Luci Marzola

# The System Beyond the Studios
## Editor's Introduction

Starting in the late 1920s, cameraman Glenn R. Kershner brought the work and worries of Hollywood cameramen to vivid life through a series of cartoons frequently printed in *American Cinematographer* and *International Photographer*, publications aimed at the cameramen and other craftsmen toiling behind-the-scenes to make the movies.[1] Kershner used cartoons to create a visual record infused with his personal experience as a working cameraman from the 1910s through Hollywood studio system. He began his career as Henry Ford's personal cameraman from 1914 to 1921, before he came to Hollywood and worked for the likes of Frank Lloyd, Tod Browning, Cecil B. DeMille, Samuel Goldwyn, First National, Universal, Hal Roach, and Famous Players Lasky throughout the 1920s. His known credits are sparse, as a work-a-day cameraman would rarely get credited on films. He was a first cameraman mostly on smaller pictures and travelogues and an Akeley specialist on bigger films, working with the specialty camera designed for difficult location work. This skill garnered him work on aerial films like *Hell's Angels* (Hughes, 1930) and expedition work to the likes of Labrador and Tahiti, which would all become subjects of his cartoon work.

Kershner's cartoons were addressed to his fellow technicians in the Hollywood community in an effort to unite the group through their common experiences and create a collective self-image. In his cartoon work, he formed an image of the Hollywood technician as a resolute professional, undaunted by technological advancement or environmental hardship. At the same time, he consistently imbues them with qualities of an ideal cameraman—technical skill, bravery, determination, and a strong work ethic. Yet absent from his images was the ongoing struggle of the cinematographer to be seen as an *artist*, so prominent in the discourse of *American Cinematographer* in particular. He also highlighted their anxieties and frustrations around technological change or industrial upheaval. His interest was in depicting the day-to-day lives of working people. In Kershner's ideal, the cameraman was too concerned with doing his job well (and keeping it!) to worry about getting praise for it.

A story like that of Glenn Kershner brings light to the reality that the lives and priorities of those working in classical Hollywood were not always aligned with what we have decided are the important historical events. The irony of figures like Kershner is that while they worked to form an image for their professions in this most visible of industries, they themselves became invisible when the histories of Hollywood were told. His little-known body of work offers a glimpse into the life and work of a group of Hollywood professionals who were rarely the subject of profiles or sound bites. The essays in this issue of *Spectator* likewise seek to give new views and change our fixed perception of what exactly Hollywood was and is.

Hollywood has been an object of myriad fascinations since it became a metonym for the motion picture industry nearly a century ago. As early as 1926 in his book *A Million and One Nights,* Terry Ramsaye presented us with the narrative that built toward the Hollywood system.[2] Despite Hollywood's brief existence and the tome's 800-page length, history was already being erased. The disappearance of Lois Weber (with three mentions) and the elevation of her contemporary D. W. Griffith (67 mentions) was happening even as they lived and breathed and continued to work in a system they both detested. Ramsaye likewise aided the elevation of the director's work over that of cinematographers, production designers, editors, and even writers who have little to no space in his "complete" history of their craft. And historians would continue to replicate these omissions, further elevating the work and works of a chosen few while the traces of many faded.

The work of film historians in the last three decades has largely been about restoring these images, both physically (in the collection and


Luci Marzola, editor, Spectator 38.2 (Fall 2018): 5-8.

preservation of lost films) and through scholarship – giving figures such as Lois Weber, Oscar Micheaux, or Gregg Toland their proper place in the million and one nights of the movies. This work began with a reassessment of the earliest years of the cinema with work such as Tom Gunning and André Gaudrealt's concept of "a cinema of attractions" and Charles Musser's work on the Edison Company.[3] It continued to the transitional era that saw narrative conventions take hold, the industry professionalize, and film culture blossom.[4] And this history has expanded to consider race, nationality, and gender in ways to which historians of the early-20th century like Ramsaye were seemingly blind.[5]

With such a profound reassessment of the years preceding the Hollywood system, how does our view of this dominant force in culture change? Early in the historical turn, David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson defined the product that the system created in their seminal work, *Classical Hollywood Cinema.*[6] They looked at the films and the publicity around them and drew insightful conclusions about how it all worked. Later, Thomas Schatz, Douglas Gomery, and Richard B. Jewell looked at the studios as institutions with their own personalities and business practices which resembled each other but each with a unique identity.[7] In these histories the term "studio system" perfectly encapsulated their object—a system defined by and completely dominated by a handful of major motion picture studios. At the same time, all of these authors make mention of the many institutions and individuals that were important to movie making in American in the mid-20th century that were not part of the big five and little three, however briefly. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, the Society of Motion Picture Engineers, the various labor unions and craft guilds, and, most of all, the Production Code Administration, all get their mentions in these broad histories of Hollywood, hinting at a system that stretches beyond the studios themselves.

Rather than looking at the figures, companies, and institutions that worked around and outside of the studios as ancillary or extraneous to the system, what happens if we decentralize the studios when we think of the history of motion picture making in America? The Hollywood studio system, once viewed as a monolithic entity that could be summarized in a single volume, expands and broadens as we turn new lens onto it. Recently scholars have revived dismissed performers, forgotten directors, and the work of labor organization.[8] They have reassessed the roles of both stars and lowly workers and the origins of genres.[9] As such the paradigms by which we frame the Hollywood system itself have already begun to complicate the portrait of vertically-integrated studios offered by scholars in decades past. While this model is still highly relevant, this issue of *Spectator* seeks to expand the view of Hollywood itself beyond the big five and little three studios and their control of motion picture production, distribution, and exhibition.

Instead of foregrounding the *studio* in "studio system," this issue seeks to answer questions about the larger "system" of which the studios were only one aspect. This issue considers the Hollywood studio system as a network of interconnected businesses, interests, and individuals focusing on the intellectual, technical, creative, and economic labor happening both inside and outside of the studio spaces themselves. It asks us to think about the various structures and networks that bolstered the system and allowed it to function for decades—from craft guilds, to scientific research councils, independent exhibitors, and even the Academy Awards. By shifting focus from vertically-integrated studios to interlocked networks of commerce, innovation, creativity, and publicity, the landscape of Hollywood is transformed from an isolated enclave into an industrial cluster integrated into the larger American economy and history.

By the very nature of this issue as thinking "beyond" the frameworks we know, the concept of the studio system is conceived broadly in terms of methodologies, perspectives, and periods. The call asked for works covering what Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson defined as the Classical era (1917-1960) and beyond. And yet, as it happens, our contributors are largely focused on a key moment in Hollywood history – the decade after World War II. When we teach the postwar period in survey histories of cinema, it is defined by change—the breakdown of the system's stability of the previous twenty years. We list out the factors that contributed to this—the Paramount Decree, the HUAC hearings, the rise of television, the introduction of new technologies, and the erosion of the Production Code. These events are so momentous that it can cloud how much more was changing in the industry besides the studios

selling their theaters and finding novel ways to sell their products such as sex and widescreens.

In the first essay, "The Editor's Face on the Cutting Room Floor: Fredrick Y. Smith's Precarious Promotion of the American Cinema Editors, 1942-1977," Katie Bird looks at the work of editor Fredrick Y. Smith in advocating an elevated status for his profession. Rather than a celebration of an exceptional craftsman, Bird shows how Smith is remarkable for his typicality in his profession, working on mediocre fare under long-term contract with a studio, then moving to freelance work in the post-studio era. Smith's writing on behalf of his fellow editors and their various organizational efforts, like Kershner's work for cameramen a generation earlier, gives life to the many thousands of people working in Hollywood who never see their names in lights and saw in the postwar period not a change in American culture, but a change in the structure which provided their livelihood.

In "By Any Manner or Means: The Distribution of *The Ten Commandments*," Zoë Wallin takes on one of the central tenants of our narrative of the breakdown of the studio system—the changes to distribution forced by the Paramount Decree. Wallin argues that the studios found ways to continue many of their more questionable booking practices particularly on mega-productions like *The Ten Commandments* and by calling old practices by new names. Through an exploration of this case study, we see how little changed in the ways that studio were able to make their own rules over the objections of theaters, even after government intervention.

Dawn Fratini's "Better the 'Devil' You Know: The Motion Picture Research Council, 3D, and the Hollywood Studio System" likewise reassesses a central tenet of the canonic history of the postwar period. The technological revolution on the screens—from 3D to color to Cinerama—is often portrayed as an invasion from outsiders allowed entry onto America's screens due to the weakening of the studios. However, Fratini argues that this narrative changes when we take an expanded view of the studio system that includes inter-studio organizations like the Motion Picture Research Council (MPRC). The MPRC was both central to the introduction and dissemination of 3D technology *and* it was also controlled and funded by the studios. This complicates our understanding of how new technologies made it to the screen so rapidly during this volatile period.

From reassessments of these central aspect of the postwar period, our next essay, Monica Sandler's "Oscars Wild: The Impact of Studio Politics on the Academy Awards Post-WWII," asks us to think again about the significance of an event and institution which is often dismissed as a frivolous aspect of the industry. Instead, Sandler argues that changes to the awards and those who were awarded both reflected and affected larger changes in the industry. It was during this time that the studios stopped funding the Academy directly, international productions gained prominence, and voting was made exclusive to membership, reducing the influence of those connected to the studies in several ways. In the unstable years after the war, even a seemingly conservative, reactionary body such as the AMPAS had to change with the times.

Our last essay diverges from the rest and yet has resonances with those studies of the postwar period. Like the 1950s (and into the 60s), the last decade and a half has seen radical changes in the financial structure and distribution models of Hollywood cinema. And yet, like that period long ago, the current climate often rhetorically exaggerates change, when in fact the same few corporations still offer the most successful model of long-term success in the motion picture business. In "Money Will Be Made: Relativity Media and Hollywood's Relationship with Wall Street," Kimberly A. Owczarki looks deeply into the early success and ultimate failure of a company that sought to challenge the business norms of Hollywood. Working against conventional wisdom led to early success, but it ultimately toppled the company with ambitions to compete with the established Hollywood studios. As Owczarski notes, there are truths about the business which the companies who have been around since the days of the system know to ignore at their peril. Looking at this very recent history of Hollywood highlights what has and hasn't changed since the heyday of the studio system, pointing to a narrative of continuity when we often overemphasis change.

Before ending on three book reviews of recent studies of Hollywood, this issue carries an extensive roundtable with historians of Hollywood discussing the present and future of the field. I assembled a formidable group of scholars—Chris Cagle, Emily Carman, Mark Garrett Cooper, Kate Fortmueller,

Eric Hoyt, Denise McKenna, Ross Melnick, and Shelley Stamp—who have all dedicated their scholarly work to finding new ways to tell the story of Hollywood. I asked them about the current challenges of the archive, from digitization to access to our role as academics in making archives available to the larger community. We then turned to discussions of what we see as the future of the field, asking what approaches and methods still need to be brought into the study of Classical Hollywood and beyond. Next, we explored strategies for bringing these changing paradigms for our understanding of the history of cinema into the classroom. How do we bridge the divide between our scholarship and our teachings especially when textbooks are slow to incorporate new approaches? Lastly, we ruminated on the nature of Hollywood itself. As we broaden our understanding of the scope and impact of 'the system' and its antecedents, where does Hollywood end? Its product has penetrated the four corners of the globe and even the White House, so what does that do to our role as historians of this cultural production? When Hollywood culture overwhelms politics is there anything that isn't part of the system?

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**Luci Marzola** is Postdoctoral Teaching Fellow in the School of Cinematic Arts' Department of Cinema and Media Studies at University of Southern California. Her research on the silent and early sound eras of Hollywood and its relationship to the technology industries has been published in *Film History, The Velvet Light Trap*, and is forthcoming in the *Oxford Handbook of Silent Cinema.* She is currently working on her book manuscript, *Engineering Hollywood: Technology, Technicians, and the Science of Building the Studio System.*

**Notes**

1 Cartoon, Glenn Kershner, October 17, 1943. Glenn R. Kershner File, ASC Collection Member Files, Margaret Herrick Library, Beverly Hills, CA.

2 Terry Ramsaye, *A Million and One Nights: A History of the Motion Pictures* (Simon and Schuster, 1926).

3 Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," *Wide Angle* 8, no. 3 & 4 (Fall 1986); Charles Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company* (University of California Press, 1991).

4 For the development of narrative see: Tom Gunning, *D.W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film* (University of Illinois Press, 1993); Charlie Keil, *Early American Cinema in Transition: Story, Style, and Filmmaking, 1907-1913* (University of Wisconsin, 2002); For professionalization see: Janet Staiger, "Dividing Labor for Production Control: Thomas Ince and the Rise of the Studio System," *Cinema Journal* 18, no. 2 (Spring 1979): 16-25; For cultural trends see: Richard Abel, *The Red Rooster Scare: Making Cinema American, 1900-1910* (University of California Press, 1999) and *Americanizing the Movies and "Movie-Mad" Audiences, 1910-1914* (University of California, 2006).

5 For gender and spectatorship: Shelley Stamp, *Movie Struck Girls* (Princeton University Press, 2000); for race and spectatorship: Jacqueline Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity* (University of California, 2005).

6 David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (Columbia University Press, 1985).

7 See Douglas Gomery's *The Hollywood Studio System—A History* (BFI, 2005); Thomas Schatz's *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010); Richard B. Jewell, *The Golden Age of Cinema: Hollywood, 1929-1945* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2007).

8 Miriam Petty, *Stealing the Show: African American Performers and Audiences in 1930s Hollywood* (University of California Press, 2016); Marsha Gordon, *Film Is Like a Battleground: Sam Fuller's War Movies* (Oxford University Press, 2017); Shelley Stamp, *Lois Weber in Early Hollywood* (University of California Press, 2015); Miranda Banks, *The Writers: A History of American Screenwriters and Their Guild* (Rutgers University Press, 2016).

9 Emily Carman, *Independent Stardom: Freelance Women in the Hollywood Studio System* (University of Texas Press, 2016); Erin Hill, *Never Done: A History of Women's Work in Media Production* (Rutgers University Press, 2016); Chris Cagle, *Sociology and Film: Postwar Hollywood's Prestige Commodity* (Rutgers University Press, 2016).