



SCREENING CINEMA

SCREENING AMERICAN INDEPENDENT FILM

Edited by JUSTIN WYATT and W.D. PHILLIPS



SCREENING AMERICAN INDEPENDENT FILM

This indispensable collection offers 51 chapters, each focused on a distinct American independent film.

Screening American Independent Film presents these films chronologically, addressing works from across more than a century (1915–2020), emphasizing the breadth and long duration of American independent cinema. The collection includes canonical examples as well as films that push against and expand the definitions of “independence.” The titles run from micro-budget films through marketing-friendly Indiewood projects, from auteur-driven films and festival darlings to B-movies, genre pics, and exploitation films. The chapters also introduce students to different approaches within film studies including historical and contextual framing, industrial and institutional analysis, politics and ideology, genre and authorship, representation, film analysis, exhibition and reception, and technology.

Written by leading international scholars and emerging talents in film studies, this volume is the first of its kind. Paying particular attention to issues of diversity and inclusion for both the participating scholars and the content and themes within the selected films, *Screening American Independent Film* is an essential resource for anyone teaching or studying American cinema.

Justin Wyatt is an Associate Professor of Communication Studies, Film/Media, and Journalism at the University of Rhode Island. He is the author of *The Virgin Suicides: Reverie, Sorrow and Young Love* (Routledge) and the co-editor of *Contemporary American Independent Film: From the Margins to the Mainstream* (Routledge). He is completing a manuscript on qualitative and quantitative market research methods in the media industries. He has published in the fields of media history, film marketing, and media industry studies.

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Screening Cinema

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Supporting the use of film screenings as a core aspect of film studies pedagogy, *Screening Cinema* fills a gap in teaching film where screenings are a core activity. Each volume of the series includes fifty essential readings on individual films specifically designed to support film screenings and to demonstrate that alternative approaches and films can exist alongside, and at no cost to, the canonical. Written by leading scholars in film studies and emerging talents specializing in film studies and cognate disciplines, *Screening Cinema* is the first series of its kind.

Screening Independent American Film

Justin Wyatt and W.D. Phillips

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by codeMantra

WDP: to my brother, Zack, with whom I first saw so many of these films

JW: to Joanne Yamaguchi and Audrey Joan Reynertson, my first film professors



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Young Love and the co-editor of *Contemporary American Independent Film: From the Margins to the Mainstream* and *Refocus: The Later Films and Legacy of Robert Altman*. He is completing a manuscript on assessing qualitative and quantitative market research methods in the media industries. He has published in the fields of media history, film marketing, and media industry studies in journals such as *Film Quarterly*, *Sight and Sound*, *Journal of Film and Video*, *Media Industries*, and *Cineaste*.

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INTRODUCTION

ON THE SWEEP OF AMERICAN INDEPENDENT FILM HISTORIES

W.D. Phillips and Justin Wyatt

The essays assembled in this volume have been designed to serve as a series of teaching and learning tools by offering critical analysis and discussion of 51 distinctive representations of “American independent film.” To offer our readers a broad exploration of this field, this collection includes both well-remembered, canonical examples of independent cinema as well as lesser- or even not-very-well-known independent films from across 100+ years of American filmmaking (1915–2020).

Organized around close readings and contextual studies of individual films that exemplify but also examine, challenge, and expand our understanding of what “independence” is and how it is manifested and articulated in American cinema, each chapter is written to be accessible to a wide range of interested readers and students. At a relatively brief length of 4000 words each, these chapters have also been designed to be easily comprehensible for those new to the film, the topic, or both. As such, each chapter operates best and, in fact, was tailored to work in conjunction with an accompanying screening of the film. Our aim as editors is that through this series of paired readings/viewings, readers will become interested in and excited by the larger field of independent cinema and that these chapters will, individually and collectively, explore films that are historically consequential but also (and perhaps most importantly) challenging, provocative, and entertaining in and of themselves.

Purpose and Premise

Generally speaking, we perceive “independence” in the context of American cinema to describe those films and filmmaking practices that exist outside, or at least at the periphery, of the dominant mainstream, broadly understood to include cultural trends, aesthetic style, narrative strategies, ideological positions,

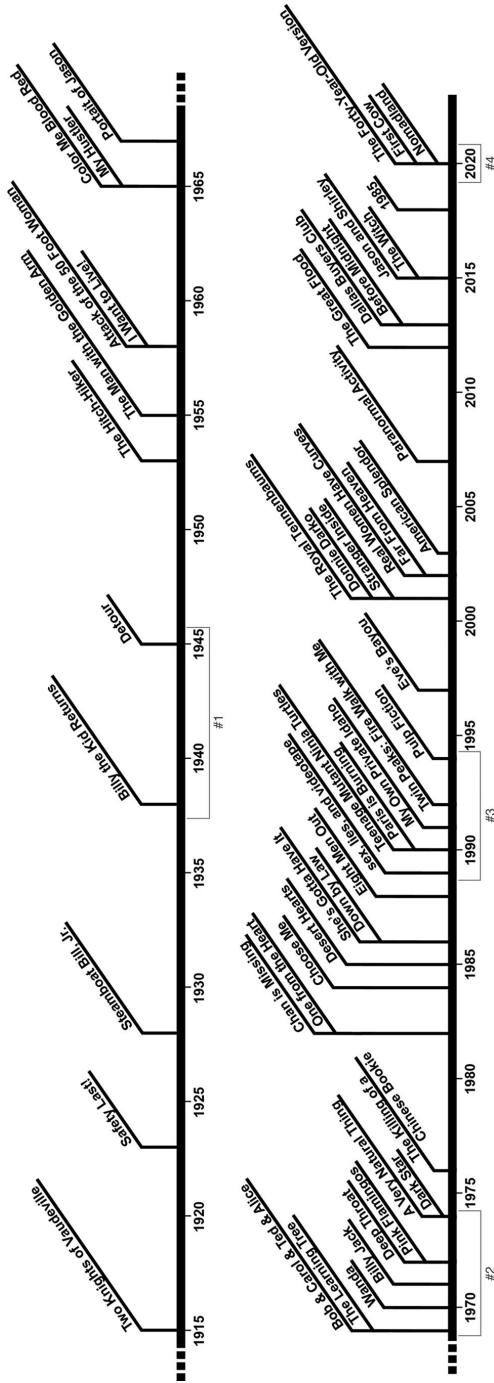


FIGURE 0.1 A timeline (1915–2020) of the American independent films addressed in this volume. The four specific periods or “moments” addressed in the Introduction have been marked and numbered here as well.

industrial structures, exhibition spaces, and standard technologies. Each author in the collection reads their chosen film within key but often unfamiliar or even forgotten contexts – historical, political, stylistic, industrial, and so on – that help us understand how and why the film was positioned, historically as well as contemporarily, as “independent.” By working to realize how each film reinforces or reimagines ideas of independence within American cinema, the chapters focus their analyses on a range of critical characteristics that interconnect and, collectively, help to posit this volume of independent cinema. A brief list of these aspects would include, at least:

- Aesthetic innovation
- Narrative alternatives
- Cultural commentary/critique
- Prosocial Mission
- Business practices
- Commerce, marketing, and exploitation
- Genre/generic revision
- Authorial voice/distinct directorial vision
- Star/icon signifying and/or performing independence
- Inclusion and marginalization
- Location
- Cooptation by the mainstream
- Technology
- Audiences
- Viewing platforms

As is hopefully clear by now, this book is neither a traditional monograph on independent cinema nor an assemblage of article-length pieces that critically analyze individual American independent films in support of a larger intervention proffered by the volume as a whole. The scholarly field for these works is by now robust (see “Suggested Reading: American Independent Cinema” below) and we have not attempted to summarize that history and scholarship in this Introduction. As a result, and due as well to the nature of this volume, not every period, genre, and subfield – and certainly not every key filmmaker – relevant to the long history of American independent cinema get addressed. We have, for example, limited our choices and inclusions to those films understood to be feature-length. Other notable omissions include the first Independents of the early 1910s that challenged the Motion Pictures Patents Company (MPPC), the “race” pictures of the mid-20th century, avant-garde films, the LA Rebellion, and the first wave of digital features. These and other gaps are, however, generally given some mention and attention within one or more of the book’s chapters. Taken collectively, the films and discussions included here attend to the project’s intended scope. As the first volume in Routledge’s new “Screening Film” series, we are pleased to be able to offer readers such a purview of American Independent Film.

Ambit of the Collection

Put simply, this collection provides a significant number of new case studies, demonstrating a wide range of approaches to studying American independent cinema. Critical lenses that readers will find employed frequently include American (and global) film history; media industry studies; cultural studies and area studies (especially in relation to historically marginalized communities); critical theory; media and entertainment studies (beyond just film); performance studies; and technology studies – to name perhaps only the most prevalent. While such breadth can be daunting, it can also be extremely enriching, bringing both new perspectives to established and canonical films as well as providing lesser-known films with a new degree of scholarly attention.

The scholars in this collection represent an intentionally wide range of identities and backgrounds with specializations inside and outside of film and media studies. One key benefit that results from this, in conjunction with the design of the collection, is that individual authors both draw on different aspects of the existing scholarship on American independent cinema and also move substantially beyond that literature, bringing their own areas of study to bear on their selected film. Our contributors, as a result, have positioned their chapters within a truly broad scope of distinct but still overlapping bodies of scholarship. Collectively, this introduces readers to a wealth of ways that contemporary scholars from across multiple fields approach, study, research, teach, and understand independent films.

At the level of individual chapters, perhaps the most significant takeaway is that no definition of “independence” is all-encompassing. Hence, definitions previously developed in reference to one historical period of the independent film are neither fully retroactive nor wholly relevant to future iterations (e.g., definitions developed in reference to the early 1990s independent boom are not comprehensive for analyzing films from the 1980s, much less the 1940s, just as they are an imperfect fit for analyzing and understanding independent films made after the turn of the millennium). This is generally clearest when the time between the film and the applied definition is great (e.g., *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* [1928] against contemporary definitions), yet it can also be true on much smaller scales. As a result, even as we offer “independent film” as a catch-all context, each film or at least each period and phase of American independent cinema traced here needs to be understood within its particular moment of “independence” and as responding (as all cultural products do) to the unique aggregation of contexts – social, cultural, industrial, or otherwise – of its own time.

The inclusion of so many films here encourages readers (and viewers!) to recognize and appreciate their similarities and hence the continuities that the field of independent cinema demonstrates. Yet it also helps to chart the changing nature of “independence” within American film and American culture (and hence the changing definition of “mainstream” as well). To that end, just as definitions of “independence” change over time, the informing contexts for those definitions

(see, for example, the bulleted list above) should be understood to be in constant flux as well – not evolutionary, but certainly dynamic. Reading the chapters and viewing the films from this collection will help readers understand more fully what is intended when filmmakers, audiences, critics, and scholars apply the label “independent” but also discern the ways that both independent films and the circumstances and contexts of independent filmmaking have changed over time.

Using This Collection

Any interested American independent film fan should be able to use this book to learn more about individual films and their contexts, informing all viewers about the experience of watching films not yet seen and enriching the experience for those films already known or even known well. Certainly, readers will be able to engage with this volume in several ways. Each chapter offers a close study of an individual film, and these case studies can anchor and elaborate on the many existing scholarly overview texts on American independent cinema. Through the Works Cited in each chapter, scholars can begin further exploration of the film and its connection to other American independent films.

In addition, by its design, this volume offers a chronological survey of American independent film. The titles represent just a small sample of the larger independent cinema universe, yet we expect that the chronology will nevertheless be helpful in at least two fundamental ways. Those designing a course on American independent film can choose a number of films and chapters from this collection to paint a picture of the continuities and transformations across the field’s long history, complemented we anticipate with books, articles, and chapters from other collections (that again can be gleaned from our contributors’ bibliographies) that expand on key aspects of that history. This book can also be used to consider, or reconsider, sampled histories and the many smaller strands – such as the “B” film, Black filmmaking, and queer cinema – composing the category of American independent film.

Creation of Independent Cinema Moments

Fitting every film into a larger framework of a singular independent cinema history is a task that, as we have already indicated, is perhaps misleading and potentially unproductive. Rather, we feel that it can be more useful to consider snapshots of various moments within the American independent cinema timeline. We refer to these groupings as independent cinema moments and suggest that such “moments” can be another way to effectively engage the chapters in this collection. Adjacent chapters’ analyses are put into a conversation to both appreciate key films from critical moments in American independent cinema and recognize the historically specific contexts which informed the choices of independent filmmakers in that period. Understanding that such cinema

moments are necessarily linked to the chapters in this volume, the moments we identify are not designed to be exhaustive or comprehensive. Keep in mind, for instance, that the start and conclusion of each moment are here tied to the release dates of only the films in this book. In the independent cinema moments we describe below, the periodization cannot fully contain the relevant contexts (Poverty Row, for example, began earlier and lasted longer than the two-film periodization here would seem to indicate). Still, what may be lost in terms of temporal precision is more than made up in the breadth of contexts and correspondences such moments can illuminate.

Connecting these independent cinema moments can also yield additional insights into the category of independent film. Factors within the cinema moments resonate and echo with other elements in different moments. Looking at business practices outside the major studios, for example, is enriched by considering both the structures supporting the “B” film in the 1930s and the rise of the American independent film movement in the 1990s. Similarly, readers might associate the social inequalities reflected in American independent film in the late 1960s with those reshaping independent cinema in 2020. Readers are encouraged to seek additional independent cinema moments in the book and also uncover their own correlations, whether between well-established strands such as these or new ones of their own discovery.

As a set of illustrative examples, we briefly characterize four moments/four sets of films addressed in this collection:

1. 1938–1945: The “B” Film & Poverty Row (2 films)
2. 1969–1974: Social Change & New Markets (8 films)
3. 1989–1994: The American Independent Intervention (6 films)
4. 2020: Addressing Social Inequality & Rethinking Distribution (3 films)

1938–1945: The “B” Film & Poverty Row

The first subset of films is the two films made by Poverty Row production companies, *Billy the Kid Returns* (Republic, 1938) and *Detour* (PRC, 1945). Apart from the shared black and white photography, little else on the surface of these two films initially appears to be very similar, with one a singing cowboy picture and the other a bleak film noir. This grouping of individual case studies, however, draws forward key overlapping contexts and presents a range of options that existed for independent filmmakers and production companies in that era in terms of stories, aesthetics, and audiences. Reading these chapters, for example, one would find that both films were “B” movies, a low-budget film that was the result of the double feature program begun in the early 1930s to entice Depression-era audiences with few cheap entertainment options (pre-television) into theaters under the guise of a two-for-one deal. The first, or “A,” film was understood to be the main draw, of higher quality, and almost always produced and distributed by one of the eight dominant Hollywood film companies. The

“B” film was extra and hence low risk and low reward; as a result, it was generally produced on a much lower budget.

Poverty Row films still needed though to engage and entertain the audience. These two films articulate very different approaches to doing so on equally limited budgets – one through a basic hero story with musical numbers and a clear moral coding and the other via a dark and bizarre tale of bad luck, stolen identity, and a femme fatale determined to seek justice against a supposed murderer. Both films, in their own way, offer pleasures quite distinct from those provided by the A films, which had to appeal to a mass and mainstream audience. *Detour* would have enticed a more adult audience attracted to the noir genre; *Billy the Kid Returns* was designed specifically to appeal to both juvenile and rural audiences underserved by the Hollywood “A” pictures. This imbrication of exhibition structures, production location, budget, film genre, and underserved audiences as mutually informing contexts then, while consequential to both films individually, is revealed more expressly when the two films/chapters are studied together.

1969–1974: Social Change & New Markets

At the end of the 1960s, the major film studios suffered continual financial losses. To remedy this, the studios attempted to secure a younger audience, lured in part by the greater freedom on screen with the adoption of the MPAA rating system in 1968. “The New Hollywood,” as the period was tagged, also foregrounded younger filmmakers with an eye for social commentary and positive social change. These profound changes were felt within the independent cinema which, in turn, was able to create and secure new revenue through developing original distribution, marketing, and exhibition opportunities during this era.

Reflecting the progress in civil rights, American independent film offered the perspective of Black, female, and gay filmmakers, largely ignored by mainstream Hollywood filmmaking. Gordon Parks’s *The Learning Tree* (1969), although set in the 1920s, sketches a picture of racial discrimination and exclusion that spoke to so much of the contemporary struggles for Black rights. With Barbara Loden directing and starring in the film, *Wanda* (1970) plays as an anti-genre low stakes heist film, confounding viewer expectations and repositioning the tale from a feminist perspective. *A Very Natural Thing* (1974) similarly depends on presenting a different point of view. Following a gay man through daily life, the film simply states that it is most certainly a very natural thing to love.

The American independent film companies of this period created business practices in contexts outside those of the traditional Hollywood studios, distributors, and exhibitors. More specifically, the cult and midnight movies, the adult soft/hardcore film, and the four-wall feature, mostly untouched by Hollywood, became viable commercial alternatives. Both John Waters’s *Pink Flamingos* (1972) and John Carpenter’s *Dark Star* (1974) enjoy a cult following, with *Pink Flamingos* helping to create the midnight movie category. Carpenter’s film inflects a

popular film genre with countercultural influences; Waters pushes even further, with a film dedicated to finding the filthiest person alive.

Sexuality was approached in many ways by the independent film during this period. Falling somewhere between satire and romantic comedy, *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice* (1969) lampoons the opportunities for an open marriage, even while it titillates with potential wife-swapping and free sexual expression. With the MPAA ratings system allowing a self-imposed X rating, the period of porno chic was ushered in by *Deep Throat* (1972). Four-wall features, in which independent distributors rented a theater outright and saturated the airwaves with television advertising, proved to be phenomenally successful for Tom McLaughlin's *Billy Jack* (1971). Aspects of the four-wall release, such as heavy television promotion, were soon adopted by the major studios. This period, therefore, embraced both more permissive screen content and the means to present film outside the traditional methods of marketing, distribution, and exhibition.

1989–1994: The American Independent Intervention

The 1990s were a time in which American independent filmmaking made a sizable intervention in culture: the commercial and social impact of independent film was the focus of much press coverage along with academic and popular criticism. This era is marked by two signposts, both winners of the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival: *sex, lies, and videotape* (1989) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994). Between these two films, American independent films flourished at Cannes, with David Lynch's *Wild at Heart* (1990) and the low-budget Coen brothers' film, *Barton Fink* (1991), released by Fox, also winning the Palme d'Or.

Steven Soderbergh's *sex, lies, and videotape* matched its examination of fidelity, intimacy, and videotaped sexual discussions with energy, sardonic humor, and unexpected Southern charm. The film's commercial success (\$25 million domestically against a \$1.2 million budget) heralded a new focus on independent cinema, proving to be of interest to many viewers beyond the traditional art house space. Independent companies, like New Line Cinema, began to target more marketing-friendly properties. *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1990) transferred the comic book and animated series to a live-action martial arts turtle extravaganza, pitched so its hipness could appeal to both children and adults (and grossed more than \$200 million globally). Certainly, authorial voices, like David Lynch in *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* (1992), continued to have a strong presence as well in the independent landscape.

With the HIV/AIDS epidemic making visibility and recognition crucial, queer filmmakers added to the independent film world with content, style, and messages that provoked, startled, and entertained viewers. Jennie Livingston's 1990 documentary *Paris Is Burning* offered a fascinating portrait of drag ball culture in New York City, populated by many Black, Latinx, queer, and trans people. Livingston's documentary highlighted those almost always ignored by

mainstream media and often by independent film too. Gus Van Sant's meditation, *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), blended Shakespeare's *Henry IV* with a narcoleptic gay hustler, his best friend, and a sensibility embracing queerness in form and content. Both Livingston and Van Sant anticipated critic B. Ruby Rich proclaiming the New Queer Cinema in 1992.

Five years after Soderbergh, another American independent film won the Palme d'Or: Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*. While Soderbergh's film helped initiate a shift toward commercial reward in independent film, *Pulp Fiction*, grossing \$108 million domestically, set a whole new standard. And, along the way, the film reminded us that independent film could be the space for bold experiments in storytelling, self-conscious engagements with narrative, and evocations of dismissed and disgraced content. Appropriately, the marketing of *Pulp Fiction* by Miramax Films focused on the intersection between its critical acclaim (the Palme d'Or) and the tawdry subject matter. If commercial and marketing imperatives appeared ever-present by the mid-1990s, the merger between independent film and the larger media conglomerates (e.g., Miramax with Disney in 1993, New Line with Turner in 1994) could be supported as a key contributing factor. The independence of the films was a brand to be highlighted in marketing. The intervention of independent film became an illusion just as the public started to label independent film as a highly desirable media category.

2020: Addressing Social Inequality & Rethinking Distribution

The last set of films we are using to demonstrate this type of localized contextual analysis is the final group of three from 2020: *First Cow*, *The Forty-Year-Old Version*, and *Nomadland*. The first thing to notice is that all three are directed by women filmmakers. Moreover, all three films are socially conscious works that, at least in part, tell their stories to raise awareness of issues of social inequality and the conditions that create it, with two of the three films centered around female protagonists. Such similarities then may be understood within both the long history of independent cinema as a venue for a range of socially marginalized voices, but also in relation to the #MeToo movement which rose to the fore in 2017.

In addition, the industrial location of the three is telling in terms of post-Indiewood American independent film, with the three films all acquired for distribution separately from their production financing and by three distributors representing an array of histories and approaches: for *Nomadland* it was the still extant Indiewood/major specialty division Searchlight Pictures (previously Fox Searchlight [1994–2020], now under Disney); for *First Cow*, a relatively recent standalone specialty film company in A24 (2012–); and with *The Forty-Year-Old Version* a streaming service in Netflix that primarily distributes but also (since 2015) produces films. With an established independent distributor (owned by a media conglomerate), a thriving independent company, and a streaming service, the diversity of the current industrial situation in American independent cinema can be fully appreciated.

Notably, all three films were released in a period that was heavily transformed by nationwide theater closures due to COVID-19. After a successful festival run that included Telluride, the New York Film Fest, and Berlin, *First Cow* was designated by its distributor to receive a relatively standard platform release and placed in select theaters in March 2020 with the intention of expanding before A24 was forced to pull it due to COVID-19 closures. Initially intending to re-release it again theatrically, it was ultimately released to VOD (video-on-demand) later that year. *Nomadland* also played key film fests in 2020 including Venice and Toronto to initiate positive buzz and was then, in anticipation of an awards-season push, given a hybrid release, distributed both in a limited fashion to theaters and simultaneously streaming on Hulu (Disney, the corporate parent of Searchlight, also owns a majority stake in Hulu). Finally, *The Forty-Year-Old Version* was purchased by Netflix after its successful premiere at the Sundance Film Festival and released directly (and only) on that service, bypassing any theatrical distribution whatsoever. The distribution histories of these three films then collectively indicate the continuing critical relevance of film fests and awards for garnering attention in a crowded field of visual content, the current state of media conglomeration, and, perhaps, the future of distribution and exhibition for American independent cinema.

Final Words

Screening American Independent Film exhibits how independence has been articulated in American cinema and sheds light on past and current trends in the scholarship on American independent cinema. At the same time, the collection illuminates new areas for growth, research, and ways to understand these films and the field of American independent cinema. We encourage students, teachers, fans, and other readers to take advantage of the flexibility and range offered by this collection of more than 50 films and chapters.

We do have a final comment or rather a hope. One strain connecting many of the chapters in this book is a focus on those who are often marginalized or simply forgotten by the mainstream media. In this book, we hope that you will discover voices, stories, and lives that are different from your own, but that speak to the abundance of the American and, moreover, the human experience. Independent film benefits substantially from diverse voices and from the accompanying rich texture of life. Our hope moving forward is that this book can be another point of departure for understanding and appreciating our differences, with independent film as one means to foster this dialogue.

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1

TWO KNIGHTS OF VAUDEVILLE (1915)

Allyson Nadia Field

From campaigns waged by the NAACP in the 1940s against Hollywood studios' perpetuation of racist stereotypes to the hashtag #OscarsSoWhite, created by April Reign in 2015, calls for diversity and inclusion in the American film industry have attempted to respond to its pervasive history of exclusion, marginalization, and misrepresentation of nonwhite people. And yet, outside of the Hollywood studio system, independent filmmaking has long provided a means for filmmakers to explore more nuanced and complex depictions of African Americans. These independent spaces encompass a range of practices, from nontheatrical films made for purposes other than theatrical entertainment, such as sponsored films, educational films, and home movies, to documentary films that explore underrepresented communities. Independent filmmaking has also provided a space for African American fiction filmmakers to assert an image of Black life that refutes the misrepresentations, whether egregious stereotypes or racist by elision, that were a predominant feature of the studio era.

Within the history of American independent filmmaking, there is a subset of films made for African American audiences. Known as race films, they featured primarily Black casts and were produced by Black, white, and interracial run film companies whose target audiences were de facto (and in many places de jure) segregated African American moviegoers.¹ This industry, active from the early 1910s to the early 1950s, constituted an independent enterprise on a double order – independent from mainstream film production, distribution, and exhibition, and independent from white hegemonic structures governing films' content, production, and intended audience.

Race films were often made solely for Black audiences, but not always. For example, Chicagoan William Foster – considered the first African American to



FIGURE 1.1 Frank Montgomery, Florence McClain, and Bert Murphy enjoying a vaudeville show in *Two Knights of Vaudeville*. Visual artifacts such as the white vertical line are vestiges of the surviving 35mm print.

own and manage a film company in the 1910s – made films for Black audiences while also seeking out screening opportunities in theaters catering to predominantly white audiences. Foster was invested in a dual-uplift project: to promote African American advancement through filmic self-fashioning against racist white misrepresentation and to promote the film industry as a viable economic venture for Black entrepreneurs and investors.

For some white-owned film companies, segregation presented a business opportunity they were eager to exploit, imagining a ready audience in Black theaters in addition to their primary market in white-catering theaters. These producers were not always attuned to the differences in film reception among their audiences and did not always anticipate African American moviegoers to be savvy spectators alert to pejorative forms of Black representation that stemmed from traditions of minstrelsy and that posited race as fodder for comedic vignettes. This was the case with the Historical Feature Film Company that produced *Two Knights of Vaudeville*, a short comedy with a predominantly Black cast about sites of performance and spectatorship. A kind of inverse of William Foster's strategy, Historical was a venture primarily interested in producing Black-cast comedies for white audiences that also sought to capitalize on the segregated Black audience. That makes these companies – Foster and Historical – distinct from other producers of Black-cast films who were targeting Black audiences almost exclusively, such as African American film pioneer Oscar Micheaux and race filmmaker Richard Norman, the white owner of the Norman Film Manufacturing Company.²

Foster's films do not survive, and *Two Knights* is the only film produced by the Historical Feature Film Company known to be extant. The absence of surviving

exemplars of race film's earliest years is a challenge for film historians and it makes a unique survivor like *Two Knights* all the more significant. The film was recently released on Blu-ray and DVD by Kino Classics as part of the *Pioneers of African-American Cinema* set curated by film scholars Charles Musser and Jacqueline Najuma Stewart. This important collection includes silent and sound films made by Micheaux over his extensive filmmaking career that spanned 1919–1948, sound films made by Black filmmaker Spencer Williams in a range of genres in the 1930s and 1940s, and a Black cast western featuring a singing cowboy played by Herb Jeffries, a famed race film actor of the late 1930s. The collection provides a significant sampling of independent films that responded to, in varying degrees, the exclusion of Black voices and subjects in the mainstream film industry. *Two Knights'* inclusion in this set – and the earliest film in the collection – affords it a privileged position. But, as with most films of its time, its meanings are not self-evident. Here, I aim to provide context for the film to help understand its assumptions and appeals, its significance as an artifact of American independent cinema, and to offer the necessary background to inform contemporary viewers who might be confused by the film's curious representational politics.

I see *Two Knights* as reflecting the influence of the popular live performance landscape on early film production, where Black actors found success performing in predominantly white venues, or venues with segregated seating for Black patrons, as well as in theaters serving an African American clientele. Here, I argue that in thematizing independent production, *Two Knights* effectively stages its own tenuous position, straddling exhibition sites between mainstream (majority-white) spaces and the intraracial space of all-Black theaters. In doing so, the film enacts a major tension of race film as a category: the contested forms of exhibition, its sites, audiences, and the risks attendant to Black representation in comedy shorts of the 1910s.

Two Knights of Vaudeville

Two Knights of Vaudeville is a comedy consisting of two parts of equal length. The first part opens with a well-dressed white man accidentally dropping a set of tickets as he exits an upscale vaudeville theater. The tickets are picked up by two Black men (Frank Montgomery and Bert Murphy) who invite a third friend (Florence McClain) to attend that evening's vaudeville show, a spectacle consisting of a series of unrelated acts brought together on a common bill. The friends are seated in exclusive box seats overlooking the stage where they watch the acts – a singer, acrobat, and juggler – and applaud and even mimic the performers by attempting their feats. In doing so, they ultimately disrupt the performance and get expelled from the theater.

The film's second half involves the friends resolving to put on their own ersatz vaudeville show for an all-Black audience. The makeshift performance begins with a singer followed by acrobats – Murphy and Montgomery – who perform approximate acrobatic feats. As Murphy performs a set of somersaults,

the audience responds by throwing objects at him and the film ends with slapstick pandemonium. A dialogue intertitle reads in presumed “Black” dialect: “‘Jest all time messin’ up somethin’. That’s all. Nevah agin.’”

How should we understand this film, its comedy, and the tensions it enacts? Is the film mocking its Black performers and is the comedy predicated on racist presumptions? Or is it showcasing the talent and range of its vaudeville stars? How should we receive it in the 21st century? What frameworks do we need to understand its operations without perpetuating the anti-Black context of its production and exhibition? In what follows, I offer a historically grounded analysis of the film and attempt to give the reader the necessary context in which to approach the film and come to their own informed conclusions.

The Performers

The three principal actors in the film, Bert Murphy, Florence McClain, and Frank Montgomery, were celebrated vaudeville performers who achieved success in theaters soliciting predominantly white audiences, as well as theaters catering to Black patrons. A key component of the film’s significance as a historical artifact is in how it showcases its performers as they appeared in vaudeville and Black musical theater, serving as an extension of the performance personae they developed for the stage. In doing so, the film preserves the otherwise ephemeral performance of its stars, albeit without sound, giving us a rare glimpse into American popular theater of the 1910s.

Murphy was known as a unique comedian with a very physical dancing style that “no one could ever imitate without fear of injuring themselves,” according to a theater reviewer for the African American newspaper the Indianapolis *Freeman*, who also noted his expressive and humorous facial expressions (Sampson 189–190). The dog in *Two Knights* likely belonged to Murphy who was known for performing with “his canine comedian” (Dope).

As a vaudeville actor, McClain was known for her beauty and versatility. Nicknamed “Dainty Florence” for her diminutive stature, she played a range of roles, specializing in swapping between gender masquerade in male roles and hyper-feminized performances in which she sang attired in stylish gowns (Owsley, “Montgomery and McClain”). The male characters she played on the vaudeville stage – for example, a sheriff, tramp, and soldier – led the Black press to comment, “O, what a pretty boy she makes” (Owsley, “Frank Montgomery”). *Two Knights* shows off her range as well as the variety of costumes for which she was known, from mannish suits to elaborate gowns to boyish garb.

McClain and her husband and performing partner Frank Montgomery shared the stage with white performers, often the only “colored” act on the bill, performing in predominantly white theatrical spaces as well as for Black audiences in theaters catering exclusively to segregated audiences on the Colored Consolidated Time, a circuit of vaudeville theaters. At these theaters, they were tremendously popular and would break box office records; in the intraracial, all-Black

performance space, they were stars and their act was celebrated as “elegant in stage effect” and “artistically aristocratic” (Meadows).

Despite their fame, audiences did not always know they were African American actors. Murphy and Montgomery would perform in blackface makeup, a convention of minstrelsy adopted by some Black performers, and McClain, being a “colored strawberry blonde,” led to audience confusion (Russell 1913). As one Black theater critic noted of Montgomery and McClain, “the audience did not know the team was colored” (Russell, “An Excellent Bill”). This confusion extends to current viewers who may misread McClain as a white woman, presuming the film to be promoting a transgressive portrayal of interracial social intimacy. Charles Musser has even suggested that the supporting actors who are playing the “white” vaudevillians are actually Black actors performing in a racial masquerade that subverts and reverses the conventions of white performers playing Black characters in blackface makeup (Musser 8). However, without credits, a verified cast list, or positive identification of the supporting actors, this would be tricky (and inadvisable) to determine. The film’s play with performance, masquerade, mimicry, and parody is certainly augmented by the racial indeterminacies that attended its cast.

Another aspect of Montgomery and McClain’s vaudeville act that informs how we might understand *Two Knights* is in their blurring of the distinction between the stage and the space of the theater. Their autumn 1914 act, for example, opened with an announcement that the pair would not be appearing due to an unavoidable delay, but then Montgomery would burst down the aisle insisting that the announcement was wrong and that the duo was ready to perform (Owsley, “Montgomery and McClain”). During this tour, Montgomery and McClain performed at the Grand, a Chicago theater catering to Black patrons, on the same bill as their films. Thus, the confusion of spaces that opened their act – the inversion of the space of the theater with the orchestra aisle becoming the site of spectacle as Montgomery rushed in – would have been echoed by the play with performance space and sites of spectatorship narrativized in *Two Knights*. This resonance would have then functioned as another layer of comedy for the live audiences at the Grand.

Historical Feature Film Co. and Ebony Film Co.

Little is known about the production history of *Two Knights of Vaudeville* or about the company that made it, but given the echoes between the film and the stage personae of its lead actors, the performers might have had a hand in the scenario or perhaps the scenario was written for them. They performed in their own costumes, showcasing aspects of their stage personae for which they were best known.

In 1914, the Historical Feature Film Co. was founded in Chicago, up-dating the former studio space of French magician and early pioneer of trick films Georges Méliès with new equipment. Aiming for novelty, the company set out to make animated

cartoons and comedies, including four “Black and White Comedies” with Murphy, Montgomery, and McClain, as well as fellow Black stage performers Jimmy Marshall and Sam Gaines: *The Shooting Star*, *Money Talks in Darktown*, *Aladdin Jones*, and *Two Knights of Vaudeville*. These were likely filmed at the same time and released in October and November 1914. In September 1914, Murphy, Montgomery, McClain, and Marshall were appearing on stage in Chicago in “The Two Detectives,” a “farce comedy song review” produced by Martin Klein, the manager of the New Monogram, along with Murphy and Montgomery (Russell 1914). This production was likely underway or in rehearsals when the performers shot the film as part of Historical’s series of “Black and White” comedies. As producers of an actual review show, Murphy and Montgomery’s appearance in *Two Knights* serves as an in-joke. Indeed, their interpretation of incompetent performance seems especially lighthearted and ironic.

From descriptions of the lost Historical productions, *Two Knights* seems quite distinct from the other comedies, especially in the ways in which the film reflected – and showcased – its stars’ vaudeville talents, albeit adapted for the silent medium. For example, it is the only one of that set of films to directly reference performance and exhibition spaces. And yet there is no record of the initial release of *Two Knights* and no clear explanation of this choice. It is possible that the set of “Black and White Comedies” were not released together, or that Historical went bankrupt before *Two Knights* could be commercially released, a failure common among early independent film producers. In any case, Historical ceased to make films and the newly formed Ebony Film Company acquired the films and re-released them, changing intertitles to include the Ebony brand, and in some cases changing film titles.

In 1917, with African American general manager Luther J. Pollard at the helm, Ebony would go on to produce comedies with other Black vaudeville actors, but Murphy, Montgomery, and McClain only appear in the films previously produced by Historical. Indeed, Ebony’s reissue of the vaudevillians’ films was noted in the Black press; the films were evidently not new as they were dated by the appearance of the performers who had not been in Chicago together for a few years. Further, Murphy had been sick and died in 1917, rendering his screen performance in the re-release a poignant posthumous note.

Critical Reception

The initial reception of the Historical films in the Black press was positive. Historical even marketed their films directly to Black spectators through newspaper advertisements in the Black press in December 1914: “If you want to see Your Own Race! In the finest series of Real Negro Comedies! Ever produced for moving pictures,” ads implored readers to ask their local theater managers “to exhibit the Black and White Films! Produced by the Historical Feature Film Co.” (Advertisement). According to records in the film industry trade press, the Historical films were officially released in February 1915 (at least to the majority

white-serving theaters), so these earlier screenings might have been an attempt to dovetail with the performers' theatrical appearance as well as capitalize on their popularity with Black audiences ("Historical Feature Film Co.").

While the initial release of the films seems to have been well received by Black audiences and critics, certainly in no small part due to the popularity of their stars, upon their re-release by *Ebony* there was significant criticism in the Chicago *Defender*, a major African American newspaper, extending beyond the films' evident datedness. The shift in response is marked by a "letter of protest" from a *Defender* reader, Mrs. J. H., who wrote to theater editor Tony Langston about the films, naming *Aladdin Jones*, *Money Talks in Darktown*, and *Two Knights of Vaudeville* in particular: "I consider it my duty, as a member of the respectable class of theater patrons, to protest against a certain class of pictures which have been and are being shown at the theaters in this district" (Langston, "Ebony Films"). In a critique based on an investment in middle-class respectability and public comportment, Mrs. J. H. lambasts the *Ebony* films for their "exaggerated display of the disgraceful actions of the lowest element of the race" (*ibid.*). Mrs. J. H. does not question the representations or critique them as conjured by white racist fantasies of blackness, instead she objects to them on class grounds: "When the beastly actions of the degraded of our people are flaunted before our eyes in places of amusement it is high time to protest in the name of common decency" (*ibid.*).

Langston took up the cause and published the letter and his extensive reply, telling readers he had intervened with theater managers to prevent the further screening of the *Ebony* films. He writes,

It would hardly be good policy for any theater in this district to book pictures from a company whose photoplays carry 'comedy' that causes respectable ladies and gentlemen to blush with shame and humiliation.... Anyhow, the films themselves are what is commonly called 'crap,' having been taken here over a year ago, and having failed in booking through the film company which produced them.

Langston concludes by advising readers to look out for Black theaters advertising "so-called 'all-colored comedies'" and avoid them. He exhorts: "keep your money in your pocket and save that dime as well as your self-respect." Positing the *Ebony* comedies against other genres, he writes, "Someday we will have race dramas which will uplift, instead of rotten stuff which degrades" (Langston, "Ebony Films"). He ends by calling on South Side Chicago theaters and managers by name. The managers responded publicly the following week, all saying they would stop showing the *Ebony* films, including at the Monogram and the Grand where the films had been well received on their initial run (Langston, "The Hammer").

Even a year later, the theater managers of the South Side's Black-serving theaters had not forgotten Langston's campaign. *Ebony* re-released *The Shooting Star* under the title *A Natural Born Shooter* and it was scheduled to be shown at the Phoenix theater in May 1917 when the *Defender* intervened and called on the

theater manager to pull the film, which it quickly did. If Mrs. J. H.'s critique hinged on a form of respectability politics and a class-based concern over forms of entertainment and venues of public presentation, especially for audience members who were invested in a form of race uplift based in part on middle-class propriety, the *Defender's* campaign against the Ebony pictures extended to the broader question of misrepresentation. On this point, Langston did not hold back:

The moving picture business can no longer be considered in its infancy and the patrons of the modern houses should not be subjected to the humiliating experience of seeing things which lower the Race in the estimation of its own people as well as in the eyes of whatever members of the 'other' race who may happen to be in attendance.

He concludes by decrying Ebony's scenes of "moral depravity": "People who attend the theaters do so to be entertained, and not to be insulted. [...] We want clean Race pictures or none at all" (Langston, "Ebony Film Cancelled").

Scenes of "moral depravity" might have referred to the early Ebony productions released in 1917 including *Dat Blackhand Waitah Man*, *Shine Johnson and the Rabbit's Foot*, and *A Busted Romance*, none of which survive, but it is not readily apparent how this critique applies to *Two Knights of Vaudeville*. Did audiences, beyond Mrs. J. H., object to *Two Knights* as well as the other Historical/Ebony films? Or was the film swept up in the ire directed at the other productions? *Two Knights'* mockery of its characters' naiveté and inappropriate public behavior in both interracial and intraracial spaces could be read both as an insult to the Black audience or as a self-mocking of the vaudeville stars themselves – a gesture of comedic irony that gives them the last laugh. And yet, without knowing that Murphy, Montgomery, and McClain are actual vaudeville stars, does this interpretation hold? Is it contingent on an audience who would recognize and appreciate their poking fun at themselves, such as the audience at the Grand that witnessed both their stage act and the motion pictures? Perhaps Mrs. J. H. and her friends eschewed even high-class vaudeville, or perhaps moving pictures were already tinged with disreputability from a class perspective. What is clear is that most forms of comedy posed a risk to uplift ambitions that hinged on public respectability and the rejection of anything that might be interpreted as ridicule of the race. *Two Knights* might have showcased its stars' talents, but its bawdy humor, indeterminate objects of ridicule, and lack of a redeeming respectable African American figure left it open to the charge of being not just unedifying, but overtly insulting. These are the terms that Black independent filmmakers like Oscar Micheaux would have to negotiate in the coming decades.

Conclusion

Like many films of its era, *Two Knights of Vaudeville* depends on a set of associations and allusions that are context-specific and whose meanings have lost valence over time. What is clear in an otherwise ambiguous picture is how the film

showcases talent that is otherwise lost due to the ephemeral nature of vaudeville and stage performance. Here we have a record of popular African American performers and a glimpse into their styles, shticks, and appeals to audiences, both humorously conjured in the narrative and invoked in the direct addresses to the filmic spectator as a surrogate theatergoer.

Yet, beyond its value as a record, how do we understand this curious film? It is hard to determine the representational stakes at play in *Two Knights*, the role of the film in the *Defender's* critique of *Ebony*, and how the film fits in the broader trajectory of race filmmaking and Black independent cinema that would follow. Is it a racist mockery of Black “trespass” and mimicry of white institutions? Or is it a critique of the absurdities of segregation that relegate Black talent – and audiences – to extreme lengths to partake in modern entertainment? In depicting intraracial sites of spectatorship and discerning audiences (even if played for comedy), does the film offer an image of an audience that would reject buffoonery as spectacle? Does the film, then, anticipate its own rejection? Perhaps this is what contributed to *Historical's* failure, its inability to represent something that would be acceptable by those whom it thought it was representing.

Notes

- 1 I follow a convention of capitalization of Black when referencing people and as a social category. There are longstanding – and ongoing – debates around capitalization of “black” and “white” in reference to race. Unresolved among journalists and scholars, the vexed issue of capitalization reflects disparities in power and lived experiences, and the question of a presumed shared history and culture. Until language conventions find a way to capture the nuances of longstanding systemic racism caused by white supremacist culture, I will continue to capitalize Black and not white in reference to race.
- 2 For more on race filmmaking, see: Bowser et al.; Lupak, *Richard E. Norman*; Lupak, *Early Race Filmmaking in America*.

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2

SAFETY LAST! (1923)

Christina G. Petersen

One of the most iconic images of silent film features a bespectacled young man (filmmaker and star Harold Lloyd) in a straw hat and three-piece suit dangling precariously from a giant clock affixed to a towering office building in downtown Los Angeles. This shot from the silent slapstick comedy *Safety Last!* (1923) captures the anxious state of those looking to achieve the 1920s American Dream in an era in which the pressure to conform to corporate interests increasingly trumped individual initiative.

In the film, Lloyd plays an unnamed small-town “Boy” who comes to the big city to make good. However, he quickly finds that his path to success lies not within the system but in clambering up its outside edges, exploiting what makes him different from the crowds who line the streets below. In this sense, *Safety Last!*’s depiction of the Boy as an ultimately successful outsider parallels Harold Lloyd’s own rise to filmmaking prominence during this era. At the same time major American film studios were organizing into vertically integrated factories combining production, distribution, and exhibition to maximize profits, Lloyd garnered success by holding to the independent workshop style of production he learned during American cinema’s early years.

This chapter will explore the independent silent comedy filmmaker-star’s ability to draw crowds at the point in Lloyd’s career in which he was transitioning from his beginnings at Rolin (later Hal Roach) Studios to the formation of his own production company (just three months after the release of *Safety Last!*). Through a discussion of the industrial context of the film, its production and aesthetics, and its place in Lloyd’s career, this chapter will explore how the Boy’s journey in *Safety Last!* from lowly wage worker to active producer of spectacles mirrors Lloyd’s career trajectory and the basis of his appeal. While only Lloyd’s fourth feature (after more than a hundred short comedies), *Safety Last!* broke records – earning over



FIGURE 2.1 Independent filmmaker-star Harold Lloyd dangles above busy Los Angeles streets as his character goes out on his own in *Safety Last!*

\$1.5 million on a \$120,000 budget – to become a top earner for 1923 (and among the top 20 highest-grossing films of the silent era), cementing Lloyd’s prominence alongside fellow silent comedy stars Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton (Dardis 142; Ramsay 942). As this chapter will discuss, Lloyd’s character in *Safety Last!* captured the star’s own attitude toward filmmaking as an independent endeavor. Like the Boy’s hair-raising climb on the outside of the downtown commercial high-rise, Lloyd’s success as an independent filmmaker depended on the structures of mainstream distribution and exhibition erected by the burgeoning major American film companies while his films lampooned those same structures. Although *Safety Last!* might seem to be a departure from later concepts of independent film, particularly Michael Newman’s definition of the post-1978 “indie” film as a cultural phenomenon associated with opposition to mainstream Hollywood, formal play, and character-focused realism (15–16), Lloyd’s film includes inklings of these aspects in its negative depiction of the factory-like department store that mirrors the 1920s film industry, playful parallels to the act of film viewing, and exploration of young white masculinity as a source of anxiety as well as empowerment. *Safety Last!*, like its title, considers how going out on one’s own in the 1920s, in opposition to the dominant methods of filmmaking and industrialization, required throwing caution to the wind and taking big risks with minimal safeguards.

Act I: Independent Beginnings

Harold Lloyd was born in Nebraska in 1893, three years before Thomas Edison's *vitascope* premiered at Koster & Bial's New York Music Hall (Dardis 1–2; Musser 115–116). After acting in theater as a boy, Lloyd went west to San Diego, California, where he took part in local stock shows before making his film debut in an Edison film in 1912 (Lloyd 39). In 1913, Lloyd moved to Los Angeles for greater opportunities just as the American film industry was beginning the transition from single-reel films to features (Bordwell et al. 132–133). In Los Angeles, Lloyd got his start in movies by sneaking onto the lot of the recently formed Universal Film Manufacturing Company, witnessing firsthand the latest phase in the organization of the film industry. Five years before, ten film production and distribution companies, led by Edison, had formed the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC), a trust which sought to control the burgeoning industry by holding the rights to key patents required for the production and exhibition of motion pictures. The filmmakers working on the Universal lot in the spring of 1913 represented “unlicensed outlaws” who shot on the West Coast to avoid the long arm of the East Coast-based MPPC (Tzioumakis 22). These early independent film companies were defined not by the style or content of their films but in industrial terms, distinguished by their “position outside an established (or semi-established) industrial-economic system” (23). Although outsiders to the MPPC, early independents’ working style modeled the transition from a workshop system (where each film’s producers hired their own personnel, including extras like Lloyd) to the factory-like approach of film production that would become commonplace during the later studio era.

In distinction from the industry’s trajectory toward the consolidation of resources and standardization of product, Lloyd’s career trended in the opposite direction. As Universal transitioned to a centralized system that employed Fordist assembly-line methods and Taylorist economies of labor, Lloyd left the lot and eventually joined fellow former Universal extra Hal Roach as a featured player at Roach’s self-funded Rolin Studios in 1914 (Bordwell et al. 134–136; Schickel 25–27). At Rolin, Lloyd would become famous as the Chaplinesque working-class clowns Willie Work and Lonesome Luke before lighting on the comic persona of “an average recognizable American youth” (Lloyd 59). For his “Glass character,” Lloyd donned a straw hat, lensless horn-rimmed glasses, and a demeanor that was “quiet, normal, boyish, clean, sympathetic, not impossible to romance” (59). As the Glass character, Lloyd embodied the anxieties of white middle-class masculinity in an era in which urban white-collar work “was equated to imprisonment in a corporate bureaucracy that limited manly independence” and the recent influx of southern and eastern European immigrants was perceived as a threat to the hegemony of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant America (Studlar 28). Amid these societal shifts, Lloyd’s Glass character offered reassurance in the power and spectacle of the white male body as a continued path to success all the while poking fun at such assumptions.

Lloyd would go on to film dozens of Glass character comedies, making the transition to feature comedies in 1921 at the same time as the American film industry was organizing into the system that would hold sway into the 1950s. This period saw the ascendance of the vertically integrated Big Five studios (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 20th Century-Fox, Paramount, RKO, and Warner Bros.), which owned theaters as well as produced and distributed their own films, and the Little Three studios (Universal, Columbia, and United Artists), which were primarily organized around film production and distribution (Ward 16). While the Big Five and Little Three adopted factory-like methods of centralized leadership and resources, including increasing departmentalization of labor within managerial hierarchies, Lloyd worked within Hal Roach Studios (as Rolin was renamed in 1920) in a version of the workshop system that he had first experienced on the Universal lot (Bordwell et al. 121–124). Lloyd and his team of three “gag men” employed a process opposite to the Fordist production methods of the major studios. Rather than produce a full script before shooting, the gag men would work backward from the central conceit. In the case of *Safety Last!*, Lloyd shot the climbing sequence first and then his gag men wrote the rest of the film to lead up to the climax (Lloyd 84–87).

With little oversight in his last years at Roach, Lloyd functioned as “virtually an independent producer using Hal Roach Studios as his production facility” (Ward 44). In his final contract with Roach, signed in November 1921, Lloyd successfully negotiated for 80 percent of the net profits on his films (with Roach earning just 20 percent), exclusive use of the company’s Culver City sound stage, and “first call on everything,” including Roach as a producer (Ward 45; Lloyd 89). In contrast to the increasing consolidation of power in the mainstream studios in this era, Roach, as an independent producer and studio head, found his influence as well as profit margins waning over Lloyd. He even had to ask Lloyd’s permission to strike the sets from *Safety Last!* once production was complete to begin work on another film (Ward 45). So when Lloyd and Roach parted ways in July 1923, it was a mutually beneficial development that would allow Roach a better return on the investment of resources and Lloyd even greater autonomy (44–45).

Act II: The Perils and Pleasures of Going Out on One’s Own

In recent years, the prevalent definition of independent film has relied as much on “aesthetic and social distinctions” from Hollywood as on production outside of established studios (Newman 6). Although *Safety Last!*’s conventional three-act structure, young white male protagonist, and blockbuster success would seem to suggest that its independent status stems largely from the way in which it was made rather than its form and content, this section will explore the film’s engagement with aesthetic and social difference. In its depiction of American industry and the modern city as sites of dehumanization where the only path to success is

to embrace one's interchangeability with objects, *Safety Last!* casts a critical eye on Hollywood's adoption of Fordist methods of mass production and consumption. As Newman describes, the form of American independent cinema that has dominated since the decline of the Hollywood Renaissance in the late 1970s has regularly asserted the importance of the individual – in the filmmaker as an individual artist in distinction to the “soulless studio committee,” in the character who represents the “uniqueness of identity positions,” and in the spectator who is invited to view the film as a type of game and herself as a discrete player (34, 45). *Safety Last!* offers a much earlier exploration of these aspects, valorizing individuality and independence while also demonstrating that they can only be achieved by performance rather than inherent traits.

One hallmark of the post-1978 independent film has been its focus on characters who are so strongly identified with their lived realities that they become “emblems of their social identities,” redefining community not as a celebration of a transcendent humanism but as a specific experience of difference (Newman 30, 34). *Safety Last!* begins with an early version of this by setting up youthful white masculinity as a distinct identity. The film introduces the Boy in a situation that many would recognize in 1920s America, though presented in an unfamiliar way. We meet the Boy on the cusp of leaving small-town Great Bend for a “long, long journey” into – it would seem – the afterlife, as he is framed in close-up behind a set of bars with a noose dangling in the background as if he is about to be hanged for some unnamed capital crime. The camera then tracks out to show two women – one younger and one older – crying at the Boy's situation as a man in an official-looking uniform walks up to the Boy and gestures toward the noose. A priest enters the frame and shakes the Boy's hand as the women join the rest of the characters on the other side of the bars, embracing the Boy. As the three turn away from the camera and walk into the background though, a match-on-action to the reverse angle reveals that the Boy is at a train station where he is about to take his leave for the big city, promising to marry his best girl Mildred (Mildred Davis) once he has found success there. The sequence ends with the Boy rushing to catch his train and, in his haste, mistaking a nearby baby for his suitcase. The mother runs after him, he apologizes for his error, and then he promptly makes another, mistaking a passing ice truck for his train. These opening sight gags set up the movement of the film, in which the act of leaving one's previous community and moving to the American city leads to confusion between things (movement and death, human and object) usually considered distinct. In what follows, *Safety Last!* presents the Boy's immigration from a member of a rural community to an alienated urban worker and ultimate transformation into an empowered entertainment producer as a general experience of imprisonment and objectification that culminates in liberation and independence accessible only to the young white American male.

The next sequence demonstrates the Boy's transformation into an urban dweller who now understands that being mistaken for something else is the means to achieve what he desires. When the film picks up with the Boy a few months

later, he is pining for Mildred, buying her jewelry to convince her that he is successful although he must pawn his possessions to achieve this illusion. In this, the film suggests that attaining the American Dream is no longer based on hard work but on performance, and the film quickly asserts what successful performance looks like in 1920s America. When the landlady comes to collect their overdue rent, the Boy and his roommate Limpy Bill (Bill Strothers) put on their overcoats and hang from hooks on the wall, pulling their feet up and successfully fooling her into thinking that they are inanimate objects. Unlike the opening execution gag, hanging in this sequence becomes a form of empowerment as it is associated with the ability to transform into an object. As Alex Clayton notes, *Safety Last!* mines its comedy from the Boy's repeated "reduction to an object among other objects" that paralleled the realities of life in 1920s America where people were now considered as interchangeable as factory-produced goods (162–163). As the film plays out though, the Boy rises in society by accepting his newfound status as an interchangeable object.

At work at the DeVore Department Store, the Boy is objectified and disempowered until he finds an audience for whom to perform. To avoid being late to work, the Boy employs the same skill of becoming an object – this time through a form of feminization (putting on a women's hat and overcoat and pretending to be a mannequin) – to sneak in and reset the store's time clock. When he sneezes in the arms of the Black worker (uncredited) carrying him into the store, the film depicts the masquerade-as-object as productive for the young white man and traumatizing for the Black man who is confronted with the breakdown of that masquerade. The film depicts the African American worker, terrified, clutching a ladder near the ceiling, unable to go up or down (in a striking contrast to the Boy's successful climb outside of the store in the third act). While the young white male can masquerade as something else and find success, this path is not accessible to the urban Black worker, who disappears from the film after this shot. In this sense, *Safety Last!* presents young white American masculinity in the 1920s as a negotiation of difference, where the Boy can gain some measure of control by accepting that what would seem to be threats to his individual identity are the means to upward mobility in this new world.

Safety Last! further valorizes independence as a form of individual endeavor, taking aim at modern industry and the mainstream film industry similar to contemporary independent film's opposition to mainstream Hollywood and celebration of the individual filmmaker as an artist (Newman 45). The department store in *Safety Last!* is a clear allegory for the Fordist factory and, by extension, the 1920s film industry, as all three provide customers with mass-produced goods through a system where each worker is focused on their compartmentalized responsibilities and productivity is ruled by the clock. Inside the store, in addition to fears about punctuality, the Boy is presented as subject to floorwalker Stubbs's (Westcott Clarke) managerial gaze and at the beck-and-call of finicky and violent female customers, who nearly tear him asunder like one of the bolts of fabric sold at his dry-goods counter. The suggestion is that

working in this fashion is dehumanizing and emasculating, rendering the Boy an object that others control.

While the Boy is just another interchangeable worker inside the big established concern, Bill, a skyscraper metalworker, offers an image of individual achievement when he climbs the outside of a multistory building to escape a policeman. Lloyd had discovered Bill Strothers in summer 1922 when he came upon a crowd who had gathered to watch Strothers scale the outside of a ten-story building in downtown Los Angeles as part of a promotional stunt. After witnessing Strothers's death-defying climb, Lloyd invited him to Roach Studios on the spot (D'Agostino Lloyd 308–309). A few months later, Strothers would feature in *Safety Last!* both as his character and as Lloyd's double for the final climb. Shown in a long shot in real time, Bill's effort on the outside of the building presents the opposite of the Boy's struggles inside. Instead of an emasculating mob of insatiable female consumers, the mixed-gender crowd (including the Boy) that gathers on the street to watch Bill's successful climb represents a means of empowerment for the individual who rises above them.

This sequence sets up *Safety Last!*'s third act, which invites the spectator into an engaged and playful relationship with the film similar to later indie's metacommentaries on the nature of cinema (Newman 37–38). After realizing that working inside an established enterprise will not bring him what he desires, the Boy proposes to “attract an enormous crowd” to the store by having Bill climb the outside of the 12-floor building for a fee. This scheme transforms the Boy into a version of Lloyd's position at Roach Studios in 1922, no longer just a salaried worker but now sharing in the profits made from the spectacles of bodies in peril. The comparison between character and filmmaker-star becomes even more apt when Bill is unable to begin the stunt and the Boy must take his place, now performing as well as producing, just like Lloyd. In addition, during the final segment, the department store shifts from a reflection of the Fordist factory to that of the 1920s movie theater, where the crowd in the film acts as a surrogate for the film's audience (Bilton 165–166). As the Boy confronts new challenges at each floor – birds landing on him, a net dropped from above, vertigo – the film's spectator is invited to respond like a member of the on-screen crowd, holding their breath and clapping as the Boy (and Lloyd) clears each new obstacle. This is due to the fact that the danger caught on camera was largely real, incorporating an actual climb by Strothers staged for the film up the side of the ten-story Los Angeles International Bank Building on 7 September 1922. The film employed long shots of Strothers with cut-ins to Lloyd produced on faux exteriors erected on the roofs of four different buildings in downtown Los Angeles, carefully working out camera angles to create the illusion of the Boy climbing a single building in a real location long before the use of green screens. The effect is like watching a live event that prompts the spectator to feel like one of the on-screen crowd but also to approach this sequence with wonder at the cinematic tricks and physical prowess required to produce this spectacle.