INTRODUCTION: MOVIES AND THE HISTORY OF CROWD PSYCHOLOGY

The movies and the masses erupted on the world stage together: in a few short decades around the turn of the twentieth century, millions of people who rarely could afford a night at the theater and who had never voted in an election became regular paying customers at movie palaces and proud members of brand new political parties. The question of how to represent the masses fascinated and plagued politicians and filmmakers, who struggled in their different ways to express the dreams of the new audiences. There was a sense of great promise: movies were hailed as the universal language and mass participation in politics was hailed as the precursor to fabulous new social orders, dissolving class and national boundaries.

For some, however, the dream of a new age seemed more a nightmare. The most influential prophet of the new era, Gustave Le Bon, warned of the end of recognizable civilization: “While all our ancient beliefs are tottering and disappearing, while the old pillars of society are giving way one by one, the power of the crowd is the only force that nothing menaces, and of which the prestige is continually on the increase. The age we are about to enter will be in truth the Era of Crowds.” Le Bon called on governments to change the way they reached their constituents, to adopt new methods of speaking and governing in order to reach the crowd. During the twenties, he declared that the movies were the ideal medium for reaching the crowd and “urged government ownership of cinema theaters” and government control of
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Several governments agreed and set up ministries of movies, but not the capitalist governments Le Bon hoped to preserve. Rather, governmental control of the movie industry became a cornerstone of the new political movements which embraced the crowd as the ideal basis of the social order: communist and fascist regimes. Political theorists in such regimes often cited Le Bon’s belief that the masses and the movies had a natural attraction to each other, and drew the conclusion that movies inherently supported collectivist, anti-individualist, and anticapitalist politics.

Needless to say, Hollywood filmmakers were rendered quite uncomfortable by such conclusions, but they did not simply deny that movies had any inherent attraction to mass politics. Rather, Hollywood believed that it was possible to control that attraction and passed industry regulations requiring movies to be constructed so as to limit and channel the power of crowd psychology—and to counter the efforts of filmmakers in collectivist countries. If we examine the representations of masses—the crowd scenes—in Hollywood films and contrast them with such scenes in communist and fascist films, we discover what could be called a political debate carried out in elements of filmic style. In this book I am going to trace the contours of that debate; the analysis establishes the crucial importance of crowd scenes to the ideological structure of movies during the twentieth century. Crowd scenes are not merely backgrounds for stories; they also function as models for the crowd in the theater, and as such they reveal the ways filmmakers conceive of and hope to control the moviegoing experience.

Film criticism has largely ignored crowd scenes and crowd reactions of audiences. Indeed, the highly influential work of film theorists such as Christian Metz, Kaja Silverman, and Laura Mulvey essentially denies that there are any crowd emotions in the reactions to Hollywood films, treating the audience as a collection of separate individuals, “spectators” who sit in the dark and have one-to-one fantasy relationships with the characters on the screen. Such theorists describe the audience as if it were just one person, speaking in the singular of “the Male Gaze,” the “All-Perceiving Subject,” the “Voyeur,” and “The Spectator,” never of crowd responses or mass fantasies or social trends.

Hollywood filmmakers and those who track the industry, on the other hand, have thought and written quite a bit about crowd responses, mass fantasies, and social trends, particularly the trends that lead massive numbers of people to stand in long lines outside theaters. It makes sense that Hollywood movies would be constructed to create and regulate such
crowd responses. One of the main ways to shape mass reactions is to show on the screen masses reacting: not surprisingly, the most popular movies have always been full of immense crowd shots, from *The Birth of a Nation* through *Gone with the Wind* to *Titanic*. It may seem strange in the largely postcommunist and postfascist world to imagine that filmmakers worried that such crowd scenes were fraught with political dangers. Public discourse about major world conflicts no longer focuses much attention on contrasts between individualism and crowd politics. But throughout the first half of the twentieth century there was an often-repeated fear that any crowd that began thinking about politics was in danger of turning into a mob espousing anti-individualist politics. The fear that all movies tend toward nondemocratic mass politics peaked of course in the 1950s blacklist, where Hollywood filmmakers were accused of having slipped communist propaganda into a remarkable range of films. The effectiveness of such accusations on the film industry has never been fully explained; the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) accused nearly every industry in America of being full of communists, but only in Hollywood did these accusations cause mass firings. I suggest that part of the effectiveness of the HUA C in Hollywood derived from the fact that filmmakers themselves had always feared that their movies had a natural attraction to un-American politics, regardless of how thoroughly the stories presented were pro-American.

Such fears appeared long before the HUA C hearings. 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.” The committee not only feared that the United States might appear badly if the world knew about riots in the country, but also—believing the spirit of riots antithetical to U.S. ideology—feared the political consequences of the representation of riots within movies. In the 1920s, the American Committee of the Motion Picture Industry of the United States found it necessary to declare itself devoted to combating “Bolshevism, radicalism and revolutionary sentiment” in movies. The need for such committees suggests that it was considered difficult to tell when such ideas would creep into films.

Hollywood’s concern about the crowd effects of movies is most powerfully expressed in the Movie Production Code of 1930, the infamous Hays Code. The Code has become most well known for requiring married couples to never be seen in the same bed, but it does not develop its
call for censorship from concerns about sexuality. Rather, it develops its argument for the need for censorship by presenting a theory of the natural relationship between movies and the newly active masses appearing throughout the world. The Code begins by outlining a vision of that relationship: “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.”

The description, though it repeats the word “class” over and over again, might nonetheless seem rather apolitical, expressing only a worry about the effect of movies on the “immature” and deviants. However, Steven J. Ross’s archival work shows that when the Code was put into effect, “censors found films dealing with class struggle even more threatening than cinematic displays of sex and violence.” We might then say that the Code has “coded” concerns about the lower classes as concerns about criminality, immaturity, and underdevelopment. Such a definition of what makes a class “lower” serves well to suggest that what many feared was a coming struggle between the masses and the old ruling classes was really nothing more than the struggle of the immature and deviant against the decent.

If the writers of the Code were really worried about “immature” viewers, we might wonder why they did not simply embrace what the movie industry came to much later—a system of regulating who is allowed into which movies, keeping the immature viewers out of movies with mature themes. The problem with such an idea in 1930 was that the difference between the immature and the mature, the undeveloped and the developed, was not seen simply as a difference in age, but rather as a difference that resided inside everyone: everyone had “immature” or “lower” qualities which movies had the power to bring out. Furthermore, this lowering effect of movies was believed to derive precisely from the broad appeal of movies. As the Hays Code puts it, “Psychologically, the larger the audience the lower the moral mass resistance to suggestion.” “Moral mass resistance to suggestion” is a peculiar, possibly incoherent notion, which might seem to allude to something that would stop a crowd from turning into a mob. The Code, though, does not discuss the dangers of people leaving movie theaters in wild-eyed gangs, but rather connects this “lowering” effect to the wide distribution of movies across the country, simultaneously reaching quite varied audiences. The Code implies that because such varied kinds of people face
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the same suggestions all at once, the “moral mass resistance to suggestion” of the entire nation is lowered. Movies seemed capable of altering the psychology of those watching, so that they no longer had “individual” personalities but rather joined together in a “crowd mind” that was inherently “lower” in morality and unable to resist suggestions.

Sociologists specializing in crowd psychology joined in tracing the connection between movie viewing and the loss of individual self-control. For example, Herbert Blumer, professor of sociology at the University of Chicago and president of the American Sociological Association, wrote in the 1930s that movies “arrest attention, check intrusion, and acquire control. The individual loses himself in the picture,” with the result that the audience watching a movie ends up having “certain features of the mob.”

Recent work in film history has started to examine the history of actual audience behavior, and found that the scene of movie watching in the first few decades may have contributed to the sense of the movie audience as a mob. Thomas Doherty, after reading numerous accounts of audience responses, summarizes the scene of 1930s movie watching: “Congregated together in crowds of hundreds, and sometimes thousands, audiences reacted in a group unity that was garrulous and demonstrative, sometimes boorish and unruly, often communal and choral.”

Vanessa Schwartz’s study of turn-of-the-century cinema leads her to conclude that people went to movies at first as an outgrowth of other public gatherings and spectacles, and being part of a crowd was part of the reason for being there. She concludes, “It is necessarily among a crowd that we find the cinematic spectator.” Such research supports critics who have begun examining ways crowds are portrayed within movies; Lesley Brill, for example, has drawn on Elias Canetti’s political theories to write the first full critical examination of crowds, a superb treatise showing that crowds in Hollywood movies are deeply enmeshed with complex notions of power.

The relationship of movies to crowds was touched on by a few film critics before Brill, though the topic has generally remained peripheral to film analysis. For example, Stanley Cavell quite casually declares that there has always been an inherent relationship between movies and mass politics in his 1971 book, *The World Viewed*. After noting first that Hollywood movie plots have “an inherent tendency toward the democratic,” Cavell adds a parenthetical caveat: “(But because of film’s equally natural attraction to crowds, it has opposite tendencies toward the fascistic or populistic.)” Another term for the fascistic or populistic political philosophies is “collectivist,” so that what Cavell is suggesting is that film has

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a “natural attraction” to collectivism. To Cavell, this is so obvious that it can be added as a parenthetical aside.

One film critic has drawn considerable attention to the relationship between movies and the new mass movements of the twentieth century: Siegfried Kracauer, who began his career in Weimar as Nazism emerged and then fled to Hollywood. Kracauer summarized what he viewed as the obvious historical connection between film and the masses in his 1960 Theory of Film: “Masses of people in the modern sense entered the historical scene only in the wake of the industrial revolution. Then they became a social force of first magnitude . . . The traditional arts proved unable to encompass and render [them] . . . Only film . . . was equal to the task of capturing them in motion. In this case the instrument of reproduction came into being almost simultaneously with one of its main subjects. Hence the attraction which masses exerted on still and motion picture cameras from the outset. . . . D. W. Griffith . . . showed how masses can be represented cinematically. The Russians absorbed his lesson, applying it in ways of their own.”

When Kracauer notes that the Russians developed “ways of their own” for using what early Hollywood filmmakers discovered—the power of images of crowds—he suggests the contrast I wish to explore: the Soviets celebrated the power of films to transform audiences into political crowds, while Hollywood turned soon after Griffith to censoring that power out of their films. The Russians were quite direct in claiming this goal: Sergei Eisenstein stated as his credo that his films would be built on the principle of “discarding the individualist conception of the bourgeois hero” and instead “insisting on an understanding of the mass as hero.”

The valuing of crowd emotions over individual consciousness runs throughout communist and fascist political commentary: Marx called for a return to the “ecstasies” and “enthusiasm” of “riots” as far preferable to the “icy water of egotistical calculation.”

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 the goal of his closely orchestrated “mass demonstrations” is to cause each person to be “swept away . . . into the mighty effect of suggestive intoxication and enthusiasm, . . . the magic influence of what we designate as ‘mass suggestion.’”

Note the similarity of the conceptions which are invoked by Hitler to those invoked by the Hays Code: Hitler praises the “magic influence of mass suggestion” and designs his mass rallies to create it; the Hays Code fears the “lower . . . moral mass resistance to suggestion” produced by
large audiences at movies, and forces moviemakers to design films to avoid the political dangers of such effects. The similarity between what movies seemed to do to people and what mass demonstrations and riots seemed to do 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.” The relationship between movies and riots slid easily into a fear that movies could have political consequences unintended by moviemakers.

The Hays Code was designed to reduce such unintended consequences—but not to entirely eliminate them, because it was not considered possible for film viewers to escape crowd psychology. Contrary to what film theorists claim, Hollywood filmmakers and early-twentieth-century sociologists never believed that audiences would react as isolated individuals. Hollywood moguls concluded that the only way to keep the crowd psychology elicited by movies from tearing the American democratic society apart was by controlling the kinds of suggestions which are made when people’s moral mass resistance is lower. Suggestions could be given for people to support democratic institutions. In other words, while unable to think as individuals, people could be given strong motivation to believe that the best way for society to operate is for people to act as individuals. The power of crowd psychology is used, in effect, to counter that very power. As we will see, this produces the paradoxical effect that Hollywood movies contain elements that can be seen as functioning to warn people against the power of movies themselves. The Hays Code in a sense requires movies to serve this function, to be constructed so as to minimize dangers that are inherent in the medium. Hollywood films seek to shape the crowd reactions they stimulate, aiming at a form of “collective spectatorship” rather different from what has been postulated in “spectator theory,” as I will show in Chapter 1.

One of Hollywood’s main strategies for channeling the power of crowd emotions created by movies can be seen in the strange way that the Hays Code switches topics in the middle of its discussion: after describing crowd psychology for several pages, the Code switches its focus to ways individuals act in private, particularly to sexual and criminal acts. The dangers of the lowering of “mass resistance” are not seen in mass behavior at all, but rather in alterations in individuals’ private lives. This shift is set up in those opening lines I quoted earlier, in which “class” seems to be defined in terms of the behavior of individuals (as mature or
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immature, criminal or law-abiding) rather than in terms of economics. The shift from concern about masses or classes to concern about private lives is central to Hollywood's answer to the appeal of crowd politics: Hollywood movies repeatedly imply that the passions driving crowds are actually desires to have certain kinds of private lives. Crowd emotions function to set up the conditions for satisfying private relationships. We might say then that in Hollywood movies, crowd politics is misguided sexuality. Such a notion is not merely a Hollywood invention; for example, 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," he writes, "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." Lippmann's words parallel one of the ways Hollywood has sought to solve the problem of the collectivist tendency of movies: by characterizing the difference between individualism and collectivism as the difference between wholesomeness and lust, Lippmann slips from the language of politics into the language of sexuality. The Hays Code makes a similar move, starting off speaking of the dangers of class differences and 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 noncollectivist 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 argued 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 properly directed into the bedroom—or into institutions which support private relationships.

Sigmund Freud is of course the main source for the belief that crowd emotions are sexual, and he provides an even more dramatic statement than Lippmann or the Hays Code of what happens when large numbers of persons share the same experience: "when it becomes a question of a large number of people, not to say millions, all individual moral acquisitions are obliterated and only the most primitive, the oldest, the crudest
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mental attitudes are left."¹⁹ Freud proposes an antidote to this crowd effect: overt sexuality. In 1920, in Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego, he says that “directly sexual impulsions . . . disintegrate every group formation.”²⁰ He also says that this effect depends on the historically modern form of heterosexual romance, not just on sexuality: “the opposition between sexual love and group ties is . . . a late development.” What Freud calls “earlier” forms of sexuality (including homosexuality) do not work to dissolve group ties; they are compatible with the herd.²¹ Freud concludes that the modern form of “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.” As Freud puts it, two people declaring they are in love “are making a demonstration against the herd instinct, the group feeling.”²²

Freud implies that love stories can be used to counter collectivism, and Hollywood movies have followed his lead, but not simply by treating love as the antidote to the herd instinct, because, as we have seen in the Hays Code, Hollywood does not believe that the herd instinct can be eliminated from the moviegoing experience. Hollywood has instead sought to channel the herd emotions into dreams of love. Indeed, we might say that Hollywood has found what Lippman called the “lusts . . . churned up” by crowds pursuing political goals to be quite useful. D. W. Griffith developed this structure in the most popular movie of the first two decades of the twentieth century, The Birth of a Nation, as I will show in Chapter 2. Following Griffith’s lead, all the later most popular love stories—Gone with the Wind, The Sound of Music, Titanic, and Doctor Zhivago—place their central passions against backdrops of huge crowds pursuing political ends or raising political issues. (Titanic might not seem to fit this model, but its love story is set against a backdrop of class conflict; its director James Cameron even described the movie as “holding just short of Marxist dogma.”²³) We could also include in this list the movie often called the most popular, though it did not really sell that well, Casablanca. Critics have focused nearly all their attention in discussing these films on the characters and the love stories, generally treating the mass political events surrounding the love affairs as background or contrast. But I will show in Chapter 3 that if we examine these movies carefully, we see that the political passions parallel and facilitate the love affairs. The madness of the political crowds in these movies 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, as Zhivago and Laura need the Russian Revolution to remove them from
their marriages and thrust them together. The psychoanalytic psychology which has most often been used by film theorists would treat the parallels of sexual and political stories in these movies as evidence that politics is fueled by misplaced sexuality. I propose that these movies are based on exactly the opposite notion, on a perhaps accidental discovery by moviemakers that the most powerful and romantic sexual desires can emerge out of moments of mass political passion. As we will see in Chapter 3, Hollywood has introduced a feeling of permanent political revolution into the structure of modern love.

Hollywood’s use of sexuality to redirect the political effects of the crowd was, of course, resisted by collectivist filmmakers. Instead of implying that private passions are the only true emotions, collectivist filmmakers show that public passions are the highest development of private passions, the culmination of feelings generated in private relationships. Collectivist filmmakers end up creating what can be called public forms of sexuality and gender, surprising alternatives to the more familiar notions of sexuality and gender in Hollywood films, as I will show in Chapter 4.

To end this book, I turn to one filmmaker, Fritz Lang, who was highly successful in both protofascist Weimar and in Hollywood. Lang’s movies acutely register the difference between Hollywood and “collectivist” film styles, but not because he was a passive recipient of whatever socio-political milieu surrounded him, but rather because he was acutely in touch with that central element of the political debates surrounding the two styles: the mysterious power of crowds to transform the minds of individuals who enter them. Lang’s movies throughout his life show mass public passions in all their chaotic power, and then generally explore the failure of various systems for controlling such passions. His career put him in the center of the debate between fascist and Hollywood filmmaking: His early German films were considered pro-Nazi films, particularly because the screenwriter on those films, his wife Thea Von Harbou, supported Hitler and remained in Germany to make films for the Nazi party when Lang came to America. Lang denounced Von Harbou and emphatically denied Nazi influence on his early films. Finally, after Von Harbou died, Lang returned to Germany to remake two of his early films. These last remakes are strangely autobiographical: they can be read as efforts to explain how he and his films were caught up (or we might say seduced) into the spirit of Nazism. They are undoubtedly self-serving, but they are fascinating nonetheless as Lang’s efforts to bridge the opposed styles of fascist and Hollywood films, and suggest the disturbing
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conclusion that actually the styles—and the politics associated with them—are not really so opposed.

The notions of crowd psychology which shaped the practices of all the moviemakers discussed in this book may in fact be utterly false. Recent studies have suggested that crowds do not become mobs very easily at all, and that individuals do not really “lose themselves” or change their moralities or their politics much when they become parts of crowds. However, what one recent history called “the myth of the madding crowd” has been remarkably consistent and strong during the last century, and has played a very large role in the history of movies. That this belief of filmmakers has been largely ignored by critics could seem surprising, but perhaps the reason critics have done so is the result of another historical conception which has shaped the way nearly all critics of aesthetic objects (films, literature, painting, music) have done their work: the conception that artists and their proper audiences are individuals who do not themselves lose their heads when creating, viewing, or commenting upon art. It is intriguing to see that historically filmmakers did not think such was the case. Hollywood films imply that before individual personalities can function to control emotions and behaviors—before individual personalities can even be visible—social structures have to be in place to block or channel the power of crowds. Collectivist films imply that to view their works at all requires dropping the individual perspective and joining the crowd. It may be possible, then, to see in Hollywood and in collectivist movies a challenge to some basic assumptions of recent literary and film criticism. By examining how filmmakers have used conceptions of mass consciousness, we may gain not only a better understanding of movies as historical products involved in political debates, but also an understanding of some of the historical limitations which continue to shape the practice of criticism today.