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Working the Crowd: Movies and Mass Politics

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M I C H A E L T R A T N E R

Working the Crowd: Movies and Mass Politics

GOING TO THE MOVIES has always been in part an experience of joining a crowd: picking up the buzz about the latest hit from friends and newspapers, feeling the line surge forward as the velvet ropes are lifted, getting carried along on a tide of rolling laughter. Yet film critics almost never speak of crowds or crowd responses when they analyze movies. Film theorists such as Christian Metz, Kaja Silverman, and Laura Mulvey go so far as to claim that people at Hollywood movies react as if they were utterly alone, each person becoming a spectator isolated in the dark fantasizing about the stars on the screen.¹ Though such theorists often turn to social criticism, they repeatedly describe the audience as if there were only one individual reacting, speaking in the singular of “the Spectator,” “the Male Gaze,” the “All-Perceiving Subject,” and the “Voyeur,” never of crowd responses or mass fantasies or even social trends. Even critics such as Mary Anne Doane and Manthia Diawara who have sought to broaden spectator theory by considering that audiences may contain different kinds of spectators still treat these alternative spectators as individuals reacting separately to movies.²

Part of the reason critics have ignored the ways that movies elicit crowd responses is that the dominant theory of crowd psychology—Freud’s—treats members of a crowd as individuals. In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Freud says that in a mass, each person is lost in a private, unconscious dream of loving the leader.³ In other words, psychoanalysis converts the crowd back into a collection of spectators, and so it has become a crucial resource for film theory.

But there are other ways to conceive of the psychology of the crowd, and, what is most intriguing, Hollywood moviemakers definitely believed in a non-psychoanalytic crowd psychology.⁴ Using the movie industry’s own account of crowd behavior, we can construct a “crowd response theory” modeled on the methods by which psychoanalytic spectator theory is constructed. Before examining this alternative psychology, however, it will be useful to briefly

summarize how spectator theory uses psychoanalysis, to suggest how an alternative psychology might be used to build an alternative film theory. Spectator theory applies psychoanalysis to two elements of the Hollywood experience: first, to the “cinematic apparatus,” the structure of movie projection; and second, to the distinctive style of Hollywood movies. In spectator theory, the apparatus is described as comprising “the darkness of the auditorium, the resultant isolation of the individual spectator, the placement of the projector, source of the image behind the spectator’s head.”⁵⁵ This structure makes movie watching rather like dreaming in bed in the dark. The stylistic features of movies noted by spectator theorists are mostly those which produce the effect that the movie world is a complete, sealed reality, plus features which define geometrically and socially a position from which the movie is supposed to be viewed, what Nick Browne calls the “spectator-in-the-text.”⁵⁶ The viewer thus seems both completely removed from the film world and located in a distinct position, becoming, as Miriam Hansen puts it, “the transcendental vanishing point of specific spatial, perceptual, social arrangements.”⁵⁷ The sense that there is a transcendental point from which to view everything draws on unconscious feelings from early childhood to fuel ideological effects: the feelings everyone had for godlike parents are transferred to the dominant group within society and the viewer is projected as an ideal member of this dominant group (in the United States, white, middle-class males).

To build a crowd response theory then, we need two more elements besides a non-psychoanalytic psychology: an alternative description of the cinematic apparatus; and an alternative list of “textual” features of movies which elicit the crowd response rather than turning viewers into isolated spectators. All these necessary elements, including the psychological theory, can be found in one document that had tremendous influence on the way Hollywood movies were constructed, namely, the Motion Picture Production Code of 1930, dubbed the “Hays Code” after Will H. Hays, the head of the organization that wrote the code. The Hays Code declares that movies are “entertainment” but of a very peculiar kind which produces strange effects never encountered before as part of any entertainment, effects which threaten to compromise the morality of movie viewers so powerfully that moviemakers must censor themselves. The Code begins its account of how these effects are produced by presenting a description of how movies reach audiences, a description of the cinematic apparatus quite unlike that found in spectator theory:

A) Most arts appeal to the mature. This art appeals at once to every class—mature, immature, developed, undeveloped, law-abiding, criminal. Music has its grades for different classes; so has literature and drama. This art of the motion picture, combining as it does the two fundamental appeals of looking at a picture and listening to a story, at once reaches every class of society.

B) Because of the mobility of a film and the ease of picture distribution, and because of the possibility of duplicating positives in large quantity, this art *reaches places* unpenetrated by other forms of art.

C) Because of these two facts, it is difficult to produce films intended for only *certain classes of people*. The exhibitor's theatres are for the masses, for the cultivated and the rude, mature and immature, self-restrained and inflammatory, young and old, law-respecting and criminal.⁸

Instead of focusing on the darkness and supposed isolation of audience members, as spectator theory does, the Hays Code describes screenings in terms of the broad distribution of prints and the resultant largeness of the audience. Movies have more "mobility" than any other artform, and as a result reach quite varied audiences. The Code thus seems to disagree with spectator theory which says that Hollywood movies are constructed by projecting an audience of persons completely identical to each other (to be more precise, spectator theory says that movies set up a response that lets each person abstract from his or her position in society into an identically transcendent position). The two theories, however, are not simply contradictory: Miriam Hansen has argued that historically, the "spectator" structure developed precisely as a way to overcome the mixed character of movie audiences, "to stabilize . . . contradictions" and to impose a sense of uniformity of response on moviegoers.⁹ What the Hays Code shows, however, is that it took much more to deal with the variation within movie audiences than just structuring each movie to imply a transcendent and hence identical, white, middle-class male spectator.

The problem with large varied audiences is that within them, people are no longer individuals, and so cannot assume the role of ideal spectator at all. The code invokes a theory of crowd psychology to explain this problem, and it summarizes that theory in one sentence: "Psychologically, the larger the audience the lower the moral mass resistance to suggestion."¹⁰ The sentence seems to invoke commonplace notions of mob psychology and riots, in which people gathered together succumb to "suggestion" and lose control of themselves, lose their "moral resistance." But in conjunction with the description of the cinematic apparatus—movies shown all over the country to different kinds of audiences—the invocation of crowd psychology draws attention to a variation on the problem of mobs: it points to what happens when people all over the country in many different venues are given the same stimulation, the same suggestion. The concern about certain images or ideas appearing all over a large society is much older than the Hays Code. One of the best descriptions of this effect was written by John Stuart Mill in 1859, long before movies, yet his description fits the way movies operate remarkably well. He wrote his famous essay, "On Liberty," in order to counter what he calls a "social tyranny

more formidable than many kinds of political oppression . . . the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling . . . to fetter the development, and, if possible, prevent the formation of any individuality not in harmony with its ways.”¹¹ Mills fears far more than merely people becoming suggestible when opinions and feelings become prevalent across a large group; he fears the destruction of individuality. Mill goes on to provide an explanation of how “prevailing opinion and feeling” produces this transformation: through the “magical influence of custom, which is not only, as the proverb says, a second nature, but is continually mistaken for the first” and leads to “enslaving the soul itself.”¹² In other words, it is not simply “ideas” commonly held by millions that produce this magical effect, but a set of images of what is “natural,” a “second nature” which is mistaken for the “first.” Mill shows that long before movies came along people worried about false images of the real, about ideological effects. The Hays Code too worries about the ways that movies create “the apparent reality of life” through the vividness of film images, bringing stories “closer” to audiences than plays ever could.¹³

Speaking of the vividness of movie images moves us into the third element necessary to construct crowd response theory: a set of “textual” features of movies which elicit the responses that are described as occurring in audiences. The realism of Hollywood movies is one of the central tenets of spectator theory, and the Hays Code suggests that realism also functions to produce crowd responses. The Code goes on, however, to focus on certain elements overlooked by spectator theory, in particular a list of three which are credited with special power in moving audiences: “The grandeur of mass meetings, large action, spectacular features, etc., affects and arouses more intensely the emotional side of the audience.”¹⁴ To arouse the emotional side is to draw people away from their rational or moral sides, so what the Hays Code is saying is that these three elements of movies are particularly effective at lowering the moral mass resistance of audiences.

The first term in the list—the “grandeur of mass meetings”—raises the specter of political gatherings. The phrase would seem to refer to films such as Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*, though that film came out a few years after the Hays Code. I do not think it is a mistake to bring up such movies: the concern about crowds, as I will show later, is in part a concern about the politics of mass movements, and in particular an effort to protect the United States against political systems based on representing masses rather than representing individuals, namely Communism and Fascism. Communist and Fascist leaders agreed with the Hays Code that large audiences make people suggestible, but they presented this as a wonderful effect that promotes morality, not a danger. The ministries of propaganda in Fascist and Communist countries actively promoted films full of scenes of grand mass gatherings.

For now, it is enough to note the oddity of the phrase, “grandeur of mass

meetings” and to consider why it gets placed as an equal to large action and spectacular features. The list suggests that mass meetings, large action and spectacular features share a certain quality, and it is not hard to see what might be underlying this trio of filmic features: all of them carry viewers away from the intimate world of friends and families and into scenes too big to be experienced intimately, scenes that generate the psychological responses of people as part of a mass.

All three would be presented in movies in long shots, and long shots function for crowd response theory the way that point-of-view shots and shot/reverse shot structures function for spectator theory: point-of-view shots define the position spatially and emotionally from which the projected spectator is to view everything; similarly long shots create what could be called the “crowd-in-the-text” by defining the position spatially and emotionally from which the projected large audience described in the Hays Code is to view everything. Adapting a term from Louis Althusser, we can say that long shots and in particular crowd shots “interpellate” the large audience directly, creating an image of the kind of crowd that is observing the movie and implying that the crowd should have certain qualities and not other qualities.¹⁵ Movies “hail” their audiences as crowds in ways parallel to but distinct from the ways they hail audience members as individuals.

One other feature of movies is highlighted in the Code as of particular power in conveying suggestions to audiences, namely stars:

The enthusiasm for and interest in the film *actors* and *actresses*, developed beyond anything of the sort in history, makes the audience largely sympathetic toward the characters they portray and the stories in which they figure. Hence they are more ready to confuse the actor and character, and they are most receptive of the emotions and ideals portrayed and presented by their favorite stars.¹⁶

Stars are not exactly “textual” features of movies; rather, as the Code notes, they exist partly within and partly outside of movies, and one crucial part of their power is that they cause audiences “to confuse the actor and character.” Psychoanalytic spectator theory, for all its concern about who is looking at what, pays little attention to the strange position of stars as only partly contained within Hollywood movies. For one thing, spectator theory postulates that everything is done by Hollywood movies to make people forget they are watching a movie—the diegetic world is supposedly experienced as a sealed reality. Stars break up that sealed reality by bringing into the world of the movie all kinds of other worlds: the worlds of other roles played by the star; the world of the star’s real life as an actor; the world of the theater in which the audience is sitting (because for someone to be a star they must be on a stage with an audience watching them); and the world of thousands of other

theaters across the country in which people are also watching this star. The supposedly sealed diegetic worlds of movies are bent by the presence of stars: scenes are set up, lit, photographed, and plotted to highlight the star quality of actors.

Consider, for example, the beginning of *Casablanca*: before we meet Rick, nightclub owner in the movie, we watch several people talk about him and say they want to meet him, and we hear his employees say that he never drinks with customers. We identify Rick as a Star in the diegetic world of the movie; then we see him, and it is Humphrey Bogart, a Star playing the role of a Star. The first action Bogart does after we recognize him is to make two decisions about who gets into the club, so we immediately are reminded of one of the crucial elements that stimulates the crowd response, the sense that to be in the crowd is pleasurable and exciting and to be ostracized is painful. Rick lets in a small-time crook, Ugarte, and keeps out a high-ranking Nazi: the movie thus suggests that being in the crowd around this star involves moral distinctions of a sort that we like—we will be allowed the thrill of small, selfish crime and yet hold to high national moral standards. The scene projects the audience in the movie theater as part of a certain kind of crowd within the movie and similarly as part of a certain kind of crowd outside the movie, the crowd that makes Bogart a star by watching many of his movies. This small analysis brings out what the Hays Code says quite directly, that movie watching is not experienced entirely as a moment of isolation in the darkness; rather, a crucial part of movie watching is experiencing the sense of being part of a huge group all across the country watching the same images.

The Code was created as a solution to the problem created by that audience experience, as a solution to the ways movies lower Americans' moral mass resistance. The solution proposed is censorship, regulation of the morality represented in movies, particularly sexual and criminal morality. In effect, the Code is proposing an ingenious way to avoid the consequences of what it says is inherent in the structure of Hollywood movie production and distribution, namely, that movies tend to reduce people to herd-like followers. If what people are given to follow is all moral then even if they do not have any moral resistance to it, it won't matter. The Code even suggests that by keeping movies moral, they will "improve the race."¹⁷ In other words, this Code prescribes how to make use of the lowered mass moral resistance to suggestion inherent in the cinematic apparatus, how to make use of the crowd response that makes people all want to follow opinions expressed simultaneously all over the country, how to construct what Mill called a "second nature" in order to make morality a "custom."

Mill would not approve of this solution to the social tyranny produced by custom. He advocated restricting the power of prevailing opinion in order to leave people alone to make up their own minds about things. He pointedly

rejected the notion of using the power of prevailing opinion to make people good. The Hays Code does not propose leaving people alone at all, and does not even propose ways to maintain people's ability to resist the suggestions made by movies; it could suggest altering film production and distribution, say, by releasing different movies in different areas of the country, so that there is no common suggestion being made to people all over the country. Instead of trying to reduce the crowd response, the Hays Code focuses on how to use that response. The difference points up a way that individualism has changed since Mill's time. Mill's individualism is a political philosophy based on setting up legal and political structures that block the social tyranny of the masses; the Hays Code instead uses the power of social influence to provide a common morality for everyone, a morality that favors the individual over the masses. Private life is no longer separated from public life but is instead constructed by it.

* * *

Now that we have extracted the elements of a crowd response theory from the Hays Code, we can turn to using these elements to read Hollywood movies. I start with a film that has been given one of the most detailed and brilliant explications of psychoanalytic/spectator/ideology theory: *Young Mr. Lincoln*, analyzed by the editors of *Cahiers du Cinéma* in 1970.¹⁸ Their analysis starts with a consideration of political issues facing the United States in the 1930s, turns to Hollywood's economic involvement with the Republican party, and then goes on to consider the movie as producing a vision of Lincoln, a Republican, as a transcendent moral figure, his eyes entirely on The Law even as he travels through a series of familial and sexual scenes. They emphasize that Lincoln is presented repeatedly with choices he does not make: he remains then a transcendent spectator who stands beyond the choices other humans have to make, and indeed beyond politics and sexuality. Producing the movie thus supports the Republican cause against the New Deal: we need transcendent Law, not governmental systems. Lincoln goes beyond being simply the greatest man: while most of the movie establishes that he is, as the authors of the article put it, capable of "castrating" every other man in the movie, such an act of standing above other men simply makes him, according to Lacanian theory, the most anxious about covering up his own "lack." What makes Lincoln transcendent is that instead of being the biggest male around, he "is the phallus" and so is completely identified with the Law, transcendent of human dimensions entirely.¹⁹

Rather than arguing with this analysis, I want to draw attention to something else produced in this movie along with the sense of Lincoln as the transcendental spectator—and that is a crowd. We don't have to look very far to see a "crowd-in-the-text" giving mass responses to various scenes, because the movie is full of crowd scenes. The movie provides us with careful directions

to distinguish between good crowds and bad ones, just as movies indicate which are good spectators and bad ones. Spectator theory has settled on gender as the crucial difference between good and bad spectators in Hollywood movies, but gender does not distinguish between crowds. Rather, as the Code suggests, the distinction is between those who have lost their moral resistance to suggestion and those who have not. In *Young Mr. Lincoln*, the bad crowd is a lynch mob out to hang alleged murderers who knifed a man, and the good crowd is the same group of people seated during a trial as the real murderer is identified. In both cases, the crowd is seeking justice, a moral end, but in the first case they go out of control. Lincoln stops them, and one line he says that seems rather humorous might provide the best explanation of the difference between the two crowds: he says that he is happy to hang murderers, but he wants it done with some “legal pomp.” The spirit of the crowd—the desire for moral revenge and the desire to see a hanging—has to be channeled into a certain kind of performance. The crowd has to become an audience responding to a show produced on a socially structured stage—the courtroom—rather than the protagonist in a drama enacted on the unstructured streets of the city.

This does not mean the crowd has to learn to be silent and sit in the dark as spectators while the trial goes on. On the contrary, the trial is entirely presented in terms of the raucous and rowdy responses Lincoln’s tricks and jokes elicit from the crowd. Lincoln plays the crowd as an entertainer, and in the climactic scene of the trial, he orchestrates a repetition of the spirit of the lynching. He does this when he seems to have lost the cause, and as a last ditch effort, recalls a witness, J. Palmer Cass, to the stand to repeat his testimony that he saw the murder performed in the moonlight. Lincoln seems to give up, tells Cass to step down, waits until Cass has opened the gate that separates the arena of lawyers, witnesses and judge from the audience, and then turns on Cass and asks him why he committed the murder. Cass demurs, and Lincoln takes out an almanac to show that there was no moonlight the night of the murder, implying that Cass is lying, then asks again why Cass committed the murder. As Cass mumbles a response, the audience rises out of its seats and surrounds him, repeating the spirit of the lynching. Indeed, the man who was identified by Lincoln during the street scene as the big mouth of the lynch mob, a fellow with the nickname “Big Buck,” takes a central role in this semi-legal proceeding by grabbing Cass from behind as Lincoln presses for a confession. Surrounded by an aroused crowd, literally in its clutches, the man confesses, and Lincoln then says, “your witness,” indicating that this moment which seemed beyond the proper structure of court testimony was just an extended part of that structure. In other words, Lincoln, at the climax of his performance as entertainer/lawyer, orchestrates a crowd response akin to a lynching, redirecting the fervor that wanted revenge and hanging in the streets so that it presses a confession out of Cass. The mob is turned into an audience

controlled by a masterful “entertainer” who even uses the tendency of crowds to get angry and rise up to get the performance necessary from the villain.

The movie defines the moment of Lincoln’s almost magical victory as the moment which elevates Lincoln to the position of Star and so sets him on the way to being President. As he walks down the hall after the trial, he is told, “the crowd is waiting” and steps into a doorway through which a bright light shines on him from outside, as we hear people cheering for him, though we don’t see the crowd. What is enacted on the screen is the structure of the movie theater itself: a bright light shining over our shoulders as we watch a Star appear in that light. This return to the crowd in the street joins us to the mob, but that mob has now become as invisible as we are, projected out just beyond the screen as the implied “crowd-in-the-text” which watches Lincoln’s performance as an ideal movie audience.

Actually, the movie also shows that the crowd was performing as a peaceful audience before it became a lynch mob: the lynching came at the end of a day of festival celebration. The movie thus traces not only the transformation of lynch mob into audience by Lincoln’s intervention, but the earlier transformation of audience into lynch mob. The cause of such a transformation is just what the Hays Code suggests: the incursion of improper sexuality and criminality into a scene of exciting entertainment. We could even describe this transformation as the improper incursion of private life into public spaces, the bad publicizing of private life. The movie shows this incursion by intercutting crowd scenes and small interpersonal scenes: the crowd watches Lincoln judge a pie contest: two hardcases, Scrub White and J. Palmer Cass, tickle a married woman; the crowd watches Lincoln split a log and start a tug-of-war; the woman’s husband and his brother get angry at the hardcases; Lincoln cheats and wins the tug-of-war. As we watch, we experience a mixture of public entertainment and private scenes of improper sexual advances.

The alternation of crowd scenes and small interpersonal scenes becomes much more intense as night falls: the brother talks to his girl about getting married as he cuts into a log with the knife that will be the murder weapon; the two brothers take a drink in front of the family campfire; crowds surround a bonfire in the dark; there is a fight between the two brothers and Scrub White, climaxing in Scrub dead and a knife from one of the brothers identified as the murder weapon; Cass cries out “murder,” and the crowd around the bonfire, now holding torches, gathers at the murder scene, reacts and heads off to arrange a lynching. The bonfire/fight/lynch mob scenes move so quickly that it is less than five minutes from bonfire to attempted lynching—and since the mob carries torches as they leave the murder scene, it feels as if the bonfire has passed through the murder to become a crowd set aflame.

The buildup to the lynching scene thus traces the gradual mixing together of emotions derived from private scenes and emotions derived from crowd

scenes. The emotions that fire the crowd begin as the emotions which fire the brothers: anger at immorality interrupting a day of exciting entertainment. Private motives are magnified into public action. The movie also highlights the central fear of the Hays Code, the danger of mixed audiences. Cass and Scrub are presented as a different kind of person mixed in with the wholesome townsfolk: they attend the festival but they refuse to join the crowd projected as responding to the festival. Instead of watching Lincoln, they watch a married woman. And the result of their being mixed in with the crowd at the festival is that entire crowd ends up transformed, breaking off from following the pleasant imagery provided by Lincoln and following instead a series of false suggestions orchestrated by Cass, the very person who refuses to accept the role as part of the crowd projected for him by the festival. The danger of sexuality and crime in this movie is not that deviant impulses lie deep inside everyone to be revealed when they are alone in the dark (as psychoanalytic theory would suggest); rather the danger is that sexuality and crime produce dangerous results when they are presented to people who are gathered in large groups aroused by watching a powerful light projected to produce spectacular entertainment—the bonfire, which becomes an image of movie projection.

The movie is then partly about the need to counter the power of movies themselves, of false images projected into a crowd by lights and words. The movie even seems to turn against itself: when Lincoln uses a farmer's almanac to show there was no moon at the time of the fight, he raises serious doubts about what we ourselves saw on the screen, since we saw the fight and it was undoubtedly lit up, much brighter than the ground around the bonfire. What the almanac shows then, is that what we saw on the screen was not "reality" but a movie version of reality; the lights by which we saw the fight must have been movie lights, not anything natural at all. The movie itself is exposed as a liar just as Cass is. The sequence of scenes enacts what the Hayes Code asks of Hollywood, letting us experience the power of movies to make us accept quite false suggestions and then reassuring us that Hollywood will use that power only to support morality.

The movie presents a message about the suggestibility of crowds, and this message aligns itself with the political concerns about crowds that permeated the 1930s. While the movie's invocation of lynch mobs certainly intersects with distinctively American politics in the South, most of the debate about crowds in the '30s was about the pressure toward collectivism worldwide as the Depression wore on. The main Republican answer to Roosevelt's radical policies was the claim that the New Deal was socializing America, was giving in to collectivism and destroying capitalist individualism. Against such a political backdrop, the movie *Young Mr. Lincoln* gains most of its political power from its portrayal of the dangers of out-of-control crowds pursuing mistaken solutions to local problems. The Lincoln created in this movie could easily be

used by the Republicans, as the editors of *Cahiers du Cinéma* argue, to bolster the image of their party, but he does so by joining them in resisting the appeal of crowd politics, of collectivism. Lincoln's admonishment to the lynch mob applies to the political crowds outside the movie theater reacting to the Depression: "We seem to lose our heads in times like this. We do things together that we'd be mighty ashamed to do by ourselves." The emotionally-charged collective body threatens to destroy the individualist basis of morality.

We can also see the anti-collectivist message of the movie in what the lynch mob is specifically trying to do: it would kill two brothers who are small farmers. The editors of *Cahiers du Cinéma* note that Republicans attacked the New Deal's biggest project, the Tennessee Valley Authority, as a threat to the American farmer, and conclude that Lincoln's use of a farmer's almanac to defend farmers aligns him with such Republican rhetoric. This interpretation can be carried further if we note that what Republicans said about the TVA is that it was a step toward socialism, towards collectivized farming à la Stalin. Lincoln would then be closest to Republican rhetoric when he defends farmers against the aroused mob.

However, we do not have to see the politics of this movie as so completely Republican as the *Cahiers* editors would make it: Roosevelt also claimed to be strongly against collectivism, and promoted the New Deal as an antidote to socialism, a way to preserve individuals—even small farmers—by using the collective wealth of the government to provide work so that the unemployed would not mass together in anger against the entire Capitalism system. The fear of collectivism was a theme of both parties in the 1930s, and the representation of crowds in this movie mirrors this broad political concern.

It might seem that I am going rather far to identify the passionate crowds in this movie with images of collectivist movements. To make this equation more plausible, it might be useful to examine the contrast between what collectivist theorists say about crowds and what defenders of individualism, such as the Hays Code, say. Communist and Fascist regimes advocate just what the Hays Code worries about—the alteration of morality caused by emotionally charged crowds. We can see an early version of these ideas in 1857 in *The Communist Manifesto*, where Marx laments what capitalism has done to the crowd passions of earlier social orders: "The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand . . . has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation."²⁰

Marx wishes to restore the "ecstasies" and "enthusiasm" that were felt before capitalism came along. He even sees the most virulent expression of such emotions—riots—as a crucial motivating force that will bring about the workers' revolution:

with the development of industry the proletariat not only increases in number; it becomes concentrated in greater masses, its strength grows, and it feels that strength more . . . the workers begin to form combinations (Trades' Unions) against the bourgeois . . . here and there the contest breaks out into riots.

Now and then the workers are victorious, but only for a time. The real fruit of their battles lies, not in the immediate result, but in the ever-expanding union of the workers.²¹

Marx describes riots as bearing “fruit” in the growing feeling of strength and unity among workers. Riots are frequently invoked in accounts of crowd psychology, but Hollywood filmmakers and Marx interpret the “fruit” of riots quite differently. To Hollywood filmmakers riots show the loss of moral resistance to suggestion; to Marx, they show the growth of a new proletariat morality.

Hitler is even more direct in *Mein Kampf* about the value of the riotous emotions which a crowd is believed to generate. He says that when a person enters a

mass demonstration . . . he is swept away by three or four thousand others into the mighty effect of suggestive intoxication and enthusiasm, . . . then he himself has succumbed to the magic influence of what we designate as ‘mass suggestion.’ The will, the longing, and also the power of thousands are accumulated in every individual. The man who enters such a meeting doubting and wavering leaves it inwardly reinforced: he has become a link in the community.²²

Note the similarity of the conceptions which are invoked by the Hays Code, by Marx and by Hitler as they all talk about the crowd experience: “enthusiasm,” “ecstasy,” “intoxication” and intensely “aroused . . . emotions.” What Hitler praises—the magic influence of mass suggestion—is identical to what the Hays Code presents as a dangerous effect of movies, the “lower . . . moral mass resistance to suggestion.”

Part of what worried the writers of the Hays Code was the similarity between what movies seemed to do to people and what mass demonstrations and riots seemed to do. That similarity was noted by numerous writers in the early twentieth century; as the film historian Jane Gaines comments “one can’t help noticing the way motion pictures have been closely aligned with and even analogized with riots, particularly during the early decades of cinema.”²³ The relationship between movies and riots slid easily into a fear that movies could have political consequences unintended by moviemakers. In 1919, for example, guidelines of the Committee on Public Information, reprinted in the *New York Times*, cautioned against pictures containing “mob scenes and riots which might be entirely innocent in themselves but [could be] distorted and used

adversely to the interests of the U.S.”²⁴ The fear in this sentence is not only that the United States might appear badly if the world knew about riots in the country; a deeper fear is that the spirit of riots is inherently antithetical to U.S. ideology. The American Committee of the Motion Picture Industry of the United States, responding to such concerns, was formed in the twenties to combat “Bolshevism, radicalism and revolutionary sentiment,”²⁵ but it could not stop repeated attacks on Hollywood movies for containing Communist sentiment, culminating in the HUAC hearings after World War II. The constant fear of Communism in Hollywood movie history derives in part from the belief expressed in the Hays Code that movies produce powerful collective emotions which overwhelm individual thought and morality.

The overt concern of Hollywood filmmakers about collectivist effects of their movies has been overlooked by film critics and theorists. I suggest that much of the reason for this oversight is that film critics and theorists have ignored the roles of crowds, treating Hollywood movies as entirely stories about a few individuals. For example, Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson’s influential book, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*, summarizes Hollywood narrative structure and its politics in these two sentences: “Character-centered—i.e. personal or psychological—causality is the armature of the classical story. . . . It is easy to see in the goal-oriented protagonist a reflection of an ideology of American individualism and enterprise.”²⁶ The problem I am exploring arises precisely when we try to make that seemingly easy leap from watching a story or a series of stories about individuals to the generalization that these stories reflect an “ideology of individualism.” Individualism is not as easy to see as it seems, not in Hollywood movies, not in social history and not in political theory. Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson are simply wrong in saying that character-driven plots are enough to make movies into supports for individualism. Wouldn’t stories about the power of individuals to shape their own lives be more congenial to arguments for anarchy (no governing structure) than they are to arguments for individualism (i.e., the need for a state with strong institutions to protect the rights of individuals)? Perhaps it would be most accurate to say that movies entirely about individuals and small group interactions have almost no political consequences, since such small group interactions are obviously part of all social systems. Communists, Nazis, Liberals, Racists and Anarchists all advocate social systems in which most people fall in love and negotiate their friendships without government interference.

Something else needs to be in a movie besides a goal-oriented protagonist and his few friends and lovers to make it seem that a story supports individualism. To defend individualism is to show a contrast between a social order based on individuals and one based on something else, and that something else has to be described or shown. In other words, to argue for individualism,

one has to present an invasive, non-individualist entity—a tyrannical social group such as a crowd, or perhaps a person identified as the spokesperson for such a group. Negative images of crowds have been part of the very concept of individualism since its first appearance in the English language, in 1835, when Alexis de Tocqueville defined the term as “a feeling, which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellow-creatures, and to draw apart with his family and friends.”²⁷

In the early twentieth century, as genuine collectivist movements emerged, individualism shifted from a genial desire to draw apart from the mass to an active terror of it. Walter Lippmann, one of the most influential political commentators and a strong defender of individualism in the 1920s, writes that even trying to think about society as a collective whole will result in unleashing wildly dangerous emotions: “to aim at justice among the interests of individuals is to keep opinion wholesome by keeping it close to intelligible issues: to aim at a purposeful collectivism is to go off into the empty air and encourage a collective madness in which, for want of rational criteria, the darkest and most primitive lusts are churned up”²⁸

Like Lippmann, Hollywood wants to keep opinion wholesome, but the problem it faces is that its medium seems aligned with the collective madness threatening wholesomeness. Lippmann’s words hint at one of the ways Hollywood has sought to solve this problem: by characterizing the difference between individualism and collectivism as the difference between wholesomeness and lust, Lippmann seems to slip from the language of politics into the language of sexuality. The Hays Code makes a similar move, starting off speaking of the dangers of collective emotions and then shifting to speaking about sexuality and criminality. The shift from sociopolitical to sexual language in the Hays Code and in Walter Lippmann’s account is not simply a way of ignoring the political issues which hover around the notion of collective passions. Rather, it is an important method developed in the twentieth century by non-collectivist nations such as the United States to redirect the powerful emotions generated by crowds. In response to the claims of collectivist writers such as Marx and Hitler that mass meetings, crowd experiences and even riots generate important political emotions, individualists argue that the intense emotions which emerge in crowds are all sexual in nature. If that is so, then crowd scenes can be used as powerful stimulants in movies, so long as the emotions churned up are redirected into the bedroom.

Freud is of course the main source for the belief that crowd emotions are sexual, and if we look back at his treatises, we can see evidence that he too sought political ends through this theory. In 1920, in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of Ego*, he argued that sexuality could be an antidote to mass political fervor: “directly sexual impulses . . . disintegrate every group formation . . . love for women breaks through the group ties of race, of national divisions,

and of the social class system, and it thus produces important effects as a factor in civilization."²⁹ He also claimed that this effect depends on the historically modern form of love, not just on sexuality: "the opposition between sexual love and group ties is . . . a late development"; earlier forms of sexuality (in which he explicitly includes homosexuality) are compatible with the herd.³⁰ So leading people to supposedly higher forms of sexuality, as psychoanalysis claims to do, is a way to resist group ties and thus to resist the attraction of the group politics of race, class, and nationalism. As Freud put it, two people declaring they are in love "are making a demonstration against the herd instinct, the group feeling."³¹

Freud implies that love stories can be used to counter collectivism, and Hollywood movies have in fact repeatedly done just that. If we consider the most popular love stories as calculated by constant dollars—*Gone with the Wind*, *The Sound of Music*, *Dr. Zhivago*, and *Titanic*—we see that they all set their central passions against backdrops of huge crowds pursuing political ends.³² Three of these movies—*Dr. Zhivago*, *The Sound of Music*, and *Titanic*, set their love stories against the backdrop of those collectivist movements upon which I have been focusing, Communism and Fascism (taking *Titanic* as a movie about class war, set just before the Russian Revolution; James Cameron, the director, even described the movie as "holding just short of Marxist dogma").³³ The one that does not focus on modern collectivism—*Gone with the Wind*—focuses on the largest mass division ever to appear within the United States, the split of the North and South over racial issues. We could add in as another example of this mixture of collective social events and private love affairs the movie which Ray Merlock called the most "popular film of the century," *Casablanca*. This list shows that it is almost a formula for movie popularity to set a love story against scenes of masses collectively pursuing political ends.

Of course there are powerful, deep characters, intense sexual passion, and all sorts of psychoanalytic issues at the center of each of these movies; nonetheless, much of their popularity and emotional impact is due to scenes in which the main characters are reduced to dots or small silhouettes, scenes full of masses of people or vast landscapes that mock the importance of private life: the burning of Atlanta and Tara at sunset; a huge ship and hundreds of bodies in the water; the mountain meadows and Nazis marching; the Russian Revolution and snow-covered steppes; the Nazi invasion of France. The audience feels both sexuality and the awfulness of vast powers that can move huge numbers of persons about regardless of the individual feelings of those persons.

It might seem that the vast social upheavals in these movies simply add piquancy by interrupting the love stories, making the love seem all the greater for emerging in such turbulent times. But if we examine these movies carefully,

we see that the turbulence parallels, supports and often directly causes the love affairs. The violent social upheavals do not stand in the way of sexual passions; they release those passions. Scarlett needs the Civil War to kill her husbands and force her into Rhett's arms. Ilsa needs the Nazi invasion to separate her from her husband and allow her to meet Rick thinking Lazlo is dead. Zhivago and Lara need the Russian Revolution to remove them from their marriages and thrust them into each other's arms.

The connections between social events and love affairs are not just plot devices: the emotions underlying the vast social disruptions—the political desires motivating huge mass movements—are presented as nearly identical to the emotions, the desires, leading to the love affairs. In *Titanic*, the desire to escape class oppression which structures the crowd scenes is directly paralleled to the emotions Rose develops upon meeting Jack: she breaks through oppressive class boundaries by leaping into Jack's arms, carrying out the desire that fuels the anger of all those people trapped below ship. The movie ends on the line that he “freed her in every way”: their love somehow embodies the desire for class liberation which is everywhere in the movie as a political theme. Similarly, in *Dr. Zhivago*, the desire to escape class oppression and unfair authority that motivates the revolution also seems to underlie Lara's move into Zhivago's arms. Before the revolution, Lara is impoverished and as a result manipulated and used by a wicked rich man, Komarovskiy. She is quite directly rescued by the revolution, marrying the leader of the workers, Pasha. But then Pasha abandons her to become Strelnikov, a figure modeled on Stalin. When she finally finds Zhivago and a satisfying love, she is thus rescued from both her initial class oppression and the authoritarianism of the misguided revolution. Love is a better solution to social oppression than revolution. Or at least it is for a while: the final sadness of the movie is that Komarovskiy gets her back, a plot twist that in effect converts love back into desire for revolution: to allow the love that seemed so wonderful in this movie, we still need to get rid of the manipulative capitalists, the Komarovskiy, hopefully with better leaders than Pasha/Strelnikov. *Gone with the Wind* focuses on an earlier shift in mass social formations than the one presented in these other movies, tracing the emergence of capitalism itself out of aristocracy: coarse, entrepreneurial Northern carpetbaggers destroy the graceful charm of the Old South. Once again, the emotional course of the love affair *requires* this social transformation: most of the narrative of the love story is taken up with Scarlett's learning to give up her dream of the Old South, embodied in Ashley, and love instead the manipulative, entrepreneurial Rhett. As Louis Rubin, Jr., puts it, “the debacle of war and the breakdown of the old plantation society serve to liberate Scarlett.”³⁴ The movie ends rather as *Zhivago* does, with love disappearing and in a sense being converted back into a desire for social upheaval, for something like another Northern invasion: Rhett leaves Scarlett, saying that he goes

off to recover the charm of the Old South, and we are left hoping somewhat ambivalently for the destruction of whatever remains of the Old South, so that Rhett will recognize that he prefers the new social order and return to loving the manipulative, entrepreneurial Scarlett.

Psychoanalytic theory would say that the parallels of sexual and political stories in these movies shows that sex underlies everything, that the politics in these movies is all misplaced sexuality. I propose that these movies show exactly the opposite, that the most powerful and romantic sexual desires can emerge out of—may even need to emerge out of—radical political desires such as the desire for freedom from class restrictions and the desire to destroy the whole social order.

To demonstrate that sexual emotions are represented in these movies as transformed versions of prior political or crowd emotions, I want to focus on a particular kind of moment which appears in each of these movies: a moment when a vast crowd scene substitutes for and becomes the representation of sexual passion, so that we in the audience are looking at and reacting to a long shot of political significance just when we were expecting to react sexually. For example, in *Casablanca*, Ilsa, having just learned that her husband is alive, leans toward Rick as he asks her about her past and says, “There is only one answer to all our questions,” and in a sudden cut the frame erupts into smoke, tanks, soldiers, planes—a monumental crowd scene that, as an explosive disaster, mirrors the explosive sexuality between the two of them. And then a bit later, as the two embrace, we hear a muffled explosion and Ilsa asks, “Is that cannon fire or my heart pounding?” War and sexuality cannot be told apart.

Dr. Zhivago, *Titanic* and *Gone with the Wind* contain similar moments when sexuality occurs off stage while we see directly violent crowd scenes or long shots which strangely resonate as images of the unrepresented sexual passion. In *Dr. Zhivago*, when Lara loses her virginity to Komarovskiy, the scene is played out as a complete parallel to the passions inciting the revolution: Komarovskiy leans over, kisses Lara aggressively, and the camera pulls back from their cart to linger on a military figure who turns to his men to command them “mount.” We cut then to a man’s crotch landing on a horse, then pull back to see many men mounting their horses. The scene proceeds as these soldiers walk their horses into the streets to confront the revolutionary workers marching. Then the captain commands the men to draw their sabers, and we watch the soldiers slash up marching workers, in a chaotic scene that ends with the camera moving in on Zhivago looking down at a patch of blood on the snow then cuts suddenly to Lara pulling her clothes back together. Komarovskiy’s seducing Lara’s virginity is thus replaced by soldiers massacring revolutionary workers. The parallel continues as Lara’s fiancé, leader of the march, gives her a gun to hide, saying that from then on the revolution will no longer be peaceful (the workers have lost their innocence by shedding their blood on the

snow). But the gun transfers its revolutionary violence to Lara, who ends up using it to shoot Komarovskiy. Sexual and political passions are somehow interchangeable, and all concern about the condition of the poor suffering people of Russia is transferred to our concern about who is going to take care of Lara. Zhivago's great romance with her involves his violating his proper upper-class marriage, so in effect he enacts the Russian Revolution in his private life.

In *Titanic* and *Gone with the Wind*, sexuality peaks offstage while we watch images which are paralleled to scenes of mass destruction. In *Titanic*, the sexual climax occurs behind a steamed auto window, and is represented by a rather ghostly white hand that slides up out of the cloudy part of the window and then tracks down back into it. We know that the hand is only a metonymic image of the powerful movements of sexuality occurring just below that wet surface. Soon after that scene, we see the iceberg rising out of the water, but this time the camera descends to actually show the explosive contact below the watery surface. In *Gone with the Wind*, the fiery sexual coupling of Rhett and Scarlett takes place in the dark after Rhett carries Scarlett upstairs, but in another scene we see Rhett carry Scarlett at night in front of a wall of fire as they escape Atlanta. Both scenes are structured to place the two lovers against a backdrop of a red triangle cut by horizontal lines: the burning buildings and the stairs alike are the locus of fiery explosive feelings. I suggest that we feel the heat of their relationship in that fire. The war is sexual; sexuality is warlike.

In all these movies, the explosive climaxes of the public stories—the destruction of the ship, the burning of Atlanta, the Nazi invasion, the Russian Revolution—become metaphoric representations of sexuality bursting forth. Part of the reason for these substitutions for sexuality is, of course, the Hays Code, which dictated that sexuality must be left off the screen. But censorship led to a discovery that Hollywood has clearly followed even after the Hays Code disappeared: the national and international reaction to love stories is greater if scenes of crowd passions provide the visual substitute for sexuality. Movie sexuality has its greatest effect on the masses if it carries with it the emotions generated from vast social upheavals.

In the G-rated family movie, *The Sound of Music*, instead of explosions substituting for sexual climaxes, we have musical numbers substituting for both explosions (which are reduced to thunder behind the song “My Favorite Things”) and sexual climaxes. This movie, like all the others, traces a liberation from rigid, inhibiting, institutions (The Convent, The Military) to a sexual relationship, but in this case what identifies liberation is the eruption of music. The inhibiting institutions destroy music either through enforced silence or a shrill commanding whistle; liberation, both sexual and political, is identified by happy singing. The climax of this movie is a giant crowd scene in which

the triumph of love and of anti-Nazi politics is represented by showing an audience undergoing the same transformation, overcoming their fear of authority to sing “Edelweiss” while surrounded by Nazi officers, after which the central couple disappears as they achieve their musical peak (winning the folk contest) and their political peak, escaping Nazi authority to the mountains.

What unites all these most popular love stories is that sexuality peaks in the dissolution of the individual, replaced by a moving crowd—exploding, marching or singing. Sexuality in these movies is not represented as a private something but rather is conveyed to the audience as an experience of merging with others, losing bodily boundaries, losing control, feeling a “movement” so powerful that it seems to carry with it huge crowds of people. And this should not be surprising, since the theater audience itself has to be “moved” all together as a crowd for the movie to work. Sexuality is experienced by the audience and represented within these most popular Hollywood movies as the feelings underlying mass movements.

I am not simply punning on the word “movement”: these movies create sexuality by drawing on the political feelings that underlie actual mass movements, the political anger about social crises affecting millions. Hollywood relies on the emotions that threaten to fuel mass rejection of capitalism—anger at class or gender or racial inequities—but turns those emotions into mass support for American individualism by showing that they would be dangerously misdirected if they become the motives for crowd action. Instead movies construct private plots which parallel the plots underlying public issues and hence can borrow the passions generated by those issues. Private life in twentieth-century America is no longer a place to escape mass emotions; it has become instead a receptacle into which the intensity of mass emotions can be poured without danger of riot or revolution.

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Notes

1. Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, tran. Annwyl Williams (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986); Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, 5th ed., ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 331–44.
2. Mary Anne Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Manthia Diawara, “Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance,” in *Film Theory and Criticism*, ed. Braudy, 845–53.
3. Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, tran. James Strachey (New York: Bantam Books, 1965), 61.
4. For alternatives to the Freudian account of crowd psychology, see Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1897);

- Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, tran. Carol Stewart (New York: Viking Press, 1962); and Serge Moscovici, *The Age of the Crowd: A Historical Treatise on Mass Psychology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985). I used Le Bon's theories in my earlier work on literary representations of collective, crowd structures, *Modernism and Mass Politics: Joyce, Woolf, Eliot, Yeats* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), but did not discuss movies. Lesley Brill, in "Canetti and Hitchcock, *Crowds and Power* and *North by Northwest*," *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literatures, Culture, and Theory* 56, 4 (2000): 119–46, shows the value of Canetti's theories for film analysis.
5. Harriet E. Margolis, *The Cinema Ideal: An Introduction to Psychoanalytic Studies of the Film Spectator* (New York: Garland, 1988), xiv.
 6. Nick Browne, "The Spectator-in-the-Text: The Rhetoric of *Stagecoach*," in *Film Theory and Criticism*, ed. Braudy, 148–63.
 7. Hansen, *Babel*, 4.
 8. The Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, "The Motion Picture Production Code of 1930," in *The Movies in Our Midst: Documents in the Cultural History of Film in America*, ed. Gerald Mast (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 322–23.
 9. Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in Silent Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 4.
 10. The Motion Picture Producers, "The Motion Picture Production Code of 1930," 323.
 11. John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism, On Liberty, and Considerations on Representative Government*, ed. H. B. Acton (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1972), 73.
 12. *Ibid.*
 13. "The Motion Picture Production Code of 1930," 323.
 14. *Ibid.*
 15. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, tran. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 170.
 16. "The Motion Picture Production Code of 1930," 323.
 17. *Ibid.*, 321.
 18. The editors, *Cahiers du Cinéma*, "John Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln*," in *Movies and Methods: An Anthology*, ed. Bill Nicholls (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 493–529.
 19. *Ibid.*, 517.
 20. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy*, ed. Lewis S. Feuer (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), 57.
 21. *Ibid.*, 63.
 22. Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, tran. Ralph Mannheim (New York: The Houghton Mifflin Company, 1971), 478–79.
 23. Jane Gaines, *Fire and Desire: Mixed-Race Movies in the Silent Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 250.
 24. Quoted in Steven J. Ross, "Beyond the Screen: History, Class and the Movies," in *The Hidden Foundation: Cinema and the Question of Class*, ed. David E. James and Rick Berg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 38.
 25. *Ibid.*, 40.
 26. David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 12, 16.

27. Cited in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989) s.v. *individualism*.
28. Walter Lippmann, *An Inquiry into the Principles of The Good Society* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1947), 294–95.
29. Freud, *Group Psychology*, 94.
30. *Ibid.*, 93.
31. *Ibid.*, 94.
32. *The Movie Times* maintains a continually updated list of the most popular movies of all time in constant dollars at <http://www.the-movie-times.com/thrsdir/Top10everad.html>. I am citing the list as presented August 14, 2002.
33. James Cameron is quoted in Patrick McGee, “Terrible Beauties: Messianic Time and the Image of Social Redemption in James Cameron’s *Titanic*,” *Postmodern Culture: An Electronic Journal of Interdisciplinary Criticism* 10, 1 (1999): 45 paragraphs, <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/pmc/v010/10.1mcgee.html>: 31. Other critics who argue that *Titanic* is based on Marxist themes include James Kendrick, “Marxist Overtones in Three Films by James Cameron,” *Journal of Popular Film and TV* 27, 3 (1999): 41; and Peter N. Churno, “Learning to Make Each Day Count: Time in James Cameron’s *Titanic*,” *Journal of Popular Film and TV* 26, 4 (1999): 63.
34. Louis Rubin, Jr., “Scarlett O’Hara and the Two Quentin Compsons,” in *Recasting: “Gone with the Wind” in American Culture*, ed. Darden Asbury Pyron (Miami: University of Florida Press, 1983), 89.