his garments. Some zoot suiters, those resisting, were beaten. . . .Streetcars were stopped and searched for zoot suiters, who, if found, were pulled onto the street, pantsed, and beaten.” (107) This pantsing became more violent as the police got involved on June 6:

Al Waxman, editor of the *Eastside Journal*, happened upon a scene at 12th and Central that typified police behavior in the first days of the riots. “Police were swinging clubs and servicemen were fighting with civilians,” Waxman reported. “Wholesale arrests were being made by the officers. Four boys came out of a pool hall. They were wearing the zoot suits that have become the symbol of a fighting flag. Police ordered them into arrest cars. One refused. He asked: ‘Why am I being arrested?’ The police officer answered with three swift blows of the night stick across the boy’s head and he went down. As he sprawled, he was kicked in the face. Police had difficulty loading his body into the vehicle because he was one-legged and wore a wooden limb.” (Starr 108)

In the end, Starr observes, the riots were, for the servicemen if not the police, less about real violence than symbolic violence, another variation on the balance between order and improvisation I have been exploring throughout this chapter:

The servicemen did not want to kill the zoot suiters or even seriously harm them. . . . otherwise, they could have easily done so, give their overwhelming numbers. . . . What the servicemen wanted was the symbolic annihilation of the zoot suiter through the pantsing ritual. . . . Pulling off a zoot suiter’s pants, shredding his frock coat, taking a scissors to his ducktail haircut, made the zoot suiter into one of them. One gang was erasing the symbols of another. (109)

What was at stake in the zoot suit riots was the question of definition, of how dominant orders and subcultures drew on and determined one another (Starr 104), and defined a city in the midst of growth, change and upheaval in the wartime period. Mike Davis writes (in words that echo the earlier Benjamin quote) that “compared to other great cities, Los Angeles may be *planned* or

designed, in a very fragmentary sense...but it is infinitely *envisioned*" (23), defined as much through aesthetic self-expression as economics. (Davis 23)

A key part of that aesthetic self-expression, of course, is Hollywood, a space (and eventually a set of styles) born out of an ironic re-creation of the foundational frontier myth, as filmmakers went from East to West in order to escape the Edison patents and their stifling regimentation and control of a burgeoning industry. The frontier tales that lie at the heart of Americana--notions of progress and moving forward, always able to improvise a new order--will be absorbed by Hollywood and reified, the detective taking the place of the cowboy as the complex symbol of both order and rebelliousness. The zoot suit riots and the mystery of Owen Taylor, both intertwined with false anecdotes, appear at a moment when that myth-making machinery is starting to break down.

Schatz writes of 1940s Hollywood as "boom and bust," noting that even as the film industry reaches an all-time peak in profits in 1946 (aided by the success of *The Big Sleep*), it faced strong challenges from labor strikes, rising costs of production, restricted overseas markets, and the increasing desire of many writers, directors and stars to work outside the ordered studio system through independent production companies. (*Boom and Bust* 285) Hanging over all of this was the threat of divestment, as the Supreme Court pondered the anti-trust suit brought against the industry; the rumblings of HUAC's nascent investigation of supposed subversive influence in film; and the growing popularity of television. (*Boom and Bust* 285) *The Big Sleep*, as it does in so many other ways, stands on a border, between the peak of Hollywood's power, and its end-of-decade slump (to return to the Dyer quote near the beginning of this chapter, *The Big Sleep*'s "felt duration" makes it seem of a piece both with wartime

Hollywood and the chaos that will follow, and often be allegorized through the noir detective film).

Both the film and riots *embody* the myths, falsehoods and ambiguities of the period quite literally, seeing style, fashion and panache (Gunning's "fugitive physicality") as a way of mediating one's relationship to the unknown. All of these threads are woven into the nightclub scene, which allows touches of the real to intrude on the cinematic: Starr's description of *pachuca* style infiltrating the mainstream—"Heavily padded shoulders, sharp lapels, single-button jackets, knee-length pleated skirts, high pompadours, a blotch of lipstick above the upper lip" (122) is a fairly apt description of Vivian Sternwood; the jazz trio reminds one, in however bland a fashion, of the zoot suit's roots; and, of course, the sullen young people at the table near the bar hint at a juvenile delinquency which the film's (and the novel's) loose narrative is meant to regulate and resolve. The quick cut from the shot of those young people to the more glamorous and witty stars at the bar can thus be read as yet another tension the film leaves dangling. On the one hand, it speaks of a desire to get away from "reality" in favor of screwball wittiness and Hollywood escapism; on the other hand, as an improvisation within the dominant narrative ordering of the studio system, the scene becomes its own "delinquent" in relation to the dominant narrative codes of Hollywood (it is ironic, in light of the sailors' regulatory attacks on the zoot suiters, that it was at least partially because of the response of a military audience that this scene replaced a more "ordered" one).

Writing of a later noir film, 1953's *Angel Face*, Jacques Rivette will write, "What tempts [Preminger], if not...the rendering audible of particular chords unheard and rare, in which the inexplicable beauty of the modulation suddenly justifies the ensemble of the phrase? This is probably the definition of something precocious...its enigma—the door to something beyond

intellect, opening out onto the unknown.” And then, in a key line, “Such are the contingencies of *mise-en-scene*...” The explicit linking in Rivette’s phrasing between *mise-en-scene* and *timbre*, and its emphasis on the importance of the part in relation to the whole (“particular chords unheard and rare”) makes his description of the Preminger film almost more appropriate for the Hawks picture, and could also stand as another definition of an anecdotal method; even more important is his recognition of the contingency of such an arrangement—its fragility, its uncertainty, and how its form and its interpretation are reliant upon a series of events or elements coming together in a very precise fashion.

Circulating the initial false anecdote about *The Big Sleep* intensifies the tensions and contradictions of the wartime period, rendering particular chords audible and therefore intensifying one’s nostalgia for it: “Who killed the chauffeur?” sets in motion a search for method—how did this happen? What does it mean? —that allows the anecdote to take on the qualities of Andre Bazin’s “mummy complex,” ordering and preserving certain details, no matter how stylized their representation:

If the plastic arts were put under psychoanalysis, the practice of embalming the dead might turn out to be a fundamental factor in their creation. . . .The religion of ancient Egypt, aimed against death, saw survival as depending on the continued existence of a corporeal body. Thus, by providing a defense against the passage of time it satisfied a basic psychological need in man. . . .To preserve, artificially, his bodily appearance is to snatch it from the flow of time, to stow it away neatly, so to speak, in the hold of life. (9)

Like Wollen’s description of the intertwined nature of Hawks’ dramas and comedies, where one can see the hint of tragedy in comedy or vice versa, the story told at the outset of Chapter 3 attempts to have it both ways: it seems to favor improvisation over control, while at the same time suggesting that, for Hawks and his collaborators, improvisation is actually the key to control.

That sense of method as something live and malleable—as reliant on atmosphere as rules—returns one to the nightclub scene where this whole crime was first staged. The live band playing in the background is another important visual clue: with the exception of “victory disks” sent to soldiers overseas (some of the very soldiers, no doubt, passing judgment on *The Big Sleep*’s first cut, and as Jody Rosen notes, receiving multiple copies of “White Christmas” in their care packages), almost no music was recorded in the United States between 1942 and early 1944. Led by James Petrillo, head of the American Federation of Musicians, the union organized a recording strike until musicians received royalties on recordings. (Young 94-95) Companies continued to sell older stock, and musicians would still perform live while the ban was in effect, but even the intervention of FDR and the War Labor Board did not cause Petrillo to budge. (Young 95-96) One unintended effect of these actions was a shift in sales from big bands to vocalists (who were not covered by the ban), resulting in popular new a cappella arrangements sung by Sinatra, Bing Crosby and others. (Young 95) What became important in this atmosphere of staging an action, then (at least musically speaking) was less the song than the voice, the way a certain timbre could shift everything.

The major record companies eventually made deals with Petrillo and the ban was lifted in 1944, but returned in 1948. There was another development that year which would have even longer-lasting effects: the introduction of the long-playing, “33 1/3” record, or LP. Again, the link between the timbre of the photo and the timbre of the recording is important here: the term “record album” was originally used to describe a collection of single 78rpm recordings, collected in a large book much like pictures in a photo album. With the introduction of the LP, that bulky contraption was no longer necessary: several songs could be held on a single disc, and as the form became more and more engrained in the consciousness of listeners, musicians began to use

the LP to craft statements built around moods and themes. Frank Sinatra was once again an important figure here, offering what have sometimes been described as the first “concept albums” in his 1950s recordings with arranger Nelson Riddle. The first of these, *Songs For Young Lovers*, came out in 1954, just as Sinatra was becoming part of the “Holmby Hills Rat Pack” started by Bogart and Bacall in Hollywood, and just as Francois Truffaut was revising the essay, “A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema” under the watchful eye of Andre Bazin. This piece announced the arrival of the French New Wave, and the contingent rise of auteurism as a critical action. Certainly, by the time Andrew Sarris translated some of these ideas into an American context in 1962, the LP was established as the mode for “serious” classical, jazz and pop recordings (the single by then relegated to rock-and-roll).

Looking at the shiny surfaces and sleek grooves of an LP, it is not hard to see it as an objective correlative of Sarris’ “three circles” of auteurism. Sarris’ concentric circles (that supposedly take a viewer deeper and deeper to the heart of a director’s “inner meaning”) are matched by the concentric grooves of the LP, whose song by song building of its concept supposedly allows the listener a deeper understanding of “pop meaning.” If an album takes the loose organization of 78’s and transforms them into a single piece, so, too, does auteurism take films that cut across genre, narrative, studio and period and synthesize them as an *oeuvre*.⁶ One can lift up the needle and skip from song to song, just as one can ignore certain films in a director’s body of work; but the form of the LP and the auteur theory both suggest a coherence that is so seductive that one is inclined to let the record play out.

Developments in recording and receiving music—multi-track recording, stereo sound, the cassette tape—didn’t necessarily challenge the hegemony of the LP (even if most listeners

⁶ James Petrillo was voted from his position as President of the AFM in 1958 (Young 95), around the same times that several of the *Cahiers* critics were working on their first feature films.

moved away from actual vinyl records as the decades wore on). The rise of digital culture did, though. The CD provides the ease of skipping without having to get up and raise the needle, and without the fear of scratching the record. MP3's, Napster and I-Tunes had an even greater impact—not only could one skip songs, but one don't even have to download the whole album. The single had its revenge on the concept, and even a downloaded album could be placed on “shuffle.”

It is the development of video technology that also helps spur the discovery of the missing footage in *The Big Sleep*: shown in limited theatrical release in large cities in 1996, the “new” version of the film found its real life on home video, and then on DVD, whose fetish for extras allows for the rich documentaries and even more found footage that I noted above. One can skip around scenes, or back-and-forth between movie and extras, like a music fan skipping songs on an I-pod: the DVD lets one hit “shuffle” on film history. In doing so, it lets viewers see the false anecdote—and a host of others—in a new light.

What is remarkable about Hawks and *The Big Sleep* is that they intuited the logic of the “shuffle” fifty years earlier—each scene in the film acts as its own “single,” and the logic of the whole is not harmed by cutting one scene out and replacing it with another, like moving songs around on a playlist. Auteurism and its romanticizing of the artistic figure feels like a marker of modernism; while Hawks was a key figure in that movement, *The Big Sleep*'s take on method and the “signature” feels very *post*-modern: not the reproducible, systematized signature, but a set of contingent meanings, a *mise-en-scene* whose opacity—that “despair of meaning” O'Brien notes-- both flaunts and requires viewer participation. The false anecdote in this setting becomes less about truth and more about the pleasures of the conversation, the allure of a certain timbre: not knowing where the story is headed becomes its own style and signature. Hawks and *The Big*

Sleep are keys to an anecdotal history, then, not only because of their story's ubiquity, but because that balance of order and improvisation is the very definition of the anecdote.

CHAPTER 4
PAS DE DEUX

“It’s only a matter of *style*, isn’t it?”

-- Judy Garland speaking to Angela Lansbury in *The Harvey Girls*

In the style of the time, all art was treated as allegory, and every public achievement was interpreted as an episode in a larger national narrative

—Mary Panzer, *Matthew Brady* (8.9).

Acts of recognition don’t always serve the political moment

—Stuart Klawans, *O.K. You Mugs* (128).

“In my mind, there is no difference between the magic rhythms of Bill Shakespeare’s immortal verse, and the magic rhythms of Bill Robinson’s immortal feet.”

—Jeffrey Cordova (Jack Buchanan) breaking down barriers, in *The Band Wagon*

Under the Lights

In February 1949, Hollywood’s grandest studio, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, celebrates its twenty-fifth anniversary. It is a heady moment: MGM’s postwar box-office slump seems turned around thanks to new production chief Dore Schary, who has returned to the studio after stints with RKO and Selznick, and his success has some at MGM calling him the new Irving Thalberg. (Schatz 453-54) Even during times of relatively poor box-office, Metro can still boast of having under contract “more stars than in the heavens,” and many of them are today assembled on the studio’s largest soundstage to be photographed as a group for *Look* magazine. There’s Judy Garland laughing conspiratorially with Katharine Hepburn, and Clark Gable hissing at Ava Gardner. (Minnelli 214-15) At the day’s luncheon, Louis B. Mayer, the proud *paterfamilias*, stands to give a speech, but screenwriters Adolph Green and Betty Comden can’t take their eyes off dessert. In Vincente Minnelli’s autobiography, Green remembers:

“[Mayer] had to introduce Dore Schary. He gave this very involved talk, trying to rationalize why Dore was now there. I don’t remember what he said, but whatever it was, none of us was convinced.”

“We probably felt the handwriting was on the wall,” Betty continued. “There was something very thick in the air. I think the dessert became the symbol of it.”

(Adolph describes it as an ice cream molded in the shape of the MGM lion. “We sat through the long speeches, looking at all these lions melting”). (215)

Pas de Deux

The “Girl Hunt” ballet sequence occupies the same place in Vincente Minnelli’s *The Band Wagon* that the “American in Paris” ballet does in the film of the same name—a surreal blend of color, boom shot, and doomed passion that climaxes the movie and enacts the emotions that the characters cannot express “off-stage.” Unlike the ballet in *An American In Paris*, however, “The Girl Hunt” is *funny*, and that shift in tone proves crucial.

The sequence opens with a close-up on a theatrical program, its page turned to “The Girl Hunt.” What follows, however, breaks with the temporal and spatial unity of previous numbers; while performances of “Louisiana Hayride” and “I Guess I’ll Have to Change My Plans” are shot from a more conventional “theatrical” space, framed by the imaginary proscenium arch, “The Girl Hunt” is much more “cinematic,” using voice-over, optical effects, close-ups and canted angles to craft a delirious pastiche of pulp fiction.

The deep blue curtain opens to a black screen, which is covered with oversized reproductions of mock pulp magazine covers: “Stab Me Sugar,” “Dames Kill Me” and “Girl Hunt” are just some of the titles. An unseen tommy gun blasts open the black screen, and it gives way to a bluish-purple stage done up to look like an abandoned urban street corner. The lights from the “building” windows define the shapes of their skyscrapers, which make geometric, L-shaped patterns against the dark blue sky.

Fred Astaire, here playing a character named Tony Hunter, who’s playing a character named “Rod Riley” in the show-within-a-show (the filmmakers already doubling and tripling their intertextual associations) enters from stage right, dressed in a white suit and fedora, with

blue shirt and white tie (an outfit that echoes the one he wears in 1945's *Yolanda and the Thief*, also directed by Minnelli). As he begins his narration, framed in a medium shot, he lights a cigarette, thrusting his arms back so the cuffs of his blue shirt are visible, fedora cocked at an angle. He saunters past a very flat street lamp as a mournful jazz trumpet plays. It is a striking image, as if the playboy schemers of Astaire's earlier films had suddenly taken on an existential loneliness.

He begins to narrate his story, in a neo-Chandler *patois*: "My name is Rod Riley... The rats and the killers were in their holes. I hate killers..." Rod has barely lit his cigarette when Cyd Charisse's "Blonde" slides onstage from the right. The camera tracks to follow her, until she is in the frame, next to Rod, whom she grabs in desperation. Framed in a medium shot, he pokes a cigarette between her lips, and her shoulders shrug. She takes a puff and falls into Rod's arms. This existential loner is not having it: he spins her back out, as the camera dollies back to a long shot to capture the movement. A tracking shot follows their dance, until their heads swivel right, and a cut reveals a thug, in brown trench coat and fedora, menacing his way through the fog in a long shot. The thug's wide frame moves to the foreground, where he picks up a bottle and a hankie. In this pastiche, however, elegance will always trump machismo, so it is only logical that the next cut returns the viewer to Rod and the Blonde, twirling in dance. Her canary yellow trench coat obscures Rod's lower left side like a Surrealist tarp in a Man Ray photo, and all one sees is his left leg and arm. Dancing in front of a deep blue shop backdrop, Rod rolls the Blonde off his front, and she lies vertically on the ground.

Another cut places Rod and the Blonde in the background and the brown-suited thug in the foreground, a visual harbinger of the danger to come: suddenly, the thug explodes, a yellow-orange flame dominating the center of the frame. As Rod runs through the smoke, the camera's

jerkiness mimics the chaos, dollying back and then panning slightly left, slightly right. A cut to a close-up of Astaire's leg and hand places him in roughly the same position as the thug a minute earlier: examining what remains of the evidence (a bone, a hankie, a "hunk of hair"). The Blonde has disappeared, but a cane from stage left lets Rod know that some more thugs have joined the scene, this time dressed in black suits and pastel-colored shirts. Rod is beaten senseless through a series of kicks and chops to the gut and the head, and a spinning swish pan moves us forward in time, to find Rod coming to against a wall whose bill advertises "The Proud Land" (the film that the Jonathan Shields character has suppressed in Minnelli's *The Bad and the Beautiful*, and which also appeared on a Times Square marquee earlier in *The Band Wagon*).

If I have gone on at some length describing this opening scene, it is to illustrate the look and tone of the "Girl Hunt," its sublime mixture of very serious modern dance and kitschy parody, all played out in front of set designer Oliver Smith's surreal designs (two scenes later, Rod will stand outside a wig shop; behind him, painted in black against a gray background, hangs the upper half of the Empire State Building. Within the diegesis, its missing lower section signifies distance and fog, as if the building were blocks away, but as Rod runs past it and around the corner, it feels more like the Japanese type in Roland Barthes' *Empire of Signs*, or the BOIS-CHARBONS in Breton's *Nadja*: an opaque symbol of a space and era). Amidst all this design and movement, Rod's question about the blown-up thug is one viewers might begin to ask theoretically about the film itself: "The guy had been trying to tell me something—but what?"

Ten years after the film's release, Susan Sontag will write "Notes on 'Camp'," in which she will attempt to elucidate a new sensibility in criticism, where a "spirit of extravagance" is celebrated (283), and whose taste "turns its back on the good-bad axis of ordinary aesthetic judgment." (286) This is a "mode of seduction" (281), full of "gestures full of duplicity, with a

witty meaning for cognoscenti and another, more impersonal, for outsiders.” (281) This “camp” sensibility, often found in “decorative art, emphasizing texture, sensuous surface, and style at the expense of content” (278), seems the perfect mode through which to think of the “Girl Hunt” ballet sequence, which puts forth a tremendous amount of effort to aestheticize, and therefore deflate the pretensions of, a genre which is often read as “low-brow.” Ponder, for instance, a later dance in the sequence, as the dance in the subway station in this sequence, an erotic *pas de deux* between Rod and the Blonde that occurs before a background of cart wheeling thugs firing their pistols as a kind of emotional release. It is extraordinarily arch and playful, a reminder of *Band Wagon* choreographer Michael Kidd’s work on *Guys and Dolls*, and a forerunner to the kinds of ballet battles Jerome Robbins would stage a few years later for *West Side Story*. The Blonde is wearing a sheer blue dress, Rod’s face is almost imperceptible through the shadow thrown by his fedora, and a series of spotlights, representing the lights of a subway train, roar by every few seconds and dance across the lovers’ backs. The scene lasts only a minute, but it is as technically complex and baroque as anything in the film—and, for all its parody, it is also extremely romantic. Is this naïve camp, in Sontag’s terms, or knowing camp? And can knowing camp express sincere emotions?

Sontag’s essay enters into the same intellectual period in New York as Andrew Sarris’s “Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962.” Both Sarris and Sontag note the importance of mise-en-scene to meaning, but Sarris, following the lead of *Cahiers du Cinema*, chooses to yoke that element’s effects to the names of certain auteurs, thereby controlling it. Sontag seems more willing to let its meaning float: as she notes at the start of her essay: “A sensibility (as distinct from an idea) is one of the hardest things to talk about...To snare a sensibility in words, especially one that is alive and powerful, one must be tentative and nimble.” (276).

Choreography

This is a chapter about movement and confession. It will turn on three points: the relationship of the film musical to various cultural discourses at middle of the 20th century; the anecdote's relationship to allegory; and how one remembers a moment of crisis, in this case the Cold War and the place of HUAC in 1950s Hollywood. Sontag's modes of seduction are crucial to thinking about the anecdote's role within film studies. Anecdotes, as seen in previous Chapters, are so ubiquitous, particularly in Hollywood histories, that they are the mode of seduction par excellence. The key question then becomes: why use the anecdote, and how will the anecdote function within one's critical discourse?

The overwhelming tendency with anecdotes, I believe, is to ponder the *allegorical* power of such tales. The story of MGM's ice-cream lion seems ripe for such a reading, which would see the melting as paralleling the collapse of the once-mighty studio. It is a snapshot of Hollywood on the verge of decline, affected by the changes of divestment and falling profits; it is also an image of Hollywood in the age of HUAC, an era that shows no signs of fading in public memory, particularly at a moment when many see parallels between that historical moment and one's own. The concept of "naming names," and the anecdotal nature of much HUAC testimony, suggests the darker side of gossip and apocrypha, its ability to destroy and reshape actual lives. Zeroing in on Hollywood at this moment, and by extension the broader "Red Scare" of the late '40s and '50s reminds one of the anecdote's power to circulate, and the difficulty of containing such circulation.

Containment lies at the heart of the differences between Sontag and Sarris that I outlined above. There are several similarities: Sontag writes that "Camp is esoteric—something of a private code, a badge of identity, even, among small urban cliques...To talk about Camp is therefore to betray it" (273); Sarris writes of the auteur theory that "It is ambiguous, in any

literary sense, because part of it is imbedded in the stuff of the cinema and cannot be rendered in noncinematic terms.” (517) Sontag admits “I am strongly drawn to Camp, and almost as strongly revulsed by it”; Sarris confesses that auteurism might be “an élan of the soul.” (517) The definability of their terms eludes them, which they confess in striking similar language (Sontag: “For no one who wholeheartedly shares in a given sensibility can analyze it; he can only whatever his intention, exhibit it” (276); Sarris: “As it is, all I can do is point at the specific beauties of interior meaning on the screen and, later, catalogue the moments of recognition.” (517) Finally, they share an interest in the fragment as a mode of expression, Sontag asserting “the form of jottings, rather than an essay (with its claim to a linear, consecutive argument), seemed more appropriate for getting down something of this particular fugitive sensibility” (276), and Sarris suggesting “the *auteur* theory itself is a pattern theory in constant flux” (517), with both relying on the word “Notes” in their title to paper over the vagueness of any of their pronouncements (it is precisely this undefined view that will so infuriate Pauline Kael, the *bete noire* they share). What both Sontag and Sarris are working towards, one through epigrams, the other under a slightly more systematic cataloging (what Sarris calls a “personal pantheon”) is what Sontag refers to as “a logic of taste” (276), but one which Sontag reads, in opposition to Sarris’s pantheon, as anti-systematic: “Any sensibility which can be crammed into the mold of a system, or handled with the rough tools of proof, is no longer a sensibility at all. It has hardened into an idea. . . .” (276)

The Mary Panzer quote above regarding the allegorizing of art in a moment of crisis (she is writing about Civil War photographer Matthew Brady) suggests the role that historical contingency plays in such a hardening. Certainly, postwar Hollywood offers several such crises. The *Paramount* decision of 1948 marked the end of the classical Hollywood system of

production and distribution; the so-called Waldorf agreement of 1947, however, already signaled that Hollywood would not be the same after the war as in the years before. That year, Congressman J. Parnell Thomas's House Un-American Activities Committee began to investigate and make allegations about the subversive influence of certain figures in the film community, and the heads of the major studios felt obliged to respond. Released to the press by the Motion Picture Association of America, the Waldorf agreement stated that the major studios "will not knowingly employ a Communist," and officially marked the beginning of the blacklist (Schatz 444), which would last until 1960, when blacklisted writer Dalton Trumbo received onscreen credit for his work on *Spartacus*.

Tracing out the stories, counter-stories, and political positions of the various players involved in the blacklist between roughly 1947 and 1960 would be a massive undertaking, one I would not presume to tackle here in any kind of definitive way. I would like to think about this period in Hollywood history in a much more circumscribed manner. Here are three reasons why.

One, the confluence of the two decisions noted above—the first a government decree to which the film industry was forced to respond, the second a government action at once public (the hearings) and private (the behind-the-scenes maneuvering at studios, the effects on marriages, friendships and professional collaborations) to which the film industry chose to respond, in both cases to protect their production operations—marks a genuine break in the history of Hollywood, a moment when the dream factory was forced to confront the real world, and rather than shaping it, as it was so often celebrated or accused of doing, found itself shaped by it. This was not the first time such an encounter had occurred—arguably, Hollywood's collaboration with the Office of War Information during World War II had made its later manipulation by HUAC even easier by suggesting the vulnerability of studio heads and

producers to the rhetoric of “patriotism” – but the events of 1947-48 suggest an even greater shift in Hollywood’s methods (and the outside world’s ability to affect them) than the Breen Office in the 1930s or OWI during the war. This shift which would have a tremendous effect for decades to come.

Two, the intersection of HUAC and Hollywood allows one to think about the centrality of anecdotes to this moment of crisis. It is impossible to ignore the anecdotal nature of much of the testimony made before the Committee, and of course, so much of our cultural memory of the period is shaped by anecdotal accounts (one such anecdotal history is the comprehensive collection *Tender Comrades*). Between the 1930s, when anecdotes circulate in fan magazines and newsreels, and the 1950s, when the form the testimonies of Congressional witnesses, the anecdote sharpens itself from a publicity tool into a political weapon.

Cold War Hollywood offers several different entry points. Examining the work of Edward Dmytryk, Dalton Trumbo, Ring Lardner, Jr., or other members of the “Hollywood Ten,” that group of Hollywood professionals who refused to name names before Thomas’s committee and were jailed for their actions, might be the most obvious method. Conversely, one might explore the work of Elia Kazan, perhaps the most notorious of the Hollywood “informers” during this period. Such approaches would not only have the advantage of direct access to the art and politics of those most closely involved in that moment, but might also allow the writer to access the 1930s and 40s milieu from which these professionals arose, New York and Hollywood during the era of the New Deal and the Spanish Civil War.

While I will, of course, address the context of those directly involved in the HUAC hearings, I would like to take a slightly different approach, by focusing on a text that, to my knowledge, has almost never been discussed in the context of this Cold War moment of

Hollywood. *The Band Wagon*, a “backstage musical” to end backstage musicals, was released by MGM in 1953, at the height of Joseph McCarthy’s power and influence. Often considered (along with *Singin’ In The Rain*, *An American In Paris*, and *On The Town*) to be a key example of MGM’s flair with the musical in the postwar era, it was a product of “The Freed Unit,” the production team run by Arthur Freed, which unofficially “housed” stars like Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly, Judy Garland and Cyd Charisse; writers like Betty Comden and Adolph Green; and directors like Stanley Donen, Charles Walters, and Vincente Minnelli.

This leads to my third reason for exploring this Hollywood period. The form of the musical opens up the exploration of this period to what I hope is a slightly different mode of theoretical expression. It is not just that *The Band Wagon* hasn’t been linked, to my knowledge, to HUAC in the manner I have described⁷, but that, through that gesture of linking, we can begin to think about what critical theorist Lesley Stern calls “the after-life of gesture” (2). In her essay, “Putting on a Show, or The Ghostliness of Gesture,” Stern writes of what she calls “the diva gesture,” and notes:

The interesting thing about the gestural as it manifests itself cinematically is its propensity for migration. Gestures migrate from one movie to another, from the movies into social milieux and vice versa, they resonate, disappear and reappear—differently, and the differences pertain to cultural and historical context as well as to media and genre... Gestures are performed individually, but they are not possessed by individuals. They acquire force and significance through repetition and variation. They are never simply signs—of a singular emotion or identity, nor an expression of the soul (or to this less quaintly, of individual subjectivity), but a charting of relations, imagined as well as real, interdiegetic as well as between films and audiences, stars and fans, characters and actors. (2-3)

⁷ The slight exception is the introduction to *Modernity and Mass Culture*, where editors James Naremore and Patrick Brantlinger make slight allusion to the Supreme Court divestment decision affecting Loews, Inc. (MGM’s parent company) in the same year that the *Band Wagon* was released (19); while they discuss the film’s relationship to mass culture and the theoretical debates of the times (as I will note later in this chapter), they do not link the film to other political movements, like HUAC, affecting Hollywood in the early 1950s.

Stern wants to explore how certain cinematic gestures make “visible the performative” and register “the performative as a quality of affect.” (3) *The Band Wagon*, a confluence of the finest musical film talents in Hollywood, is full of gestures, from the dancing of “The Girl Hunt” to the elegant way Fred Astaire lights a cigarette in a Pullman car. My interest is in the anecdote as a theoretical gesture similar to the cinematic gesture Stern describes above: as a rhetorical/narrative mode in movement, and a form that perhaps allows for the kinds of charting of relations she describes-- in my case, to film history and cultural memory. Thinking of the HUAC period through anecdotes surrounding this musical film might allow one to break through the repetitive gestures and postures that often define histories of the era, and to do so in a way that allows for the kinds of “invocations of the everyday” Stern sees as central to such gestural analyses. (Stern 8) She writes, “Fiction movies, in their indexical nature, do have a relation to the real, and movies produce effects as well as affect. Not in a straightforward way, but—as in any aesthetic medium—in convoluted and displaced ways.” (8)

Anecdotes are very much the “fugitive sensibility” within film studies that Sontag describes in “Notes On Camp,” and if they do not operate precisely according to a “logic of taste,” I would argue they operate according to a logic of aesthetics, where the slightest movement in one direction or the other completely changes the rhythm of the piece (here one might compare the anecdote to the idea of cinema put forth in interview form by Minnelli himself: “A good film is made up of a hundred *hidden* things”). It is a theoretical gesture whose ambiguity (it might be allegorical, but its fugitive status also opens it up to alternative readings) means that it takes on the “double sense” of Camp of which Sontag writes: “It is the difference between the thing as meaning something, anything, and the thing as pure artifice.” (281) Per

Stern, perhaps another way of thinking about the anecdote in relation to these subjects is to ask: what is the effect of its affect?

“I always find it a hoot when film buffs turn directors’ names into adjectives,” Minnelli writes in his autobiography, *I Remember It Well*. He continues, “It’s an embarrassment, a pomposity I don’t relate to and an intellectuality I don’t espouse.” (254) This will not pretend to be an *auteurist* reading of Minnelli—*The Band Wagon*’s form and meaning arguably lies somewhere between Sarris’ *auteurist* sensibility, and the campiness described by Sontag-- but in a chapter that is at least in part about “naming names,” I would like to use three names—that of “Minnelli,” that of “the Freed Unit” and “The Band Wagon” itself to perform a “chorography” across different moments, cities, and figures related to the anecdote above. Writing of chorography and topos, Gregory Ulmer notes that “topistics replaces problems, arguments, solutions with a choral ‘dream reasoning’ of riddles...Chorography attempts to translate this ‘dream reasoning’ into a method.” (70) This might be a useful method for exploring a Minnelli film from this period: as James Naremore notes, “In fact, the imagination, or one of its surrogates, such as show business or dreaming, was Minnelli’s favorite subject.” (*Minnelli* 3) “Chorography,” with its pun on “choreography” and movement, also offers a useful method for thinking about the Hollywood musical, particularly one like *The Band Wagon*, with its emphasis on a wide range of dances, from the dark humor of “Triplets” to the high spirits of “Shine on Your Shoes” to the campy eroticism of the “Girl Hunt Ballet.” Following these threads might lead to what Roland Barthes describes as an *aesthetic discourse*: “What shall we call such a discourse? *erotic*, no doubt, for it has to do with pleasure; *aesthetic*, if we foresee subjecting this old category to a gradual torsion which will alienate it from its regressive, idealist background and bring it closer to the body, to the *drift*.” (*Barthes* 84) The anecdote about MGM’s twenty-

fifth anniversary brings together several important subjects—gossiping stars; antipathy between a studio chief who supported the blacklist (Mayer) and one who, briefly, opposed it (Scharj); a great studio of classic Hollywood on the verge of decline. All of this is relevant to a discussion of *The Band Wagon* and the blacklist, and so is that image of the lions slowly melting, like Cyd Charisse's leg slipping across Astaire's shoulder.

Dream Work

The story begins in New York, not California, and we will take a view of events not unlike that of Astaire on the red staircase in the “Girl Hunt” ballet, knees bent, arms glued to the railing, face riveted to the action. In *Heuretics*, Gregory Ulmer expands on the definition of “topistics” by stating that “A place is experienced wholistically as a riddle understood in terms of the *ker*, ghost, or bogey associated with the energy of space as an active receptacle.” (70) In the section that follows, I wish to create a sense of that scattering of narrative, movement of figures and uncertainty of meaning—what in cinematic terms we might call “elliptical editing”—common to an unfolding dream. Appropriately, for this “dream reasoning” (Ulmer 70), I will start this series of stories with one about a dream, one about ghosts and hallucinations, and ask the reader to be patient if I do not immediately explain all of my riddles.

“Incidentally, I have had many dance ideas come to me as I lay awake at 4 A.M.,” Fred Astaire recounts in his autobiography (165), and tonight it is a dream of lyrical violence:

I visualized a long line of boys in top hats and imagined myself using a cane like a gun, shooting the boys one at a time and having them drop simultaneously with the sound of a loud tap from my foot, leaving a sight somewhat like a comb with a tooth out here and there. Then I behaved like a machine gun mowing down the whole lot of ‘em. (Astaire 164)

This dream came in the midst of a Broadway flop called *Smiles*, in which Astaire was dancing with his sister Adele. The idea was put aside, and would later turn up in *Top Hat* (Astaire 165),

but in the meantime, the Astaires had a show to close, and another to open, a new revue entitled *The Band Wagon*. Opening in 1931, this show would be far more successful than *Smiles*, and it would climax with a “dream ballet” called “The Beggar’s Waltz,” which Astaire danced with ballerina Tilly Losch. (Astaire 169) It was the last show Astaire would do with his sister Adele, who would soon get married and leave show business. Another flop, *The Gay Divorcee* (with music by Cole Porter), followed, and then Hollywood beckoned.

In 1931, Vincente Minnelli came to New York, as the costume designer for the shows of theater chain Balaban & Katz, recently absorbed by Paramount Pictures. (Minnelli 11) As Minnelli remembers in his autobiography, 1931 was also the year the city opened The Empire State Building (57), soon to be deployed in nightmarish fashion in *King Kong*. Minnelli’s recollections of Times Square in this period also have a dream-like quality:

I was drawn to time and again to Times Square and the color and fire of all that neon. . .How well I understood G.K. Chesterton’s observation when he’d seen the letters and trademarks advertising everything from pork to pianos: “What a glorious garden of wonders this would be, to any one who was lucky enough to be unable to read.” (Minnelli 56)

It is an observation that echoes Walter Benjamin’s famous statement that, in the language of the urban space, what matters is less the message of the neon light, than “the fiery pool reflecting it in the asphalt” (“One-Way Street” 86), and it suggests just how closely aligned Minnelli was to several strains of modernism alive in the 1930s. His interest in Surrealism is well documented (Minnelli 10), and its dream logic informs that of the revue, a musical format in which Minnelli came to prominence, with such shows as *At Home Abroad*, *The Ziegfield Follies of 1936* and *The Show is On*. (Minnelli 19) The revue form, with its loosely connected numbers, stock characters, and reliance on a constantly shifting mise-en-scene, bears a resemblance to the walking tour described by Andre Breton in *Nadja*:

The words BOIS-CHARBONS, which appear on the last page of *Les Champs Magnetiques*, enabled me, during the whole of one Sunday I spent walking with Phillipe Soupault, to exhibit a peculiar talent for detecting every shop they serve to designate. . . .And my predictions always turned out to be right. I was informed, guided, not by the hallucinatory image of the words in question, but rather by one of those logs in cross-section, crudely painted on the façade, in little piles on each side of the door, all the same color with a darker center. (27)

What matters, in other words, is less the meaning of the word, then the sensation provoked by the accompanying image; the usefulness of “bois charbons” is not that it informs Breton of where to buy charcoal, but that it allows him entrance to a transformed world, one mediated by images (a far less “stable” signifier than words). Lacking the need for a coherent “plot” to tie together skits and musical numbers, the revue could engage the “space” of performance like Breton’s *flâneur*, choosing a particular theme, image or place (Paris, for instance, or the Caribbean) and using that as the “through-line” that connected material with rhythm, color, and striking juxtaposition.

Minnelli’s revues would often refer to Paris or the Caribbean, film critic Stephen Harvey reminds the reader, despite the fact that Minnelli had not been to such places at the times the revues were staged. (34) Instead of anthropological “authenticity,” such spaces allowed Minnelli what James Naremore calls “a protonarrative transitivity,” which allowed “a feeling of variety-within-harmony.” (*Minnelli* 20) Writing of Japan thirty-five years later, Roland Barthes will state a similar idea more succinctly:

The Lacanian subject (for instance) never makes him think of Tokyo, but Tokyo makes him think of the Lacanian subject. This procedure is a constant one: he rarely starts from the idea in order to invent an image for it subsequently; he starts from a sensuous object, and then hopes to meet in his work with the possibility of finding an *abstraction* for it, levied on the intellectual culture of the moment: philosophy then is no more than a reservoir of particular images, of ideal fictions (he borrows objects, not reasonings). (99)

The “reservoir of particular images” from which Minnelli drew included French Impressionism, Surrealist and Freudian thought, contemporary jazz and blues, and the movies (*Minnelli* 10), and other Broadway shows; the result, as Naremore notes, was “a sort of costume

party,” one that was “self-reflexive, frequently using show business as a theme, incessantly quoting or parodying other artists and entertainments.” (*Minnelli* 22) What came out was less an “original” reasoning than a startling reproduction, of the sort Benjamin describes in 1935:

One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. (“The Work of Art,” 220)

Across town, a different sort of dream was being staged by a young director named Orson Welles. Star of radio and stage, and dervish behind the Mercury Theatre, Welles had, by 1937, staged an all-black *Macbeth*, a modern-dress version of *Julius Caesar* which alludes to Nuremberg and the Nazis, and most recently, a troubled but legendary version of Marc Blitzstein’s “labor opera,” *The Cradle Will Rock*; the last of these, sponsored by the Works Project Administration’s Federal Theater Project, faced a “rousing and unconventional opening” (Brady 117), when a forced shutdown from the WPA caused the cast to head uptown to the Venice Theater, where they performed the play while standing on seats in the audience (Brady 114-117). He was equally active on radio, not only directing and starring in productions for his own Mercury Theatre on the Air, but also originating the voice of *The Shadow*, appearing on the popular program *Suspense*, and also lending his talents to offbeat projects like *The Fall of The City*, an allegory about Fascism written by Popular Front poet Archibald MacLeish. The aptness of the cliché, “boy wonder,” is almost laughable—Welles is not yet 23, and following the legendary Mercury Theatre broadcast of *The War of the Worlds* in 1938, he will depart for Hollywood, signing a groundbreaking contract with RKO Pictures.

But a year before that broadcast, another studio will come calling: Metro-Goldwyn Mayer. As Welles recounts the tale to Peter Bogdanovich, MGM was looking for a co-star for Hedy Lamarr, and wanted an “exotic” leading man. (Welles and Bogdanovich 1-2) It was Ben

Hecht who suggested Welles, with the encouraging comment that “He looks kind of weird. . . .” (2) Calls were placed, but Welles was a difficult man to find—he didn’t seem to be at any of his late-night hangouts. By the time he is tracked down, five hours later, the MGM executives have lost interest: “What does he want?” is their gruff reply to the secretary who announces that Welles is on the line. (Welles and Bogdanovich 2) MGM and Welles will cross paths a few more times before he finally makes *Citizen Kane* for RKO: In 1939, he flirts with the studio over filming an adaptation of Sinclair Lewis’s *It Can’t Happen Here*, another allegory about the dangers of Fascism (Brady 196-98), while in 1938 he bickers with the studio over Hedy Lamarr, whom MGM refuses to lend to Welles for a radio version of *Algiers*, the success of which was the impetus of the studio’s original interest in hiring Welles in the first place.

As the bright young stars of the New York theater scene, Welles and Minnelli have much in common. They are transplanted Midwesterners whose work combines a very “urban” and sophisticated perspective with a nostalgia for the distant, small-town past. Both have an interest in experimentation, playing with the space of the stage and integrating “cinematic” techniques into their theatrical storytelling. (*Minnelli 23*) They share a liberal political sensibility, in both cases seen most obviously in the breaking of color barriers in casting (Welles with *Macbeth* and a stage version of *Native Son* (Brady 294-298), Minnelli by utilizing stars like Lena Horne in his stage shows and filming *Cabin in The Sky*, one of the most acclaimed “all-black” Hollywood musicals. (*Minnelli 22*) Finally, both share a deep fascination with the cultural objects of modernism: jazz, film, modern painting, and consumerism.

They differ in the outspokenness of their political sensibilities: Welles’ radio and theatrical work, as well as much of his later work in film, juggles the demands of “commercial” entertainment with a political viewpoint that, while not didactic, is also not hidden. The stage

versions of *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar*, as well as the aforementioned *Cradle Will Rock* and *Native Son*, offer examples of Welles' willingness to confront his audience on the problems of the day, while *Citizen Kane* and *The Magnificent Ambersons* offer paradoxical views on the effects of industrialization, mourning a lost past and decrying the political corruption that followed through utilization of those very tools of cinema that would not have been possible without such technological and industrial change. In that sense, Welles' self-reflexivity in theater and film, if not Brechtian, is much closer to the kind of politicized art that Benjamin calls for at the end of "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."⁸

Minnelli, by contrast, was much more muted in his political statements, both personal and professional. While a great admirer of the Federal Theater and Welles (which came into being while he was away in Hollywood, working for Paramount Pictures) (Minnelli 101), Minnelli's own contributions to a theatrical scene he describes as "lean and hungry, and infinitely more exciting" (101), were much more limited: a modestly successful parody of European fascism called *Hooray for What*, and a never-produced idea for a "surrealist revue," *The Light Fantastic*, which, according to Minnelli's notes and sketches, would have parodied Fascism, consumerism, and modern art in a whirligig style. (Minnelli 105-106) Like Welles, Minnelli was also approached by MGM in the late thirties, but his career there would be far more lasting than his theatrical contemporary's.

Theater, however, was not the only art scene that was thriving in the late 1930s; Abstract Expressionism was starting to take root in 1937, thanks in part to the sponsorship of the Guggenheims, whose "Museum of Non-Objective Painting" displays the work of Wassily

⁸ It should also be noted that Welles' politics were not limited to his work: he was an outspoken campaigner for FDR throughout the 1930s and 40s, and later used a newspaper column, "Orson Welles Today," to speak out against coming Cold War hysteria. See Brady, p.378-379.

Kandinsky and others, including a young Jackson Pollack. (Hartt 1018) The influence of the Surrealists on Pollack is profound, and he will later speak of his work in dream-like terms, as a series of unconscious gestures: “When I am in my painting, I’m not aware of what I’m doing...I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image, etc., because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through.”

Outside Manhattan, in Dover Furnace, New York, a group of actors and directors are attempting to achieve a similar effect in performance. Elia Kazan describes the approach The Group Theatre was reaching for in 1932:

The essential and rather simple technique, which has since then been complicated by teachers of acting who seek to make the Method more recondite for the commercial advantage, consists of recalling the circumstances, physical and personal, surrounding an intensely emotional experience in the actor’s past. It is the same as when we accidentally hear a tune we may have heard at a story or an ecstatic moment in our lives, and find, to our surprise, that we are reexperiencing the emotion we felt then, feeling ecstasy again or rage and the impulse to kill...[Lee Strasburg’s] actors often appeared to be in a state of self-hypnosis. (Kazan 63)

Mystery Trains and Atomic Armoires

In 1973, Metro-Goldwyn Mayer filmed *That’s Entertainment!*, a tribute to their great musicals of the 1930s, 40s and 50s. When they returned to the mock-up of the New York train station that was used in *The Band Wagon*, Fred Astaire, who recreated the whistling walk past the trains of “By Myself” as part of his introduction, observed, “The set was a mess. All the windows on the trains were broken. . . .As I walked along, I noticed that the carpeting was torn and the seats of the train were missing. But I suppose nothing should last forever.” (Minnelli 275) In the film, after he lights his cigarette, Astaire’s character, “Tony Hunter,” waits nervously in the Pullman car, torn between his desire for a crowd and his need to slip quietly into the city, a divided personality captured by the clash between his elegant gray suit and the tapping and fidgeting of his hands and feet as he waits. Finally, arms held in at his chest, his body almost

swaying, he gets up and walks to the edge of the car doorway, bouncing on the heels of his feet and eavesdropping on a young couple noting the gaggle of press by the train, probably waiting for some movie star. Tony adjusts his tie and walks out to meet the mob. Almost sneaking into the left of the frame, his face covered by the gesture of putting on a straw hat, he eventually stands face-front, addressing the reporters with false modesty, until Ava Gardner steps off the other car, and poses in the door for the reporters. *This* is whom they were really waiting for, and they make her repeat her very dramatic exit pose twice for the cameras (she and Astaire will meet up again, six years later, in producer-director Stanley Kramer's anti-nuclear war opus *On the Beach*, probably wishing they were back on the train).

The train was mock-up of the Deco Superliner used in the film, all sleek silver and plush interior. Writing of one such train, the *20th Century Limited* (designed in 1938), Bob Johnston and Joe Welsh note designer Henry Dreyfus's plans for the train: "By repeating the type style, logo, striping and color scheme on stationary, dinner china, and even matchbooks, he created an instantly recognizable 'branding' for the *Century*" (47), a branding similar to that engaged in by film studios like MGM. Oddly, the train used in the film says "Santa Fe" on the side, despite the fact that Santa Fe is a *westbound* line, and the train in *The Band Wagon* is going from Los Angeles to New York. Perhaps this error, this reversal of direction makes it an apt metaphor—like Tony's jittery gestures-- for the collapse of the studio system. By 1973, MGM was a shell of its former self, still producing and distributing motion pictures, but with nowhere near the success and acclaim of its glory days. The studio's auctioning off of costumes, sets and props in 1969 symbolized this decline, at once suggesting both the studio's dire straits and the hold that those older films still had on the imagination of the public.

The concept of the auction—with its bidding, financial haggling, claims and counterclaims, and auctioneer coaxing commitments out of suggestible crowds-- suggests one metaphor for studio life in the postwar era. *The Band Wagon* begins with an auction, or, more properly, a title sequence that then turns into an auction: the titles run over an image of a top hat and cane, instant signifiers of Fred Astaire, and the “class” and “elegance” his screen image personifies. As the titles fade, off-screen voice takes bids on the top hat and cane, and one learns they are the property of fading movie star Tony Hunter. The blurring of diegetic and non-diegetic space in these opening minutes of the film suggests the slightly campy, self-reflexive tone *The Band Wagon* will pursue in its tale of theatrical excess and insecurity. How MGM journeyed from top studio in Hollywood to studio in decline is another story this chapter will explore.

By the time the United States entered World War II, Hollywood was already a town in transition, slowly moving away from the producer-centered, assembly-line production mode favored by the majors in the 1930s. Janet Staiger notes that part of this transition was forced, as the federal government issued a consent decree forcing the major studios to halt their practice of “blind selling and block booking” and the studios agreed to a “no-more-than-five films” rule with regards to trade shows and block booking. (*Classical Hollywood* 331) Staiger further observes that this ended up benefiting the studios during wartime:

This change encouraged the companies to load up each film with as much talent and spectacle as possible so that all the blocks-of-five would attract exhibitors. Furthermore, concentrating on fewer and higher-priced films fell in line with monopolistic practices. The affiliated majors could indirectly collude, reducing the total number of A and Super-A products, most desired by the exhibitor, and still achieve similar profit returns. Even when the consent decree lapsed in 1943, the firms did not return to their former practices. (*Classical Hollywood* 331)

When postwar profits hit an all-time high in 1946 (*Classical Hollywood* 331), studios continued to concentrate on a more limited number of profitable, long-running “A” pictures, and studio

talent began setting up independent and semi-independent production companies and deals with the studios, to maximize their own profits and reduce their taxes. (*Classical Hollywood* 331-332)

Standing alone in the crowd (as Astaire sings in *The Band Wagon*, “I’ll go my way by myself/Teach my heart how to sing...”), with no such deals in place in 1946, was Metro-Goldwyn Mayer. (*Classical Hollywood* 332) In fact, MGM was moving in the opposite direction, expanding the number of producer units and continuing to crank out the successful genre films and series pictures (*Andy Hardy*, *The Thin Man*) that had served them well in the previous decade. (Schatz 360-361)

Into this system stepped Dore Schary, a young MGM staff writer who had recently shifted to producer duties. Schary came to Hollywood in 1932 (the same year that Vincente Minnelli was serving an unsuccessful stint at Paramount Pictures), working at Columbia Pictures, then moving to MGM, Universal, Warner Brothers, and back to Metro. (McGilligan 183-90) It was a peripatetic journey around Hollywood, not unlike the one taken a decade earlier by one of Schary’s mentors, David Selznick, for whom he would shortly go to work. Before that, however, he had the entire slate of “B-unit” pictures at MGM to produce (McGilligan 199), and he was very successful at it, producing such films as *Joe Smith, American* and *Lassie*. As Thomas Schatz notes, the films blurred the lines between “A” and “B” films, staying under the budget ceiling, but using fresh new talent and tackling provocative subject matter. (369-70) According to Schary, it was just such a project that precipitated his departure from MGM: Schary was collaborating with Sinclair Lewis on a western called *Storm in the West*, meant to be an allegory about fascism. (McGilligan and Peary 202) When Schary submitted the script for studio approval, he was told that it was “Communist propaganda.” Unable to convince the studio otherwise, Schary left for Selznick’s Vanguard Productions. (McGilligan and Peary 203)

Still at MGM was producer Arthur Freed, whose musical pictures were both the studio's most successful and its most expensive. (Schatz 370) When Freed brought Minnelli back to Hollywood in 1940, the movie musical was also in transition, shifting from the bodily abstractions of Busby Berkley, whose musical numbers, despite their frequent Broadway settings and revue-style dances, used a fluid camera and extraordinary overhead shots to break the "proscenium arch," proto-theatrical view of the audience, to a more "integrated" whole, merging story and production number to achieve a deeper emotional and thematic resonance. Rick Altman observes that "By the end of the thirties, the backstage device was clearly losing ground to other, less stereotyped methods of motivating song and dance. In fact, the demise of the backstage paradigm is a classic example of how too much success can lead to failure. . . . New forms began to appear, where the show usually doesn't even exist until the characters create a need for it." (235) One form Altman recognizes is the "folk" musical of the 1940s, which he reads as a response to the war and a rising sense of nationalism: "Singing, like working, is now an anthem of allegiance to the nation's past glory, present strength, and future hope. . . a model for the films of the late forties and early fifties, especially at MGM." (120)

Vincente Minnelli played a central role in this shift, with such acclaimed, integrated films in the "folk syntax" (Altman 120) as *Cabin in the Sky* and *Meet Me In St. Louis*. In contrast to those films, which utilize motifs of "the natural" and "small town" in ways not dissimilar to Minnelli's stage work (Altman 120, *Minnelli* 60-62), *The Band Wagon* works extremely hard to signify "urbanity," to its audience, from its New York setting to its references to "high art" figures like Matisse and Picasso to its casting of Astaire himself, with his whiff of thirties nightclub glamour. Its rare encounters with the sorts of "folk syntax" of the earlier films tend to be conflicted and ironic: numbers like "New Sun In The Sky" and "Louisiana Hayride" both

celebrate and poke fun at Broadway models like *Oklahoma!* (Harvey 123). Minnelli nails the colors and movements of such shows while exaggerating the tones of the numbers to such a degree that it becomes impossible to take their emotional content seriously.

Something similar is occurring in the “Shine on Your Shoes” number. Tony Hunter enters a Times Square arcade that, in its crowds, neon and bright color, reminds the viewer of Walter Benjamin’s observation about effects on the collective unconscious of the Paris arcades of the 19th Century:

...images in which the new is intermingled with the old. These images are wishful fantasies, and in them the collective seeks both to preserve and to transfigure the inchoateness of the social product and the deficiencies in the social system of production...Intimations of this, deposited in the unconsciousness of the collective, mingle with the new to produce the utopia that has left its traces in thousands of configurations of life, from permanent buildings to fleeting fashions (“Paris” 148).

Like a Surrealist playground, the arcade is littered with provocative signs and advertisements (“The gayest music box,” “Take home a souvenir,” etc.) that grab the viewer’s eye and create a sense of disorientation not unlike that Hunter is feeling, distressed that this garish tribute to “fleeting fashion” has replaced the older Broadway theaters where he performed in the twenties and thirties. He moves through it in eight fluid, boom-driven shots, Minnelli’s matches-on-action barely perceptible, as Hunter stops at a hot dog stand, a mechanical fortune teller, a “love meter” that “measures” attractiveness and then, in a clever juxtaposition, a distorted mirror that shrinks and fattens him (the pairing of the positive evaluation from the love meter and the distortion of the mirror foreshadows Hunter’s fate in his new Broadway show). He moves through the space as a dancer, non-diegetic music mixing with the sounds of the arcade to act as accompaniment, Astaire’s precise turns and jutting arms offering another kind of doubled consciousness, one whose movements are both shaped by the mechanized sounds of the space and, in their wit and grace, work to transcend and control it. After exploring some of the

arcade's other attractions, he trips into a black shoe-shine man (LeRoy Daniels), and it is here that the number proper begins, as Hunter begins to sing and performs a tap dance with him. Daniels' race connects the number to *Cabin in the Sky* and to *Meet Me In St. Louis*, where a black "jockey" statue on the Smith's front lawn, seen only in a fleeting shot towards the beginning of the film, reminds the viewer of the role of casual racism in Hollywood's construction of "folk" and "otherness" in the classic period.⁹ Within a space like *The Band Wagon*'s arcade, however, where everything is hyper-aestheticized and commercialized for satiric effect, it is too simplistic to read Daniels' character as a racist stereotype. Rather, one might say that the film utilizes a racist stereotype (the black man as dancing, smiling servant) as yet another commodity with which Astaire interacts. James Naremore's comments about "Africanism" in reference to *Cabin in the Sky* might also apply here:

Minnelli relied on a kind of primitivism, explicitly associating blackness with sexuality, instinctiveness, and the Freudian subconscious. At the same time, however, he promoted an uptown face of jazz, tied to contemporary fashion and big-time entertainment. In this context, blackness began to signify both wildness and sophistication. The African imagery was as "stereotypical" as any other cultural code, but it seemed attractive and denatured by parody or playful quotation; moreover, because it was regarded by audiences as in the vanguard, it tended to problematize the distinction between the savage and the cultivated. (Minnelli 62)

This reading doesn't entirely lessen the still-disturbing stereotype, however playfully "quoted" (in fact, the role Daniels plays as buoy to Astaire's spirits seems another example of the kinds of postwar liberalism film scholar Thomas Cripps analyzes with mixed feelings, where, as he writes of *Home of the Brave*, "a one-armed white man equals one whole Negro" (224), but Naremore's definition does suggest other possibilities for the way it fits into a film where time and space are

⁹ This attitude is continued in a throwaway line a few scenes later, when Jeffrey Cordova's press agent claims that Cordova's charisma and audacity might cause him to cast Tallulah Bankhead as "Little Eva," the character from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

constantly juggled and conflated. In a new Hollywood musical with an old Broadway title that showcases songs from a variety of previous shows and a self-reflexive star performance, such deployments can be read for their ironic effects.

Philosopher Stanley Cavell also explores this scene, in a chapter entitled “Fred Astaire Asserts the Right to Praise,” where he himself asserts that Astaire is “not merely staking a certain aesthetic claim to his art’s promise of shared pleasure, but a certain political claim that his mode of art—one which, we can say, appropriates the achievements of black dancing—is not only acceptable to me, but represents a striking adornment of American culture, one which makes my praise of his work an expression of my consent to America’s partial democracy happier or more heartened than it might otherwise be.” (Cavell 62) That is a long sentence, one with its own intricate choreography, and indeed, Cavell’s philosophical exploration of the meaning (political or otherwise) of Astaire’s dance is similarly wide-ranging, moving from how Astaire’s dance, and Cavell’s philosophical stake in it, signifies differently in Amsterdam (where he is giving the chapter as a lecture) than in his native America; to Henry James and Shakespeare; to operatic antecedents; and finally to the routine itself. This is a journey in writing, one I think worth highlighting not only for the way in which it mirrors Astaire’s tour around the arcade, but because, from its anecdotal opening (as Cavell looks out on Amsterdam) onward, such a methodology again emphasizes the importance of movement and what one might call lingering (or a fascination with tangents) to thinking about history and cultural spaces. What does it mean, in these vexed spaces, to praise? That is Cavell’s question, and to answer it he invokes Kant’s notion of “pleasure without a concept. . . .As Kant roughly puts matters: The ground of my universal voice in aesthetic judgment remains no more than subjective.” (Cavell 67)

How, then, does such a subjective judgment relate to Cavell's earlier observations about the politics of Astaire's dance, its role in defining and partially consenting to a particular vision of American democracy? In part it relates to an earlier performance, "By Myself," in which, Cavell claims, Astaire could not fully dance (and thereby not fully express himself) (68): "Shine on Your Shoes" becomes the release of the emotional build-up of the earlier number; but that release, for some critics, comes through the problematic appropriation of black dancing. Cavell addresses this problem in two ways. The first is to confront such critics head-on, pointing out minor flaws in their remembrances and analyses of the film, and reading such flaws as symptomatic of the very problems of consent, assent, and identity that he feels Astaire's dance raises: "the case is not, I think, merely one in which a writer presumes in advance to know what a work must be expressing since it is of a piece with a class of works already pegged by him or her; beyond this presumption the casualness is a function of a fixed picture of the history of the movies...It is a picture of the history of film as a linear causal sequence of famous events." (70) And if Astaire's assertion is one that comes through movement, such a fixed, linear progression will not do.

The second way is to think of Astaire's dance with LeRoy Daniels less as one of the dominant (white) culture appropriating the culture of another (as critics have claimed), than "of finding the means of expressing praise, of acknowledging mutuality with another, expressing gratitude for another's existence." (68) Astaire literally finds his feet in the number, dancing and "reacquiring language" (75) in the form of song and dance: "Hovering has found its landing, melancholy has found its ecstasy" (77), in a "dance of identity" (76) that owes its existence to black dancing, American history and (therefore, perhaps) American injustice. Astaire hits the mystery machine with the question mark, refinds the black shoeshine man, and goes into a

routine of departure. “It is—if again perhaps only after the fact, but then traumatically—a moment of sharp and unexpected poignancy.” (77) But in dancing together, according to Cavell, the two men have created “a territory of magic or exemption in which such things as that walk-off can form themselves,” have created a “tragic glimpse of Utopia.” (78) In the end, Cavell is less concerned with Astaire (or Daniels) than with one’s response to him, and to the scene, the tendency to judge as a way of separating oneself from Astaire’s appropriations, and also from his achievements (82), a separation that is not only philosophically suspect, but perhaps a rebuke to the acknowledgment of others in a democracy that Cavell is suggesting Astaire’s dance stands in for: “If I am to possess my own experience I cannot afford to cede it to my culture as that culture now stands. I must find ways to insist upon it, if I find it unheard, ways to let the culture confront itself in me, driving me some distance to distraction.” (83)

Film critic Stuart Klawans takes a different tack, investigating the mystery of LeRoy Daniels himself (Daniels was a real “bootblack” in Los Angeles discovered by Michael Kidd, and hired for only this one film). (Klawans 124) Klawans goes on to note, “He can’t be more than thirty. Shoeshine men don’t lead pampered lives; yet this one has the head of a young sensualist. . . .Were you to pause and think about this figure, a new question mark might form around him.” (123) Finally, in an evocative observation that has resonance for the moment in the song that follows (and for an anecdotal history), Klawans writes, “LeRoy does something between one phase of the shine and next: he executes a spin.” (127)

Executing spins and resolving question marks lie at the center of one the most interesting items in the arcade, one Cavell alludes to in his analysis: towards the beginning of his syncopated, circular journey, Tony Hunter stumbles across a strange, shiny gray metallic box, like some sort of atomic-age armoire. On its front is a red question mark, signifying riddles and

mystery. Try as he might, Astaire can't get the box to open—he turns the dial and turns the dial, but to no avail. It is only after his “Shine on Your Shoes” dance that he is able to return to the box and break it open, at which point flags of many nations and fireworks pop out, and a blurry animated image plays on a small television screen within.

This box—and Tony's triumph over it-- fascinates me for several reasons. First, its pyrotechnic display seems the perfect cap to the scene's ambivalent interaction with postwar consumerism and entertainment, offering a kind of parody of patriotic excess that might take one back to thinking about Hollywood in this Cold War moment. Cavell reads this box as a straightforward, and very serious allegory: “[It] reminds him that he cannot praise black dancing without consenting to, being compromised by, an American scene of mechanical self-praise whose self-forgetfulness the counter-scenes of entertainment deeper within the Arcade have remembered.” (80) It might just be the temperamental difference between a philosopher and a film studies scholar, but I choose to read the box in a different manner.

Second, the box itself with its riddling question mark—which holds all manner of garish entertainment, if one knows how to crack the code, and to which Tony stands in a relation both frustrated and amused, might stand in for cinema itself, and Hollywood cinema in particular. The density of its riddles—which come in the form of references, allusions, dance moves, bright neon and sensual dress—don't always give themselves up to the usual code-cracking. How one cracks open the box depends on the way – and the moment at which—one executes the spin (or, as Walter Benjamin puts it in “One-Way Street,” “Strength lies in improvisation. All the decisive blows are struck left-handed.” (65) Perhaps it is time for me, like Tony Hunter, to crack open my box and begin explaining some of the riddles I've been telling up to now.

Testimonies

Writing in 1956 of the work of Minnelli, Cukor, Mankiewicz, Aldrich, Welles, Hawks, Lang, and Hitchcock, French film critic Jean Domarchi declared, “If the House Un-American Activities Committee investigation had any sense, it would have been the directors just named who would have lost their right to work, not those doubtless admirable but infinitely less dangerous directors like Dassin, Losey, or Berry.” (244) He recognized in the work of those directors “the same subject—the impossibility in the present state of things of an effective and genuine morality, or, if you like, the *incompatibility of morality* (other than that of the police) and capitalist society” (243-44), and made a crucial observation: “I will add that it is at moments when their subject seems furthest from any social preoccupation that the critique goes furthest, touching the sensitive nerve of the new Leviathan which is American capitalist society.” (243)

In 1947, Hollywood had no choice in its social preoccupations: the “Red Scare” was sweeping through the town, and decisions had to be made. Victor Navasky notes that the first round of HUAC hearings, run by J. Parnell Thomas in the fall of 1947 “had comic overtones” (80), where “the subpoenaed witnesses were either ‘friendly’ ones who didn’t really know any names.... or ‘unfriendly’ ones who wouldn’t give them.” (79) If, as Navasky notes, Walt Disney railing against communist control of Mickey Mouse (80) indeed had comic overtones, the next week things became more serious: ten writers and directors, noted as “unfriendly,” were called before the Committee and refused to cooperate. Alvah Bessie, Herbert Biberman, Lester Cole, Edward Dmytryk, Ring Lardner, Jr., John Howard Lawson, Albert Maltz, Sam Ornitz, Adrian Scott, and Dalton Trumbo were cited for contempt, and came to be known as “The Hollywood Ten” (Navasky 80-82). Response in the Hollywood community quickly became divided. On the one hand, there was the “Committee for the First Amendment,” consisting of well-known actors like Humphrey Bogart, Lauren Bacall, and Groucho Marx, and writer-directors like John Huston

who supported the civil rights of the Ten. On the other hand, there was a meeting of studio executives at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York that would have far more lasting effects.

When the heads of the major studios met at the Waldorf on November 24, 1947, they formulated what came to be known as the “Waldorf Agreement,” or in darker phrasing, “the blacklist.” The Waldorf Agreement stated, “that the Ten would be suspended without pay, and that thereafter no Communists or other subversives would ‘knowingly’ be employed in Hollywood.” (Navasky 83)

Now, at last, it is time to return to February 1949, and that MGM soundstage, where the *Look* magazine photographer preserves an image of studio glamour and grandiosity (Looking at the photo now, fifty-three years later, one is struck by the ordering of stars. Astaire is in the front, and so are stalwarts like Lionel Barrymore, Edward Arnold and Mary Astor. But there, next to Arnold, is Lassie. Do Frank Sinatra, Clark Gable, and Judy Garland—all of whom sit in rows behind the pooch—feel at all put out?). There are no writers or directors in the bunch, unsurprising at a studio that has never favored directors to the degree of Paramount, RKO or Columbia. Noticeably absent are studio executives Dore Schary and Louis B. Mayer, who have been coming to verbal blows with one another. Schary returned to MGM after a successful stint working for David Selznick, Mayer’s son-in-law, for whom he produced the Shirley Temple hit *I’ll Be Seeing You*, before moving on to a brief stint as head of production at RKO. (*Showman* 421-22) At RKO, Schary had overseen production of one of HUAC’s targeted films, *Crossfire*, a tale about anti-Semitism in the U.S. military, directed by Edward Dmytryk and produced by Adrian Scott. (Schatz 443) Schary had testified in front of HUAC in 1947, taking a position that Navasky later described as that of “many liberals” (83), attacking the Committee for its tactics and hysteria, while neither dismissing outright their concerns nor fully defending the actions and

behavior of the Ten, whom he felt had made strategic errors in their testimony. (Navasky 83-84) Still, Schary's liberalism makes him an anomaly among studio executives, especially the well-connected, very conservative Mayer. Schary was one of the few executives to oppose the Waldorf Agreement (Schatz 445), a stance for which he was attacked by Mayer, and will later be picketed for his relatively liberal stance by a group known as The Wage Earners Committee, with its self-declared purpose to battle for the "inalienable rights of the individual, as opposed to regimentation, communization, or dictatorship in any form." (Cogley 113) Schary's surprise success with the low-budget *Battleground* at the end of the year will enhance his prestige and exacerbate his strained relationship with Mayer. The lions are definitely melting.

In the meantime, there is a show to put on. In 1951, HUAC returns to Hollywood, this time under the leadership of Congressman John S. Wood (Cogley 93), and has far more reaching effects than the initial round in 1947. John Cogley outlines some of the reasons:

In 1947, the wartime friendship between the U.S. and Russia was still a fresh memory. By 1951 U.S. soldiers were at war in Korea with the forces of two Communist powers and the Cold War with Russia was at its height. With the Hiss-Chambers, Klaus Fuchs and Judith Coplon cases behind it, the nation was becoming ever more security-conscious and, in the opinion of many, was afflicted with a bad case of political jitters. (93)

Having watched brave words and free speech committees melt in the face of both the Ten's intransigence and the studios' blacklist, Hollywood is not eager to repeat the experience, and when HUAC comes around again, it finds a community still divided, but more pliable: "a number of prominent persons were begging the Committee for a chance to testify and the Committee had to disappoint some of them." (Cogley 94) Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner call this "the choreographed confession" (xiv), and observe it existed "to compel the rebels of earlier day into public shame at having rebelled, to compel them to deny their earlier selves." (xiv) By 1954, the year after *The Band Wagon* is released, 324 people will have been "named" as communists or

potential subversives, 212 of whom are active, every-day motion picture workers (as opposed to spouses, or trade unionists only occasionally associated with the industry). (Cogley 109-110) They are named by those who have always identified themselves as anti-communist, like actor Robert Taylor, and by others, like screenwriter Budd Schulberg and director Elia Kazan, who are former communists willing to go record in the second round of hearings. (Cogley 96) Some, like Larry Parks, indeed find themselves “choreographed” into naming names by HUAC congressmen, caught in the confusion of legal notes and verbal orders. (Cogley 97-100)

It is impossible to ignore the anecdotal nature of much of the testimony. In one famous moment, Robert Taylor named actor Howard Da Silva as a communist by recalling that he “always has something to say at the wrong time” at Screen Actors Guild meeting. (Cogley 106) Ginger Rogers’ mother Lela testified by telling stories of her daughter’s experiences making supposed “agit-prop” films in Hollywood. (Navasky 79) Budd Schulberg’s testimony told the story of a bad review in the *Daily Worker* for his novel, *What Makes Sammy Run?* (Buhle and Wagner 61) The testimonies of Walt Disney, Elia Kazan, and many others took an anecdotal form, both in their shape (telling stories about those marked “subversive”) and in a general lack of support or evidence (Taylor’s comment above being a prototypical example). That is not to say that such accusations of communism were not accurate—many of those named were, at least briefly, members of the Party, although many of those same men and women had, by the time of the hearings, dropped membership—but to suggest the slippery nature of the anecdote in this moment. In some ways, those who testified (both the “friendly” and the “unfriendly”) were caught between a form of public display “relatively rigorous in its ritual” (Navasky 85), with a whole set of expected gestures for naming names or taking the Fifth Amendment (John Cogley’s *Report on Blacklisting* discusses a whole set of variations on the latter—the “diminished Fifth,”

in which one denied current Party membership but refused to say if there had been membership in the past, or the “augmented Fifth,” in which one performed a similar act in a more heightened and vehement manner (103-104). There was also the position taken the Hollywood Ten: “I am answering your question, but in my own way” (Navasky 82).

The position mapped out by the Ten points to the ways in which the Cold War environment made it difficult to “take sides” on a variety of issues. For many postwar liberals, both communism and the tactics of HUAC were troubling: “these modern witch hunts were tolerated and given legitimacy *in part* because many of the nation’s leading liberal intellectuals loathed Communists more than they feared McCarthyites, and because they shared with their enemies on the right some of the same assumptions about internal subversion and potential threats to national security”. (Pells xiv) The transition a figure like Kazan made, from Party affiliations and alliances on the Left to a more anti-communist, or at least “individualized” position in the postwar era was mirrored by liberal critics and intellectuals like Dwight MacDonald, Clement Greenberg, and James Agee after the war. As Richard H. Pells writes,

they all shared a disenchantment with the political and cultural radicalism of the 1930s together with the felt need to ask new questions about and explore the new tensions of a ‘postindustrial’ society. . . .Because of these suppositions, they neither proposed nor trusted any sweeping solutions to the difficulties of their times. . . .In this way, they hoped the citizen might assert his individuality and protect his freedom with the constraints of the existing order. (vii-ix)

For critics and commentators like MacDonald and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., this meant taking the stance of “anti-communist liberals,” liberal on domestic issues but more conservative and hawkish on international affairs. Critiques of mass culture and corporate conformism echoed those of the Frankfurt School in previous decades (the Cold War intellectuals hadn’t completely shed their leftist origins), but also took on a more nationalist urgency—rejecting the plastics of consumer society was not only an aesthetic, but also a communal decision, for a better educated

American public, one aware of the manipulations of mass media, would be better able to resist totalitarianism. (Pells 227) The Americanization of the Frankfurt critique was concurrent with the popularization of Freudianism in the postwar era, albeit a watered-down Freudianism (Pells 217), and its effects can be seen on both high art and theater. In the case of the former, the rise of abstract expressionism, and Greenberg's valorization of Jackson Pollack, marks a shift from the art of the Popular Front in the 1930s (which Greenberg and MacDonald had already, derisively, marked as "kitsch" (Pells 217) to a more internalized, "unconscious" form of expression—the playfulness of Surrealism converted from a group aesthetic back to a more Romantic conception of the artist-as-hero. In theater, the interest in an individualized interior found its most popular expression in "Method" acting, a style that necessarily shifts the importance from the text to a personal, individualized experience in relation to that text. Kazan, of course, was central to this popularization, and it is intriguing to think of the HUAC testifiers themselves as "Method actors," using anecdotes as "sense memories" within the "text" laid down by the Committee, to unlock the emotions necessary to perform.

Not surprisingly, Orson Welles and his first film, *Citizen Kane* are at the center of all these shifts. Made at RKO, always a home for mavericks (perhaps because its ever-precarious financial position precluded the development of a "house style" and necessitated taking risks), a year after RKO star Fred Astaire announces a brief "retirement" from the screen, *Kane*, as James Naremore notes, merges any number of disparate styles and viewpoints: the radical politics of the Popular Front, the muckraking journalism of Hearst and Luce, and the popularization of Freudianism then taking root; the rat-a-tat verbal banter of screwball comedy; the deep-focus photography popularized by John Ford and cameraman Gregg Toland; and the murky chiaroscuro of German Expressionism. As if predicting the postwar mood of ambivalent

liberalism, Welles wraps his critique of capital in the more personal story of a young man taken from his mother and his childhood (and, by implication, from his “true” self). It is sheer melodrama on the level of story, but on the level of style, Welles is exploring cinematic technique (and bringing to bear his own vast knowledge of theater and radio sound) in a manner not dissimilar to the one Pells uses to describe the Cold War intellectuals above: frustrated with older models, looking for new forms of expression and (aesthetic) alliance. Welles’ acting style is too declarative and Shakespearean to be described as Method, but he shares with the school an interest in ambiguity, in letting small gestures (an upticked eyebrow, a well-timed pause) stand in for explanation, and the tortured, unresolved character of Kane, for all his histrionic excess, will act as a model for a new kind of melodrama that many of those involved with “Method” style, like Kazan and Nicholas Ray, will perfect in the coming decades.

Minnelli will make one of those melodramas, *The Bad and the Beautiful*, in 1952, but *The Band Wagon*, as a light-hearted musical with a “classic” star, will have to find other methods of approaching its character’s neuroses and ambivalence about a changing world. In her essay on cinematic gesture, Stern proposes that part of *The Band Wagon*’s fascination lies in “its performative register, the way it develops ideas about performance through enactment.” (5) At a moment of shifting trends in art, film and theater, and when the “choreographed” gestures of certain HUAC testifiers are designed to affect a pose of “cooperation” in the face of crisis, Minnelli, in the words of Stern, “elaborates an intersection of theatre and film, primarily through generic tropes, figuration, and performative modalities.” (5) Her most intriguing passages are those on “the daily body” and the “extra-daily body,” and her descriptions have resonance not only for thinking about *The Band Wagon*, but also for the “rehearsed” HUAC testimony described above:

The daily body is also a gestural and cultural body, imbued with techniques that have been absorbed and learnt and which are acted out on an unconscious and habitual level. The extra-daily body is differentiated from the daily body in the kind and range of techniques and the way they are deployed. This body has been produced through disciplined training, which enables a particular deployment of energy, and includes a context: the presence of an audience, and the marking out of a performance space. . . .The *Band Wagon* takes this distance [between performance styles] as its very subject matter.” (7)

Diminished Fifths and The Whole Eight-Eighths

More precisely, Camp involves a new, more complex relation to “the serious.” One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious.

— Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp” (288)

It would be a simple task to read *The Band Wagon*’s narrative as allegorical of this moment: the washed-up star who, like so many blacklisted writers, actors and directors, is forced to return to New York theater to find work. Stern’s observation that *The Band Wagon* conflates the on-stage and off-stage spaces of the film in order to call into question the relationship between performative modes and the everyday offers one way of allegorizing HUAC testimony (as noted above). Already, when discussing “Shine On Your Shoes” and “By Myself,” I have suggested certain numbers and gestures as standing in for something else—the nation, the studio system, cultural anxiety and insecurity.

The temptation is there because of the highly charged cultural moment (and, importantly, the desire to respect the experiences of those involved in such traumatic situations), and because of the highly charged nature of Minnelli’s mise-en-scene, which balances precariously between the debonair and the neurotic, aestheticizing every tiny detail—Astaire’s fedora, Charisse’s green trench coat, Jack Buchanan’s smoking jacket—until the viewer is placed in the position of Sontag’s divided Campist: “It is the difference between the thing as meaning something, anything, and the thing as pure artifice.” (281) Every object jumps off the screen with such force that it must be symbolic of *something*.

The allegorical impulse also arises out of a sense of obligation: the imperative of the ideological reading. To not find the politics in the pool of the melted ice cream lions is to be placed in the dock at Brecht's tribunal (as mentioned in the Introduction): Am I not completely in earnest? Writing of the Camp sensibility, Sontag notes, "Behind the 'straight' public sense in which something can be taken, one has found a private zany experience of the thing." (281) Like many of the epigrams in her piece, that one is written with a kind of anthropological objectivity: it is impossible for me to know if she thinks the "private zany experience" is a "good" or "bad" thing (and in a sense, the whole article is an argument against the simple determination of such categories). Still, in a chapter about movement and confession, I must confess that it is enough to give me pause—does an anecdotal analysis of this traumatic period, to say nothing of linking it to a bright musical, make zany and trivial that which was serious? Or is this confession, like those before HUAC, a choreographed one, and a "diminished fifth," a profession in the face of the profession, no matter how sincerely felt?

Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner, two film historians who have devoted much of their work to documenting the blacklist period, admit that reading the work of the period through the lens of politics becomes difficult: "The ups and downs of the movie business as well as the political logic of American society at large pose paradox upon paradox for any large overview of the history of film content. No generalization can be absolute, and not even the ebb and flow of censorship can provide an unshakeable foundation." (x) Still, in their book, *Blacklisted*, they attempt to do just that, documenting thousands of films created by blacklisted film professionals and searching for the signs of the radical within the form and narrative of each. Their language in the introduction, explaining their own logic in doing so, often echoes, ironically, of Sontag's explanation of Camp: if the latter is "esoteric—something of a private code, a badge of identity,

even, among small urban cliques. . . ” (273)--Buhle and Wagner believe the politics of the Hollywood Left “sometimes had been able in the first decade of talkies to transform mundane story assignments into something like art objects that contained personal meanings for vast audiences.” (x) Sontag insists that Camp is “apolitical”: “It goes without saying that the Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized” (277), but the overlap of language here—the belief in private codes of meaning that could subvert a text’s intended meaning—culturally contextualizes Sontag’s later remark that “Camp is the answer to the problem: how to be a dandy in the age of mass culture.” (288)

As James Naremore and Patrick Brantlinger note succinctly in their introduction to *Modernity and Mass Culture*, “Fred Astaire is of course an answer to that same problem, and he might be seen as a quintessential camp artist.” (*Modernity* 18) Tracing out *The Band Wagon*’s relationship to what they term “an unsettled mixture of at least six artistic cultures” (High, Modernist, Avant-garde, Folk, Popular and Mass), they also note, in an echo of Sontag’s unstable camp and Sarris’s undertheorized auteurism, “that there is good reason to doubt whether all the cultures have existed. If they are real, they partake of one another, sometimes overlapping, blurring together, or speaking dialogically—and sometimes like figures on a chessboard, living in antagonistic relation.” (8) Certainly, as they note, *The Band Wagon* moves quite easily across these divides; as if constructing a tracking shot in eight sentences, Naremore and Brantlinger follow Astaire from dancing with LeRoy Daniels (popular art) to meeting with Buchanan in the theater to discuss the new show (modernism within a popular space) to meeting with Charisse the ballerina (high art), eventually noting the reworking of the original *Faust* idea into “a light entertainment called *The Band Wagon*,” whose musical numbers, they observe “might be described as MGM’s notion of folk art.” (17)

The most intriguing idea floated in Naremore and Brantlinger's essay (which they credit to Andrew Ross) is the idea that camp depends on *nostalgia* for a great deal of its effect (18), a notion that recalls Benjamin's fascination with cultural objects that have recently gone out of fashion. This sense of nostalgia "is inscribed everywhere in the film" (19), they write of *The Band Wagon*: "The vertical integration of the movies was being challenged, television was changing the face of America, and Fred Astaire was growing old." (19) This "nostalgic" recuperation of lost forms and lost stars creates a text that works, on one level, to reaffirm both the values of narrative cinema and, by extension, the relationship of "entertainment" to "the American Way." (Naremore and Brantlinger 17-18)

But it is never that simple. If camp, per Sontag, is "apolitical," and if the very cultural categories theorists use to explore such questions are in doubt (Naremore and Brantlinger 8), it should be possible to open the film up to less doctrinaire readings. Indeed, Naremore and Brantlinger note the film's parodic aspects, as well as the complex politics that underlie categories like "high" and "mass" in any case—that "each of the categories has both left-wing and right-wing manifestations, and can't be described with the usual political language." (13)

In another context, the Hollywood Ten's statement above-- "I am answering your question, but in my own way"-- becomes another way of thinking about the role of the director within the studio system, and the fluidity of genres as seemingly disparate as the musical and the film *noir*. Jean Domarchi's provocative reading of Minnelli as the ultimate subversive suggests certain correspondences with the American political moment, and a different way of thinking about "naming names." Certainly, James Naremore has offered Minnelli as the best example of a Hollywood dandy—"Repeatedly he operated on the fault line between bourgeois ideology and extreme aestheticism" (*Minnelli 2*)-- and the mission of *Cahiers*, which would be established the

year after *The Band Wagon*'s release with Francois Truffaut's "A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema," would be dandyish, and similar to that marked out in quite different ways by Sontag and Buhle and Wagner: to find the personal meanings in seemingly "commercial" texts, and to use them as a marker of style and personality (and by extension, a definition of cinema itself). *Cahiers* founder Andre Bazin's famous essay in response to Truffaut and the others, "On the *politique des auteurs*," is, at best, ambivalent regarding Minnelli's status, using his canonization by Domarchi as an example of the theory's limitations:

My point of departure is an article by my friend Jean Domarchi on Vincente Minnelli's *Lust for Life*, which tells the story of Van Gogh. His praise was very intelligent and sober, but it struck me that such an article should not have been published in a review which, only one month previously, had allowed Eric Rohmer to demolish John Huston. The relentless harshness of the latter, and the indulgent admiration of the former, can only be explained by the fact that Minnelli is one of Domarchi's favourites and that Huston is not a *Cahiers auteur*. This partiality is a good thing, up to a certain point, as it leads us to stick up for a film that illustrates certain facets of American culture just as much as the personal talent of Vincente Minnelli. . . Can Domarchi claim that a *Van Gogh* by Renoir would not have brought more prestige to the *politique des auteurs* than a film by Minnelli? What was needed was a painter's son, and what we got was a director of filmed ballets! (249)

Across the ocean, in 1950, James Agee wrote a proto-auteurist appreciation of Huston's work that might act as a response to Rohmer's "devastation," as well as suggesting a different strain of pop culture critique and appreciation than Sontag's Camp¹⁰, particularly in its rejection of seduction as a mode to be celebrated:

Huston is one of the few movie artists who, without thinking twice about it, honors his audience. His pictures are not acts of seduction or of benign enslavement but of liberation, and they require, of anyone who enjoys them, the responsibilities of liberty. They continually open the eye and require it to work vigorously; and through the eye they awaken curiosity and intelligence. That, by any virile standard, is essential to good entertainment. It is unquestionably essential to good art. (*Agee on Film* 426)

¹⁰ If Sarris is a theoretical disciple of the *Cahiers* school, it is notable that his harshest critic, Pauline Kael, repeatedly cited Agee as an influence, and that she inherited Agee's fierce appreciation for Huston's work.

Huston was at MGM, working on *The Red Badge of Courage*, when Agee wrote this appreciation for the photo magazine *Life*, just a year after *Look* snapped the famous photograph mentioned in this chapter's opening anecdote (the two men would collaborate soon after on *The African Queen*). Lillian Ross would famously document the ups and downs of *Courage*'s production, and later transform it into a book, *Picture*. In *Picture*, she recounts going to Hollywood in 1948 to do an article on HUAC's effect on Hollywood, and being seduced by what she describes as Huston's charm and intelligence on the issue:

Despite the pressure of the investigation, Huston, a man of unfailing spirit and lighthearted high jinks, was brave, outspoken, independent, and funny. Conversation with him was like a breath of fresh air. He voiced courageous views about all the nonsensical fear and paranoia going on around him, and he showed, with his particularly sardonic and wry diplomacy and humor, his impatience with the cowardly and silly behavior of his peers. (vi)

It is hard to imagine two more diametrically opposed directors, working at the same studio at the same moment, than Huston and Minnelli: the former famously macho and maverick (that "virile" in Agee's review is no accident), specializing in stories of men pushed by work to a breaking point (*The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, for instance, or *The Maltese Falcon*); the later more reserved, bisexual, and very much the company man, specializing in musicals, light comedies, and melodramas that questioned the kinds of masculinity Huston's films often celebrated. The differences between them are illustrated by how they write of HUAC in their respective autobiographies. Huston's tone is angry when writing of HUAC and the Committee for the First Amendment, an anti-HUAC group Huston helped found: "A sickness permeated the country. Nobody came to the defense of those being persecuted for personal beliefs under our most sacred charter, the Constitution of the United States." (152) Minnelli's sole reference to HUAC in his autobiography centers on a party anecdote involving Groucho Marx and Judy Garland:

[Judy] wore her clown outfit from *The Pirate*, and I wore Gene Kelly's. Groucho's party never got off the ground. We sat around talking about the Unfriendly Ten, some of them being quite friendly in that same room, and the implications the House Un-American Activities committee held for the rest of us. Here we all were, dressed in clown costumes, talking of our imminent death. What if we'd unconsciously included Communist dogma in our pictures? How would this affect our careers? It was a bizarre evening. (204)

Even Andrew Sarris is ambivalent about both directors, ranking Minnelli slightly higher than Huston (in Sarris' listing of friendly and unfriendly directors, the former falls into "The Far Side of Paradise," while the latter is categorized as "Less Than Meets the Eye"). Writing of *The Band Wagon*, Sarris notes "A sympathetic mise-en-scene lyricized loneliness" (*American* 101), and marvels that "Only Minnelli believes implicitly in the power of his camera to transform trash into art, and corn into caviar" (*American* 102), before finally concluding that this very stylishness is also the filmmaker's "fatal flaw...his naïve belief that style can invariably transcend substance, and that our way of looking at the world is more important than the world itself." (*American* 102) He also notes Truffaut's dismissal of Minnelli: "*un esclave.*" (*American* 102)¹¹

In the "producer-heavy" system set up by Mayer, Minnelli's duties are set: he works primarily as part of the Freed Unit, and has, by 1953, become a highly successful director of musicals. Within this "factory" system, however, Minnelli crosses boundaries rather easily, also directing melodramas and comedies, and even his earlier musicals, like *Meet Me In St. Louis*, and romances like *The Clock*, have a desperation and emotional unsettledness that is reminiscent of film *noir*. In *Time* magazine, Agee praised his work on *The Clock*; while quickly admitting "there are quite a few things wrong with this picture" (*Agee on Film* 344), he is fulsome in his praise of Minnelli's style: "Vincente Minnelli's talents are so multi-sided and generous that he turns even the most over-contrived romanticism into something memorable." (*Agee on Film* 344)

¹¹ On Huston, he is far harsher: "As a stylist, Huston has always overloaded the physical with the moral...Huston's intimate scenes are often staged as if he were playing croquet with a sledgehammer" (157).

In another review of the same film, this time for *The Nation*, Agee expanded on his remarks: “his extras and their gaits and groupings, and their stammering collisions and multiplicities of purpose and aimlessness, beat anything I can remember out of Hollywood.” (*Agee on Film* 154)

Noir was a key means of expression for many of the Ten, and others who both supported and criticized the blacklist. Like *Citizen Kane*, *noir* films utilized the tropes of B-films and screwball comedy, and the visual techniques of German Expressionism, but its fusion of the arty and the populist was much more raw than the high-gloss *Kane*, and more explicit about social inequities (it was this explicitness that got many of the Ten in trouble in the first place). That most of the tropes of this genre—the detective, the doubling of the female lead (between “good” blonde and “fatale” brunette), the arch narration, the gunplay—are parodied by Minnelli in the “Girl Hunt” sequence suggests both Minnelli’s facility with numerous genres and willingness to absorb the popular commodities of his day, while also managing, within the factory system, the ability to tweak and critique those commodities in the manner Naremore describes above—standing on the fault line between sincerity and dandyish cynicism (while generous to a fault about crediting collaborators in his autobiography, Minnelli is adamant that he wrote the narration that accompanies the sequence: “I wrote Fred’s voiceover narration to the action. It was disjointed and made little sense, but it incorporated all the clichés.” (281)

While this is an anecdotal, not an auteurist, look at the period, I wanted to linger on the critical response to Minnelli in the previous pages to give a sense of the critical environment into which the film was received, and a cultural moment in which criticism in both France and the United States found itself in dialogue—sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit—with an often repressive political rhetoric. While Agee and Bazin were not, to my knowledge, aware of one another’s work, they share a remarkable number of affinities. Both men were lapsed Catholics

who transferred their passion and fervor to the arts and criticism; both move between journalistic and more “high-brow” intellectual circles; both found themselves as essentially left, but uneasy with traditional Party orthodoxy; both were committed humanists who saw film as engaging in social relations (even as they were both suspicious of overt politicizing in film); both gave a remarkable attention to the power of the cinematic detail to generate affect and meaning; both died in the late fifties, just before their work would have its greatest impact; and they both loved Italian Neo-Realism and other genres and filmmakers who were interested in preserving a sense of the “real” rather than the artificial in cinema.

Susan Hegeman notes that Agee’s response to a *Partisan Review* questionnaire in 1939 saw him insisting on the artist as the “enemy of society,” saw him criticizing communism in practice but admiring it in theory, and saw him expressing a “violent contempt toward all factions and joiners.” (Hegeman 176) She further notes, quoting Dwight Macdonald, that in place of politics, Agee would substitute “reverence and feeling,” a sense that ultimately, the complexities of “human divinity” were unknowable. (Hegeman 177) Both Agee and Bazin are, unknown to each other, grappling with what it means to think culturally, politically, individually and cinematically in a world defined by Cold War binaries and divisions. Hegeman writes of Agee’s “handwringing” position of liberal guilt, “the work would find favor with Cold War intellectuals...many of whom saw in Agee’s anger and hand-wringing a model for their own—infinitely complex, fascinatingly ambiguous-- position of self-imposed marginality in relation to the ethical and political questions of the day.” (191) She continues, writing of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, that “In Agee’s revision of the documentary form, the point is not to show how “they” get along (or do things differently), but to reveal oneself, through one’s (thoroughly dissected) relation to them. The self is recentered as the object of interest, the reason for

writing.” (191) With a change of a few words—substituting “filming” for “writing,” for instance—that’s not a bad description of the New Wave that Bazin’s journal would spawn (particularly the later work of Godard); at the heart of auteurism, as Robert B. Ray notes, is “Sartre’s existentialist insistence on individual responsibility.” (88) In insisting on this responsibility, and embracing the ambiguity that such a stance often necessitated, Agee and Bazin offered models for nondoctrinaire resistance in a Cold War age—one might say they were, like Cyd Charisse in “The Girl Hunt” ballet, the critical equivalent of both the “good” blonde and the “bad” brunette.

The ambivalent response of Agee, Bazin, Sarris and others to Minnelli’s artifice, and to his insistence, as Sarris puts it, that style can overcome any problems of content or “truth” hints at the limitations of not only Minnelli’s artifice but the “virile” real that Agee and Bazin, in their individual ways, insisted on. While one could never describe Minnelli as a “realist” in any sense (certainly not a “neo-realist” one), I would like to suggest two ways in which the aesthetics of Minnelli and Agee/Bazin might find a correspondence.

One is the love all three men had of the long take and the tracking shot. Writing approvingly of Minnelli’s adoration of the boom shot, Agee notes Minnelli’s “love of mobility, of snooping and sailing and drifting and drooping his camera booms and dollies.” (345) This linking of the long take, unbroken camera movement and revelation finds its echo in Bazin’s “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema,” where he writes about, “the secret of a film form that would permit everything to be said without chopping the world up into little fragments, that would reveal the hidden meanings in people and things without disturbing the unity natural to them.” (38) Later, in a review of *Open City*, Bazin observes that “Nobody is reduced to the condition of an object or a symbol that would allow one to hate them in comfort without having

first to leap the hurdle of their humanity.” (21) Minnelli was not the only director of musicals to use the long take and the unbroken shot: it was a hallmark of Astaire’s work at RKO, and certainly prevalent in other Freed Unit productions, like *Singin’ In The Rain* or *On The Town*. Still, the lyricism in *The Band Wagon* that Sarris notes above, that sense of loneliness mixed with optimism, is inconceivable in an Eisensteinian montage system of chopped symbolism and typage—as Klawans notes, the humanity of the smaller moments in “Shine on Your Shoes” comes through how one follows Astaire around the arcade, and suddenly stumbles over LeRoy Daniels’ legs.

The second correspondence comes from what Agee notes in his review of *The Clock*: Minnelli’s use of “his extras and their gaits and groupings, and their stammering collisions and multiplicities of purpose and aimlessness, beat anything I can remember out of Hollywood.” (*Agee on Film* 154) That description might act as an apt description of *The Band Wagon*’s utilization of the revue form, which refuses coherence and narrative logic—which makes it even harder to theorize allegorically. To borrow Minnelli’s description of the “Girl Hunt” narration, it is disjointed and makes little sense, but its openness and multiplicity allows for an openness of reading that is more anecdotal, and thus perhaps open to meanings outside the allegorical.

I mentioned that this was a chapter about movement and confession. A third element should be added to that list: tension. Several tensions interest me here: the tension the body, as it moves in time to the music of dance; the tension between studio heads opposed on the blacklist, between colleagues in the film industry during the Red Scare, and between an industry and its government; the tension between “realism” and “theatricality” that is on display in *The Band Wagon*; and finally, the tension between different modes of cultural memory.

Writing of allegory in a postmodern moment, Frederic Jameson notes, “the newer allegory is horizontal rather than vertical: if it must still attach its one-on-one conceptual labels to its objects...it does so in the conviction that those objects are now profoundly relational, indeed are themselves constructed by their relationships to each other.” (168) Writing later of “the activity of generating new codes” (394), a process demanding “the invention of new skills altogether” (394), he notes that this new theoretical discourse “is produced by the setting in active equivalence of two preexisting codes, which thereby, in a kind of molecular ion exchange, become a new one.” (394) It is not, he emphasizes, a synthesis of the previous codes, but a pairing “in such a way that each can express and indeed *interpret* the other” (394-95).

Lesley Stern, in her essay on cinematic gesture, writes of *The Band Wagon*'s “Dancing in The Dark” sequence, and its expression of character: “Put simply, it is the tension between walking and dancing.” (9) I would like to argue that allegory and anecdote offer a similar tension in the way they help one remember and rethink historical periods. Both allegory and the anecdote bring in a meaning outside the “proper text.” *The Band Wagon* also holds the potential for an allegorical reading, particularly in the moment of the Red Scare. But the tensions its own form presents, between integrated show and backstage musical revue, potentially open it up to other kinds of readings, more anecdotal readings, where the movement is less a walk from point A to point Z than a tentative, nimble dance.

Much of *The Band Wagon* is taken up by the form of the rehearsal, as the cast and crew struggle to get the show on the road. In one moment, director Jeffrey Cordova tells Tony Hunter that he is like an iceberg: only one-eighth of his performance is peeking out of the water. Cordova wants Hunter to display “the whole eight-eighths,” causing Hunter to burst back out onto stage bellowing like Brando, much to Cordova's delight. Later, Hunter will reject this

approach, declaring “I am *not* Marlon Brando.” Indeed, it is hard to think of an actor whose persona is further from Brando’s than Astaire’s, but what interests me is the evocation of rehearsal and Method/methodology in this scene. Gregory Ulmer notes of the popular misinterpretation of the Method approach, that it “was never meant to be a performing technique but was instead a technique for rehearsal,” (115), as actors broke down the narrative of the play into “a Through-Action or larger goal of the play,” and from there, translated those goals into a series of physical and psychological gestures. (115) When this went from a rehearsal technique to an on-stage performative mode, Stanislavski realized “A more efficient access to the emotions could be had through specific physical gestures associated in memory with specific emotions.” (Ulmer 117) Ulmer notes the usefulness of these models for new modes of academic writing:

The part of the Method appropriated in choreography...is not the public performance, but the rehearsal, not the realistic effects of a finished performance but the “work around the margins” of the play, the improvisational exercises conducted in response to the play, parallel to the play and different from it, in which an autobiography and a work of art are brought into a fragmented correspondence. A choreographer reads disciplinary texts the way a Method actor reads a (screen) play. (118)

Rather than a Kazan-like question of “What are you on stage *for?*” which leads to the allegorical, the hardening into the idea of which Sontag warns us, I would like to think of the anecdote as a mode perpetually *in rehearsal*, suspended like those ice cream lions in a state of waiting, of melting. Like *The Band Wagon*’s walking and dancing gestures, those modes through which Fred Astaire so ambivalently expresses his inner self (and of which Stern writes with such grace and power), the anecdote can be denotative or connotative (it can be the blonde and the femme fatale of film studies at once). Its slippery quality, its “paradox upon paradox,” to borrow Buhle and Wagner’s phrase, might place it in a category of denotative gesture (as in silent film acting), but its potential opacity might also take its “meaning” elsewhere, to the kinds of fragmented

correspondences of which Ulmer writes above, and to a seductive *pas de deux* of aesthetics and cultural memory.

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

In the 1970s people started having fairly decent hi-fis, instead of the old record players, and this changed the way we listen. People started noticing the aural surface, the richness of the textures. I realized that this was what the recording studio was for: to change the texture of sound, to make it more malleable. That, more than the melody, rhythm, or lyrics, was what I wanted to concentrate on.

—Brian Eno, *Another Green World* (95-96)

What form do you suppose a life would take that was determined at a decisive moment precisely by the street song last on everyone's lips?

—Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism" (182)

The sounds are what I remember initially—the rustle of coats in the closet, the squeak of rubber boots squeezed on to dirty socks, the whispers of anticipation: wherever we were going was an *event*. Where we were going was the movies, a place I'd never been, to see *Star Wars*, a movie that would carry me somewhere else (but not on first viewing). It is 1977, I am living in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and my life is about to change irrevocably.

The images are blurred photographs of half-memory: every detail is questionable, but I remain convinced of the full image's veracity. Mostly what I remember seeing is the dark—the gray-black interior of the hall closet I sat in as a tiny four-year old, pulling on my boots (boots? *Star Wars* was released in the summer—was I really wearing boots?); the black-and-orange of the Beacon movie theater's walls, as the dimming lights threw everything into shadow; the hard plastic black of the seats I could barely see over. Not that I was really watching that much: for a hyper young child, this new space of the movie theater (as opposed to the reflective glass barrier of the TV screen on which I saw bits of movies growing up in Rochester, Minnesota) was a new playground to explore, and who had time for the movie itself? Much, I'm sure, to the consternation of my mother and older brother, I planned to take full advantage of it, and walked and crawled around the narrow movie rows, until I made it down to the front. My timing was precipitous: I made it there around the film's mid-point, the famous "Cantina" sequence that

displayed the B-movie monster talents of George Lucas's crack special effects staff. My primal movie memory is of glancing up at the screen, precisely when one of these creatures held its center, and being terrified. I rushed back to the safety of the seat by my mother, and the rest of the film is a blur of hiding my head and falling asleep during the climactic run on the Death Star.

That monster in the center of the screen is the only visual memory that's clear to me from this initial viewing (it would not be until the film was re-released the next summer that I, now a worldly-wise five-year old, would pay full attention to it, and let it colonize my young cinephiliac brain), and I am not even sure I screamed—it might have just been a silent gaping. When I relayed this story to my mother last summer, she had no memory of any of this. “All I remember is that you liked the films right away,” she said. I told a variation on this anecdote many years ago—it opened the “statement of purpose” essay on my graduate school applications as a way of suggesting how long and how deeply cinema had held my interest. I repeat it here to square the circle at the end of the journey, and to suggest that the anecdote has been the ghost haunting my academic life right from the beginning—and to suggest that it haunts the history of writing about Hollywood in general. That haunting happens through the image, of course, but also, crucially, through the sounds the anecdotes play on our memories—slippery, elusive grooves that bear paying attention.

If I am honest with myself today (to paraphrase Jean-Luc Godard), I have always wanted to conduct research in the form of a pop single. The research part is a certain film (or figure, or idea) in a certain place at a certain time; the pop single comes when one makes oneself not just a writer or researcher (although the methodology draws on both of these skill sets), but a theoretical DJ or studio producer-- mixing research, interpretation and imagination in a manner where one can be open to improvisation, to catching that decisive moment that Benjamin notes

before it disappears in a wash of noise. It is about finding the balance between mastering a groove and giving myself up to its bliss. The idea has to find the rhythm and melody that makes it *sing* (or, in a phrase that connects this formulation to Godard's old New Wave partner Truffaut, makes it *pulse*).

The "information" a pop song provides is ephemeral and ambiguous, at best open to interpretation and layered meaning (and at its worst at least providing the pleasurable buzz of the a great riff matched to an agreeably banal lyric)¹². Concerned with craft as much as idea, the pop single forces its creators to think about the relationship between verse and chorus, progression and return, melody and harmony, voice and instrument. What "meaning" is generated happens as much within these relational structures as in whatever the song is "saying." A great pop song has the power to reverse one's understanding of "narrative" (lyrics) and "style" (timbre), or what in cinematic terms one might call foreground and background; it is a methodology built as much around "effects" as "meaning" (and indeed, blurs the distinction between the two). In a way, the question is best posed by the pop group The Shirelles, if one imagines them not just as the girl group *par excellence*, but as cinephiliac researchers: "Is this a lasting treasure/Or just a moment's pleasure?" What I want to suggest is that anecdote functions in a similar way, as the pop single of film studies, where the meaning doesn't just rise out of the groove, but *is* the groove (and vice versa)¹³.

¹² For example, as I type this I am listening to The Answering Machine's "Oh, Christina" on my I-Tunes player. The song is built around a repetitive, punkish bass line and a sharp three-note guitar riff, and its lyrics about a doomed relationship traffic in emo-is-me cliché; and yet as the banal syllables around which the soaring, melodic vocals gather and take flight, the lines remind the listener that it is the splicing of word and sound that gives pop its power, not some fetishized literary obsession with lyrics. As the song's chorus puts it, "It's not simple at all."

¹³ In my downtime, I have been devouring a new biography of David Bowie. One of the anecdotes it tells is of producer Niles Rodgers' first meeting with the rock star to discuss the *Let's Dance* project. Expecting to work on an album similar to the sonically dense and lyrically ambiguous collaborations Bowie had crafted with Brian Eno in the late 1970s, "Bowie shocked [Rodgers]," Bowie's biographer Marc Spitz relates, "by confessing, 'I just want to make a good groove record'" (319). This also strikes me as a good methodology for academic writing, particularly on cinema. After all, even Eno has confessed a love for doo-wop.

This has been a project with a long history of development and gestation, change and variation. If I extend the music metaphor a bit longer (stretch the notes), one might say that new notes were constantly discovered, rhythms tested, arrangements sketched and then rejected. What began several years ago as response to a Ph.D. exam question about the power of the anecdote (a space within which one might say I was a studio musician improvising on a set melody) quickly transformed itself into an idea for a dissertation built around a set of anecdotes about Classic Hollywood, a period so rich in stories, legends and general apocrypha that it seemed like an ideal cinephiliac playground. As sketched out in the introductory chapter, it also felt like a relatively untapped space; despite Greil Marcus's call more than twenty years ago for a writing of "secret histories," (made up of stories and voices that might maintain for the reader a sense of surprise, "because a life infused with surprise is better than a life that is not" (23)), film studies had largely ignored the anecdote as a model for writing its own history. In drawing on the anecdote for information but disregarding it as a theoretical song form, the discipline ignored its true potential: how the anecdote's compact, dense nature, full of mysteriously cinematic allure, might allow its user to reconnect with a past that sometimes feels distant and opaque. Thinking about the anecdote in this way felt like stumbling on the movie equivalent of the Great American Songbook, except that its previous interpreters seemed mostly concerned with the lyrics. Could the melodies be made to say something new?

Like Eno in his studio, then, I had a sense of the atmosphere I wanted to create, but not necessarily which songs I wanted to sing. The first step, it seemed, was to choose the right anecdotes, but that process immediately revealed that a surplus of anecdotes could also be a problem—like a DJ with his crate of records and the whole history of pop facing him down, how does one narrow down and decide what to use? Tentative organizational strategies (built

around studios, directors, stars) gave way to a structure built around periods. I assigned a decade to each chapter while making room for movement a bit before or after that decade (so, for instance, the 1930s chapter actually begins in 1927, and the 1950s chapter pokes its head into 1973).

But while this at least provided the illusion of structure necessary to overcome any anxieties and begin writing (Godard again: “The only great problem with cinema seems to me more and more with each film when and why to start a shot and when and why to end it” (214)), it did not eliminate what soon seemed a more pressing concern: what were these anecdotes actually *doing*? And perhaps the more interesting question: how much did I want to control what they did? The worst anecdotes were those that immediately gave themselves up to allegorical readings, where the one-to-one meaning of “this story stands in for this abstraction” reduced any possibility of exploration down to a few putrid sentences (in pop terms, these stories were the John Lennon of *Some Time In New York City*, when what was needed was the Lennon of “Instant Karma,” less concerned with trite rhymes about John Sinclair than making Ringo’s drums sound like “fish slapping against the sand”). On the other hand, if the stories felt too opaque, one could end up with the Lennon of “Revolution 9,” painstakingly crafting something dense and beautiful in its own way, but so disassociated from what came before as to be impenetrable.

What I needed were anecdotes that achieved the balance Roland Barthes once called for: that of “being serious without seeming so.” More reading, researching and re-mixing followed. Working through the pile, I found that the best anecdotes were strange, slightly playful, often had a tinge of violence (corpses on movie sets, bodies at the bottom of rivers, ice cream cakes melting on a warm day). They were stories that, when told to colleagues or unveiled at

conferences, would generally elicit a chuckle and a gasp at the same time; I knew when that happened that I was on to something.

Chapters began to cluster around objects or images, often vehicles frozen in mid-movement: the train, the plane, the car at the bottom of a lake (at one point, I half-considered titling the dissertation *Trains, Planes and Automobiles*). Other anecdotes also played with this sense of the anecdote as a blur of freeze-framed motion: dancers in mid-beat, couples bantering at a night-club table, fidgeting stars trapped on a sound-stage, airplanes landing on eerie Tennessee nights, fan letters floating across time and space. It felt like cutting frames out of an ongoing movie, or sampling bits of one song and mixing them into a new track; even as the work leaned on this visuality for its inspiration, there was always the sense that these anecdotal snapshots were musical, offering not just oral history through their specific stories, but the buzz of a whole world opening through them, the street songs that Benjamin references not made fully manifest, but hinted at, whispered, *hummed*.

Without my being initially aware of it, a taxonomy of anecdotes began to develop, as the stories took on a singer's set of poses and gestures: the anecdote as memory; the anecdote as evidence; the anecdote as vehicle; the anecdote as lie (and its cousin, the anecdote as alibi); the anecdote as legend; the anecdote as gossip; the anecdote as weapon. The anecdotes that opened different chapters (or were dropped like riffs and choruses throughout them) would draw on one or several of these categories, while hopefully not being limited to such labeling. In her recent monograph on Brian Eno's *Another Green World*, Geeta Dayal notes musician Harold Budd's conception of a song title as "mostly images, and kind of little things that tend to paint or tint the tenor or the atmosphere of a room" (101), and that is how I saw the nascent taxonomy as functioning: not a set of firm categories, but malleable suggestions of mood or purpose that could

shift as needed. Much of the critical impetus of the developing project—as just as important, the emotional impetus underlying the critical—was a curiosity about just how far these categories, and the “pop songs” which have made up the repertoire of cinema studies could be stretched, sampled, and improvised to create new interplays of meaning and effect. More and more, my job as writer/producer seemed to be sustaining the groove for as long as I could, scratching against these anecdotes to generate new sounds, new atmospheres and images. “Is this a project about argument or effects?” I was asked more than once in dissertation seminars. The correct answer in such a situation is “both” (it is another way of sustaining the groove, delaying closure), but more and more I wondered if the honest answer was “effects” (a harder sell in the mercilessly argument-driven academic ‘Top Ten’), or indeed if the question itself was just a pretext towards a more interesting question: if one changes the elements one is playing with, is it fair to expect the same old results? In an anecdotal space, how would one know what would an argument sound like? Certainly it would not be a lip-sync of previous hits, would it?

As writing continued, I found that the pop song kept popping up in various chapters, not just as a metaphor, but as an actual object within the anecdotes, creating unexpected effects as figures or genres that seemingly had nothing to do with songs inevitably led to them. The 1950s chapter, with its concentration on the film and Broadway musical, was the most obvious place (even if my writerly desire in that chapter started less from sound than choreography—that of Cyd Charisse and Fred Astaire sliding across each other in “The Girl Hunt Ballet”). But even the 1940s, with its emphasis on *noir*ish gangsters and detectives, took me to pop standards through the jazz music used in its most famous scene, while the 1930s chapter’s initial fascination with David Selznick led to both the Broadway musical *Parade* and Billie Dove writing a contest-

winning jingle for *Gidget Goes Hawaiian*. The growing relationship between the form of the anecdote and the form of the pop single was a melody I could not get out of my head.

Conventionally, a conclusion in academic texts acts as a summing-up of what has come before, a space within which to restate the claims of the introduction and raise the stakes of argument in a grand, unifying gesture (while leaving just enough room for the next book, the sequel that will extend the idea). Asking about the stakes of an argument would seem to be a straightforward query, but punning on “stakes” would suggest many meanings: those of a claim on a certain subject, those of claims on a piece of land or a certain space, and certainly the implied power of that “stake” as a rhetorical weapon. I have been relaying these anecdotes about the process of writing for several pages because I think the stakes of my argument are about process—and the impossibility of a final summing-up within an anecdotal space.

That Shirelles quote mentioned earlier—“Is this a lasting treasure/Or just a moment’s pleasure?”—bears repeating here. Just what is the shape of a pop argument? One might compare the period between 1967 and 1975 or so (just before the nascent punk and disco movements once again uprooted the stakes of the musical territory), a period marked by *Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts’ Club Band* and *The Who Sell Out* on one end, and *Physical Graffiti* and *Wish You Were Here* on the other, as the high-water mark of the “concept album,” where pop craft is driven across the course of one-and-two-disc opuses by narrative or thematic concepts of varying degrees of clarity (the band masquerading as another band, or pretending to be a radio station, or telling tales of lost boys and girls wandering through a cold and commercialized world). To be “serious” in this environment means shifting away from the pop single towards the album, subordinating the hook to the larger meaning generated by the idea.

Certainly, not every pop artist of the period fits this model—this is also the bubblegum high watermark, when AM radio cannot get enough of “I Want You Back,” “Sugar Sugar,” and “One Bad Apple”—but the more purportedly serious *artistes* between 1967 and 1975 (The Beatles, The Who, The Rolling Stones, Stevie Wonder, Pink Floyd, The Beach Boys, David Bowie, Curtis Mayfield, Marvin Gaye, to name only a few)¹⁴, all flirt with or develop the notion that the concept piece is a deeper, richer statement.

This does not happen in a vacuum—like any paradigmatic shift, timing and cultural paratexts are essential. The development of recording technology and the more decisive shift in the late 50s and early 60s towards the LP as the preferred format for recording; the rise of underground “pirate” radio and free-form FM (more amenable to playing multiple tracks, whole sides and sometimes entire albums straight through) means there is an outlet for playing such music; the rise of a college-educated counter-culture means there is an audience (the two movement find a poetic link in 1966 when protesting students on the Berkeley campus begin singing “Yellow Submarine” during one of their rallies). Most significantly, perhaps, there are several magazines that speak to this audience and treat seriously the idea of the rock star as socially engaged poet.

Undoubtedly the most important is *Rolling Stone*, whose first issue hits stands just as *Sergeant Pepper* is dominating the British and American airwaves. A photo of John Lennon in his costume for the film *How I Won The War* is the front-page image (the magazine didn’t yet have full covers), and a Declaration of Principles by publisher/founder Jann Wenner promises to self-consciously celebrate the burgeoning new youth culture that wants to take rock in a more conceptual direction. Explicitly modeling itself on the long-form interviews of *Playboy*, *Esquire*

¹⁴ Falling somewhere between these camps is Parliament-Funkadelic, whose Mothership stage spectacles feel like both the ultimate statement in concept rock and a sly parody of their pretensions.

and *The New Yorker*, the “Rolling Stone Interview” will not only be a space for rock stars to gush about their obsessions, insult their rivals and expound on everything from music to drugs to politics¹⁵—their discursiveness will unconsciously mimic that of the concept album, and further reinforce the notion of concept album as important cultural text. Even as the magazine itself oscillates between commitment to and aversion from the counter-culture¹⁶, it never loses sight of the idea of rock as a cultural statement, and a potential force for good. The synergy between the magazine and the music it covers, each enhancing the other’s credibility, makes this theoretical model of pop all the stronger between the late sixties and mid-seventies.

This is also the period sometimes referred to as “High Theory” in cinema studies. It is the moment when *Cahiers du Cinema* publishes the seminal essay “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism,” marking a growing interest in semiology, Marxism and psychoanalytic theory as ways of reading movies; when Peter Wollen publishes *Signs and Meaning*; when journals like *Screen* and *Jump Cut* herald a slow shift in academic film studies from a more auteurist-driven study to one where the auteur is folded into a broader cultural critique (inflected by a variety of schools of continental theory) about cinema’s mystifying power (and the need to break that mystification). To extend the analogy with the concurrent moment in pop music—if the musical hooks of the song were subordinated by the concept album, here the power of individual shots or elements of the mise-en-scene became part of a larger superstructure of theoretical meaning and purpose.

“Cinema/Ideology/Criticism” finds its bookend in 1975 with Laura Mulvey’s brilliant “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” A feminist, psychoanalytic analysis of the ways in

¹⁵ The most famous of these is certainly John Lennon’s, published in two parts in 1970, and later reprinted as a standalone book called *Lennon Remembers*. Its fascinating mixture of vitriol, loopy humor and naïve earnestness caused rifts between Beatles that would last for years, and would even lead to back-and-forth sniping between Lennon and McCartney in song and on album art.

¹⁶ The single best history of this back-and-forth is Robert Draper’s richly researched *Rolling Stone: An Uncensored History* (NY: HarperCollins, 1991).

which narrative cinema (especially that of Classic Hollywood, from which Mulvey draws several of her examples) structures “the male gaze” (and its consequent sadomasochistic power), Mulvey’s essay offers readers a hook at once complex and clear, and so compelling that it becomes a standard of the film theory songbook in the years to come. Its triumph marks a convergence of writer, audience and paratext (in this case, *Screen*) very similar to the triumph of art rock in *Rolling Stone*’s pages. In Shirelles’ terms, it is the victory of the lasting treasure over the moment’s pleasure (and even the writer of “Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow,” Carole King, would jettison that song’s girl group harmonies for something slower, folkier, and seemingly “deeper” on her solo album *Tapestry*, in 1971).

And yet, even at this peak of High Theory, the moment’s pleasure peeks out, as Mulvey opens her essay by referencing one of the most famous moments of fetishistic pleasure in cinema, and one potentially linked to the power of a pop song. Alluding to the director’s famous collaborations with Marlene Dietrich, Mulvey writes, “It is well-known that Sternberg once said he would welcome his films being projected upside down so that story and character involvement would not interfere with the spectator’s undiluted appreciation of the surreal image” (840). Many of the most famous images in these films are musical performances—the slouched body of Dietrich crooning at the end of *The Blue Angel*, the tuxedoed Dietrich singing as she strolls around the nightclub, flirting, in *Morocco*. It is a provocative way to open the essay, and it suggests that even with its desire to deconstruct these mystifying images, Mulvey understands the power of an anecdotal opening—that “moment’s pleasure”—to grab the reader’s ear.

“The links between the cinema, personal memory, the anecdote (metonymy) and the uncanny are strong—indeed, uncanny. . . . From the specific moment, the cinephile moves metonymically, partly into personal recollection, partly into public information and history, until

the snap of the uncanny is encountered,” Christian Keathley writes in *Cinephilia, or The Wind In the Trees* (151), and he might also have been writing about the way a pop song unfolds on both a personal and broader cultural level. Like the visual tone and flow of a scene in a film, the riffs and hooks of a great pop song have an almost Proustian power to call back the time and place where one first heard them: where one was, who one was with, what one was wearing or doing as the song poured out of a radio or club speaker; but because they flow so quickly, and sometimes blend with the other noise around a listener, it becomes difficult to *exactly* recreate what one heard.¹⁷ A pop song can freeze a moment in time (which is why so many of those songs from the concept album era have been ironically repurposed as boomer-baiting nostalgia generators in American television advertising), even as one’s memory constantly rewrites that moment each time the song is played—imperceptibly, perhaps, but almost always with a slightly different emphasis (what *was* one wearing, really?). The uncanny Keathley speaks of derives precisely from this indeterminacy, from the way (as Julian Barnes notes in *Flaubert’s Parrot*) the tiniest detail can shift everything, and upset whatever larger structures of memory and meaning into which those scenes, stories or songs have been placed.

Even the rise of VHS and DVD, with their power to freeze and study the image, cannot overcome the slipperiness of memory—and with the ongoing arguments on film blogs about digitalization and “grain,” one might even say that it is not the “same” image one might have seen in a theater or on television many years ago, no matter how clear the picture looks on pause. The Eno epigraph at the top of the Conclusion speaks of the importance of the hi-fi and other listening devices in shifting the stakes of recording music by the mid-seventies (*Another Green World* is recorded in 1975, as Mulvey is publishing “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”),

¹⁷ For a longer discussion of the power of memory in relation to pop timbre, see Theodore Gracyk’s *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock* (NY: Taurist Co. Ltd., 1996).

and the advanced technology of the DVD and its copious “extras”—with commentary, deleted scenes, and making-of documentaries—would suggest a similar paradigmatic shift, one which privileges the anecdote as the paratext *par excellence*. I remember one colleague telling me, with a mixture of bemusement and exasperation, that the rise of the DVD meant there was no way a scholar could ever keep up with the flow of information pouring forth. For Eno, the musical version of that constant flow became, not a hindrance, but a tool; the famous anecdote about ambient music is that Eno was hit by a car crossing the street (cars again!), and was laid up in the hospital when a friend brought him a recording of harp music. The stereo in the hospital room was not working properly, and sound only came through one speaker; this meant half the recording was missing as it played, and began to mix with the sound of the rain outside. After his initial frustration, Eno began to realize he liked the effect it created, and became determined to recapture that texture in the studio. (76-80) To speak then, of the “stakes” of an anecdotal argument runs the risk of missing the point. The question for an anecdotal scholar might rather be how to play with the texture of information and sound in a similar way, in order to find the uncanny effects in what Roland Barthes (bringing together all of our textual forms under a performative rubric) called “the grain of the voice.”

Before this dissertation was completed, I pulled up my own stakes and moved to a new space, taking a job teaching cinema studies at Oberlin College. Well-known for its music school, its strong liberal arts tradition, and its devotion to a liberal politics that sometimes feels very much rooted in the traditions of the 1960s (it counts both Jerry Rubin and ice cream magnates Ben & Jerry among its graduates), it is a fascinating space to test this relationship between cinema, anecdote and musicality that this conclusion has explored. There, asking students to engage with a writing assignment structured around an anecdotal method, a student posed a

query (the grain of her voice was dismissive): “Yeah...This way of writing is fun, and it’s cute, but what does it really do?” (I flashed on the passage from *Barthes par Barthes*, where Barthes responds to a friend’s critique of *The Pleasure of the Text*— that it “ keeps brushing up against catastrophe”—by noting its implied insult: “No doubt catastrophe, in his eyes, is to fall into the aesthetic.” (*Barthes* 104) It is an interesting question, and a useful one in the way it asks me to think about the stake I have in this methodology; it is also useful as a way of thinking about the stakes that student (or any scholar) has in competing methodologies. Implied in her question is the naturalization of the mythology that the “concept album” approach generates within academic discourse, a false binary between the pleasure of the stylistic hook and the “meaning” of the ideological concept. Turned on their heads (or, to think of it in pop music terms, played backwards), the more standardized ways of working that this student was used to might also be asked, “What do you *do*?” Or more honestly, “what do we expect you to *solve*?” That this question did not occur to her suggests the power of particular playlists on academic syllabi.

That day, sitting in a coffee shop reminiscent of the one in *2 or 3 Things I Know About Her*, I vaguely remember fumbling for an answer to that student’s question, rambling on about style and voice and the relationship of the personal to the academic. I do not remember every detail of what I said; it seemed to serve its purpose in answering her question. But in the three years since the question was posed, I have thought about it a lot, and wonder if it does not deserve a slightly longer answer.

I think it means taking seriously Benjamin’s question about the street song last on everyone’s lips. It means seeing that question not just as a nostalgic or class-driven call to arms, but as a valid methodology in terms of both recognizing the forgotten details of film history and (crucially), the way in which those details are written: with all of the beauty, concision and

uncertain timbre of a song echoing down a one-way street. What would that really look (and sound) like? I think it means thinking about craft and style as generators of meaning, not just the overdubs laid in later on top of some kind of false “transparency” of the text. I think it means doing a complex dance step: one must simultaneously recognize the grain of one’s own voice (like a jazz artist, one would never tell the anecdote the same way twice) and one’s own positioning in relation to the writing (as Barthes, again, reminds us, there is always an “I” speaking), while also giving something up to the strange immediacy of the anecdotes (and the figures and periods and texts they are discussing). I do not think that means erasing away the decades that have passed, in some kind of “Method” performance of the 1930s or 40s. I suspect it is more like that little kid running and crawling around the Beacon Theater in 1977 as *Star Wars* played: there’s a mobility and agency in one’s movement through history, but one also has to leave open the possibility of being gobsmacked by what one sees on the screen (or the page). In that way, it is a pedagogical method as well as a research one: like guiding a classroom, it means finding the balance between listening and leading, between offering up a lesson and letting yourself get carried away on the stranger, funnier, even better idea that arises from discussion.

Finally, it means letting go of the definition of the stake of an argument being a kind of weapon. In my Introduction, I mentioned my discomfort with a tradition of academic writing that “requires one to loudly proclaim one’s difference from (which most often takes the form of ‘opposition to’) competing theories, forms, and ideologies.” I intuited at that moment that an anecdotal theory would act less as a great overturning of the past than as an inclusive form that would allow us to re-mix past films, theories and approaches into something vibrant and new. After many years of working to complete the project, I am more convinced than ever of the value

of this “mash-up” approach to theoretical history, and sense even more clearly the stakes of its underlying openness. What that student wanted was closure, something definite and portable. I do not think that is what the anecdote provides—what it leads to is more process, or as Greil Marcus might put it, better surprises. But along the way, it can take history—cinematic, cultural and personal—and make it dance.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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