

INTRODUCTION



Movies and the 1910s

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The Birth of a (Modern) Nation

The 1910s represents a turning point for American society, a period that saw many of the key transformations that helped shape the United States into a modern nation. By the decade's close, America's global supremacy as a supplier of commercial goods was secured, in part due to the disruptions caused by World War I. Progressivism, the dominant political movement of the era, guided social policy and legislation with the goal of taming the mayhem of unchecked modernization. An enhanced sense of American identity was promoted by the spread of national distribution and communication networks that disseminated everything from mass circulation magazines to nationally branded consumer items, trends and fads like the wristwatch, the Raggedy Ann doll, and the Ouija board, and—of particular significance for a shared notion of Americanism—the movies. A host of new products, from Oreo cookies to the Frigidaire and the Model T, demonstrated how technological innovation continued to affect daily life. The horrors of World War I, the first highly technologized war, underscored that fact in a grim way. Liberalization within the social sphere brought the introduction of Planned Parenthood and the nation's first no-fault divorce law (in Nevada). In popular culture, ragtime music, the fox-trot dance craze, and lavish revues like the *Ziegfeld Follies* signaled the weakening grip of Protestant moral austerity and the growing importance of amusements emphasizing stimulation and fun. In the realm of high culture, American artists in various fields participated in the modernist experiment, with figures as diverse as painter Joseph Stella and writers Ezra Pound and Gertrude Stein redefining the boundaries of aesthetic expression. Stein, tellingly, related her stylistic innovations to a quintessentially modern and American mode of constant change encapsulated in the moviegoing experience. If the movies were indeed representative of American modernity during this decade, it was arguably the ever-changing nature of motion pictures and

the rapid transfiguration of the industry creating them that capture most vividly their representative quality.

For many, the image that comes to mind when thinking about America at this time is of teeming masses and traffic jams in Lower Manhattan or Chicago's Loop. Such pictures convey the strikingly modern experiential milieu of at least some portion of the population. It is important to bear in mind, however, that most Americans still lived in distinctly quieter places. The country's population in the 1910s was one-third of its current size (around 100 million versus 300 million) and, while urbanization was escalating, America remained a predominantly rural society. Quantifying population distribution is complicated due to idiosyncrasies and changes in the categories and methodologies employed by the census bureau, but as a rough approximation one can say that in this period about 60 percent of Americans lived in small towns or rural areas. One person in three worked on a farm, compared with one person in fifty today. Only about one person in four or five lived in a major city (that is, one of the twenty to twenty-five cities with populations over a quarter million).

Given the rural majority, what justifies emphasizing modernization as the keynote of the 1910s? One answer would be that all cultures have centers and peripheries, and it is invariably the centers—hotbeds of expression, innovation, industry, commerce, politics, and civil society—that define an age and rightly attract historical attention. A more compelling answer, the one that informs this volume, is that the 1910s was a time when the center reached into the periphery on an unprecedented scale, due to new technologies and systems of transportation, communication, and distribution. The boundaries between urban and rural America became less distinct. An urban national culture infiltrated the hinterlands as never before, rendering the periphery's consciousness of and contact with the cultural center more extensive and palpable than in previous decades. With ever-expanding transportation networks and the emergence of mass production, mass marketing, and mass communications (especially the cinema), American society became more integrated, more interconnected, and more dynamic in its circulation of goods, images, ideas, and people.

This is not to suggest that a rural/urban divide no longer existed; small-town America was largely buffered from the sensory and heterosocial intensity of the nation's metropolitan centers, and even a casual glance at the period's entertainments will find that popular culture never tired of highlighting comic and moral differences between provincial country folk and urbane urbanites. In the many films focusing on small-town life, country lads and lasses are virtuous, albeit awkward and naive, while city slickers

and “vamps” are suave but degenerate. Yet this very motif underscores the fact that the issue of contact and interaction between the two was a timely phenomenon engaging social reflection.

The primary engine driving new forms of interconnection was the tremendous rise of big business during the decade, a force reflecting major technological innovations, a movement toward stringent “rationalization” (i.e., the implementation of optimally efficient techniques and systems of corporate management, manufacturing, distribution, marketing, accounting, and so on), and access to enormous sums of investment capital to finance large-scale commercial expansion. The growth of big business is exemplified by the rise of Ford Motors, a company whose stunning success stemmed from quintessential examples of industrial rationalization (to such a degree that the term “Fordism” is often used as shorthand for “rationalization”). Automobile manufacturing began in the mid-1890s in the United States. In the 1910s, Henry Ford and his engineers transformed the automobile from a flimsy plaything of the rich to a rugged, practical machine affordable to mainstream consumers. He did so by focusing on a single simplified and standardized design—the Model T—and innovating ultra-efficient manufacturing techniques, most significantly the moving assembly line, which, upon its introduction in 1913, cut the labor required to assemble a chassis from 12.5 hours to 1.5 hours. Six thousand Model Ts were manufactured in 1908, its first year of production. By 1916, that number had increased almost one-hundredfold, to nearly 600,000 cars, while the purchase price had dropped from \$850 to \$360 (equivalent, in today’s dollars adjusted for inflation, to a drop from just over \$19,000 to \$7,000). During that period, Ford’s distribution network rose from 215 to 8,500 dealerships across the country (Tedlow 125, 137). Overall, 8 million automobiles (of every make) were registered in the country by the decade’s end, up from just under half a million in 1910 (Blanke 3).

To cite a few other examples of the decade’s shift toward big business on a national scale, the A & P discount grocery chain expanded from 650 stores in 1914 to 4,600 stores six years later. Mail-order giant Sears, Roebuck saw its net sales increase from \$61 million in 1910 to \$245 million in 1920 (adjusted for inflation, the equivalent of \$1.4 billion and \$2.5 billion today). Sales of Coca-Cola rose from just over 4 million gallons in 1910 to almost 19 million gallons in 1919 (Tedlow 29, 194, 280). Such figures indicate not only the upsurge in consumerism that characterizes the decade, but also the degree to which the conveniences afforded by an ever more technologically sophisticated manufacturing sector, delivered through ever

more intricate delivery systems, permeated the life of every American who could afford to partake of them. Many could, as the decade witnessed unprecedented increases in economic output and average wages. But balancing the unbridled expansion was increased concern for the social costs attached to that expansion.

With the election of Woodrow Wilson as president in 1912, the continued influence of Progressivism on American politics was assured. Progressivism, sustained through the previous administrations of Roosevelt and Taft, had affected not only government, but the related spheres of journalism, academia, and activism. Committed to battling the excesses of big business and the potentially dehumanizing effects of modern life (largely attributable to the Industrial Revolution), advocates of Progressivism were proponents of efficiency, expertise, social justice, and, above all, the notion that it was the proper role of government to implement them. As the name implies, Progressivism was committed to an ideal of progress, a betterment of living conditions that nonetheless often put its faith in the power of trained authorities and bureaucratic systems to effect the necessary changes. Progressivism accounted for many of the notable achievements and trends of the decade, from the introduction of labor reforms (such as the eight-hour work week, minimum wage guarantees, and the increased acceptance of unionism) to the journalistic tradition of muckraking (dedicated to exposing fraudulent business practices, social inequities, and government corruption) to the reining in of industrial combines through trust-busting.

The Progressive commitment to efficiency often found itself at odds with its own drive for improved social justice and enhanced democracy. For example, Progressives championed the employment of city managers—professionals hired to oversee the daily operations of municipal governments—even though this empowered non-elected officials and potentially opposed the will of the people. Similarly, their zeal to eradicate social problems that they believed interfered with progress, such as prostitution and the consumption of liquor, led them to propose solutions that not only impeded individual liberties, but also were ultimately ineffective, since they tended to attack the symptom without addressing the root causes. Critics would argue that the Mann Act of 1910, prohibiting the transportation of women across state lines for “immoral purposes,” may have thwarted so-called “white slave” traffic, but also led to a crackdown on brothels that simply forced many prostitutes onto the streets. Similarly, the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1919, which rendered the production and sale of liquor illegal beginning a year later, created a huge

underground economy and inadvertently aided the operations of organized crime in the process.

Even though the Progressive agenda was riven by its own inconsistencies, the movement's achievements during this decade remain remarkable. Aside from the labor reforms already mentioned, the Wilson administration alone was responsible for an extensive list of changes to the operations and influence of the federal government, among them the introduction of a national income tax; the establishment of both the Federal Reserve system and the Federal Trade Commission; changes to tariff laws, loan policies, and, eventually, in 1920, ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, extending the right to vote to women. Progressive reforms touched many other aspects of public life as well. An emphasis on the value of education led to a substantial rise in funding, so that it reached \$1 billion by the end of the decade, with per-student spending vaulting from \$4.64 to \$9.60 (Blanke 26). Progressives were influenced by John Dewey's child-centered approach to pedagogy, a philosophy that led to curricular reforms, better training of teachers, and more attention paid to the benefits of age-specific learning environments (including the widespread introduction of kindergarten during the decade, and a large increase in the number of high schools). The need for child protection prompted the creation of a wide range of social service agencies, epitomized by the federal Children's Bureau, established in 1912. The Bureau gathered statistics on everything from infant mortality to juvenile delinquency, an endeavor that helped provide the data required to support Progressive legislation. Overall, the Progressive tendency was to educate mothers in the proper raising of their children and to lessen the strain on childrearing (even to the point of providing monetary support, as with the provision of "mothers' pensions" throughout the decade). While Progressive efforts definitely helped ameliorate some of the most pernicious policies of earlier eras (including child labor), they also led to intrusive and moralizing attempts to monitor the lives of the poor and of immigrants under the assumption that professional experts possessed superior knowledge.

While poorer females were often the focus of Progressive initiatives, the burgeoning middle class produced numerous women who helped define the activist dimension of Progressivism, particularly within the domain of social justice. Civic leaders such as Jane Addams set the agenda for aiding urban ills through settlement houses (institutions established to provide support for poor urban women), while crusaders like Margaret Sanger pushed for birth control to be provided to women. The common drive for suffrage proved a unifying issue. Its implicit demand for a rejection of outmoded

ways of defining womanhood also contributed to the social phenomenon of the “New Woman.” This label attached itself to those who broke with previous traditions by pursuing a more active and independent lifestyle, replete with dancing in public, smoking, and engaging in athletic pursuits. As consumerism increased throughout the decade, advertisers used the image of the New Woman to entice women to embrace a lifestyle defined by indulgence and self-involvement, an aim at odds with the loftier goals of the Progressive impulse.

Despite the expressed Progressive concern for the improvement of living conditions of all Americans, certain groups fared better than others. Poverty continued to be widespread, especially among immigrants, rural inhabitants, and African Americans. Upholding segregationist policies, the Wilson administration did little to aid the plights of Blacks in America during this time, leaving advocacy for their rights to groups like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), founded in 1909 and dedicated to upholding the Fourteenth Amendment provisions that had expressly ensured equal protection under the law to former slaves. Blacks found themselves subject to sustained and often violent racism during the decade, particularly demonstrated by the recurrence of lynchings and the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan. By the latter part of the decade, increased dissatisfaction with their situation and better prospects in the North resulting from World War I (as enlisted men vacated jobs and immigration slowed to a trickle) fueled the Great Migration and contributed to major race riots in 1917 and 1919.

Barred from equal access to most of the practices and institutions that define a citizen’s daily life, African Americans still managed to influence white society through one means in particular—music. Syncopated rhythms, derived from African musical styles, became popularized through ragtime. Demand for sheet music flourished, due largely to dramatic increases in the sale of pianos for home parlors. Vying with the music of Tin Pan Alley as the popular choice of sheet music consumers, ragtime was played in the parlors of millions of white Americans, raising the hackles of many cultural critics, but also paving the way for the acceptance of other homegrown musical forms created primarily by Blacks, such as the blues and jazz. The broad popularity of music by Scott Joplin, W. C. Handy, and “Jelly Roll” Morton pointed to ways in which black culture could influence the white-dominated mainstream. Irving Berlin appropriated ragtime, for example, for his massive hit “Alexander’s Ragtime Band.” It also demonstrates how the spread of popular music became increasingly dependent on centralized distribution (mass-produced sheet music and audio recordings)

and was fostered by an urban ethos of sophisticated entertainment that motion pictures would also tap into as the decade progressed.

Modernization influenced the fads and leisure pursuits of Americans throughout the decade. Mass production and improved systems of delivery sped the dissemination of prized consumer goods across the nation, and even toys and games capitalized on the fascination with technology that defined the age. The Erector Set, which allowed children to construct their own miniature versions of skyscrapers, the Singer toy sewing machine, and Model T joke books, are different examples of playthings owing their existence to the modern era. Modern marketing also influenced the way goods were sold, with corporate icons (like the Campbell Soup kids, which became the model for a pair of popular dolls) demonstrating the newfound popularity of the tie-in. The omnipresence of advertising is one of the clearest markers of the ethos of modernity that blanketed the country, as advertising revenues soared, doubling to a total of close to \$1.5 billion by the end of the 1910s (Lears 162).

The most obvious beneficiary of this additional advertising spending was the mass circulation magazine, including such stalwarts as the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, and *Cosmopolitan*. It was not uncommon for half of such a magazine's pages to be devoted to advertising. Since the substantial revenues generated by the sale of advertising space offset production costs, publishers could keep the price of magazines low, maintain high circulations, and, in turn, ensure their attractiveness to advertisers. Inevitably, advertising also helped sell the war to the American public: the single most recognizable image attached to enlistment efforts was James Montgomery Flagg's poster of Uncle Sam soliciting prospective soldiers through the direct "I Want You."

America's involvement in the war was measured at first: when war broke out in August 1914, Wilson issued a formal proclamation of neutrality. However, economic ties with Allied Powers, especially Britain, and a British naval blockade obstructing trade with Germany soon made the United States neutral in name only. The war was a tremendous economic boon to Americans, as the Allies purchased billions of dollars of weaponry and supplies and took out billions more in loans from American banks. By contrast, the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, and Bulgaria) gained virtually no material or economic assistance.

Tensions escalated in early 1915, when Germany announced that it would target for surprise submarine attack all enemy ships in the seas around the British Isles. On 7 May, a German U-boat sank the British passenger liner *Lusitania* off the coast of Ireland (en route from New York to



The film industry's patriotism on display: Fatty Arbuckle in Times Square putting up a poster for the 1917 Liberty Loan drive. National Archives and Records Administration.

Liverpool): 1,198 people perished, including 128 American citizens. Although the incident spurred anti-German sentiment and prompted Wilson and Congress to initiate measures toward increased military preparedness, many Americans still opposed involvement.

Antiwar separatism became an untenable position in March 1917, after U-boats sank seven American merchant ships and after revelation of “the Zimmermann telegram”: a secret communiqué from the German foreign secretary to his ambassador in Mexico advancing the idea of a German-Mexican alliance (encouraging Mexico to invade the United States and win back Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona). On 6 April, after exhorting that “the world must be made safe for democracy,” President Wilson issued a declaration of war. Domestic opposition receded quickly as America mobilized, in part due to a major propaganda initiative mounted by the government’s purpose-created Committee on Public Information. The film industry played an important role in the success of the CPI, especially promoting the sale of war bonds.

In accordance with the Selective Service Act, 24 million men registered for the draft, and 2.8 million were called up for service, joining roughly 2

million volunteers. American forces engaged in their first battles in northern France in May 1918. Helping stop a German offensive, and then fighting a successful counteroffensive, U.S. troops hastened the armistice, which began on 11 November 1918. In all, 52,000 Americans died in battle—a small fraction of the nearly 10 million military casualties suffered in the war overall. Sixty thousand more American soldiers died from an outbreak of influenza that would soon spread around the globe, causing an estimated 50–100 million deaths worldwide. It was by far the deadliest pandemic in modern history (or perhaps recorded history: by some estimates, it claimed more lives than even the Black Plague).

At home, the postwar “return to normalcy” was anything but normal, marked by widespread labor strife, racial conflict, and political repression triggered by terrorist bombings and a resulting Red Scare. Wilson participated actively in the European peace treaty negotiations, calling (ultimately unsuccessfully) for nonvindictive conditions of surrender by the Central Powers. His one great diplomatic accomplishment was the formation of a League of Nations as a mechanism for avoiding future wars. In a bitter defeat at home, however, Congress rebuffed the plan, fearing it would entangle the United States in international conflicts without pressing national interest.

Casting an influence over every aspect of life in America, the war years offered enhanced employment opportunities to Blacks and women, while also bolstering the fortunes of unions that helped support the war effort. Federal bureaucracy increased during this period, including the formation of the Federal Bureau of Investigation in 1917. Popular culture channeled patriotism through songs like George M. Cohan’s “Over There” and through the resonant work of magazine illustrators, the most famous of whom was Norman Rockwell; his iconic work for the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* first appeared in 1916. Rockwell’s combination of realism and nostalgia for the simple pleasures of a premodern era remind us again of the transitional nature of this period. By the same token, changes to the ways Americans ate and dressed during the 1910s demonstrate as clearly as any other social shifts the combined influence of modernity and World War I on the decade.

Whereas 1910 still saw women’s fashions favoring the hourglass silhouette produced by the constricting corset and layered, ornate clothing, the influence of the New Woman as a model of increased freedom and vitality prompted the adoption of looser, more comfortable garments as the decade wore on. Numerous developments affected fashion trends. The increased popularity of public dancing by mid-decade, spurred by various

dance crazes, including the fox-trot and turkey-trot, required female clothing that permitted freedom of bodily movement. Similarly, the growing acceptance of athletics as part of a middle-class existence (encouraged in part by the active lifestyles of celebrities, including movie stars) translated into a more liberal conception of casual clothing. The normalization of automobile travel also dictated the adoption of garments for riding that permitted one to ride in the open air. And the scarcity of materials during the war years led to simpler, more relaxed clothing styles for both sexes and a reduced palette of colors. Advertising played a role in transmitting fashion trends all the more readily to the national populace and certainly led to the popularization of cosmetics and other beauty aids.

A parallel trend toward lighter diets and increased convenience defined the way Americans approached eating and food preparation during the decade. Technological innovations in the realm of kitchen appliances and cookware permitted a wider range of meal choices, while lifestyle changes rendered the eating habits of an earlier era outdated. Breakfast, in particular, became a meal defined by both convenience and lighter foods. Packaged breakfast cereals proliferated during the decade as companies like Kellogg's, Quaker, and Post profited from the assumed health benefits of their products. Of course, not all convenience foods conferred healthiness onto their consumers: snacks of various kinds became popular ways to satisfy appetites between meals, and World War I only increased the appeal of chocolate bars and chewing gum, not to mention cigarettes. Overall, the lifestyle changes introduced during the 1910s are evidence of a nation constantly involved in the process of redefining itself in light of the influence of technology and media, among other modernizing forces.

Struggles for Control, Systems of Efficiency

As American society faced a series of challenges and changes, the American film industry was undergoing its own transformation. The decade began with a relatively new structure imposed by the recently established Motion Picture Patents Company (alternately known as the MPPC or the Trust) in its attempt to monopolize production. Strictly speaking, the MPPC was set up as a patent pooling organization, but it was designed to drive out of business all producers and distributors who were not members. The Trust desired to restrict the market only to those producers who were part of the original cartel, organizing exchanges (small-scale distributors working within defined territories) and exhibitors in the process, by issuing licenses allowing them to show Trust films (and use Trust-produced equipment).

These licensed exchanges and exhibitors were charged fees for the privilege of showing MPPC product, a practice that invited considerable resentment. The Trust also chose to disregard a substantial number of peripheral exchanges and exhibitors that were unlicensed and therefore, they assumed, would wither away. Ignoring this portion of the market would prove to be a fatefully unwise business decision.

Although its chief aim was to profit by eliminating competition, to its credit, the MPPC injected some much-needed supply stability into what had become an industry growing too quickly on the demand side. An estimated 12,000 nickelodeon theaters clamored for films. The Trust initiated numerous improvements that allowed exchanges and exhibitors to plan their own business practices with more confidence. Chief among these was the establishment of a 1,000-foot format standard, regular release schedules, and more attentive control over the quality of prints in circulation. In 1910, the MPPC moved to extend its monopolistic designs by creating the General Film Company, a parallel organization that systematically purchased every licensed exchange, effectively placing a large sector of the distribution sector under its control. The sole holdout among the licensees was the Greater New York Film Company, owned by William Fox (who would subsequently found the Fox Film Corporation).

As vigorously as the MPPC pursued its goal of total market control, it could not keep pace with the burgeoning market. Intense demand for films allowed for the emergence of an opposing faction, the Independents. These producers, who primarily courted those exchanges and theater owners who remained unlicensed (and those licensees who chafed against Trust control), emerged almost as soon as the MPPC made its intentions known, and by 1910 there were several Independents already in operation, including the New York Motion Picture Company, Powers, Nestor, and, most important in terms of later developments, Carl Laemmle's Independent Moving Picture Company, commonly known as IMP. Nineteen ten saw the creation of more Independent firms of substance, including Thanouser, Reliance, Solax, and the American Film Company. Many of these companies established themselves by hiring away personnel from established Trust firms, particularly the most prized asset, actors. This poaching of acting talent by upstart companies demonstrates that "picture personalities" were fast becoming one of the cinema's most identifiable and promotable ingredients.

The various fledgling Independent producers soon realized that they would need to organize themselves in a manner similar to the Trust if they were to survive. Accordingly, a few of the leaders of the Independent



An example of the Independents' campaign against the MPPC, ca. 1910 (Bowers 63). ("Simoleon" is period slang for "dollar.")

faction, Laemmle among them, established the Motion Picture Distributing and Sales Company in April 1910 to provide unlicensed exchanges with a steady supply of Independent films. The Sales Company was sufficiently successful in its efforts that it managed to provide twenty-one reels a week to its exchanges by June, while the Trust was guaranteeing thirty (Bowser 81).

The basic structure of Trust versus Independents would prevail for several years, and this version of limited competition within a climate of strong demand led to an increasingly powerful production sector. Limiting the presence of foreign films on domestic screens also tipped the balance. While films from France in particular had dominated the U.S. market in the pre-Trust years, the MPPC cannily limited the number of foreign firms allowed to join its cartel. As Eileen Bowser has pointed out, the combination of curtailed access to the American market by foreign film companies and an improving rate of productivity led to a growing percentage of American films circulating within the market: "By the end of 1912, national production accounted for well over 80 per cent of the American market, at least according to the number of film titles released (not copies sold)" (Bowser 85). By the time World War I had decimated foreign production (most pointedly in France and Italy), U.S. control of the world market would fol-

low. American domination of its own market was the economic foundation upon which its subsequent success in many other countries was built. Producers could sell their films at a relatively low price to ensure competitiveness elsewhere.

Ironically, the Independent faction experienced its own internal divisions by the time it had reached parity with the Trust. The Sales Company's domination of Independent distribution was shaken by the formation of the Mutual Film Corporation in 1912, a breakaway firm that soon attracted numerous companies that had previously leased their films through Sales. The success of Mutual forced a reorganization of the Sales Company, renamed Universal Film Manufacturing Company later the same year. Universal would remain a vital force within the industry, much more so than the MPPC, which found itself attacked on numerous fronts. Competition from the Independents eroded the Trust's early domination of the market, and the growing popularity of features caught at least some of its members off-guard. Beset by government legal attacks (for violation of antitrust legislation), the Trust was officially dissolved by court decree in 1915. It was effectively defunct by that time anyway, a victim of ever-changing market forces.

The robust demand for films during this decade spurred producers to find ways to ensure a steady flow of product. The reforms introduced by the MPPC went some way to ensuring supply would meet demand, but changes to the mode of production aimed further at increasing efficiency and, hence, productivity. It is during the decade of the 1910s that one sees concerted efforts toward increased rationalization of production duties, leading to the ascendancy of the producer as the central organizing figure. Investing control in the position of a central producer introduced the concept of managerial oversight to film production: no longer did directors have the same autonomy that previously they had enjoyed. Scripts became blueprints for budget-based decision making and delegation of duties. These changes were prepared for by establishment of the 1,000-foot reel as the standard length for films, a common unit of exchange that defined norms for the production sector, leading to a greater standardization in production procedures. Key craft areas were identified, and labor divided among task-specialized departments. A Vitagraph promotional pamphlet from 1913 depicts a host of departments, ranging from scenic to costume to property to carpentering and upholstery. The company lists its workforce as numbering 400 in its Brooklyn studios alone (exclusive of extras). In describing its managerial structure, the pamphlet notes that "each one of [the company's] branches is governed by its head, and the whole force is under the Studio Manager,

who lays out the work, and is responsible for the performance of the work and the fulfillment of the duties apportioned each day. The regular Vitagraph production is one complete picture a day, or six a week. Often it reaches ten a week."

As long as distribution practices favored the delivery of a slate of single-reel films to exhibitors, the overall quality of a producer's output proved more important than the attributes of any individual title. The price of leasing a film was standardized, so there was little incentive for producers to undertake ambitious, expensive productions or multi-reel films. When on occasion a producer did make a multi-reel film, invariably it would be broken up and distributed as a set of single-reel units.

For the first several years of the decade, the dominance of the single-reel format led to a degree of predictability in every sector of the film industry. Within the realm of production, the 1,000-foot length provided the parameters for scenario construction: filmmakers came to know exactly what was required to turn out a story lasting approximately the same amount of time for each title. For distributors, the uniform length ensured an interchangeability of product, so that different titles from different producers could be mixed and matched at will when programs of films were offered to exhibitors. And theater owners easily integrated films of this nature into their preexisting variety programs. An evening's entertainment at a small-scale theater would involve a bill of five to six one-reel films, illustrated song slides (that encouraged audience participation), and a range of live entertainment, typically music or vaudeville performance, depending on the theater's budget, size, and cultural aspirations. The ever-changing bill of fare meant that patrons did not need to worry about start times for the performance: if one walked in during the middle of a film, one could be certain that another would commence in a few minutes. When the single-reel format was displaced by the feature, exhibitors lost control over the organization of their programs; producers assumed that power.

Since fixed receipts and fixed film lengths discouraged individually distinctive productions, some producers focused on strength in particular genres to differentiate their products. For example, Keystone was known almost exclusively for comedy; American for westerns. Other studios relied more on the popularity of familiar actors. Promotion of motion picture actors did not begin in earnest until the start of the 1910s, in part as a tactic by Independent producers to draw attention to their new offerings. The most high-profile defection of a star from an established company to a new concern at the beginning of the decade was that of Florence Lawrence. Previously billed as the Biograph Girl, her fame derived from her presence in

that company's films. Lured by Carl Laemmle to IMP, Lawrence was made the focus of an elaborate advertising campaign devised by Laemmle to manufacture controversy and put her name in the news. The IMP ads stressed the falseness of "reports" of Lawrence's death in a streetcar accident and asserted they were planted by unnamed "rivals" to deceive the public into believing one of its favorite actresses would no longer be making films. Through this hoax, IMP achieved both its objectives: it cemented the association of Lawrence with her new employer, and it changed the terms of her recognition, transforming her from the Biograph Girl to Florence Lawrence.

Despite what some accounts have argued, the Trust companies were no more reticent about advertising their stars by name than their Independent counterparts. The MPPC's Kalem was the first firm to publicize its stars by making lobby cards of their images available to exhibitors; Edison provided full cast lists in its advertising before any other company; and Vitagraph promoted its premiere star, Florence Turner (the Vitagraph Girl), with personal appearances at the same time that IMP was capitalizing on the Lawrence rumors. Recognition of fan interest in stars fueled companies' efforts to promote them in whatever way possible. Just as film was a reproducible commodity that could be circulated easily, so too were star images, most obviously through photographs. Images of stars soon appeared in numerous different forms, on everything from postcards to pennants, from pillow tops to the handles of spoons. Every star image further spurred audience interest in the originating vehicles—the films in which they appeared. And, as audience investment in stars intensified, advertisers learned to employ stars to sell an array of consumer goods, connecting them to soap and perfume, among other health and beauty items. Such campaigns initiated a longstanding tradition of aligning stars with both consumerism and physical self-improvement.

With studios now employing the collective resources of publicity departments (Vitagraph's 1913 pamphlet claimed that to "popularize its players" was one of its promotion people's chief aims), an entire infrastructure developed to cultivate fan interest, including the emergence of publications designed to provide more information on the stars for a curious public. Several new publications emerged that devoted themselves to stories about stars, typically adorned with full-page photos. Journals such as *Motion Picture Story Magazine* and *Photoplay* existed chiefly to provide the public with a never-ending stream of copy about the stars whom filmgoers had come to adore. Popularity contests were held to determine which stars commanded the largest fan base, and as the industry structure shifted to

privilege the presence of particular stars in feature films, the salaries of the most popular stars rocketed upward to reflect their market value.

The centrality of stars to the industry's publicity machine and to key industrial strategies such as block booking (in which theater managers had to accept numerous films packaged together) affirms the growing clout of actors, but also points to how quickly fan culture had developed around the figure of the star. Aiding in this process was the concentration of production activity on the West Coast, gravitating toward a cluster of communities near Los Angeles that would eventually come to be known as Hollywood. Although geographic and symbolic identification of the filmmaking community with this iconic name still lay in the future, the industry began to be associated more consistently with the West Coast from the mid-1910s onward. Filmmaking companies had been traveling west for the benefits of extended sunlight and varied terrain since the beginning of the decade, and by 1915 the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce reported that "close to fifteen thousand residents earned their living in the film industry, drawing some five million in wages annually" (Stamp, "Filmland" 334). With numerous companies building extensive studios on the cheap land California provided, an image of exoticism and extravagance attached itself to motion picture production, especially when the studios promoted themselves as glamorous versions of municipalities, devising names like Inceville and Universal City. The latter studio actively courted visitors by offering tours that afforded firsthand views of the wonders of moviemaking. Fan magazines played their part in promoting the appeals of the so-called movie colony, featuring photo spreads of both the studios and the lavish lifestyles of select stars. Readers were encouraged to imagine the lives of those in "Filmland" as an enhanced version of reality, a parallel to the increased opulence on display in the films produced.

The film industry coveted the female audience in particular, in part because women aided its campaign for respectability, but equally because they were a prime consumer group. And with women (and children) a central target of motion picture promotion, through newspapers and mass-circulation magazines, in addition to theater advertising and fan magazines, custodians of public mores continued to pay attention to the content of motion pictures and the conduct of those making them. At the turn of the decade, exhibitors in New York convinced the People's Institute, a civic body, to establish what would become the National Board of Censorship. The Board viewed most of the films shown in the country, deciding whether they violated obscenity standards or condoned criminal acts. Despite this effort on the industry's part, state censorship boards

emerged throughout the 1910s, arising in reaction to the perceived laxity of the Board (which was often seen as an arm of the industry it was supposed to oversee). Ohio, Pennsylvania, Kansas, and Maryland all set up censor boards during the decade, and a pivotal legal case emerged out of the industry's attempt to challenge the constitutionality of these state regulators. The Mutual Film Corporation sought to have the boards disbanded on the grounds that they thwarted free speech. In 1915 the Supreme Court heard the case and decided that movies were not worthy of the protection accorded the press and forms of artistic expression, opting instead to describe motion pictures as "a business pure and simple." For many years thereafter, this decision left cinema vulnerable to the prospect of increased external regulatory pressures; fearing the repercussions of oppressive state censorship, the film industry instead practiced various forms of self-regulation over the succeeding decades, steering clear of controversy and contentious subject matter in an effort to prove that it was nothing more than a purveyor of "harmless entertainment" (Grieverson, *Policing* 202).

The Feature Era Begins: Stars, Picture Palaces, and a New Business Model

The mid-1910s was a period of revolutionary transformation in the film industry, one in which virtually every practice of production, distribution, exploitation, and exhibition underwent profound reconfiguration. The upheaval recast not just the moviegoing experience but the entire business model upon which leading firms in the industry operated.

The years immediately preceding the advent of the feature had been a period of hyper-demand in which the industry's principal goal was to impose order and deliver a fixed commodity at a fixed price, and in which a well-defined oligopoly sought to stifle competition by controlling patents and exerting legal barriers to entry. The next phase involved a redefinition of both the industry's central commodity—from single-reeler to feature film—and its dominant exhibition venue—from small nickelodeon to grand picture palace. The focus shifted from simply coping with demand to doing everything possible to expand the market and maximize profit potential. The stupendous rise of the feature film and picture palace entailed a new commercial calculus: bigger, better films enjoyed in bigger, better theaters would generate greater public demand for cinema, and, in conjunction with considerably higher ticket prices and hugely increased seating capacities, would ultimately yield much larger profits. The costs would be much greater, but so would the returns. Bold entrepreneurs like Paramount's

Adolph Zukor proved the familiar economic dictum that you have to spend money to make money. Thinking big not only maximized profit, but also impeded competition. The more or less ineffectual legal constraints on competition employed by the MPPC gave way to brute economic constraints, as industry leaders turned moviemaking into a big money proposition demanding prohibitively huge capital and logistical resources.

The earliest experiments in the exhibition of feature films took place in 1912, when a handful of historical-biographical epics based on successful plays such as *Queen Elizabeth*, *Cleopatra*, and *Richard III* were screened in rented legitimate theaters. The publicity and commercial success they enjoyed led to a seven-fold increase the following year, when 56 features were made by American companies, and again in 1914, when almost 350 features were produced. Still, those numbers were insignificant next to the roughly 5,000 shorts that were released each year (Singer, "Feature"). Rank-and-file exhibitors were entirely satisfied with the daily-change variety format to which they were accustomed. Given the industry's well-established film-rental infrastructure and comparatively low rental prices, few saw any reason to rock the boat. Not only were feature films much more expensive to rent (around \$600 or \$700 per week for a large urban theater, compared with \$100–\$150 for a week of daily changed variety programs), they were also a hassle; since supply was erratic, there was no coherent distribution network, and contracts and prices had to be negotiated on a film-by-film basis with a scattering of different distributors. Moreover, mainstream movie theaters served an informal, come-and-go-as-you-please audience. Exhibitors understandably would have had concerns that long narratives demanding that the entire audience be in place from the start would curtail casual walk-ins. They also saw variety programs as inherently flop-proof, since, unlike features, a short film that failed to please would not spoil an entire showing. Consequently, feature films had virtually no impact on mainstream exhibition for several years after their introduction (contrary to accounts by many historians). Features belonged to an essentially different exhibition circuit comprised of playhouses, concert halls, and general-purpose auditoriums. In most cases, features were screened only irregularly, often just on Sundays, or during the summertime that was off-season in legitimate theaters.

This began to change at the end of 1914, however, when Paramount—by far the most active feature-film concern—introduced the first full-service standing-order rental program. Exhibitors contracted for a year's worth of films, two five-reelers a week. Booking features was now just as convenient as booking shorts. But the high cost was still a major problem for most the-

aters. Paramount established a zone-clearance system so that smaller theaters in smaller markets could pay considerably less than large urban first-run venues. Even so, Paramount's package was still well beyond the reach of a great many modest theaters. Features were predicated on a new calculus, designed for theaters that could sell tickets in high volume and at high prices. Big, well-appointed theaters profited very handsomely. Run-of-the-mill theaters—rural theaters, neighborhood theaters, vestigial downtown nickelodeons, dog-eared converted playhouses—were in a bind, not fancy enough to justify significant price hikes and, even with swanky remodeling, still less alluring than picture palaces offering newer films, grander amenities, and better music. More to the point, they still were simply too small to sell enough tickets to turn a profit after paying out the cost of feature programming. A great many theaters of fewer than 600 seats went out of business in the mid-1910s.

Feature films and picture palaces were mutually enabling and dependent, bound together like the two strands of a double helix. One could not exist without the other: high-volume, high-price exhibition norms gave producers the revenue necessary for making expensive, attractive features with major stars; expensive, attractive features with major stars were necessary to fill large theaters and merit higher ticket prices. The highest-profile early picture palace was the 3,500-seat Strand Theater in Times Square, which opened in mid-1914. It marked the inauguration of a theater building boom across the country. More than just an urban phenomenon, it reshaped the contours of film exhibition far and wide. As Zukor commented in 1918, "It is no longer surprising to find a \$200,000 theater in a town of 25,000 people" (483).

Features surged in number after 1914 and by any measure constituted the film industry's dominant product by around 1916. Interestingly, more short films were produced in 1915 than in any previous year, but thereafter they declined sharply for several years, finally settling into a production level consistent with their new role as accompaniments to the main feature (Singer, "Feature"). The profit margin on shorts was slim, and studios that were behind the curve on the industry's transformation were never able to recover: Kalem and Lubin ceased production in 1916; Edison and Biograph called it quits in 1917; Essanay and Selig closed down in 1918. Vitagraph and Universal were able to survive the transition by focusing on serials (which, while shorts, resembled features in their reliance on high-profile star-centered promotion) and by ramping up feature production.

Although stars were a commercial factor in the industry from early in the decade onward, their importance in the film industry grew exponentially as

Stunning Mary Pickford---Only 19 Now---Quits \$10,000 "Movies" Career to Shake Her Golden Locks As a Belasco Star

By Gertrude M. Price.

NEW YORK, Jan. 9. Mary Pickford of the "movies" has become a Belasco star!

A few months ago she was a \$10,000 "movie" actress, the best paid girl in her profession.



The jump to the speaking stage was made over night. And now the little girl whose golden hair is a real "crown of glory" can smile down from her magnificent five feet and no inches upon hundreds of fame-faded actresses.

Mary Pickford was the "Biograph" girl with probably the largest following among feminine moving picture players.

She is almost—not quite—19-years-old and is about as big as a good-sized minute. Even high heels and a suggestion of the pompadour in her wonderful curls won't make and perceptible difference to the "5" on the door where the family measurements are registered.

With his wonderful sixth sense for types, David Belasco "discovered" Mary Pickford and set her, with all her charming trimmings, into the center of the scenes of "The Good Little Devil," a fairy tale play after his own heart. Mary's role is the blind sweetheart, who finds happiness and sight through the good fairies.

"It's not the name part, my dear," said Belasco, as he patted her curls one day after a long, tiresome rehearsal. "but it's the beautiful, appealing part which you are to play in this production."

Trying to get five minutes chat with Mary Pickford is almost as difficult as trying to see the president. Not that she is "uppish" and "haughty," but simply because she is too busy to do anything but work. I managed to take Miss Pickford away from a party of girls she had promised to lunch with. I kept her for nearly twenty minutes.

"It's 1:40 now," said the stage manager. "Be at the 'Republic' at 2 o'clock for afternoon rehearsal." Mercy, how we rushed!

It took her fully five minutes to

Only 19 —



Salary
\$10,000
a Year

Mary Pickford, from a photograph posed especially for this newspaper,

bat, get into her white coat and tuck her hands into an ermine muff. Then spoiled the whole thing by pelting her with questions, after it was served.

By that time I had found out that Mary Pickford became the "daddy" of the family at the age of 5, when her own father died.

Her sister, Lottie Pickford, used to be in the "movies," but married and retired. She has a brother whom she put into the business, too.

The originator of "Goldy Locks" went into the moving pictures to make money, and she left them to make more money.

I ordered something I thought she might be persuaded to eat because

"What for?" I asked.

"Well, the first week I worked because I wanted to give a party I'll be 19 in April, but I've never had a real party.

"And the next week I worked be

Mary Pickford's salary is already newsworthy in early 1913, detailed here in the *Des Moines News*. It would grow 200 times greater in the next five years.

the decade progressed. The amazing trajectory of Mary Pickford, the decade's leading star, drives this point home. When she joined the Biograph Studio in 1909 at the age of seventeen, Pickford's starting salary was \$40 a week, a sizeable income for a young woman, equivalent to four or five times the earnings of an average public school teacher. Over the next eighteen months, her salary rose to \$100 a week. In 1911, Carl Laemmle wooed

her away to IMP with an offer of \$175 a week. After another spell at Biograph, where she earned roughly \$200 a week, and then some acting on Broadway, she signed with Adolph Zukor's Famous Players Company in 1914, starting at roughly \$400 a week (a year-long contract of \$20,000). Her box office appeal soon prompted Zukor to boost her salary to \$1,000 a week. Within just a few months, Pickford's popularity (and her hardnosed business acumen) yielded another successful salary renegotiation: a January 1915 contract gave her \$2,000 a week and half the profits of her productions (ten films a year). That deal would soon be dwarfed by another one signed in mid-1916: Pickford would earn a guaranteed *minimum* of nearly \$16,200 a week (or, if more lucrative, about a third of a million dollars plus half the profits of her contracted six films per year). Additionally, she would be given her own studio, her own production and releasing company (Paramount Arcraft), total choice of cast and crew, top production budgets, and a host of other perks. Astonishingly, Pickford's star value would soon command even more. Two years later, Pickford signed with Zukor's key rival, First National, which offered her a package assuring earnings of at least \$1 million a year—perhaps \$2 million or more factoring in her 50 percent share of box office profit—for only three films a year. That translates into between \$20,000 to \$40,000 a week (or between \$15 to \$30 million a year in today's dollars) (Wing; U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Index" 91; Hampton 148–49; Balio 160–63).

Pickford's career is far from typical, needless to say. Nevertheless, the very fact that such a salary trajectory was even possible in the 1910s demands attention. It is important to stress that the story of Pickford's skyrocketing income is not just an early version of the kind of narrative we are familiar with today about, say, a waitress earning minimum wage in Los Angeles getting discovered and catapulting onto the Hollywood A-list. The Pickford phenomenon was utterly unheard of, with no precedent. Indeed, if it merited a newspaper article in 1913 when Pickford was making a jaw-dropping \$200 a week, one can only imagine how mind-boggling it must have been just five years later when she was making 200 times that much.

What accounts for the increased centrality of stars to the commercial and competitive strategies of the film industry in the second half of the 1910s? To begin with, producers simply became ever more convinced that stars were the crucial magnet attracting ticket buyers. The industry took its cue from the empirical observation that fans fell in love with stars. The spectator's sense of personal affinity and connection to a star was, more often than not, what motivated moviegoers' film selections. Other factors, such as the production company or the story, while sometimes important,

were secondary considerations. As Zukor noted, "A star is more important than the play [the narrative], for the people know the star and do not commonly know the play" (481).

Stars were particularly crucial, as already intimated, in the context of the industry's new higher-volume, higher-price business model based on bigger, better films shown in bigger, better venues. Stars were recognized as the most important signal of a film's presumed "bigness" and quality, and hence tied directly to the high-volume consumption. Leading producers were particularly keen to make films capable of capturing income from major first-class, first-run theaters. Since such theaters had the highest ticket prices, greatest box office volume, and an ability to assume the highest possible rental charge, the first run was by far the most lucrative (relative to number of screenings), accounting for one-quarter of a film's gross income. Access to first-class, first-run screens was limited, so failure to attain exhibition in a prime theater meant foregoing that income, losing out on ripple-effect income (first-run successes created publicity and boosted subsequent-run profits), and surrendering those benefits to a competitor (Seabury 50). Under such circumstances, the importance of star power was compounded. Paramount, in particular, aimed to monopolize first-runs by securing the services of the top-tier stars whose films invariably would be chosen by the owners of first-class first-run theaters.

Stars were also central to the drive for market expansion undertaken by Paramount and other industry leaders because growth required expansion into broader demographic sectors—winning over well-to-do audiences—and into all regional and international markets. The industry believed that stars were the key wedges into both. As Zukor noted with respect to the latter, "From [exhibitor feedback] reports, we have learned that a good play will go anywhere; that a star who is popular in Maine will be equally so not only in Arizona but also in England, China, and the Argentine. The whole world loves Mary Pickford" (481). Moreover, star magnetism became especially pertinent with the rise of the feature film, since longer narratives demanded greater characterological depth and psychological involvement on the part of spectators if these stories were to hold interest for five or six reels. The importance of star value grew in proportion to the reliance on longer, more sophisticated, narratives.

More concrete business practicalities were also a factor in the ascendancy of stars. Paramount and other distributors had established the practice of block booking, whereby an exhibitor was obliged to rent an entire year's worth of films altogether, sight unseen. This regularized producers' revenue by protecting them from the risk of losses that would be incurred

when they made a film that, for whatever reason, fell far below the anticipated number of rentals. Producers tried to convince exhibitors that block booking was a win-win proposition, since overall rental costs could be reduced. As Hiram Abrams explained, "The exhibitor agreed to take the program of the producer over the contract period. The producer was thus insured against losses, while the exhibitor could have his films at a much lower price than if he had been compelled to pay for [a] producer's losses—for a good picture sold alone would otherwise have had to stand the money wasted on the bad ones" (Abrams 203). Whether or not this was true, exhibitors disliked block booking because it obliged them to buy blind and prevented them from tailoring film selections to suit audience preferences in their particular theaters. Throwing star vehicles into the mix made it much easier for producers to sell program blocks. Keen to secure probable hits, exhibitors were more willing to take a gamble on the unknown balance. In the late 1910s, Paramount switched to a modified version of block booking that they called the "star selective system." It involved contracting for star-centered blocks, composed of eight pictures a year all featuring the same star. The producer was again protected against unforeseeable losses, but probably the main virtue from the producer's perspective was that it was an efficient way of passing on the ever-increasing expense of star salaries. Abrams claimed that it was devised in part as a response to exhibitor preferences for smaller blocks, permitting at least some flexibility in program selection.

One final benefit producers accrued from stars should be mentioned. As the film industry became more and more rationalized, studios became increasingly concerned with commercial predictability. Success depended upon the accuracy of two calibrations. First, a film's production budget had to be aligned with its subsequent earnings. As Zukor put it, "Knowing the possible and probable revenue, then we can decide how much money can safely be spent upon production." Second, producers had to set a film's rental charge so that, relative to its subsequent box office performance, it was neither too high (creating angry exhibitors) nor too low (throwing away profit). Studios came to rely upon stars as the most reliable predictors of a film's possible and probable gross, based upon records of past performance. Expensive as they were, stars provided fiscal rationality. They were not actually expensive if they enabled outlay and income to be properly attuned. Losing money through inaccurate calibration was much more damaging to the bottom line. Given their utility along these lines, one can better understand why producers were willing to acquiesce to astronomical pay demands by the most consistent performers.

Some Reflections on Reflectionism

Scholars often take it for granted that films reflect the times in which they were made. Such reflection, however, can take any number of forms. A film might portray contemporaneous news events directly, effecting a kind of reportage about issues of public concern. Many films dealing with World War I would be examples in this decade. Or a film might engage with social issues and debates of the day, participating overtly in discourses already animating other channels of social commentary. Films advocating Progressive reforms (or, alternately, those highlighting the damage done by sanctimonious meddlers) might fall within this category. Typically, such social problem films forward some clearly communicated didactic position. Alternately, a film might tap into topical issues less for the sake of earnest message-mongering than for sensationalism and curiosity value. Many films, like those in the white slavery cycle of this decade, harbor some degree of ambiguity in this regard, accommodating opposing assessments of their motivations. Or, as it is commonly argued—probably correctly—films can (or cannot help but) reflect their cultural moment and influence spectators' conceptions of the world, in a more implicit, non-intentionalist way by displaying contemporary customs, norms, manners, lifestyles, trends, fashions, behaviors, tacit assumptions, material environments, consumer ideals, and so on. It is unlikely that a director shooting a thrilling race-to-the-rescue chase between a locomotive and a roadster, incorporating telegraphs, cut phone lines, and so on, proceeded with any consciously formulated objective of reflecting "modernity" or the spatio-temporal transformations brought about by new technologies. These elements of iconography are the raw materials for constructing stories and only inadvertently chronicle the cultural milieu. Finally, films often reflect their times in deliberate but indirect ways that normally fall even further below the threshold of spectator awareness. A case in point would be a kind of negative reflectionism underlying what kinds of films are *not* produced at a given historical juncture. One might assume that World War I primarily shaped American cinema through forces of propaganda (motivating depictions of Hun atrocities) or through moderately topical reportage (motivating representations of the experiences of doughboys or of the folks back home). But the war probably shaped American cinema more substantially through producers' sensitivity to escapist counter-impulses and situational biases. As Adolph Zukor observed in 1918,

There are some styles that none of the people want right now. They do not want "costume" plays, fairy stories, or anything that is morbid or depressing.

La Tosca was exquisitely presented, but it did not take because it was in costume. In these war times, there is enough of the depressing in the air and people go to the movies to be amused. Therefore we have to cut out all costume play, "wig stuff," and "sob stuff." At the beginning of the war, war plays were fairly attended, but today the people find enough war in the newspapers. They do not care for war drama except in small doses and then only if the scenes are real and there is not too much featuring of some actor who they may think ought to be at the front and not merely playing at being a soldier. (481)

The chapters that follow aim to elaborate on various facets of cinema's relation to American social history. Throughout, it should be borne in mind that the two interacted in many different and complicated ways. This volume highlights some of the most illuminating examples of their crucial interrelationship.