



THE
HOLLYWOOD
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Movies and American Modernity

PETER M. CATAPANO

ROUTLEDGE



THE HOLLYWOOD BRAND

The Hollywood Brand traces the development of the moving picture from its humble roots as an object of mass amusement to its transformation into an art form worthy of exhibition in museums and academic study in leading universities. This book provides historical context to the ideas that coalesce to create the iconic Hollywood brand that comes to define American identity.

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INTRODUCTION

Modernity under the Hollywood Sign

Entertainment is the objective of the photoplay and we must keep in mind that as entertainment it must appeal to the varied tastes of all people. Other arts generally appeal to a selected group, but the motion picture art, and it is an art, must have universal appeal.

Irving Thalberg, 1929¹

“Hollywood” is obviously much more than a description of a mode of film production or a geographical designation. This unique and descriptive name has the characteristics of a “brand.” The Hollywood brand should not be confused with iconic corporate brand names that also emerged in the early twentieth century like Ford or Coca-Cola. The Hollywood brand has never been interchangeable with one single company that came to dominate an entire industry. In the era before the studio system had been established, Thomas Edison’s efforts to retain monopolistic control of his moving picture patents and become the Henry Ford of the American film industry failed. Hollywood as brand unfolded as an idea, not as a company marketing campaign. It emerged even before the industry had created its production centers in Southern California or before the famed Hollywood sign had been constructed over the hills that divide Los Angeles from the San Fernando Valley. It is uncommon as a brand because it existed even before it bore its ubiquitous name.

Nearly everyone has a firm grasp on what “Hollywood” is, or what it means to “go Hollywood.” However, this quintessential American term is only a century old and emerged under specific historical circumstances. Hollywood became interchangeable with showmanship, mass entertainment, and the American cinema as the medium of moving pictures became invested with a set of shifting cultural meanings during the first decades of the twentieth century. In a relatively short period of time, moving pictures had been introduced to audiences as a

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spectacle of technology that spread to traveling shows, vaudeville houses, nickel theaters, and eventually the movie palaces of the studio era. The medium outgrew its sideshow infancy to be recognized as a main attraction. From the nickelodeons to the sound era, moving pictures increasingly came to be defined as a new form of art that had appealed to both the classes and the masses even as the medium became increasingly dominated by the Hollywood studio system.

The studios profited from the enhanced cultural status of the medium among critics as long as the movies remained popular with its mass audience. The Hollywood brand was a means to this end. Famed movie producer Irving Thalberg, the inspiration for F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Last Tycoon*, captured this transcendent ability of the Hollywood brand to cross the high/low culture divide of entertainment and art. According to Thalberg, "other arts generally appeal to a selected group, but the motion picture art, and it is an art, must have universal appeal."² Who better than Irving Thalberg—the famed "quality" producer—to advance the idea that Hollywood's goal was to produce art of "universal appeal" that was not elite, but whose artistic value was in part borne out by its embrace by the public? The Hollywood brand described by Thalberg emerged as a unique "mash-up" or pastiche of art and entertainment and of culture and commerce. "Hollywood" remains even today a powerful cultural trope to describe quality commercial entertainment even as it has become increasingly detached from the American movie studios or the conditions of its very emergence.

The process of branding was not merely the result of industry advertisement and self-promotion—though such efforts often served to distinguish American studio production from its competitors at home and abroad. Certainly, movie companies advertised and marketed their film titles and their contract stars. However, as film historian Janet Staiger has pointed out, the film business had already by 1915 come to a collective decision that "company 'brand name' advertising" would be kept to a minimum. The association of specific Hollywood studios with film styles and genres was more the construction of later film historians than a product of contemporary marketing. Instead, the industry preferred the path where "brand names would be submerged to product features (genre, stars, plots, spectacle, or realism)."³ Those product features were the factors among many others that shaped Hollywood as a brand to become standardized by the studio system. It is these elements that continue to best define the Hollywood brand as a cinematic style.⁴

In addition, the act of "branding," as applied to Hollywood or any other industry, should not be reduced to marketing. Unlike marketing, branding is part of a complex cultural process of signification involving multiple competing individuals and institutions rather than the product of a single vision, or in the case of American cinema, any single studio or group of studios. As marketing expert Douglas B. Holt explains, brands "emerge as various 'authors' tell stories that involve the brand" and have "extraordinary identity value because they address the collective anxieties and desire of a nation."⁵ While Holt's concepts of brands

and branding are more likely to find a home in business, rather than academia, he readily acknowledges the importance of anthropological and sociological concepts to his work. This process of signification he describes as “authors telling stories” also bears a resemblance to what Michel Foucault would describe as a discursive practice. The many conflicting voices of those critically engaged with movies set the parameters for what would come to define American cinema as “Hollywood.” The emergence of the Hollywood brand was more often than not the unintended result of the individual voices. The discursive dissonance rather than any harmony produced the unstable cultural signifier of Hollywood.

What is more, the rules of this discourse defined the Hollywood brand as the new medium emerged as both a product and a symptom of twentieth-century modernity. Hollywood’s eventual iconic cultural status among the public rested in its ability to capture both the promise and the fears of American modernity, which promised progress but also brought forth disquieting, unintended challenges. Marshall Berman neatly described the inherent tension of modernity faced by those living through its rapid emergence: “To be modern,” according to Berman, “is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world—and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are.”⁶ Movie madness offered the public the joys of modernity while also functioning as a palliative against its discontents. Thus, the movies provided an opportunity for Americans to work through their collective anxieties as both movies and modernity became permanent fixtures of American life.

Therefore, the branding of Hollywood was the result of many institutions and individuals who for their own reasons wanted to shape the cultural significance of the movies and movie-going as the country was experiencing rapid change. Among the significant groups who voiced their concern over the increasing popularity of the movies were those that historian Henry F. May identified as the “custodians of culture.” These well-educated, middle-class Americans “accepted political democracy and believed in progress, and most, not all, thought America superior to Europe.”⁷ This diverse group of social workers, educators, religious leaders, intellectuals, and political reformers looked to incorporate the new technology of moving pictures into their own traditional values that combined Victorian views of art and culture with late nineteenth-century American boosterism. Many also targeted the movies for attacks on the wider social transformations in American life in the early twentieth century the new medium seemed to represent. However, while many shared common principles among themselves and even with representatives of powerful members of the film industry, there was no single response to this new force in American cultural life.

The efforts of traditional cultural elites to define the movies were constrained by their own declining status in the twentieth century. As audiences embraced the movies as an attractive leisure activity, industrialists and smaller theater entrepreneurs had already transformed the movies into a profitable business before the

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custodian of culture eventually took note of the movies as a social problem or as an art form. More radical elements among the cultural elites that began to advocate modernism in the arts began to promote the notion of the movies as art. The advocates for the modern arts proved receptive because they were more willing to challenge traditional ideas that defined the boundaries of art. The uniqueness of the new medium coupled with its increasing popularity also promised to breathe new life into the arts.

However, before Hollywood could achieve its iconic status the moving picture needed to be raised to the status of culture. Yet the new medium possessed little cultural capital of its own. The motion picture had to overcome its industrial and commercial origins if its status was to be raised from faddish commercial ephemera to an object of cultural value. Without a clear grounding as a genuine object of culture, moving pictures had a challenging route to respectability. Since high culture often depended on popular forms as a source of growth and rejuvenation, the movies eventually found advocates among those who championed modern art in the early twentieth century. However, they needed to overcome skepticism or downright hostility to modern art as both an abstract and a foreign concept. Many art historians have argued that the 1913 “International Exhibition of Modern Art” at New York City’s 69th Regiment Armory was a watershed moment for the acceptance modern art in America. The Armory Show introduced Americans to the European avant-garde that challenged an audience more accustomed to realism in the arts. However, the new experimental styles from Europe fostered as much hostility as approval. Former President Theodore Roosevelt, for one, in a widely read magazine article, famously warned the American public about the influence of “the European extremists” on the American moderns. Roosevelt sounded the alarm in particular against the works of the Cubist and other non-representational artists. After 1913, modernism in the arts became a recurring target for conservative critics and cultural populists who decried the new styles as “unamerican.”⁸

Defining the moving picture as American would assuage some of the concerns held by the traditional custodians of culture regarding the alien influence of abstract, modern art. Using the work of Benedict Anderson, Richard Abel has demonstrated the role the movies played in creating a common national cultural identity during this period of intense immigration and demographic changes associated with early twentieth-century modernity. Abel describes how journalists, movie critics, and the leaders of the film industry began to argue for the superiority of American movies in the nickelodeon period, despite the high public demand for European movies, especially from France.⁹

While the ascendancy of American films domestically after World War I may have been due as much to supply as quality, it also coincided with the rise of the narrative feature film.¹⁰ Many cinephiles also embraced the feature-length narrative film as the exemplar of American film art in the decades between the two world wars, even while acknowledging that the earliest multiple-reel films exhibited in

the United States were imported from Europe.¹¹ The independent film companies that would successfully challenge Edison's trust—the Motion Picture Patents Company—quickly adopted the feature film as a means to differentiate their products from their more established competitors.¹² The full-length narrative feature would become the dominant product of the increasingly powerful studio system and come to define “Hollywood” and the American cinema against foreign art cinema and experimental independent films.

Raising the status of the movies to art was in the interest of the American producers even before the establishment of the studio system in the 1920s and 1930s. For the movie industry, “movies as art” was an attractive means to protect the medium against social critics and local censorship boards. As art, the industry hoped that the content of movies would be protected by the First Amendment, rather than regulated by the government as a business. The producers were always both reactive and proactive—responding to criticism and trying to create a product that would have universal appeal with the simple motive of attracting larger audiences that would lead to greater profits. Since any attempt at controlling the image of the movies by the producers would be mitigated by a cultural environment which was often hostile to the industry, its own agency at shaping the reputation of the medium was limited. Therefore, the movie industry sought allies among those in the cultural establishment who also hoped to raise the cultural status of the movies.

However, defining American cinema as art threatened the business model of movies as popular diversion. Patriotism alone would not be of sufficient appeal to the masses who had regularly attended screenings of foreign films before World War I. For many Americans, art was associated with urban elites and, as conventionally defined, required a rigor at odds with entertainment. This skepticism applied to the value of all “high art,” including modern art. The challenge was reconfiguring the meaning of art and its relationship to the emergence of American cinema in such a manner as to reconcile the great divide between high culture and mass culture.

The Hollywood brand was the residue of competing discourses on the cultural status of the movies that attempted to reconcile this split between high and low art. It did so by simultaneously defining the movies as an art form *and* entertainment. Many Americans searching for an art independent of traditional European high art embraced the movies as a means of defining the nation's growing economic and cultural power. What is more, the art of American film came to be defined as a uniquely modern form accessible to the masses, while simultaneously possessing the complexity requisite of the sublime. It would be a “classless” American alternative to the hierarchical culture of Europe. Hollywood, many argued, contributed to international culture by providing movies of high artistic standards as well as entertainment for the masses.

However, this book is not simply the story of how elite cultural institutions like museums and universities constructed American cinema as an object of

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aesthetic and scholarly worth with the help of the movie industry. It is a cultural history of how multiple, contradictory discourses regarding moving pictures constructed the “Hollywood brand” as a universal art form synonymous with American modernity. Even in an era of studio ascendancy this brand was never a stable object that fit neatly into the category of high or low art. These competing discourses produced a parallax object that can only be understood within the conditions of its reception. It is the “Hollywood brand” that makes a movie like *Stagecoach* an object of entertainment as a John Wayne Western when viewed at the local theater but an object of aesthetic contemplation as a John Ford masterpiece in a museum or university lecture hall. By foregrounding the conditions of reception, the emergence of the “Hollywood brand” redefined not just the movies but all art and its relationship to its audience.

To demonstrate how the Hollywood brand came to define the American cinema, I will look at its primary authors. Douglas B. Holt identified “four primary authors” involved in “telling the story” of any brand that has achieved iconic cultural status. They are “companies, the culture industries, intermediaries (such as critics and retail salespeople), and customers (particularly when they form communities).”¹³ As for the Hollywood brand, I have modified Holt’s paradigm by identifying my own primary authors: critics, film producers, museums/universities, and cinephiles/movie fans. The brand was a residue of the competing discourses of these “authors” in which the movie industry was powerful, but not uncontested, in its efforts to control public perception of the medium.

I will also emphasize the diachronic dimension in the slow unfolding of Hollywood into an iconic brand by placing the process in a specific historical moment of American modernity. I will pay special attention to how moving pictures came to be viewed as objects of cultural value that redefined high and low art when the new activity of movie-going became a feature of American life. I will trace the development of the medium from its humble roots as technological spectacle to its acceptance as an art form worthy of exhibition in museums and academic study in leading universities. I will do so by investigating the power relations and social practices that form the rules of inclusion and exclusion around the cultural value of the medium to emphasize its historical contingencies, rather than any inherent aesthetic qualities.

Since I am interested in the historical development of the Hollywood brand over time, I have organized the chapters chronologically, beginning with the first moving picture exhibitions. Within each chapter, I will specify the role each of the four “authors” played in the branding process. In Chapter 1, “What’s in a Name: Exhibition and Expectation,” I explain how the medium came to be called “the movies.” The naming process reflected the protean character of moving pictures and how the perception of them depended on the context of reception as much as the content on the screen. I will argue that the transformation of the moving picture into an object of cultural value was an unintended consequence of the anti-nickelodeon campaigns of the 1910s. First, by perceiving the

nickelodeons as a threat, many reformers credited the new medium with the ability to dramatically transform society. Anti-movie critics were more successful than the early film industry in arguing for the centrality of the moving picture in American culture. Second, by shifting away from regulation of the theaters and toward censorship, the discourse of reform unwittingly helped to construct the movies as an aesthetic object independent of the context of theatrical performance and as a discrete object with formal properties specific to the medium. By the end of World War I, the movies had supplanted the nickelodeon as the primary object of fascination.

In Chapter 2, “Movies with a Mission: Populism and a New ‘City on a Hill,’” and Chapter 3, “A Home among the Moderns: Movies and Modern Aesthetics,” I provide analyses of the works of two of the most significant early film theorists, Vachel Lindsay and Hugo Münsterberg. In Chapter 2, I argue that Lindsay’s *The Art of the Moving Picture* was an attempt to raise the status of film by providing a comparison between its formal qualities and those of other traditional arts. Like Victorian Matthew Arnold, Lindsay believed that an appreciation of art served as a bulwark against social anarchy. Unlike Arnold, however, Lindsay was a Mid-western populist suspicious of elite, high culture. Instead, he asserted that the moving picture could be an instrument for national renewal by providing a common culture based not on tradition but on democratic values or what he called “old-fashioned Americanism.”

Münsterberg, whose theories on film are the subject of Chapter 3, also argued that the medium was an art, but one independent of the other arts. On the most basic level, his status as a noted Harvard professor provided the cinema with a much-needed boost in its cultural standing when he advocated for the movies as an autonomous modern art form. Münsterberg promoted the artistic potential of the medium decades before colleges and universities began offering regular classes in film. His *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* (1916) provided a theory of film consistent with other modern theories of art that were circulating in the United States and Europe during the period. Münsterberg insisted upon a theory of film with its own independent critical language; hence, his theory resembled the emerging New Criticism in literature and aestheticism in the arts.

In Chapter 4, “Hurray for Hollywood: Entertainment as Art,” I examine the ways in which the film industry attempted to raise the status of the medium during the studio era with the creation of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Unlike growing numbers of cinephiles who were beginning to publish articles and to encourage the creation of an “art cinema,” the Academy represented the ideals of those in the film industry who were ambivalent about art. Instead, they preferred the term “entertainment” as a populist alternative to “art.” They also emphasized the technological side of the movies that had been supplanted by an emphasis on art in order to promote the sound film and other Hollywood innovations. The Academy endorsed the idea that the movies as entertainment improved with the coming of sound and color. Portraying the movies as

entertainment embedded in emerging technologies rather than as art also allowed the industry to accrue the cultural capital associated with scientific progress for the medium.

In Chapter 5, “A New Art for the American Century: Hollywood Enters the Museum,” I contend that the acceptance of motion pictures by the Museum of Modern Art as a permanent feature of the institution represents a recognition of film as not only a modern but also an American art form. Iris Barry, curator of the Museum of Modern Art Film Library, appealed to her membership and the public by arguing that the movies were essentially a uniquely American cultural expression. What is more, she promoted the idea that the motion picture was America’s contribution to the international modernist movement in the arts. Her message was compatible with that of Hollywood, which played a significant role in supporting the new institution. Though Hollywood was ambivalent about defining American cinema as art, the motion picture industry longed for the cultural recognition that would protect it from critics and social activists over the long term. The legitimization of Hollywood by an international institution like the Museum of Modern Art also played a considerable role in enhancing the industry’s profile overseas in a period when it sought to dominate screens around the world. The creation of the Museum of Modern Art Film Library as a study center and archive also facilitated the creation of film courses at universities and provided support for the first wave of important scholarly work on cinema.

In the Conclusion, “The Future for the Hollywood Brand,” I argue “Hollywood” had become an iconic brand and an interchangeable term for “American cinema” by the end of the 1930s. As an art, Hollywood developed its own aesthetic criteria that challenged the purity of traditional or high modernist aesthetics. By the end of World War II, the American film industry had reached an apex of economic and cultural power, and Hollywood had become synonymous not just with the movies or a mode of film production, but with modern American fashion and lifestyle. This hegemonic reach of the American movie industry could not have been predicted a half-century earlier, when the first exhibition of Edison’s Vitascope on April 23, 1896 at Koster & Bial’s Music Hall on Herald Square, New York, had introduced the projected film to a curious US public. Moving pictures may have started as a spectacle of technology spreading to traveling shows, vaudeville houses, and nickel theaters, but in a relatively short period of time a mode of film production and exhibition came to be known by a single word—“Hollywood”—that become a global brand for American modernity.

Notes

- 1 Irving Thalberg, “The Modern Photoplay,” in *Introduction to the Photoplay: A Course in Photoplay Appreciation*, ed. University of Southern California, College of Letters, Arts, and Sciences, and Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (Los Angeles: University of Southern California and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, 1929), 185.

- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Janet Staiger, "Announcing Wares, Winning Patrons, Voicing Ideals: Thinking about the History and Theory of Film Advertising," *Cinema Journal* 29, 3 (1990), 6.
- 4 David Bordwell, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960*, ed. Kristin Thompson and Janet Staiger (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); Douglas Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986).
- 5 Douglas B. Holt, *How Brands Become Icons* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Publishing, 2004), 4, 7.
- 6 Marshall Berman, *All that Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso, 2010), 15.
- 7 Henry Farnham May, *The End of American Innocence: A Study of the First Years of Our Own Time, 1912–1917* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 31.
- 8 Martin Burgess Green, *New York 1913: The Armory Show and the Paterson Strike Pageant* (New York: Scribner, 1988).
- 9 Richard Abel, *Menus for Movieland: Newspapers and the Emergence of American Film Culture, 1913–1916* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).
- 10 Ruth Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood, 1918–1939* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 13–18.
- 11 Terry Ramsaye, *A Million and One Nights: A History of the Motion Picture* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1926), 514–518.
- 12 Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood*, 13–18.
- 13 Holt, *How Brands Become Icons*, 4–5.

1

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Exhibition and Expectations

After the biograph came the vitagraph and kinetograph, and by the time these additions came into being, no well-regulated theatre of varieties was without its own specially named device. If a manager's name was Jones, he could call his machine the "Jonesograph." If a theatre was known as the Empire, then it would be the "Empireoscope."

Robert Grau, 1910¹

Photoplay, cinema, movie, or film? The medium's shifting names reflected the historical process that defined the moving picture to its audience and provides insight into how the movies settled into the iconic "Hollywood" brand. Before the filmed drama was considered an art worthy of contemplation, technology itself was the main attraction and its star status was reflected in the medium's early names. From its very origins, the technological wonder of motion photography took on many names as producers and exhibitors alike pursued strategies to capitalize on its popularity and to invest in the cultural capital of the new medium. Many neologisms, awkward to our contemporary ear, emerged to describe moving pictures. In its earliest emergence, the machine was the medium. The various cameras and projectors with their dazzling array of names long forgotten—Praxinoscope, Phenakistoscope, Zoopraxinoscope, Kinetoscope, and Animatograph—thrilled audiences in exhibition halls on both sides of the Atlantic.

However, during the earliest exhibitions in the United States, the medium came to be dominated by two machines—Thomas Edison's Vitascope and the Lumière brothers' Cinématographe. Both of these early machines were patented and name-branded by their famed inventors as a means to establish proprietary rights over the medium. These earliest of entrepreneur-inventors promoted the spectacle of moving photography by distinguishing each name with Greek and

Roman cognates for “movement” or “life.” These naming practices also suggested a desire to endow the new technology with the aura of the ancients and the gravity of the classics. Later, as moving pictures established their own exhibition spaces, this investment continued as the use of the Greek suffix “-odeon” gained currency as a new set of show business entrepreneurs began to emphasize their exhibition spaces rather than the machine. Nonetheless, until the nickelodeon era, moving picture technology was the main attraction and the medium’s names reflected the machines’ technology. There was very little attention paid to the cultural value of the images depicted on the screen, other than as an amusing curiosity.

Toward a Technological Utopia: The Theater of Science

While early moving picture exhibition did not necessarily take place in a theater, the presence of the projector and screen transformed the physical space into a different kind of space than most people had experienced. Since the machine was the attraction, this new entertainment space was not only a theater of comedy or drama, but a theater of science.² Every movie exhibition projected a future of technological progress accessible to all who could pay the relatively low entry price. Electricity, telephones, movies, and other technologies all seemed to promise improvement in the present and progress into the future. Many agreed with Edward Bellamy that the new technologies might even offer solutions to the social conflict marked by labor strife and racial violence during the Gilded Age.³ Bellamy’s highly popular utopian socialist novel, *Looking Backward: 2000–1887* (1888), imagined a future America where social harmony would be achieved through scientific management and technological modernization.

However, many of the same modern forces that promised to use technology to ameliorate the excesses of Gilded Age capitalism also brought rapid immigration, urbanization, and other social changes that threatened traditional life. Americans adjusted to this new modern environment of increased technological innovation with nervous enthusiasm. New technologies, including moving pictures, also created specialists with a new set of skills. Any challenge to existing authority was met with contempt by those more entrenched in the status quo. As historian Carolyn Marvin has pointed out, the introduction of these new modern technologies created conflicts “in which existing groups perpetually negotiate power, authority, representation, and knowledge with whatever resources are available.”⁴ Those who held more conservative views regarding art raised fears about the growing relationship of photography and moving picture technology to culture.

Audiences enthusiastically embraced the latest moving picture technology, effectively ignoring the sometimes despairing jeremiads of critics. The subsequent introductions of sound, color, wide-screen formats, and other technological innovations continued to raise concerns about the aesthetic value of new technologies, even among those who had previously endorsed the view of “film as