

PLEASING EVERYONE

*Mass Entertainment in Renaissance London
and Golden-Age Hollywood*



JEFFREY KNAPP

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MASS ENTERTAINMENT IN RENAISSANCE LONDON
AND GOLDEN-AGE HOLLYWOOD

Jeffrey Knapp

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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Knapp, Jeffrey (Professor of English) author.
Title: Pleasing everyone : mass entertainment in Renaissance London
and golden-age Hollywood / Jeffrey Knapp.
Description: New York : Oxford University Press, 2017.
Identifiers: LCCN 2016027980 | ISBN 9780190634063 (hardback) |
ISBN 9780190634087 (epub) | ISBN 9780190634094 (online content)
Subjects: LCSH: Theater—England—London—History—16th century. |
Theater—England—London—History—17th century. |
Theater and society—England—London—History—16th century. |
Theater and society—England—London—History—17th century. |
Motion pictures—United States—History—20th century. |
Motion pictures—Social aspects—United States. |
BISAC: ART / Film & Video, | PERFORMING ARTS / Film & Video /
History & Criticism. | LITERARY CRITICISM / Shakespeare.
Classification: LCC PN2596.L6 K647 2017 | DDC 792.09421/0903—dc23 LC record
available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016027980>

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed by Sheridan Books, Inc., United States of America

To
Dori and Maddie
and
James and Sam

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	1
PART 1: The Individual and the Mass	
1. Which Moll?	47
2. The Real John Doe	67
PART 2: Show Business	
3. I Must Be Idle	95
4. One Step Ahead of My Shadow	112
PART 3: Junk and Art	
5. Mocked with Art	147
6. Throw That Junk!	165
Epilogue: The Author of Mass Entertainment	197
Coda: A Second Look	228
Notes	235
Works Cited	269
Index	287

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

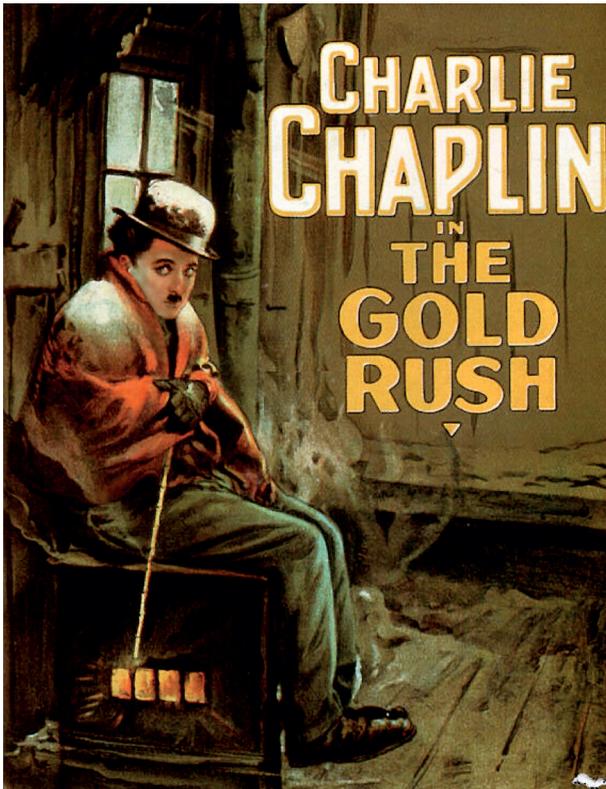
It's wonderful to have this chance to thank the many friends and colleagues who helped me write this book. At several stages throughout the process, Oliver Arnold, Victoria Kahn, and D. A. Miller boosted my spirits and gave me superb advice. I'm extremely grateful to them, as well to my colleagues at *Representations* and in the Early Modern Working Group at Berkeley; to my students, especially the brave souls who took my first graduate seminar on mass entertainment; and to Mark Goble, Stephen Greenblatt, Jesse Knapp, and Nancy Ruttenburg. I received expert assistance from the staff at the Margaret Herrick Library, the Wesleyan Cinema Archives, and the Cinematic Arts Library and Warner Bros. Archives of the University of Southern California. Jesse Cordes Selbin was a truly extraordinary research assistant; Wendy Xin and Aileen Liu were a great help with proofreading. My thanks to Brendan O'Neill for his faith in my project, and to Norman Hirschy for seeing me through; it was a pleasure to work with Stephen Bradley, Andrew Ward, and Amy Whitmer as well. My audiences at the University of Chicago, the CUNY Graduate Center, Caltech, Columbia, Yale, King's College London, and Berkeley made an enormous difference to my thinking about this book. And I'm deeply indebted to the University of California, Berkeley, for the research support I received first from a Chancellor's Professorship and then from the Ida Mae and William J. Eggers, Jr. Chair in English.

I would never have begun this book, let alone completed it, without the indefatigable encouragement and support of James Schamus and Samuel Otter. I dedicate the book to them, and to the two lights of my life: Dorothy Hale, always my first and best reader, and Madeline Hale, who just might read this one.

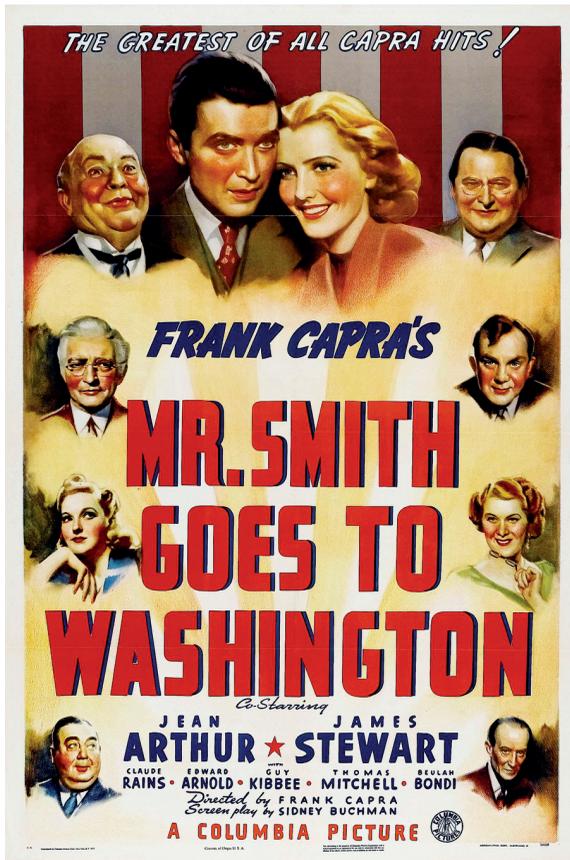
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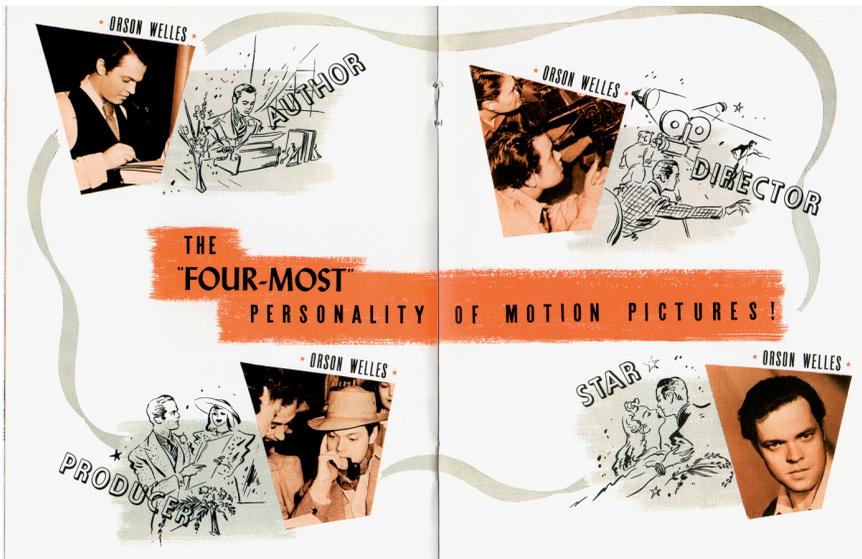
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Introduction

Nothing contrasts more starkly with a work of art completely subject to (or, like film, founded in) technological reproduction than a stage play. Any thorough consideration will confirm this.

—Walter Benjamin, “*The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility*”

For most writers on the subject, “Shakespeare and film” means Shakespeare *in* film: the plays adapted to the screen.¹ The imprecision confuses no one because the alternative meaning of comparing Shakespeare *to* film seems to make little obvious sense. What substantive connection could there possibly be between two media so technologically different and historically distant from one another as sixteenth-century theater and twentieth-century cinema? But the connection turns out to be a surprisingly strong one, and it is consequential for more than our understanding of the theater and the cinema, because Renaissance plays and Hollywood movies share an identity that our current theories of modernity and mass culture do not allow them to share. At every level of artistic content, in plot, characterization, and theme, both the drama and the film were designed to meet the same formidable demand: they were both intended to please a mass audience.

Three-quarters of a century ago, this claim seemed less implausible than it now appears to be. In his influential book *Shakespeare’s Audience* (1941), the theater historian Alfred Harbage argued that the original audiences of Shakespeare’s plays were just as “universal”—that is, just as “socially, economically, [and] educationally heterogeneous”—as “the moving-picture clientele” of Harbage’s own day. A few years later, in his

equally influential *Shakespeare and the Popular Dramatic Tradition* (1944), S. L. Bethell drew on modern film as well as Renaissance drama to analyze “the essential psychology of the popular audience.” And yet both scholars ultimately shied away from the cross-historical “parallel” they invoked. “The analogy between the modern movies and the Elizabethan theater,” they decided, was “in many ways a poor one,” and the shortcomings were all on the side of film. According to Harbage, modern developments in technology and “salesmanship” had rendered film audiences more passive and powerless than their Renaissance counterparts. Bethell went further: “modern popular entertainment” was not only “more calculatedly commercialized” than Renaissance drama but also “depraved in values, superficial in ideas, false in sentiment, and insensitive to the quality of words.” For both critics, in other words, the fundamental problem with comparing Shakespeare to film was the perceived disparity in artistic merit between them—even though every one of Bethell’s charges against movies had figured prominently in Renaissance attacks on plays, as I’ll soon show.²

Only in recent years have the comparative projects of Harbage and Bethell been revived in earnest.³ The first important new work on the subject was Michael Bristol’s *Big-Time Shakespeare* (1996), which, however, offered no reassessment of film’s artistic value: Bristol, too, expressed contempt for “the frenzied environment of commercial popular culture,” “where hyperactivity and distraction are preferred to the more difficult pleasures of traditional literature.” What inspired Bristol to treat Shakespeare and film as related forms of “show business” was instead a perceived narrowing of the *historical* gap between them. Most Renaissance scholars now characterize the period they study as “early” modern, and Bristol consequently defined Renaissance drama as an early version of modern mass entertainment. “Shakespeare’s durable popularity,” he maintained, reflected “the success of the culture industry” that *began* “in urban centers like London in the latter part of the sixteenth century.”⁴ Yet for all its explanatory appeal, the claim of Shakespeare’s relative contemporaneity with our own era has many obvious limitations, too—his drama has nothing to say about automobiles, for instance, or electricity, or corporations—and most theater historians would therefore agree with Harbage and Bethell that modern commercial and technological innovations in particular constitute an impassable historical barrier between Shakespeare and film. By calling the Renaissance theater mass entertainment, I don’t mean to make a broader historical claim than these other theater scholars do; I’m not arguing that Renaissance drama belongs to the same *longue durée* as film does. In my view, it’s not the modernity of the sixteenth-century theater that links it so powerfully to twentieth-century cinema: it’s the audience, the mass audience.⁵

When Bristol and others define Shakespeare's theater as a rudimentary form of the modern culture industry, they do more than downplay the historiographical objections to their approach. They also deny the theater the status of a fully developed mass entertainment in its own right, and as a result, they tend to overlook just how revelatory the modern commentary on mass entertainment can be when it is applied to Renaissance plays as well as modern films. To take advantage of the insights such commentary yields, I'll draw throughout this book on the theorists of film who produced their most influential work during cinema's own classical period: the Anglo-American writers Gilbert Seldes, Iris Barry, Robert Sherwood, and Paul Rotha, for instance, along with such Frankfurt School writers as Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Siegfried Kracauer. For decades now, the study of mass entertainment has been anchored in the work of the Frankfurt School, and for that reason I'll pay special attention to this group of theorists, particularly to the debates between the pro-cinematic Walter Benjamin and the anti-cinematic Theodor Adorno. Where Benjamin celebrated the power of mass entertainment to promote equality, to build community, to demystify art, and to make it accessible to all, Adorno accused mass entertainment of deceiving, exploiting, and debasing its audiences. Both positions, I'll argue, are major preoccupations in the plays and movies I discuss.

So probing, indeed, are these plays and movies on the subject of mass entertainment that they illuminate as much in the theoretical literature as the literature illuminates in them. Too often, the Frankfurt School thinkers have been allowed to overshadow the works they have been called upon to elucidate, as if the ability to conceptualize mass entertainment depended on a high-theoretical detachment from it. Adorno, for one, was not as removed from the culture industry as his criticism might indicate: he socialized with Hollywood luminaries, read scripts for the director William Dieterle, and even pitched a film project to Jack Warner and Dore Schary.⁶ Nor did the Frankfurt critics devise their theories *ex nihilo*. They offered unusually sophisticated and compelling elaborations of views that were widely held in the culture at large and that were disseminated through such mainstream media as film. Movies did more than merely transmit these views, however; they also helped formulate them. In every chapter of *Pleasing Everyone*, I'll pursue detailed readings of individual plays and movies in order to show how these works often analyze mass entertainment with greater shrewdness and ingenuity than many modern theorists bring to the question.⁷ In part, this self-conceptualizing power of plays and movies depends on the intellectual flexibility that fictional license provides them. But I also want to argue, against the detractors of mass entertainment, that the

ambition to please a large heterogeneous audience can have a complicating rather than reductive effect on entertainments. Scholars often take this point for granted in relation to Renaissance drama, without recognizing its implications for film. Writing around the same time as Benjamin and Adorno, Harbage declared that the breadth of Shakespeare's audience "compelled" breadth in him, and justified it, too. "The subtleties missed by one" playgoer were "not missed by his neighbor," Harbage maintained; "Shakespeare's meanings" were instead "caught in the mesh of a thousand minds."⁸

But if mass entertainment is as cross-historical a phenomenon as I claim it is, why match film with Shakespearean drama in particular, rather than with any other form of mass entertainment? During the Renaissance itself, writers frequently compared the vast theater audiences of their day to classical antecedents. For instance, Philip Massinger begins *The Roman Actor* (acted 1626) by situating his play in the theatrical tradition first of Greek tragedy and then of Roman drama—performed, as the title character declares, in an "Amphitheater" that "hath giv'n full delight / Both to the eye, and ear of fifty thousand / Spectators in one day." In 1633, the theater-hating William Prynne linked his charge that "the whole City" is regularly drawn "to a Play-house" with "the Poet *Juvenal's* complaint of old": "*Totam hodie Romam Circus capit,*" "the Circus holds all of Rome today." According to Horace in Ben Jonson's 1604 translation of the *Ars Poetica*, the only time in theater history when the "seats" were "not yet / So over-thick, but, where the people met, / They might with ease be numbered" was the immemorial past.⁹ My purpose in focusing on the connections between Renaissance drama and modern film is not at all to deny the existence of mass entertainment in other times or places.¹⁰ On the contrary, I hope that my research might prompt other scholars to explore different mass entertainment linkages than the ones I address here. Ease of comparison has led me to confine myself to works in English, and I've focused on Renaissance drama rather than on later material such as the nineteenth-century British novel so that any correlations with film will be less readily attributable to historical proximity. But the lofty status accorded to Renaissance drama in our own time also gives it a special power to broaden our conception of related entertainments such as film by enhancing the artistic credibility of works designed to please everyone. Admittedly, some recent theorists of mass entertainment are already so confident about its artistic merit that they drop the term "entertainment" altogether and refer to film as "mass art," but that characterization narrows film in its own way, by disregarding the fundamentally uneasy relation of mass entertainment to art.¹¹ Though few would now scoff at calling Shakespeare's plays art, many would have done so during

Shakespeare's lifetime. Associating Renaissance drama with film broadens our conception of the drama, too, by helping us recognize the often self-confessed cheapness and vulgarity in Renaissance plays that their current cultural prestige belies.

Within the history of the theater and the cinema, I've singled out two comparably transformative periods when the makers of plays and movies understood that they were addressing a newly expanded audience. In each case, the change galvanized the enemies as much as the advocates of the entertainment in question. I concentrate on the decades of Renaissance English drama that are widely considered its heyday, the 1590s to the 1610s, when the drama took full advantage of a technological innovation that had been instituted a decade or so earlier: the construction of England's first amphitheaters, which made possible a regularly returning mass audience. For some contemporaries, this new environment for theater lifted English drama to heights that few had ever imagined it could reach: in 1599, the poet Thomas Weever proclaimed that London's playwrights, actors, and playhouses now rivaled or else surpassed their ancient Roman counterparts.¹² At the same time, many other contemporaries viewed the multitudes "swarming on every side" to plays as marking a new cultural low. So open, accessible, and unrestrained had entertainment become in the theaters, one critic lamented in 1587, that "a man may buy his damnation there for two pence."¹³ In my discussions of film, I've similarly chosen to focus on a period that is now regarded as a golden age: Hollywood from the late 1920s to the early 1940s. During these decades, too, the cinema increased its viewership by embracing a technological innovation, talking pictures, that both raised and lowered film's reputation. It was in 1935 that the Museum of Modern Art opened its Film Library, dedicated to the "art" of the movie "you see every time you go to a motion picture house"—to the art, that is, of "the commercial product mainly and chiefly."¹⁴ Yet talking pictures also provoked charges that film had vulgarized itself beyond redemption; even movie-lovers such as the British filmmaker and critic Paul Rotha declared in 1930 that the talkies were "harmful and detrimental to the culture of the public."¹⁵

The emphasis I'm placing on periods of technological change might seem to be at odds with my insistence that the audience is the bottom line for mass entertainment. By arguing for the primacy of audience over technology, however, I am not opposing one factor to the other. A technology can help assemble a mass audience; it can even make possible a mass audience that would not be able to assemble without the technology; and it surely influences the design of the entertainment that it disseminates to the audience. But a mass audience requires no specific technology in order to be assembled; in some cases it requires no technology at all; and it's for the audience, not the technology, that the entertainment

is devised in the first place. The dominant argument against characterizing Renaissance drama as mass entertainment takes the opposite view: that mass entertainment could not begin until modern technologies made possible the mass production and distribution of entertainment. In the remaining sections of the introduction, I'll first examine this belief in technology as the defining issue for mass entertainment. Next, I'll take a closer look at some of the chief historical as well as technological differences between Renaissance drama and Golden Age film that theorists assume must stand in the way of regarding these plays and movies as comparable modes of mass entertainment. I'll then highlight three crucial issues from the modern commentary on mass entertainment that I'll be using throughout my book as a means of comparing the drama and film, and I'll briefly expand on these issues by showing how they figure in three late silent pictures. Finally, I'll end the introduction by outlining the structure of my book and then summarizing each of its chapters.

Technology vs. Audience

In "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," an essay that he drafted and redrafted throughout the 1930s, Benjamin treats mass entertainment as the unprecedented consequence of twin technological "processes" that have shattered all the traditional theories and practices of art. The first of these processes, Benjamin argues, is the mechanical reproduction of artworks, which replaces their "unique existence" with "a mass existence" of copies. The second process is the mass distribution of the copies, which allows "the reproduction to reach the recipient in his or her own situation." For Benjamin, the "most powerful agent" of both processes, and thus the definitive form of the entertainment they generate, is the incontrovertibly modern medium of film.¹⁶

To begin, it makes sense to weigh Benjamin's technocentric account of mass entertainment on its own terms and ask why the technological preconditions of mass production and distribution had not already been met hundreds of years before the invention of film, with the advent of print. While Benjamin acknowledges "the enormous changes brought about in literature by movable type," he does not consider print to be a "truly revolutionary means of reproduction," nor does he allow that it generated any literary form of mass entertainment. "Film," he argues in the second version of his "Work of Art" essay (1936), "is the first art form whose artistic character is entirely determined by its reproducibility." Benjamin's admirer Alain Badiou (2005) echoes this claim when he calls film "the first great art that is mass *in its essence*."¹⁷ But print is just

as reproducible as film: before digital media, indeed, the publishing industry often issued more copies of individual books than the film industry produced of individual films. Conversely, mass reproduction is no less contingent a feature of film than it is of print. If it were an essential element, as Badiou claims, then a film could not count as a film unless it were mass-reproduced.

Even theorists who more fully credit print as a technological breakthrough share Benjamin's resistance to granting the title of mass entertainment to any medium earlier than film. In his *Philosophy of Mass Art* (1998), for example, the film theorist Noël Carroll asserts that "mass art" did indeed "develop in tandem with the onset of the printing press," but he repeatedly introduces a time lag to this synchronism that betrays his merely nominal interest in any "mass art which pre-dates our current age of mass culture." "The printing press," he writes, "made possible the emergence of early forms of mass art, such as the novel"; as the language of nascency suggests, Carroll relegates the novel to the prehistory of genuine mass entertainment, as one of "the first *potentially* mass-art forms." Under pressure, Carroll is "willing to bite the bullet" and allow that, by his own lights, "eighteenth-century novels of the gothic variety" must also count as mass art, but he never explains why mass art had to wait three centuries after "the onset of the printing press" before these "early forms" of it could first emerge.¹⁸ Like Benjamin, Carroll downplays print because it undermines the historical uniqueness for modern mass entertainment that his technological theory is intended to secure. Carroll's explicit goal in *A Philosophy of Mass Art* is to define mass entertainment in such a way as to distinguish "the relevant popular art of our times from popular art construed ahistorically." Hence his investment in the technology of a "mass delivery system," which "commands our attention once we try to differentiate the kind of art people are attempting to characterize in debates about contemporary art." But since he concedes that "printing" was "the first major" mass delivery system "to emerge in the West," Carroll is forced to add a further technological criterion to the mix and argue that a piece of entertainment cannot count as mass art unless it has been distributed by the same "power technologies" that fuel "the routine, automatic, mass production of multiple instances of the same product." From the start, the printing press routinely mass-produced multiple instances of the same product, which were then widely distributed; why did this production and distribution have to become "automatic" before mass entertainment could occur? Carroll's answer: to make "the discussion" of mass entertainment "a pressing one for our century."¹⁹

Yet even the restriction of mass entertainment to an electrically powered production and distribution system has its limits in helping Carroll

differentiate mass entertainment from other art forms. As he himself points out, “esoteric art” may also be “technologically distributed,” but that distribution does not by itself turn such art into mass entertainment. To address this complication, Carroll must demote technology from its starring role as “*the significant feature*” of mass entertainment and promote the intended audience instead. “Mass art,” he declares, “is art that is designed to be consumed by lots and lots of people. That is why it is produced on such a large scale and distributed by mass technologies.” But “lots and lots of people” consumed art before film came along. To make mass entertainment seem unprecedentedly modern even when a large audience is its deciding feature, Carroll must define a mass audience as so numerous and far-flung that they can be reached only through the distributive mechanism of “power machinery”: by “lots and lots of people,” he means “consuming populations” who “cross national, class, religious, political, ethnic, racial, and gender boundaries.” Yet printed books crossed such boundaries centuries before movies did. Within a few years of its initial publication in 1605, *Don Quixote* was being sold throughout Europe in translations as well as Spanish-language versions; some copies even made their way to Peru.

The crucial difference, for Carroll, is the *size* of the audiences that *Don Quixote* reached in its own day: thousands, not the millions who watch movies. “Scale,” as Carroll rightly insists, is an “utterly relevant” standard for defining mass entertainment; if it were not, then the very notion of distinguishing a specifically “mass” form of entertainment would be meaningless.²⁰ But why must the benchmark for mass entertainment be *millions* of consumers? What categorical difference do these millions make, aside from a historical one? According to Badiou, who thinks of cinema as “a mass art on a scale that brooks no comparison with any other art,” not even millions is a number large enough to distinguish the audiences for film from the audiences for print. “In the nineteenth century,” he notes, “there were writers of the masses, poets of the masses,” such as “Victor Hugo in France” or “Pushkin in Russia,” who “had, and still have, millions of readers.” Consequently, Badiou believes that *many* millions are needed to differentiate “the scale” of Hugo’s and Pushkin’s popularity from “that of cinema’s greatest hits.”²¹ Carroll takes Badiou’s premise still further: only works that aim to reach “the *largest possible* audience” he argues, should be classified as mass art.²² But since no artwork has ever reached the largest possible audience, it’s hard to distinguish one entertainment from another on this basis, and if we instead take Carroll’s “largest possible” to mean the largest audience that circumstances allow, then the largest possible audience might be one or two people, not a mass. These problems with Carroll’s formulation suggest that it makes better sense to define a mass

audience in terms of minimum rather than maximum requirements. And that is how I define it throughout this book: as an audience large enough to seem indefinite in social composition as well as size—the sort of audience, again, that printed books reached centuries before film.

Carroll himself is not entirely convinced that the *actual* size of the audience ultimately matters. Just as a work intended for the few remains “esoteric” even when it is widely distributed, so, Carroll maintains, an entertainment “may be a work of mass art even if it is a bungled attempt” at entertaining the masses. “As long as it can be established that the work in question was intentionally designed to be generally accessible, even if it is not, it still counts as a work of mass art.”²³ According to this argument from design, in other words, the audience that defines a work as mass entertainment is a notional entity: an entertainment should count as mass entertainment when it has been *conceived* for a mass audience. There’s no question that, in making it possible to address larger audiences than ever before, modern technological developments encouraged the production of works that were specifically intended “to elicit mass engagement,” as Carroll puts it. But the technology did not create the desire for such engagement, nor would technological limitations have kept earlier entertainers from aspiring to reach mass audiences.²⁴ In 1632, Shakespeare’s contemporary Thomas Heywood boasted that an earlier play cycle of his had “at sundry times thronged three several Theaters, with numerous and mighty Auditories.” Carroll worries that broadening the category of mass entertainment to include such precinematic crowd-pleasers would only obscure the “historical specificity” of the phenomenon; I hope to demonstrate instead that Renaissance plays help sharpen our focus on mass entertainment by disentangling it from modernity.²⁵

Many of these plays, it is important to keep in mind, were not merely theatrical events: they also drew on the mass-distributive technology of print. Books were often the sources of plays, and plays themselves often became books.²⁶ “During Shakespeare’s lifetime,” as Lukas Erne has reminded us, “*The First Part of Henry IV* would not only have been watched by a great number of spectators, but also read by all those who bought the printed playbooks that appeared in no fewer than six editions.” Print thus gave drama the ability to satisfy both of Benjamin’s technological preconditions for mass entertainment: a play could be reproduced in multiple copies, and those copies could meet the consumer in his or her own situation. This always potential second life for a play meant that print was never far from the consciousness of dramatists. As Erne observes, Shakespeare “could not help knowing that his plays were being read and reread, printed and reprinted, excerpted and anthologized as he was writing more plays.”²⁷

But many Renaissance commentators also regarded the theater as a mass delivery system of its own, comparable to print rather than subsidiary to it. A 1551 proclamation by Edward VI singled out “Players of Interludes” alongside “Printers” and “Booksellers” for disturbing “the quiet of the realm”; the authorities often regarded playing as no less effective than printing at “spreading” trouble.²⁸ In the 1563 edition of his *Acts and Monuments*, John Foxe took the side of the troublemakers and praised “players” as well as “Printers” and “Preachers” for constituting “a triple bulwark, against the triple crown of the Pope, to bring him down.”²⁹ These testaments to the reach of this sort of entertainment, which could be repeated, revived, and taken on tour, preceded the construction of amphitheaters on the outskirts of London that were capable of holding thousands of playgoers at a time. Shortly after the first of those amphitheaters opened in 1576, the preacher John Northbrooke spoke of plays as “now” being “universally” performed “amongst us,” and for decades afterward contemporaries marveled at the crowds who would “flock” or “press” or “throng” to plays, stuffing the theaters “so full” that they seemed to “crack” with the strain.³⁰ These were no ordinary gatherings, the theater-hating Prynne insisted in 1633: audiences “swarm so thick in every Play-house,” he claimed, that they “almost crowd one another to death for multitude.”³¹

Modern commentators prefer to think of the throngs in Renaissance theaters as “popular” rather than “mass” audiences. But in Renaissance usage the term “popular” was strongly class-coded: it signified the common people, as opposed to the “better sort” of gentlemen and aristocrats. To call Renaissance audiences popular, then, is to imply that they were restricted to the common people, whereas contemporaries regularly bore witness to the social heterogeneity as well as the size of the crowds at plays. “Truly you may see daily what multitudes are gathered together at those Plays, *of all sorts*,” Northbrooke observed. “At a new Play,” wrote another author in 1609, the theater can be seen to “swarm with *Gentiles* mix’d with *Grooms*.” According to Sir John Davies in 1594, “a thousand townsmen, gentlemen, and whores, / Porters and servingmen together throng” at plays. Playwrights often boasted of their ability to win “grace / In the full Theater,” but they also often complained about the social divisions in the amphitheaters especially, where a genteel spectator could find himself “choak’d / With the stench of Garlic” or “pasted / To the barmy Jacket of a Beer-brewer.”³² How were all the different interests and demands of these “promiscuously” mixed assemblies to be met? “Neither quick mirth, invective, nor high state, / Can content all,” laments the prologue to John Day’s 1606 *Isle of Gulls*: “such is the boundless hate / Of a confused audience.” Day’s expectation of trouble for his play suggests not only that he had experienced the

discordancy of “confus’d applause” in “a full-throng’d theater” but also that he had written his play with the possibility of such a mixed reception in mind.³³

Mass audiences were indeed so conventional a feature of commercial Renaissance drama that playwrights assumed their presence even in their absence. “For all the period’s references to ‘the multitude’ or ‘ten thousand spectators’ or ‘Throng’d heapes’” at plays, the theater historian Paul Menzer has recently asserted, “early modern actors, far more often than not, surveyed half-empty houses from the lip of the stage.”³⁴ It was of course commercially advantageous for theater people to pretend that everyone was going to plays all the time, so that no one would want to miss out. And it made equally good business sense to persuade theatergoers that the best way to see a play was in a throng of other spectators. As Menzer puts it, in the slightly paranoid terms that often appeal to critics of mass entertainment, “players, playwrights, and playhouses colluded to give the crowd a domesticated experience of itself.” Theaters, indeed, made mass audiences conspicuous to themselves in more ways than by gathering the audiences together. Oftentimes, a character in a play would describe to playgoers how they looked from the stage, thus encouraging them not only to visualize themselves as an audience but also to regard themselves as a constitutive feature of the theatrical experience. Midway through the induction to Ben Jonson’s *Every Man Out of His Humor* (1599), one character speaking with others suddenly catches sight of the audience and declares, “I not observed this throngèd round till now. / Gracious and kind spectators, you are welcome.”³⁵ A less overt and not coincidentally less positive reversal of perspective occurs in the second part of Shakespeare’s *Henry VI* (c. 1590), when the Duchess of Gloucester laments to her husband as she is being led in penance through London’s streets, “Look how they gaze! / See how the giddy multitude do point / And nod their heads, and throw their eyes on thee!”³⁶ In both cases, the audience are prompted to recognize not only how they play a role in the theater but also how the theater has *amassed* them—a notion of the theatrical experience that even its enemies helped promote: “Were not Players the mean[s], to make these assemblies,” wrote Stephen Gosson in 1579, “such multitudes would hardly be drawn in so narrow room.”³⁷

Historical Differences

To help make sense of the mass entertainment in sixteenth-century playhouses as well as in twentieth-century cinemas, I will regularly draw on the historical context of the works I discuss. Defining mass entertainment as

a cross-historical phenomenon does not mean ignoring the cultural and technological differences between Renaissance plays and Hollywood movies, any more than defining both *The Aeneid* and *Paradise Lost* as epics means ignoring the historical dissimilarities between Virgil's time and Milton's. But historical context is not the only determinant of artistic content, and scholars who focus exclusively on it tend to exaggerate historical variations into categorical distinctions. However remarkable and important they may be, many of the differences between the Renaissance theater and Hollywood cinema are also often more relative than they appear, and these differences cannot be accurately understood without taking into account the strength of the congruities between the theater and the cinema as well.

Modern theorists of mass entertainment generally assume that the technological divide between Renaissance plays and modern film is irreducible because it promotes and reflects profound sociological transformations: above all, the seismic shift from a monarchic society to a democratic or else mass society. According to Badiou, cinema counts as the first real mass art "because it is the democratization" of all the others. The claim has a long history. In his 1911 tract *The Religious Possibilities of the Motion Picture*, for instance, Herbert Jump celebrated movies for their "popularizing of a privilege which previously had been confined to a few."³⁸ Before the advent of cinema, as a 1918 editorial in the fan magazine *Photoplay* similarly argued, "painters, musicians, poets and sculptors lived on the bounty of monarchs and princes," and their only care was to please "their royal patrons"; "art scorned democracy." But "then came the moving picture, and democracy clasped it to its heart," as the art that was at long last "of the people" and "for the people."³⁹ In his 1931 *History of the Movies*, Benjamin Hampton called film "the one triumph of democracy in creating an effective agency of its very own." Movies "provide entertainment for the high and mighty, and for the meek and lowly, without distinction," wrote Robert Sherwood in 1923; "the films which are displayed at command performances in St. James's Palace are also shown, in exactly the same form, at the Rosebud Theater in Gopher Prairie." Once inside the new "cinema palaces," Lloyd Lewis observed for the *New Republic* in 1929, "every man is a king and every woman a queen"; "all men enter these portals equal, and thus the movies are perhaps a symbol of democracy."⁴⁰

Centuries earlier, however, similar claims had already been made for the Renaissance theater, which itself provided entertainment for the meek and lowly as well as the high and mighty. A Florentine dispatch from London in 1613 reported that "anyone at all" could attend commercial plays "for a few pence." Taking a jaundiced view of this accessibility, the Renaissance dramatist Thomas Dekker maintained in 1609

that the theater was “a place...so free in entertainment...that your Stinkard has the self-same liberty to be there in his Tobacco-Fumes, which your sweet Courtier hath: and that your Carman and Tinker claim as strong a voice in their suffrage, and sit to give judgment on the play’s life and death, as well as the proudest *Momus* among the tribe of *Critic*.” Dekker’s satire raises the question whether the values of the theater were as democratic as its box office. Officially, Shakespeare and his fellow actors were hardly beholden to the “suffrage” of the lower classes: they were the servants of James I, the King’s Men. But for many contemporary observers the reality was different. “Howsoever he pretends to have a royal Master or Mistress,” another satirist claimed of the “common player,” “his wages and dependence prove him to be the servant of the people.” Actors and playwrights were frequently irked by this dependence, and they often wished that they could write for gentlemen or aristocrats exclusively. But they just as frequently celebrated their special connection with the thousands they entertained. Even the notoriously prickly and arrogant Ben Jonson welcomed “all” spectators to his 1629 comedy *The New Inn*, just as he had professed his desire “to delight all” in his 1614 comedy *Bartholomew Fair*.⁴¹

The very revulsion that some contemporaries expressed toward the theater’s audiences suggests how conspicuously democratizing a force the theater seemed to be at a time when democracy had little currency in the culture generally. Throughout the Renaissance, as the theater historian Ian Munro observes, “some of the most explicit and intense invocations of the many-headed monster as a violent mass” appeared in the “antitheatrical discourse” of the period. Speaking for his fellow theater-haters, Henry Crosse in 1603 declared that “the common haunters” of plays were “for the most part, the lewdest persons in the land,” “the very scum, rascality, and baggage of the people.” Faced with such an audience, the players, the antitheatricalists assumed, had no choice but to debase themselves, “for exempt their licentiousness only out of Plays,” then “too too small alas will be their gettings to maintain their idle life; that being the thing which most pleaseth the multitude.”⁴² What especially appalled theater-haters was the servile willingness of actors to derive “glory” from “the vulgar opinion” and to sacrifice every other proper allegiance to “that great master the multitude.” “There is no passion wherewith the king, the sovereign majesty of the Realm[,] was possess’d, but is amplified, and openly sported with, and made a Maygame to all the beholders,” Crosse went on to complain. Northbrooke and many others called the theater the place to go “if you will learn... how to disobey and rebel against Princes”; the indignant author of the 1615 *Refutation of the Apology for Actors* put “*Tyrannous Kings and Queens*” at the head of a list of parts that crowd-pleasing actors

loved to play.⁴³ Taking stock of such contemporary attacks on the theater's rabble-rousing, the literary scholar Franco Moretti has compellingly argued that Renaissance drama did indeed help undermine the credibility as well as the prestige of the English monarchy. The theater, in his view, constituted "one of the decisive influences in the *creation* of a 'public' that for the first time in history assumed the right to bring a king to justice." Even as the theater confirmed the worst fears of some contemporaries, moreover, it encouraged others to evaluate "the multitude" in positive new ways. Opposing those who "maintain *Contempt / 'Gainst common Censure*," a character in the induction to John Marston's 1601 comedy *What You Will* argues that "*Music and Poetry* were first approv'd / By common sense; and that which pleased most, / Held most allowed pass." "The theater," as Harbage concludes, "was a democratic institution in an intensely undemocratic age."⁴⁴

Centuries later, the cinema fanned similar prejudices against the masses and promoted similar democratic reassessments of them. Unwittingly echoing Renaissance theater-haters, Paul Rotha in 1930 complained that American film had generated "a new type of audience, a vacant-minded, empty-headed public, who flocked to sensations, who thrilled to sensual vulgarity, and who would go anywhere and pay anything to see indecent situations riskily handled on the screen." For the influential journalist William Allen White in 1936, Hollywood's disgraceful truckling to the masses left every film "at the mercy of its stupidest patrons." In his 1937 column "The People and the Arts," by contrast, Gilbert Seldes echoed the Renaissance theater-lover Marston when he argued against "the principle that only those things are worth communicating which comparatively few people will understandingly receive." "A substantial proportion of the most successful movies," Seldes maintained, had also been "good pictures," which proved that "millions of people who have little experience with the principles of the great arts" might be a discriminating audience, and that an entertainment "specifically intended to please" these masses might constitute a great work of art.⁴⁵

For other cinephiles, film could do more than meet popular standards: it could elevate the mass audience. Badiou assumes that such democratic uplift is a unique capacity of film. "With cinema," he argues, "*you have the possibility of rising*. You can start with your most common ideas, your most nauseating sentimentality, your vulgarity, even your cowardice. You can be an absolutely ordinary film viewer. You can have bad taste in your access, in your entry, in your initial attitude. But that doesn't prevent the film's allowing you to rise." And yet Renaissance theater-lovers made exactly the same claim about commercial plays. Even as the preface to the 1609 quarto of Shakespeare's *Troilus and*

Cressida disparaged the vulgar “multitude” who normally attend plays, it confidently asserted that “all such dull and heavy-witted worldlings, as were never capable of the wit of a Comedy,” have “found that wit” at Shakespeare’s comedies “that they never found in themselves, and have parted better-witted than they came.” Thomas Dekker echoed this sentiment in the prologue to his *If This Be Not a Good Play, the Devil’s in It* (1612): a talented playwright, he asserted, “can draw . . . even creatures / Forg’d out of th’ *Hammer* . . . to *Reach* up, / And . . . clap their *Brawny hands*, / T’ *Applaud*, what their *charm’d* soul scarce understands.” Thomas Heywood expressed the same view the same year, though without Dekker’s contempt for the “ordinary spectator”: “so bewitching a thing is lively and well-spirited action,” Heywood declared, “that it hath power to new-mold the hearts of the spectators and fashion them to the shape of any noble and notable attempt.”⁴⁶

For some film-lovers as well as theater-lovers, part of the uplift in mass entertainment came from encouraging the audience to think more highly of themselves *collectively* than as a “giddy multitude.” Hampton in his 1931 *History* argued that the continuing popular demand “for better and better pictures” powerfully refuted “the dogma that mass mentality could not, or would not, move ahead.” “The common people,” he claimed, had instead made “remarkable progress in creating for themselves a form of entertainment that carried with it an immeasurable quantity of stimulation, enlightenment, and education.”⁴⁷ “What possibilities lie in this art, once it is understood and developed, to plant new conceptions of civic and national idealism?” asked the 1922 preface to Vachel Lindsay’s *Art of the Moving Picture*; “how far may it go in cultivating concerted emotion in the now ungoverned crowd?” When Heywood spoke of drama that had “inflam’d” spectators with lofty aspiration, he was referring to Renaissance history plays such as Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, where the Chorus’s opening address to the audience as “gentles all” anticipates King Henry’s own conferral of universal nobility on the “band of brothers” in his army: “For there is none of you so mean and base / That hath not noble luster in your eyes”; “For he to-day that sheds his blood with me / Shall be my brother; be he ne’er so vile, / This day shall gentle his condition.” Throughout the choruses to *Henry V*, Shakespeare links Henry’s vision of patriotic fellowship to the theater’s concentration of diverse energies inside its “wooden O.” While apologizing for the attempt to “cram” such “mighty” forces “within the girdle of these walls,” the choruses also suggest that the theater has a special power to compress the audience into an image of English solidarity—“like little body with a mighty heart.”⁴⁸

Benjamin, perceiving “the masses” of the twentieth century as “a matrix from which all customary behavior toward works of art is

today emerging newborn,” expected that moviegoers would achieve a far more radically democratic fellowship than Shakespeare ever could have imagined. But he downplayed the more striking difference between theater and cinema that his essay on reproducibility evoked: not egalitarian but rather fascist “attempts to organize the . . . masses” through film. There is no real political equivalent to fascism in Renaissance commentary on the theater’s mass audiences. Contemporaries understood that the government occasionally enlisted the theater in propaganda campaigns, particularly against Catholic and puritan enemies.⁴⁹ Arguments were also made for regarding the theater as a means of social control, although these generally took the weak, Juvenalian form of claiming that plays were a distraction from politics; the story was often told that “when Augustus reproached a certain player because through his occasion there was a tumult among the people, he answered, *It is good for thee, O Caesar, that the people be withheld by our idle exercises, from busying their brains about other matters.*”⁵⁰ But no Renaissance commentator, to my knowledge, anticipated the claims of modern theorists such as Horkheimer and Adorno that mass entertainment amounts to an illusion of popular consensus generated by a “culture industry” whose aim is the methodical “breaking down of all individual resistance” to the status quo. With the help of mass entertainment, Dwight Macdonald contended in 1944, “everything and everybody are being integrated—‘coordinated’ the Nazis call it—into the official culture-structure.”⁵¹

This is not to say that the Renaissance lacked any notion of the drama as mass deception. That claim was in fact a staple of antitheatrical fulmination, with the crucial difference that theater-haters identified the deceiver as the devil, not capital. Players, William Rankins declared in his 1587 *Mirroure of Monsters*, “are sent from their great captain Satan . . . to deceive the world, to lead the people with enticing shows to the devil.” Calling plays “the doctrine and invention of the Devil,” Stephen Gosson maintained in 1582 that they “drag such a monstrous tail after them, as is able to sweep whole Cities into his lap.” The political moral of such diatribes was if anything the reverse of Horkheimer and Adorno’s: the devil’s aim in deluding the people, Gosson argued, was to “break our order,” not to shore it up. And yet Renaissance attacks on the theater as “Satan’s Synagogue” did nevertheless share the most counterintuitive feature of Horkheimer and Adorno’s assault on mass entertainment: the theory that such entertainment amounts to *systematic* deception, perpetrated by a *unified* agency.⁵² Why would both Renaissance and modern commentators regard the manifest abundance and variety of mass entertainment as camouflaging a hidden sameness? Since these commentators do not agree about the nature of that same-

ness, their concurrence must be based on some other feature of mass entertainment that they do agree upon, and the one element that is common not only to plays and to films but to every piece of mass entertainment is the mass audience for which each piece is conceived—an audience that *in itself* presents critics with an image of unified multiplicity, which the critics then read back into the entertainment.

Horkheimer and Adorno spread the blame for mass deception beyond the deceivers. It's not just capitalist collusion, they maintain, that has turned film into an unprecedented "means of domination and integration": it's also the machine, which has dehumanized entertainment in its reception as well as its production and distribution. What makes "the sound film" the "most characteristic" product of the culture industry, Horkheimer and Adorno argue, is the way it forces the audience to "react automatically" to its own automated display. Talking pictures "are so designed that . . . sustained thought is out of the question if the spectator is not to miss the relentless rush of facts."⁵³ But the claim that mass entertainment stupefied its audience was nothing new. Renaissance commentators similarly condemned the theater for "bewitching" the "minds" and "benumbing" the "souls" of spectators. A play, wrote Gosson in 1582, "is a block in the way of reason"; "such force have their enchantments of pleasure to draw the affections of the mind," another theater-hater asserted in 1580, that "no man" is safe once he is caught in their "webs."⁵⁴ Even the "relentless rush" that Horkheimer and Adorno attributed to movies was a recurring theme in Renaissance theater criticism, which often censured commercial plays for their tendency to "outrun the apprehension of their auditory." Whereas "the mind," according to Henry Crosse, "is stored with wisdom, the life bettered and settled in quietness" by "reading good books," that same "mind" is tumultuously overstimulated at the theater, "carried from one thing to another" by plays that "swiftly run over in two hours' space, the doings of many years, galloping from one country to another." As if to prove Crosse's point, the chorus to *Henry V* boasts that "our swift scene flies / In motion of no less celerity / Than that of thought."⁵⁵

Those who view film as categorically different from earlier entertainments would counter that the machine enabled film to homogenize as well as mesmerize its audiences. In his 1925 essay "The Monotonization of the World," Stefan Zweig blamed film for spreading "a herdlike taste that is everywhere the same" and for thus effectively "mechanizing humanity." "The photoplay is a standardized commodity," Frances Taylor Patterson declared in 1928: "entertainment has been deftly and dexterously canned like vegetables in neat, tin containers."⁵⁶ During the Renaissance, however, publishers had already managed to package plays in the neatly reproducible containers of printed books, and by that