

Popular culture

Hollywood sold us dreams

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BY ROBERT SKLAR

Hollywood!
The studio sound stages are empty, the props and costumes auctioned, the back lots turned into office buildings. The Garden of Allah and Romanoff are gone, part of Hollywood Boulevard is a sleazy strip of adult bookstores and fast-food restaurants.



Robert Sklar is professor of cinema and chairman of the department of cinema studies at New York University. Previously he taught history at the University of Michigan (1965-76). The author of more than 50 articles and reviews of films and books, he has been honored for his own book, "Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of the American Movies."

But the place retains its magic aura. The tourists come all the same, look at the old-time stars' footprints at the Chinese Theater, buy the maps that guide them past the present day stars' homes.

Though a shadow of its former self, Hollywood still holds a firm grip on the public imagination as the popular culture capital of America—indeed, of the world.

The Dream Factory they called Hollywood in its heyday. Every week, 10 or more films came off the studios' assembly lines. For decades, movies made in Hollywood dominated the world's screens.

ALL THAT has changed.
Television arrived. Political controversy in the 1940s disrupted the old Hollywood. A federal antitrust suit brought about a restructuring of the movie companies. Attendance dropped, then production.

From a weekly habit, movies became an event, like going to the theater. People began to think of movies less as part of popular culture, more as one of the arts.

The Dream Factory shifted to the small screen. Television producers took over some of the old studios. Their programs reach far more viewers than the movies did even at the height of their success. On television, Hollywood's products are more popular than ever.

BUT MOVIES still fulfill a unique role as purveyors of dreams to a popular audience.

Even today, Hollywood's glamorous attraction derives more from movies than from television. Our feelings about current films are passionately formed and avidly debated.

Movies occupy a much more central place in contemporary popular culture than simple numbers would indicate. The reasons for this are partly psy-

chological. Our reactions are shaped by our personal histories, our cultural backgrounds, even our momentary moods—what pleases us one day may be distressing the next, or the reverse.

Nevertheless, some aspects of moviegoing seem to have a common impact. As we sit in the darkened theater, watching larger-than-life figures moving freely through time and space, we may easily enter into a dreamlike state. We feel a sense of heightened power and awareness, and a close identification with the heroes and heroines on the screen.

In real life, our dreams are often troubled. Movies with their fictional plots, can provide emotionally satisfying resolutions—an underdog's triumph, a wrong righted, a true love fulfilled.

When this happens, we walk out of the theater with that familiar "bigger-than-life" feeling of well-being. A recent film that gave audiences that experience was the Academy Award-winning "Rocky," the story of an Italian-American club boxer who gets a crack at the heavyweight title.

THE ROOTS of our attachment to movie heroes and heroines also lie in the specific way movies became a part of our cultural life early in this century.

When movies became part of the American scene around 1900, they were looked down upon by the comfortable classes. Movies found their first audience in the big city working class districts and immigrant ghettos, where it cost only a nickel to see their flickering images in hot, rank storefront theaters.

The silent movies were accessible to the polyglot audience of Eastern and Southern European immigrants as language-based entertainment, not just as theater and magazines, was not.

The newcomers, faced with the task of shaping a culture from their old country origins and their new urban setting, discovered new heroes and heroines in the movie parlors.

ACTORS and actresses were not simply characters in a filmed story. They were people the audience saw week after week, striving through the

sexual promiscuity and other social ills.

For some years, a number of states and municipalities pre-empted movies before they were allowed to be shown. Following a threatened boycott of theaters by the Catholic organization, the Legion of Decency, the movie industry from the 1930s to the 1960s strictly enforced a production code. Over the past decade, it has simply relied movies for their suitability for young viewers.

DESPITE SUCH criticisms and controls, movies expanded steadily in importance in American popular culture for a half-century. The view of America they presented was attacked as unrealistic, but the producers realized that their fantasy images of American life were exactly the point of their success.

The movies have never offered a full and rounded portrait of American society on the screen. Rather, this most characteristic feature has been their presentation of extremes—extremes of wealth and glamour, of violence and action.

Think of the great movie names—Garbo, Hepburn, Bette Davis, Cagney, Bogart, John Wayne. The lure of their pictures and performances has been their capacity to take us out of our own lives and into distant and exotic worlds—the Park Avenue penthouse, the underworld hideout, the western frontier.

"A Star Is Born" and "King Kong," recent remakes of motion picture classics, have re-emphasized the appeal not to audiences and producers of extremes of glamour and exotic violence.

NEVERTHELESS, the movies have also portrayed a counterbalancing image of social harmony—the traditional American ideal of happiness achieved through family and community. The "Andy Hardy" series of the 1930s and 1940s, starring Mickey Rooney, offered one of the most long-lasting and successful versions of this social ideal.

Since the rise of television and the subsequent decline of motion picture attendance, the movies have less and less often tried to present this balancing social theme. The most successful recent movies—"Jaws," "The Godfather," "Star Wars"—have been closer to the extreme.

The movies today are pre-eminently a popular culture medium of spectacle and have left to television the opportunity and challenge of creating images of who we are now.

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Movie makers exiled from society?

By JESSE PITTS

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I am going to speculate about some of the esthetic problems encountered by the movie industry since the 1960s. I am going to call this the "Hollywood Ten" syndrome.

When the Hollywood Ten were making movies in the 1930s and 1940s, their mandate, as Communist Party members, was to include five minutes of the party line in the movies they were working on. Usually the propaganda value of these five minutes was nil: Only a fellow party member could recognize the message.

Still the message was not wasted, for the Communist spectator found in the movie a secret ceremony of allegiance that bolstered his morale. And the fact that the message was underground, like an inside joke, gave him a feeling of power and superiority over the yokels who were too dumb or too brainwashed by the capitalist press to even recognize that they were being put down or told the truth.

In the past—that is, before 1960 or thereabouts—movie makers had to worry about the Hays Office, the Legion of Decency, the American Legion, perhaps even the House Un-American Activities Committee.

IN THE LAST 18 years, the movie industry has had practically every taboo removed from its field.

The Hollywood Ten have been made into martyrs. Raw language is accepted, and copulation need not be hidden or limited to marriage (18 per cent of the greater metropolitan theaters and drive-ins specialize in porno flicks).

No institution is off limits, no personality is immune from the prying of the movie camera, whether the A.G. President Nixon or Jackie ex-Onassis.

The North American clientele which has some college or has completed college and can pay \$2.50 for a movie ticket must now be equivalent to the whole adult population of a country the size of France.

If an average movie breaks even at \$1 million gross (at least that is what the industry tells IRS), it means that it need be seen by only a mere seven per cent of the college-educated clientele before it starts making money. There is no need to "flower" one's pre-war eighth grade audience, as pre-war movie-makers used to lament.

AND YET IT is hard to escape the conclusion that American movies in the last 15-18 years have yet to match Chaplin's "Gold Rush," "The Maltese Falcon," "Moby-Dick on the Bounty," "The Beachcomber," "The South-

erner" (Jean Renoir's American period), "Treasure of the Sierra Madre," "All Quiet on the Western Front," "Citizen Kane," "Ninotchka," "The African Queen," "The Asphalt Jungle," "Shane," "High Noon," "Bridge on the River Kwai" and perhaps even "West Side Story" and "Mr. Roberts"—the last because it is much closer to the average experience in World War II than banal flicks like "The Longest Day" or "Twelve O'Clock High."

No Hollywood cold war flick comes near "The Spy Who Came in from the Cold," made by Great Britain. Perhaps only "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" comes close to competing with the old-time greats, many of which made good money for their makers, in a poorer and less educated America.

I realize the subjectivity of best movies lists, and it is also true that old movies benefitted from the "star" system, which increased substantially their ceremonial valence and organizational weight.

Nevertheless, these films have an artistic density and a mythic dimension that an "Annie Hall" or "One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest" cannot claim. It is true also that three or four times as many movies were made in the old days, which increases the statistical chances of getting a great one once in a while.

MY TENTATIVE explanation for this esthetic deficit is that the Hollywood Ten were only the premonition of a characteristic of many present Hollywood producers: an internal exile, a contempt for a public they believe to be beneath their artistic potential, their enlightened liberalism, their innovative morality.

And this contempt is amplified by the frustration they feel in being compelled to play up to this public, because that is where the bucks are. The more educated, the more open,

in actuality, is this public to all their innovations, the more closely they must remain in their self-imposed ghetto under risk of losing their alienation, which is the major part of their artistic identity.

HOW DO THEY express this alienation? By preaching—against American racism, American imperialism ("The Godfather"), by the more or less hidden put-down of the public—and by the inside joke which calls out for the solidarity of the secret brothers out there who sympathize with their supposed predicament.

Another good example of this alienation are the "educational" movies of

Fred Wiseman, which are projected in French art theaters in week-long anti-American festivals.

Instead of being art, these strictures against War, the Army, America, the Bad White Man are the negative counterparts of the John Wayne and Doris Day movies. They replace the Bad Indian by the Good Indian, the old ethnic gangsters by the psychopathic WASP Vietnam veteran.

Only when the movie makers come out of their self-imposed exile and rejoin America will they be able to match the masterpieces of their predecessors, many of whom spoke better German than English.

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