

“Pictures Seem to Run in Cycles”: Industry Discourse and the Economics of Film Cycles in Classical Hollywood

ABSTRACT: Cycles were a useful profit-making strategy within the high output of the Hollywood studio system where recycling and imitation were built into production practices and the reproductions of recent successes helped mitigate risk. While the growing research on cycles has identified their usefulness for situating films within their industrial and historical context, this research largely remains focused on production practices and cultural trends. This article offers a broader survey and analysis of the industry discourse about cycles across the classical Hollywood era. It provides insight into the specific commercial strategies cycles enacted by Hollywood while pointing to distribution and exhibition as key forces in cycle formation.

KEYWORDS: film cycles, classical Hollywood, economics, industrial analysis, trade press.

In a questionnaire conducted by *Film Daily* in 1932, 95 percent of the several hundred anonymous industry participants listed cycles—groups of similar films produced, circulated, and consumed in a concentrated period—as their biggest industry “pet peeve.”¹ The previous year, in recognition of cycles’ costliness and detriment to viewers’ interest, an agreement had been made between the studio executives to avoid cycles.² MGM head Louis B. Mayer called for an industry-wide staggered system of release, “to vary the market and ensure sufficient diversity and novelty features to pique public interest . . . in a group, they go for the best and the others die.” This intervention was described by *Variety* as being “for the good of the industry” at a time when increased productions of musicals and gangster pictures were flooding the market and the heightened competition of the cycles was seen to “kill one another off” at the box office.³

Mayer was likely responding to the discussions held between the studio heads and Will H. Hays, head of the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors Association (MPPDA), earlier that year where it was decided that the release of gangster pictures should be regulated.⁴ This decision was made in response to

the moral panic over the detrimental effect such films were believed to have on young and vulnerable viewers, which led to the films' ban by censorship boards in Canada and some American cities.⁵ In late 1931, Jason Joy, director of the Studio Relations Committee, the forerunner to the Production Code Administration, wrote to Breen: "With crime practically denied them, with box office figures down, with high-pressure methods being employed back home to spur the studios on to get a little more cash, it was almost inevitable that sex, as the nearest thing at hand and pretty generally sure-fire, should be seized upon. It was."⁶ Hays's initial concern was the avoidance of moral criticism from outside the industry over film content and business practices; a sudden clump of objectionable films would draw greater condemnation than if the films were released gradually over a longer period.⁷ In addition to asking for changes in films' content, Hays and the executives sought to dilute the negative impact of the cycle through the modifications of distribution. While the gangster and fallen-woman cycles—the latter of which followed narratives of the rise and fall of ambitious women who used their sexuality to ascend to positions of power and wealth—were the specific targets of moral and religious groups at this time, film critics and industry commentators extended censure to the production of cycles more generally.⁸

These discussions about cycles continued throughout the classical Hollywood era, from the 1930s to the 1950s, and are significant in several ways. Not only do they indicate that the practice of cycles went beyond films exploiting topical subjects, they suggest how cycles underpinned the business strategies of the studios more broadly. Second, distribution was clearly recognized in these discourses as a key factor in the formation of cycles and as the principal means to end the "cycle evil."⁹

As noted above, film cycles are produced, circulated, and consumed in a concentrated period. As a result of this identifiable lifespan, cycles have a traceable outline of initiation, increase, and decline. In recent years, cycles have emerged as a significant tool for film and media historians. The grouping of films according to the framework of the cycle has developed as a means of examining films within their original historical context and considering their interconnections with all films (including those in other cycles and the same cycle) produced, circulated, and consumed immediately alongside them.

Beyond film studies, recent scholarship on cycles is aligned with the burgeoning field of seriality in its various forms. Fundamental to this idea is the predication of works of mass media on patterns of repetition and variation. As Frank Krutnik and Kathleen Loock describe, "seriality is an integral feature of cultural production."¹⁰ Amanda Ann Klein and R. Barton Palmer, whose edited collection positions cycles alongside sequels, series, and spin-offs, view seriality

in terms of “textual multiplicities,” which they define as “texts that consciously repeat and exploit images, narratives, or characters found in previous texts.”¹¹ This framing of media products as multiplicities is, Klein and Palmer argue, a productive way to highlight and discuss the links between transgeneric groupings in a contemporary landscape characterized by transmedia. While seriality studies has gained traction in recent years, Krutnik and Loock argue that the low cultural status of cinematic seriality has led to its relative neglect in film studies.¹²

The crass commercialism associated with formulaic repetition and imitation has long tainted labels such as *cycle*. While the critical disdain can be traced to the Frankfurt School’s critique of the “culture industry,” as Frank Kelleter discusses, these dismissive attitudes toward serial practices were always evident in the industry discourse surrounding cycles.¹³ Yet it is this commercial basis that also makes cycles a valuable object of study. Peter Stanfield’s explanation of film cycles as “patterns of reiteration alongside modification” draws upon the theories of business cycles by economists W. C. Mitchell and Stanley Bober. Bober describes how business cycles are singularly shaped by the specific market conditions that surround them, which prevent the development of a universal model of cycles. Nonetheless, one can identify the types of conditions that give rise to cycles, which enables some degree of prediction based on historical evidence.¹⁴ Thus, as Stanfield points out, the industrial practices of Hollywood, including its economies of scale, semicompetitive studio system, and legally sanctioned practice of imitation, form the environment that creates cycles, while each cycle that develops from these conditions is unique. For Stanfield, the historical basis of film cycles and the charting of their development and interconnections provide a way to make social and cultural change visible while still situating cycles in the contemporary production trends of the film industry.¹⁵

Additionally, cycles are an important means to examine industrial developments, market shifts, and changing business strategies, as Richard Nowell’s work makes clear. His studies of teen slasher films and of the truncated roller disco cycle of 1979 focus on the role of distribution in the formation of cycles.¹⁶ In this way, Nowell distinguishes between cycles as the concentrated *release* of quantities of similar film types and identifies the increase in the *production* or green-lighting of similar films in terms of a “production trend.”¹⁷ Nick Heffernan’s recent article on the silent era’s gangster regeneration cycle also provides a detailed examination that draws on the discourses of the trade press, distributors, and reviews to examine the development of the cycle’s different phases.¹⁸ Heffernan’s study widens its focus, however, to the cross-cultural currents that fed into the production of these films while providing an ideological analysis of its thematic concerns in comparison to prior gangster cycles.

The singularity and unique form of each cycle has contributed to the dominant methodology of cycle case studies, such as those above. These studies closely interrogate the form and process of individual cycles in relation to their surrounding context and cultural discourses and suggest potential implications for cycle studies. What is still needed, however, is a wider analysis of what these discourses reveal about the industry practice of cycles more generally, without being restricted to a single case study. This article seeks to supplement the close focus of these case studies by providing a survey of the various ways cycles operated across the studio system of classical Hollywood. In doing so, it explores how contemporary discourses regarding cycles developed and considers why they intensified at particular points in time. Such an examination indicates the important economic function cycles enacted within the structure of the studio system. This perspective also continues to widen the focus beyond film production to consider how cycles took shape in distribution and release. This article will first explore cycles as a commercial strategy practiced across the Hollywood studios before more closely dissecting the industry discussions around such cycles.

As Rick Altman and Steve Neale have argued in their work on the discursive nature of genres, cycles too can be viewed as discursive objects that are formed and given shape through the writing and discussions of others.¹⁹ While this is clearly the case with film critics and scholars seeking to identify and label these groups of films as a retrospective critical activity, we can gain further insight into cycles and their operations by examining the discourses of contemporary industry practitioners and trade commentators. This paper considers two main conceptions of cycles. The first one delineates the process of fluctuation in the production, distribution and exhibition of similar films. The second one encompasses the view of cycles as a contemporary occurrence and commercial industry strategy used by the Hollywood studios. These definitions of cycles are more nebulous, particularly given the industry's ambivalent attitude and frequent reluctance to admit their presence. By tracing and locating these discourses within their contemporaneous industrial context, these discussions can be unpacked further.

Film cycles were particularly prominent in the classical Hollywood era. Pictures were mass produced, and in the semicompetitive studio system, the majors pursued portfolio investment strategies to spread the risks of production across a wide variety of films. In an industry where a degree of imitation and recycling was accepted practice, cycles were created as competing studios sought to replicate one another's successful film formulas and build on audience expectation. The particular form of cycles was shaped by classical Hollywood's pattern of staggered distribution, the run-zone-clearance system.

The circulation of pictures was punctuated by clearance windows that divided their exhibition runs into designated geographic zones, which enabled the distributors to control the flow of films to audiences. In practice, this allowed the large theater circuits and those affiliated with the major studios to receive top product more quickly, while delaying and limiting smaller exhibitors' access to such product. While the former group was often sold films individually on a percentage basis, the smaller exhibitors were bound by the standard exhibition contract and bought the product in bulk, a practice known as block booking.²⁰ The practice of block booking saw distributors bundling pictures together to sell them to exhibitors so that theater managers who desired the A films were also forced to take the studio's lesser product. The rate at which the films of the cycle flowed into theaters could dictate when the moment of market saturation could occur and influenced the rise and fall of the cycle.

Throughout the classical Hollywood period, the major Hollywood trade publication *Variety* primarily described cycles as the increased production of a certain film type. This categorization was usually based on a similarity of content, such as a narrative theme, character type, or setting, but it could also include aesthetic style or an overarching tone or treatment. In 1927, *Variety* described a "production vogue" for "circus stories, carnival stories, Russian, Chinese and baseball yarns," which were cycles unified by their narrative settings, as well as film cycles instigated by recent topical events, such as the aviation cycle of that same year.²¹ On the other hand, the "Color 'n' Scope history cycle" identified by *Variety* in 1953 contained films with historical settings ranging from ancient to medieval eras, and both real and fictional characters; these were unified as a cycle in their exploitation of the recently disseminated technologies of Technicolor and widescreen.²² Similarly, *Variety* described the late 1940s and early 1950s simultaneous message cycles of "anti-communist" and "pro-Negro" pictures, which were bound into cycles by their respective ideological approaches.²³ The most consistent uses of the label in the trade press were to announce cycles as part of upcoming production schedules, or to identify groups of similar films currently in release. For example, in 1932 the *New Movie Magazine* wrote:

Cycles everywhere: Hollywood is going cycling! There is going to be a series of cycles of pictures from all studios this next year! There are twelve exploration and adventure pictures scheduled, all location pictures on odd spots around the world. There are five stories about Hollywood being filmed now, including "Movie Crazy," the Harold Lloyd picture, "Once in a Lifetime," "The Double," "Broken hearts of Hollywood" and the first to be finished, Constance

Bennett's "What Price Hollywood." There are four political pictures to be released. Two depression yarns and three prison stories are to be filmed. Several radio-crooner stories, and several stories built around the careers of men [*sic*].²⁴

Although this use of the cycle label extended beyond the classical era, a word search through *Variety's* digitized archives suggests that the term was less commonly used after the 1950s.²⁵

To better understand the trades' deployment of the term *cycle*, we should first examine the commercial function of such cycles for the Hollywood studios. Economic film historians John Sedgwick and Michael Pokorny view the film industry as a high-risk business for both producers and consumers. Producers must predict the financial performance of the product based on an estimation of capricious viewer responses.²⁶ Risk is also explored by Sedgwick and Pokorny as something that cinema audiences experience in the process of selecting and viewing a film; there is frequently a gap between the expectation of pleasure and the actual pleasure derived from watching a movie.²⁷ This shapes the business environment faced by producers, with the task of distributors and exhibitors being to induce consumers to take a chance in paying to view an unknown product.

Cycles can be considered part of the attempt to reduce risk in production investment, as well as audience consumption, through a strategy of affiliation and expectation. Producer-distributors attempt to generate a certain level of expectation that will persuade viewers to purchase a ticket in anticipation of a similar pleasure, while still promising a degree of novelty or difference in the product. In order to reduce this risk, producer distributors can include in the product or emphasize in the marketing particular aspects that have proven successful in past products. The replication of a winning formula is a defining feature of cycles and the means by which they function to mitigate risk. As Loock writes regarding another serial format, the sequel, "the right balance between repetition and innovation meant the difference between a risky and a safe business venture; for audiences, it settled whether watching the sequel was a pleasurable experience or a disappointment."²⁸ A film is viewed as successful, according to Sedgwick and Pokorny, when there is a large degree of positive difference between the consumer's initial expectation for the product and the actual enjoyment gained from viewing the film, or when their high level of expectation is fulfilled. In searching for such a successful formula, the studios could hedge their bets over a wide variety of product, in accordance with a portfolio investment strategy.

In classical Hollywood, a studio would plan a large number of films in its annual production schedule, with each film having a perceived level of

risk. The production budgets for each film were determined in reference to the distribution of risk across the group as a whole.²⁹ Within these large portfolios, cycles could work to differentiate a studio's output across a range of film types and act as a risk attenuation strategy in providing proven formulas on which to model productions, as well as providing some economy in preproduction costs, while attempting to remove some of the uncertainty over audience response by associating the film with a similar success. The allocation of space for cycles in the preparation of production schedules was addressed by Howard T. Lewis in 1933 when he argued for a more organized procedure. Discussing Paramount's production, he noted that the number of the company's commercial failures in the 1929–30 season revealed the necessity for a systematized planning process that was less reliant on the judgment of executives. Starting in 1930 the studio scheduled only 75 percent of its annual program in advance to allow for the flexible production of films according to current public tastes and incorporated market analysis to determine the existence and extent of "style cycles."³⁰

The range of products within an investment portfolio generally followed two forms of differentiation, according to Sedgwick: horizontal differentiation and vertical differentiation.³¹ With quality understood as the consumers' anticipation of pleasure, a product is differentiated vertically when it has more desirable qualities for consumers than other products on offer. Horizontal differentiation complicates consumer choice as it offers more of some desirable qualities, but less of others. Sedgwick identifies how genres and stars are forms of horizontal differentiation, although vertical difference of quality can also exist within such categories. On a basic level, the different film cycles in circulation at any one point are an instance of horizontal differentiation by subject matter, with the range of film types positioned to appeal to a variety of audience groups and taste publics.

The booking chart shown in figure 1 indicates the films available for first-run exhibitors to book over an eleven-week period in mid-1944. The studio releases contain a variety of product that illustrates forms of both vertical and horizontal differentiation. Paramount's releases include two blocks of product and a special release. The vertical differentiation is most evident in this "special" designation for *Going My Way* (1944), which was sold individually to exhibitors, rather than as part of a block package. This indicates the studio's expectation for high returns for their investment in this production. Paramount's blocks also contained several pictures whose short running times indicate their status as B features, which played a supporting role on double bills. Series entries *Henry Aldrich Plays Cupid* (1944) and *Henry Aldrich's Little Secret* (1944) sit alongside the low-budget films from semi-independent producers Pine-Thomas, *Gambler's*

MOTION PICTURE DAILY BOOKING CHART											
WEEK OF	COLUMBIA	M-G-M	MONO.	PARA.	PRC	REPUBLIC	RKO RADIO	20TH-FOX	U. A.	UNIVERSAL	WARNERS
June 10	THEY LIVE IN FEAR Ours Kruger Pat Patrick Colleen Clancy D-107 mins. (129)	(Seventh Black) ANDY HARDY'S GAGA TROUBLE Mickey Rooney C-107 mins. (124)	SONORA STAGE C-107 mins. (124)	(Fifth Black) AND THE ANGEL'S KING Dorothy Lamour Fred MacMurray Betty Hutton M-99 mins. (121)	WATERFRONT John Carradine J. Carroll Nash D-113 45 mins.	(Sixth Black) THE FALCON OUT WEST Tom Conway Barbara Hale D-84 mins. (121)	(Sixth Black) THE FALCON OUT WEST Tom Conway Barbara Hale D-84 mins. (121)	THE HAIRY APE William Benday Sous Hayward D-99 mins.	THE INVINCIBLE MAN'S REVENGE E. J. Hall James Ashroy Anne Corley D-78 mins.	MAKE YOUR OWN BED Lena Horne James Egan Manning C-82 mins. (117)	
June 17	THE LAST HOREMAN Herald Hayer Bob Wills -Dak Taylor C-102 mins. (120)	GALILEO Regent Rogers Charles Boyer John Carradine D-116 mins. (121)	MEET THE PEOPLE Dick Powell Lucille Ball M-100 mins. (126)	RETURN OF THE APE MAN Bob Lusk John Carradine D-106 mins. (121)	THE HITLER DOVER Betty Hutton Edward G. Robinson C-107 mins. (121)	GOOD NIGHT SWEETHEARTS Robert Leighton Ruth Terry D-97 mins. (120)	THE YELLOW ROSE Anna Neagle John Barrymore D-103 mins. (122)	THE YELLOW ROSE Anna Neagle John Barrymore D-103 mins. (122)	SEVEN DAYS AND A NIGHT Richard Dix Michael O'Shea D-94 mins.	SEVEN DAYS AND A NIGHT Richard Dix Michael O'Shea D-94 mins.	SEVEN DAYS AND A NIGHT Richard Dix Michael O'Shea D-94 mins.
June 24	SHE'S A SOLDIER TOO Beulah Bondi Nora Park John Barker D-87 mins. (124)	THREE MEN IN WHITE Leland Hayward Van Johnson D-101 mins. (127)	TWO GIRLS AND A SAILOR Brown Jimmy Durante Van Johnson C-124 mins. (128)	LOUISIANA HAYRIDE Judy Canova Ben Hunter C	(Special Release) LOUISIANA HAYRIDE Judy Canova Ben Hunter C	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.
July 1	LOUISIANA HAYRIDE Judy Canova Ben Hunter C	(Special Release) LOUISIANA HAYRIDE Judy Canova Ben Hunter C	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.
July 8	LOUISIANA HAYRIDE Judy Canova Ben Hunter C	(Special Release) LOUISIANA HAYRIDE Judy Canova Ben Hunter C	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.
July 15	LOUISIANA HAYRIDE Judy Canova Ben Hunter C	(Special Release) LOUISIANA HAYRIDE Judy Canova Ben Hunter C	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.
July 22	LOUISIANA HAYRIDE Judy Canova Ben Hunter C	(Special Release) LOUISIANA HAYRIDE Judy Canova Ben Hunter C	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.
July 29	LOUISIANA HAYRIDE Judy Canova Ben Hunter C	(Special Release) LOUISIANA HAYRIDE Judy Canova Ben Hunter C	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.
Aug. 5	LOUISIANA HAYRIDE Judy Canova Ben Hunter C	(Special Release) LOUISIANA HAYRIDE Judy Canova Ben Hunter C	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.
Aug. 12	LOUISIANA HAYRIDE Judy Canova Ben Hunter C	(Special Release) LOUISIANA HAYRIDE Judy Canova Ben Hunter C	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.
Aug. 19	LOUISIANA HAYRIDE Judy Canova Ben Hunter C	(Special Release) LOUISIANA HAYRIDE Judy Canova Ben Hunter C	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.	SECRET COMMAND Pat O'Brien Cherie Merrill Paul Warwick D-88 mins.

Dates Are Based on National Release Schedules and Are Subject to Change. Letters Denote the Following: (D) Drama, (M) Musical, (C) Comedy, (O) Outdoor Action. Production Numbers Are in Parentheses.

Fig. 1: Booking chart, Motion Picture Daily, July 6, 1944.

Choice (1944) and Take It Big (1944), as products that have fewer desirable qualities for viewers. Enticing qualities could instead be found in well-known Paramount stars, such as Fred MacMurray, Bing Crosby, and Dorothy Lamour, and directors Preston Sturges and Billy Wilder, who carried expectations of quality that differentiated their pictures vertically, and whose association with particular types of films, such as comedies or musicals, could differentiate them horizontally.

The booking chart also distinguishes the pictures horizontally by sorting them into the four general categories of drama, musical, comedy, and outdoor action, with each having different types of appeal to different audience sectors. Both within and sometimes across these categories are cycles that differentiate the films further. Double Indemnity (1944), for instance, is categorized here as a drama, alongside Preston Sturges's comedic biopic The Great Moment (1944) and political war film The Hitler Gang (1944). Yet Double Indemnity belongs to a cycle retrospectively labeled film noir and has more in common with Christmas Holiday (1944), which is labeled a musical in the booking chart. Film noir provides an example of the way in which cycles have become used as a critical tool.

James Naremore has documented how this label was developed and adopted by French film critics who themselves experienced the influx of Hollywood films in the postwar context.³² The application of the film noir label and its critical development into a broader generic category differ from the way in which the films were originally viewed. The contemporary industry understanding of such cycles was as a means to categorize, differentiate, and market product on a practical level. The benefits of hindsight, alongside the means to select and view films without the time constraints of the original exhibition window, allow critics to identify and group films, such as *Double Indemnity* and *Christmas Holiday*, in a way that was less obvious to those producing, distributing, and exhibiting the individual films in the moment.

Films within a cycle could also be vertically differentiated through signifiers of quality, often in the form of production values, stars' names, and story origins. The final value, however, was assigned by viewers after the film had been tested at the box office. Low-budget cycles were generally less differentiated from one another and adhered more closely to a particular formula, such as the girl reporter films that ascended in the mid-1930s.³³ The studios had less of a financial incentive to differentiate low-budget film cycles as the product was predominantly sold in blocks and on a flat-rate basis, which guaranteed their income for producers. It was only when a widespread perception of low quality and a saturated market started to affect attendance or generate criticisms of the industry's trade practices that the studios attempted to address the issue of cycles.

In the trade press, industry commentators generally invoked film cycles, such as the aforementioned circus stories and baseball yarns, as a way to detect patterns of change and repetition among popular types of film stories.³⁴ These discussions alternated between a passive understanding of cycles as simply a way to label and measure current audience interest and taste, and a suggestion that the studios actively constructed and stimulated this interest. This tension between cycles as naturally occurring phenomena and a practice actively pursued by producers ran throughout the trade discourse and was evident in Lewis's 1933 analysis in *The Motion Picture Industry*:

Pictures seem to run in cycles—producers work according to the theory that the public is interested in gangster pictures at one time and at another time is primarily interested in war pictures, and at some other time it is interested in sophisticated triangle pictures. Here again it is very doubtful whether the theory held can be sustained. What actually happens is that an outstanding gangster or war picture is produced. Immediately after other

directors try to imitate it in an effort to take advantage of the new idea conceived by someone else and to capitalize on the favorable publicity which the good picture has received. As a result, a flood of such pictures, more or less copies of the original, inundates the screen. This fact does not prove that the public is interested in gangster pictures at that moment. It proves only that those responsible for production are copyists, assuming with more or less justification that the public, having seen one eminently good gangster production hopes (usually in vain) that the next one will be equally good.³⁵

Here Lewis identifies a common defense used by Hollywood producers when they faced public criticism for their practices of imitative cycles: that they were simply following the currents of popular taste. Instead, Lewis argues that it is simply producers attempting to replicate the success of a prior hit. In essence, this is the relationship between supply and demand; viewer interest can create a kind of feedback loop that informs production, while the product can also shape and inform audience taste. Yet, while producers would rather claim that they were releasing products in response to demand, the sectors of the industry that suffered most from a saturated market, such as exhibitors and viewers, were far more skeptical of the cycle practice.

There was always an unresolved tension between cycles as a business strategy that the studios actively pursued or as an accidental occurrence that came about as a result of the wider commercial conditions, the impetus of the studio system, and its economies of scale. The economic environment encouraged the process of imitation and repetition of a successful formula until it was no longer commercially viable, and the studio's participation in this process was natural behavior within this environment, despite the occasional acknowledgment that overindulgence could alienate audiences and risk profits. While the function of cycles was built into the system itself, the decision of individual agents could facilitate or encourage the process. Yet the negative associations of cycles and the disapproval that they drew from critics, exhibitors, and trade commentators mean that the cycles would more likely have been described by industry spokespeople as accident rather than design. This sentiment is captured in David Hanna's 1938 editorial in *Independent Exhibitor's Film Bulletin*, where he describes cycles as a "serious threat" to Hollywood's preeminent position in global entertainment as they attract widespread criticism that pointed to the industry's supposed lack of imagination and ingenuity. He argues that cycles stem from producers' imitative practices and reluctance to risk an original production, and, yet, at the waning of a cycle avoid responsibility by blaming

the public or dismissing it as simply the nature of the entertainment business.³⁶ Similarly, critic Roland Barton, writing in response to Pare Lorentz's dismissal of exhibitors in 1935, purposefully emphasizes that cycles are not desired or demanded by exhibitors and traces cycles back to producers' "lack of originality" and the distribution system of block booking that prohibits exhibitors from being more selective about the product they screen.³⁷

Despite fulfilling a practical industrial function, cycles were criticized throughout the classical Hollywood era. A cursory glance at the trade press reveals that editorials exploring the presence and process of cycles were published every few years.³⁸ For example, Don Carl Gillette, writing of cycles in *Film Daily* in 1932, highlighted the pervasiveness of such cycle discourses in the early 1930s: "In the film field the minute three pictures of the same type appear on the horizon somebody yells 'Cycle!' and the whole industry, aided by the critics, proceeds forthwith to fire away at the newcomer without as much as waiting till they can see the white of their eyes [*sic*]."³⁹ In the same year, Sam Katz, vice president of Paramount Publix argued that the familiar "cycle evil" could be addressed through industry cooperation to eliminate "the costly conflicting release dates."⁴⁰ Industry discourse regularly focuses on distribution to mitigate the effect of cycles. This establishes the extent to which product circulation is a key component to the operation of cycles.

In response to such criticisms in the early 1930s, producers returned to an explanation of cyclic occurrence as a natural result of the production system. Editor Howard Smith and producers Darryl F. Zanuck and Samuel Goldwyn were reported in the trade papers as identifying cycles with mass production, the great quantity of programmer pictures being made, and the pattern of release dates.⁴¹ Zanuck and Cecil B. DeMille more explicitly linked cycles to the contemporary mode of production, arguing that the industry's gradual move to a production unit system, with its specialization and increased focus on individual pictures, should help to end cycles.⁴² At the end of 1933, Zanuck, who had been accused of being the man who "started cycles," wrote in *Motion Picture Daily*: "In my opinion mass production is due for the discard because the day of the 'cycle' is over. Practically every new type of picture has been made and there has been no background or type of story left untouched. Producers who play a game of 'Follow the Leader' must now depend on their own resources and ingenuity."⁴³ Zanuck appears to acknowledge that cycles were inevitable under Hollywood's mass production but suggests that a different production system with less imitation could lead to a reduction in cycles. Yet, just as the producers were distancing themselves from cyclic production, the promotional material appearing in the trade press explicitly sought to identify studios as instigators of successful picture cycles. Warner Bros., where Zanuck

was the head of production, declared in their trade-paper ads for *Night Nurse* (1931) (fig. 2) and *Blessed Event* (1932) that the films were certain to initiate a cycle. Similarly, in the promotions of their upcoming 1935 season, Warner Bros. asserted themselves as “cycle starters” and “the acknowledged pioneers of production cycles.”⁴⁴ Later, both Universal and Columbia also advertised pictures using a similar cycle discourse.⁴⁵ Utilized by studios with a reputation for low-budget production, these advertisements were attempts to publicize an image of the studio as being at the vanguard of production trends.

Following the decline of the prominent gangster and fallen-woman cycles, the years 1934–35 were perceived to be relatively cycle-free, with the trade press’s comments on studio production schedules noting the wide variety of topics, locales, and periods.⁴⁶ Consequently, *Film Daily*’s Don Carl Gillette speaks of this reduction of cycles together with the improvement in advertising and the general cleaning up of the screen in the past year.⁴⁷ Similarly, Hays, in announcing an improvement in quality and greater number of original screenplays, spoke of cyclic production in relation to the overall image and purpose of the industry: “Banality itself is a form of bad taste . . . and the imitativeness that results in a ‘cycle’ is a reproach to the recreational medium which serves a universal public—a public that demands ever-changing entertainment fare.”⁴⁸ The year 1935 was heralded as the return of cycles with the much-publicized G-men films resuscitating elements of the gangster cycle. With a number of pictures on the Department of Justice workers in production, Red Kann noted that Warner Bros. was rushing out their film to be the first.⁴⁹ Again, an industry meeting was held about the resurging gangster pictures, which utilized law enforcement figures as gunmen to ensure the narratives appeased the Production Code guidelines.⁵⁰ Hays subsequently wrote to Ned Depinet at RKO, “The quantitative element is a serious factor and it is going to be necessary to stagger the releases.”⁵¹ Although the stagger system was not implemented, the moralistic discourses and criticism surrounding cycles did seem to momentarily subside.

Similar discussions of cycles arose in the mid-1940s and carried over into the next decade. In 1946, when cycles of controversial subject matter again threatened the industry’s public image, the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), successor to the MPPDA, sought action. The Hollywood studios had profited during the war years, when attendance and box-office revenue peaked, but in the postwar era, Alexandra Gil argues, “with the boom in movie attendance caused by World War II, courts and regulators were not sympathetic to Hollywood claims of economic necessity for disapproved practices.”⁵² In May 1946, *Motion Picture Daily* described a recently published report that detailed an agreement between the major producers and Joe Breen of the Production

Get Ready For The 'Cycle,' Boys!

HOLLYWOOD'S BEST "LEADERSHIP CLAIMERS" HEAR ABOUT THE NEW WARNER BROS. SENSATION !



Barbara
STANWYCK
in the greatest of all dramatic thrills
NIGHT NURSE
 Ben Lyon, Clark Gable
 Joan Blondell
Directed by
WILLIAM WELLMAN

CRASHES through to new records at Atlantic City World's Premiere!!!
 A Sensation at the Branford in Newark!
BOOKED FOR LONG RUNS EVERYWHERE!

A WARNER BROS. *More than your contract calls for* HIT!

Fig. 2: Warner Bros. instigates the nurse cycle. (Warner Bros. ad, *Motion Picture Daily*, July 15, 1931, 3)

Code Administration (PCA) to abolish cycles of censorable subjects.⁵³ This was apparently precipitated by the recent Battle of Alcatraz event and subsequent submission of six separate jail-break stories by producers.⁵⁴ The trade press does not provide any details of how such an event would be achieved, but Breen intended to prevent the production and release of cycles. Thus, although the office of MPAA head Eric Johnston denied the report, in September 1946 *Variety* recorded Breen's announcement of an "outlawing" of cycles as part of a plan to avoid repetitious subject matter in short periods of time:

Breen's aim is to avoid a curse that has plagued Hollywood since the industry's birth. That's the fact that as soon as one successful picture is made on a particular theme, the tendency is for a flock of other studios to cash in by turning out other flicks on the same theme. This is particularly to be noted on topical yarns following a major news event ... Distribution execs in New York, who face the task of selling the cycle product, are more enthusiastic than studio toppers for the Breen scheme of avoiding duplication, although the feeling is general on both coasts that the move is necessary to avoid criticism of the industry and to keep public interest high.⁵⁵

The trade press linked Breen's effort to the recent announcement of successive production plans following the release of controversial pictures *The Lost Weekend* (1945) and *Duel in the Sun* (1946).⁵⁶ In his PCA position as overseer of scripts from across the studios, Breen felt that he was uniquely equipped to recognize and forestall these approaching cycles. Walter Wanger's subsequent production on alcoholism, *Smash-Up: The Story of a Woman* (1947), was, however, presented by the trade press as proof to the industry that Breen had little authority to prevent cycles that complied with the Code, and that producers were invariably reluctant to shelve a potentially profitable subject. After the death of Al Capone in 1947, the trade press recorded numerous production plans for gangster biopics, with a total of twenty-five related titles registered with the MPAA. At the same time, it was noted that the industry was facing church protests over the adaptation of *Forever Amber* (1947).⁵⁷ The studios were reluctant to attract further external scrutiny of their production practices at a time when audience attendance was beginning to drop, there was a public relations concern with the House of Un-American Activities Committee hearings, and a new antitrust decree was being introduced by the US government. It is likely that Breen's concern was over the further negative publicity that would be drawn to Hollywood should any of these controversial films spur a cycle of imitations. This led to a show of Code tightening and renewed threats from the PCA to withhold their seal from gangster pictures that failed to show criminals punished for their actions.⁵⁸

Starting in 1947, cinema attendance began to steadily decline and trade discussions regarding the underlying cause and the means to offset this frequently returned to cycles.⁵⁹ In *Variety's* annual roundups of Hollywood executives' opinions on the current state of the industry, cycles were a central topic in 1948, 1950, and 1951.⁶⁰ The attitudes expressed were inconsistent, however, and few solutions were offered. The executives fell into familiar positions: Nick Schenck (MGM) claimed cycles were the inevitable result of high quality production that drove imitation; Grad Sears (United Artists) stated that they were a lazy, imitative production practice; Barney Balaban (Paramount) argued that they were not necessarily imitative but often creative; and Herbert J. Yates (Republic) declared that there was no such thing as cycles. Jack Warner (Warner Bros.) elaborated on this last idea, arguing that a film's success was ultimately a question of timing, with a good picture made at the right time always able to do well, no matter where it sat in a sequence of similar pictures.

While Warner was right to emphasize the role of timing in a picture's success, exhibitors would have disagreed with his dismissal of release sequences. In this same period, *Motion Picture Daily* recorded the occurrence of cycle roundtables as part of industry conferences held by the Council of Motion Picture Organizations (COMPO) and the Theatre Owners of America (TOA). A report on the COMPO discussion of cycles in 1951 noted that the producers placed the responsibility with exhibitors who constantly demanded pictures similar to previous hits.⁶¹ Cycles nevertheless drew the increasing ire of exhibitors who blamed the studios for distributing the pictures in clumps that quickly saturated the market. At a 1949 conference of the Allied States Association of Motion Picture Exhibitors, complaints were voiced over the numbers of recent cycles and the results suffered by theater owners: rental fees were usually raised by distributors on a currently popular subject, while an influx of similar pictures was difficult to program, and small-town theaters were adversely affected.⁶²

In the case of small theaters, the initial interest that accompanied the relative novelty of the cycle's early stages would have waned by the time the films reached the subsequent runs. Independent exhibitors and theater owners were thus on the front line in experiencing the effects of cycles. At the same time, the higher turnover rate of programs in such small cinemas would have both magnified the repetitive experience of cycles for viewers and made the flood of films easier to identify. Yet small theaters were not the only exhibition sector that endured cycles. A 1951 report on the first-run cinemas in an area of Los Angeles also described the effect of cycles, not only in relation to programmers based on a similar formula or headline event but also for big-budget films. Exhibitor H. Dick Dickson defined cycles in terms of the "simultaneous release of the same type picture by all studios, or the simultaneous release in various territories of big important features with the same name stars playing the important leads."⁶³ Dickson reported a total of nine

musicals in three months, seven westerns, four detective stories between October and November, war pictures playing about once a month for nine months, and a total of ten message pictures, spaced roughly a month apart. Dickson's description again emphasizes the release of the pictures and their flow into cinemas as a key factor in creating the effect of the cycle for viewers. Despite these individual cycles having different rates of release, he argued that the result for audiences was often the same experience of repetition and inundation.

These exhibitors pointed out that even if cycles were not deliberately planned by producer-distributors, the consequence was the bunching of films in release during a given period.⁶⁴ In 1950, Bernie Brooks, owner of the New York Fabien theater circuit, again argued for an intervention in distribution: "The distributors would do us a great favor and themselves a great favor if they'd use more foresight and caution in scheduling releases to avoid this over-supply of similar product. It becomes very difficult for a buyer and booker to do justice to his houses or to the pictures when he's forced into the same position of dating the same type of product week after week."⁶⁵ Such remedial solutions were voiced by exhibitors in the early 1950s at a time when the "lost audience" was a fixture of the trade press and the industry was concerned with maintaining attendance numbers in the face of competing demands for time and money.⁶⁶ Exhibitors H. A. Cole and Dick Dickson argued that producers and distributors should coordinate release schedules and set up a priority system to tip off rival producers, while others suggested periodic interstudio story conferences to prevent duplication.⁶⁷ But, as industry writer Red Kann noted, these options would inevitably raise further issues such as who would determine the suitable quantity of films for a cycle, and who would get the "first crack." He also implied that such intertrade agreements among producers might not be legal.⁶⁸ Following moves in the late 1940s by the Department of Justice to halt the unfair trade practices of the studios, cross-studio agreements to monitor production and distribution in such a way could be interpreted as an act of collusion and market control. Consequently, in the aftermath of the 1948 Paramount decision, cycles were cited by producers as indicators of healthy competition between the studios, which could spur a higher standard of filmmaking.⁶⁹ In the Paramount decision, the US Supreme Court sought to break the vertical integration of Hollywood's studios by ordering the divorcement of their theater chains and by outlawing anticompetitive practices such as block booking.

The shifts instigated by the divorcement decree, such as the emphasis on big-budget spectacles, were seen to have altered the particular industrial environment that had initially given rise to the studios' use of cycles as a market strategy decades earlier. In 1959, *Variety* declared: "Significantly, the cycles are over. The big-studio thinking anent one money-making handling of certain type subject matter deserving another, like M-G's series ('Andy Hardy', 'The

Thin Man' etc.) for the most part is no more. This is largely because independent producers have taken over and more and more are trying to get away from the routine."⁷⁰ Here the trade writer specifically associated cycles with formula-based, low-budget, serialized production. In this case, the emphasis on differentiation and the rise of independent production was seen as a departure from cyclic production.

Perhaps the most notable features of the industry's discourse on cycles are its contradictions and inconclusiveness. As we have seen, cycles were a source of anxiety in the industry discourse throughout the classical Hollywood period. In the pages of the trade press, we have seen cycles censured in the following terms: they demonstrated unimaginative, lazy production practices based on the recycling of story material; they condoned immorality with their excessive onscreen representations of sexual or violent conduct, which could negatively influence viewers' behavior; they employed a generally sensationalist approach that exploited controversial topics for commercial purposes; and they lacked adequate differentiation, which saturated the market and resulted in box-office decline.

From the 1930s to the 1950s the familiar arguments about cycles were repeated throughout the industry, from powerful studio heads to small theater owners. Cycles were attacked as low-rent objects and complaints were raised regarding their bunching in exhibition. Arguments were periodically made in favor of regulating production and distribution, which were then refuted as being anticompetitive, and proponents of cycles claimed they were evidence of robust competition. These perennial discussions of cycles raise the question of whether the number of cycles increased alongside fluctuating quantities of total film output, or whether it was the objectionable nature of certain sensational cycles that merely generated greater discussion. A greater number of programmer cycles were produced in times of higher studio output, yet cycles were perhaps more obvious when there were fewer films being produced in total, as in the years of World War II or those following the 1948 consent decrees. The recurring expressions of concern over cycles in times of economic, social, or industrial uncertainty suggest that while they may have been increasingly pursued as a low-risk production strategy at such moments, cycles could be conjured as a convenient scapegoat for the ills of the industry, such as a decline in attendance or the pressure of external moral condemnation. The involvement of all levels of the industry in the operation of cycles meant that the attribution of direct responsibility could be avoided by any single party, be it producers, distributors, or exhibitors. Cycles could work as a method of categorization and differentiation when studios were planning their annual production and distribution schedules, allocating budgets, and marketing their films.

The tracing of the industry's discussion and active efforts to curb cycles reveals how wider criticisms of cyclic production gathered strength when

cycles were attached to subject matter deemed morally reprehensible, which could draw wider public criticism and negative publicity for Hollywood. Yet, once we broaden our understanding of cycles beyond the exploitation and low-budget pictures, it is clear that cycles had a significant economic function for Hollywood, being a low-risk strategy to plan and organize the manufacture and distribution of films within a system of mass production.

Surveying the trade discussions around cycles reveals that cycles, like genres, have a discursive basis; the meaning and form of cycles is construed differently according to the perspective of the speaker. An awareness of this is useful in informing how film scholars utilize cycles as a critical framework, and the broader perspective of contemporary attitudes to cycles can complement the more focused approach of cycle case studies. Finally, the role of distribution and release patterns in creating cycles, as highlighted in the trade discourses, can inform the direction of future cycles studies, while also pointing to the need for more work on the operations of cycles in different industrial contexts.

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