COLLECTIVE SPECTATORSHIP

In the 1970s and ’80s, film theorists developed “spectator theory,” claiming to have found complex structures that underlie the movie-going experience, then showing that these structures were manipulated by filmmakers (perhaps without fully understanding them) to promote ideological purposes. Moviegoers, sitting in the dark, watching emotionally provocative scenes, became receptive to effects that played on deep psychoanalytic structures to turn everyone into a single unified model of a “spectator.” Recently, critics such as Mary Anne Doane and Manthia Diawara have expanded spectator theory to theorize how people who do not fit the prescribed definition of a spectator work out ways of viewing movies.¹ Miriam Hansen, in Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film, has further complicated the theory by tracing the way that the unified model of a single type of spectator emerged from earlier models of multiple cultural groups all viewing movies in different ways and developing their own film industries.²

In all these critical accounts, Hollywood filmmakers seem to be trying above all to unify audiences, but I have found that, throughout history, a unified audience deeply troubled filmmakers—and politicians. It was precisely a fear of what might be unleashed if everyone in a vast nation responded with the same emotions that led to Hollywood’s censorship of its own movies, codified in the Movie Production Code of 1930. The Code justifies censorship entirely in terms of a nonpsychoanalytic theory of crowd psychology—more a fear than a theory—that when large, varied audiences all experience the same emotions, there is a general lowering of “mass moral resistance to suggestion.”
COLLECTIVE SPECTATORSHIP

The fear of the power of movies to produce mass suggestions led to distinctive structures within Hollywood movies—while the desire to promote mass suggestions led to different structures within communist and fascist movies. If we bring together an account of filmmakers’ nonpsychoanalytic theory of crowd psychology with an analysis of the movie structures that manipulated that psychology, we can extract a theory of “collective spectatorship.” To see how Hollywood’s portrayals of crowds operate as a form of spectatorship, it will be useful to begin by first outlining the basic elements of the more familiar spectator theory.

Roughly, the theory, created in the 1970s, has three elements: a psychological theory; a description of the “cinematic apparatus,” the structure of movie projection; and an analysis of the distinctive style of Hollywood movies. In spectator theory, the psychological theory is psychoanalysis. 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.” 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 those which define geometrically and socially a position from which the movie is supposed to be viewed, a position which Nick Browne calls the “spectator-in-the-text.” 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.” The sense that there is a transcendental point from which to view everything draws on unconscious feelings from early childhood that end up fueling ideological effects: the feelings everyone had for seemingly 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 construct an alternative theory of collective spectatorship, then, we need versions of the same three elements: 1) an alternative, nonpsychoanalytic psychology; 2) an alternative description of the cinematic apparatus; and 3) an alternative list of features of movies which elicit the crowd response rather than turning viewers into isolated spectators. All these necessary elements can be found in the Motion Picture Production Code of 1930, dubbed the Hays Code after Will H. Hays, the head of the organization that wrote it. The Hays Code starts by declaring that movies are “entertainment” of a peculiar kind, which produces strange
CROWD SCENES

effects never encountered in any entertainment before, effects which so powerfully threaten to compromise moviegoers’ morality that moviemakers must censor themselves. The Code says these effects are produced by the ways movies reach audiences, in other words by the “cinematic apparatus.” That apparatus in the Hays Code, however, is 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.

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 large audiences. Movies have more “mobility” than any other art form and as a result reach quite varied audiences. The Code thus seems to disagree with the ’70s 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 quite varied moviegoers. What the Hays Code shows, however, is that it took much more to deal with the variations 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 people within them are no longer individuals, and so cannot assume the role of ideal spectator. The Code invokes a theory of crowd psychology to explain this problem, which it summarizes in one sentence: “Psychologically, the larger the audience the lower the moral mass resistance to suggestion.” 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 of the problem of mobs: it points to a belief in 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 . . . the tendency of society, by other means than civil penalties, to impose its own ideas . . . to fetter the development, and, if possible, prevent the formation of any individuality not in harmony with its ways.” Far more than people becoming suggestible to widespread opinions and feelings, Mill fears the destruction of individuality. Mill goes on to provide an explanation of how “prevailing opinion and feeling” destroys individuality: through the “magical influence of custom, which is not only, as the proverb says, a second nature, but is continually mistaken for the first,” which leads to “enslaving the soul itself.” 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 the effects of false images of the real, or in other words, ideological effects. The Hays Code too worries about the ways people mistake images for reality; it speaks of the vividness of movie images and their ability to bring stories “closer” to audiences than plays ever could, giving movies “the apparent reality of life.”

Speaking of the vividness and easy readability of movies brings us to the third element necessary to construct crowd response theory: a set of
CROWD SCENES

...stylistic or “textual” features of movies which are believed to 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 that 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.”12 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”—seems a very odd thing for the Code to mention, since it is difficult to think of any Hollywood movies that show mass meetings at all, much less ones creating a sense of grandeur. What comes to mind when one thinks of movies showing the grandeur of mass meetings are Leni Riefenstahl’s film *Triumph of the Will* and Sergei Eisenstein’s *The Battleship Potemkin*. I do not think it is a mistake to bring up such movies: the concern about crowds in Hollywood movies during the classical era was in part a concern about the politics of mass movements, and in particular an effort to protect the United States against the political systems based on mass movements rather than on individual voting—communist and fascist systems. Communist and fascist leaders agreed with the Hays Code that large audiences make people suggestible, but they thought this was a wonderful effect that promotes morality. The ministries of propaganda in fascist and communist countries actively promoted films full of scenes of grand mass gatherings.

I will discuss fascist and communist films in Chapter 4; 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 world of friends and families into scenes too big to be experienced intimately; the Code implies that filmmakers believed such scenes would generate the psychological responses of people as part of a mass.
COLLECTIVE SPECTATORSHIP

These three types of scenes all would be presented in long shots, and long shots function for crowd response theory the way that point-of-view shots and the shot/reverse shot structure 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. 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 into 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.

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 to be a star is to be on a stage in front of a large, admiring audience); 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 cracked open by the presence of
CROWD SCENES

stars: scenes are set up, lit, photographed, and plotted to highlight the star quality of actors.

Central to the role of stars is their ability to draw crowds to movies, and we can see that filmmakers used this ability to define within movies themselves the proper kind of crowd. 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 employee say that he never drinks with customers. We identify the character 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: he 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 moral standards. We soon learn as well that Ugarte has killed two German couriers, in effect lining up with Rick against the Germans. Since Rick’s club is devoted to entertainment, the opening scene of the movie projects the audience in the movie theater as part of a certain kind of crowd within the movie—fun-loving and free of Nazi influence—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 developed to solve the problem, as it sees it, that emerges from the way movies hail their audiences: once hailed, audiences supposedly become herd-like followers of almost any suggestion. The solution proposed is censorship, regulation of the morality represented in movies, particularly sexual and criminal morality. In effect, the Code proposes an ingenious way to avoid the consequences of the problem: if what people are given to follow is morally acceptable, 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.” In other words, this Code prescribes how to make use of the crowd response that makes everyone 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. He pointedly rejected the notion of using the power of prevailing opinion to make people good. The Hays Code, contrary to Mill, does not propose leaving people alone at all, and does not even propose ways to help people resist the suggestions made by movies. It could propose, for example, transforming the distribution of films, say by releasing different movies in different areas of the country, so that no suggestion is made at once to people all over the country. Instead of trying to reduce the crowd response, the Hays Code focuses on how to use that response, which shows how individualism had changed since Mill’s time. Mill’s individualism is a political philosophy that calls for legal and political structures to 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.

This transformation of individualism from a rejection of the crowd to a dependence on it is itself represented in Hollywood movies by two contradictory images of the crowd. The first, and most vivid, image is of a crowd that threatens individuality, the crowd that individuals must escape to become themselves. The second is of a crowd that supports the individual’s escape. Let me give one surprising example of a Hollywood movie straining to reverse itself and recover a “good crowd” after it has condemned repeatedly and thoroughly the mindlessness of anonymous people gathered together. I turn to a movie presenting one of the most strident defenses of individualism of any Hollywood film—and an equally overt rejection of collectivism: *The Fountainhead*, from the book by Ayn Rand, who fled the USSR and wrote her novels to oppose collectivism in all forms. This movie seems to contrast the free individual, Howard Roark, avant-garde architect, with a collection of apparent cowards, who do not believe that individuals can stand against the crowd and so spend their time supporting traditional views that they don’t really believe. These cowards are represented as tied to a newspaper that everyone agrees easily manipulates public opinion. The movie thus sets up a contrast between “genius,” which constructs new things, and collective thought, which enforces old norms. Throughout the movie, both Roark and the toadies of the newspapers denigrate the average man as someone who lets himself be controlled. Roark seems to be a man who ignores collective opinion and goes his own way, with just enough independent
backers to let him do his own work. When his designs are altered without his approval, he tries to get the buildings that result torn down and finally dynamites them. He is put on trial so that finally his freedom hinges on the decision of a jury of anonymous persons, who side with him after he makes an impassioned speech defending "individualism."

My point is that Roark's (and Ayn Rand's) defense of individualism requires this anonymous support, this collective approval, in order to be the basis of a political system that supposedly opposes the kind of thinking that average, anonymous people do. We might expect the movie to reveal that the jurors are independent thinkers, but there is nothing in the movie that gives any clue to their minds at all. They appear only in collective shots, not even in close-ups of each thinking out his or her own ideas. There is no explanation for why this body of anonymous people thinks differently from the anonymous people so easily manipulated by the newspapers. We might presume that the reason this anonymous collective body can support individualism is that it is formed inside a legal system designed to protect an individual's rights. These people are safe from the insidious influence of the newspaper while they are sequestered on the jury, and perhaps that is why they are capable of independent judgment. Or we might conclude that the jury never thinks as independent individuals, that they simply come under the powerful influence of Roark's charisma and are swayed to the "right" conclusion. That would fit the Hays Code's view that the key to moral presentation of an issue to a crowd is that the person presenting it is moral: Roark's persuasion of the jury is simply the right kind of manipulation. The movie certainly takes that view towards its audience: it never risks exposing us to the newspaper. The audience only sees those who write the newspaper stating directly that they do not believe what they have written. Roark is the only person who believes in his own words and acts, and so the movie carefully keeps us in the jury box, insulated from the influence of widespread ideas. The movie carefully flatters its audience that we are in the "right" crowd, separated from the mindless group manipulated by mass media.

Though Roark claims to defend individualism, his appeal to the jury is not for them to think as separate individuals, as we might expect. Instead, he talks about the system of collectivism and its contrast to individualism: he asks them to vote for a social system, for individualism, and thus to join together with one coherent vision of what individualism is. The courtroom scene suggests what John Dewey says explicitly: that in the twentieth century, the complex architecture of the individualist social
order cannot survive if everyone thinks only of their own private interests. Paradoxically “the individual” gets lost if there is nothing but a collection of completely isolated individuals:

The tragedy of the “lost individual” is due to the fact that while individuals are now caught up into a vast complex of associations, there is no harmonious and coherent reflection of the import of these connections into the imaginative and emotional outlook on life. . . . The habit of opposing the corporate and collective to the individual tends to the persistent continuation of the confusion and uncertainty.17

Dewey goes on to say that the enslavement of individuals to a uniform social code, the evil individualism always opposes, derives in the twentieth century from the separation of individuals from a communal vision:

Why should regimentation, the erection of an average struck from the opinions of large masses into regulative norms . . . be so characteristic of present American life? I see but one fundamental explanation. The individual cannot remain intellectually in a vacuum. If his ideas and beliefs are not the spontaneous function of a communal life in which he shares, a seeming consensus will be secured as a substitute by artificial and mechanical means.18

To produce a social order in which the ideas of individuals are “spontaneous functions” of a “communal life” while avoiding regimentation is a tricky proposition. But that is precisely the fine line Hollywood movies seek to walk. While the central plots show individuals resisting regimentation, the moviegoing experience aims at providing a sense of communal sharing, and somehow what is supposed to be shared is the belief in individuals resisting regimentation, so that the commonality of the support for individualism seems spontaneous, emerging from each and every member of the community separately. Twentieth-century individualism does not seek merely the freeing of individuals from coercive collective opinion; it seeks to create a communal life, a collective experience, which in some way produces and supports individuals in all their variety.

The individualism of Hollywood movies is usually considered to operate via a process of identification with the few stars at the center of the plot. But it is not simply a one-to-one identification that is going on. Like the jury in The Fountainhead, movie audiences are trained to collectively support the individuals with whom they identify. Identification is mediated by a process of first joining together with others in a collective,
nonpersonal identity and then slipping from that into one or a few persons with whom we “identify.” I identify with someone who is not “me” by first merging with a body of persons who include “me” and this new person. Althusser made this point in his early work, *For Marx*:

Before (psychologically) identifying itself with the hero, the spectatorial consciousness recognizes itself in the ideological content of the play, and in the forms characteristic of this content. Before becoming the occasion for an identification (an identification with self in the species of another), the performance is, fundamentally, the occasion for a cultural and ideological recognition. This self-recognition presupposes as its principle an essential identity (which makes the processes of psychological identification themselves possible, in so far as they are psychological): the identity uniting the spectators and actors assembled in the same place on the same evening. Yes, we are first united by an institution—the performance, but more deeply, by the same myths, the same themes, that govern us without our consent, by the same spontaneously lived ideology.19

The basis of identification is the sense of an undifferentiated identity bringing together everyone involved in the performance. We might say that everything that precedes the actual story—the titles and credits backed by symbolic visuals and music—is designed to serve this function. As people file into movie theaters, they usually come as separate “private” groups—members of a family or a few friends. The first task which moviemakers set themselves is to dissolve these interpersonal relations and set up instead what sociologist I. C. Jarvie calls an “unstructured group”—an audience.20 The list of names indicates to the audience that the movie itself was produced by a crowd of people each of whom had a distinct function, but in fulfilling that function their distinctive personalities and private lives largely have faded away: they become a small version of the overall American social structure, producing what Althusser calls the “ideological recognition” that precedes identification. The audience members too drop their own personal distinguishing names as they watch the names of the creators of the movie all blur together. The music creates a common rhythm and emotion spreading over everyone: the audience becomes a group feeling “moved” together. After the movie has created this unstructured group reaction, the entire group can together get involved in supporting individuals in the pursuit of their
COLLECTIVE SPECTATORSHIP

own private goals: we pass from our private lives into an anonymous collective experience and then into other private lives.

A great deal of recent film theory has ignored this first step of ideological recognition preceding one-to-one identification; indeed, Althusser’s later work has engendered a whole school of film analysis which seeks to show the reverse, that ideology is a result of one-to-one psychological identification. Critics draw on Althusser’s concept of interpellation to transform analysis of ideology into analysis of interpersonal relationships, a move he himself supports by using Lacanian psychoanalysis to unpack the operation of ideology. But such a move turns the attention of critics toward characters and spectators as individual psychologies whose relationships are basically variations on sexualized family structures. The result is a strange vision of social issues, as if they were entirely a function of attitudes held by separate individuals locked together in peculiar familial relationships. The valuable critical method of looking for the social inside the personal seems to have resulted in the conclusion that there is nothing else but the personal.

A contradiction permeates such criticism: the imaginary world of the movie is entirely structured by personal, familial, characterological structures, while the world which is said to have constructed the film is entirely institutional and impersonal. Hollywood movies are then illusory in a way that puts them almost entirely outside any debate about politics: all they are doing is covering up social issues, and the only reasonable political response must be to disrupt the vision they present: such is the conclusion drawn by critics such as Laura Mulvey and Colin MacCabe. MacCabe, drawing on Marxist theory, says that the world is structured by contradiction, but Hollywood movies “cannot deal with the real as contradictory.” So the only way to bring any touch of the “real” political scene into movies is to create avant-garde disruptive movies such as Godard’s. Mulvey similarly argues that progressive politics requires “the decline of the traditional film form.”

In effect, such criticism finds the efforts to make movies supportive of their society’s dominant ideology completely successful. But, as this book argues, Hollywood filmmakers found the structure of the movie experience so uncongenial to American ideology that they consciously placed within movies elements that undermined the political effects of that structure. And, as we shall see, supporters of alternative ideologies developed alternative structures, downplaying the elements that promoted individuality and highlighting the elements that produced a crowd response.
In Hollywood and “collectivist” movies alike, filmmakers struggled to control the contradictory political consequences of elements of their movies. Labeling the ideology of a film is not, then, as easy as film theorists would have it. And producing counter–Hollywood movies may not require acts as revolutionary as film theory would have it; reworking some contradictions within Hollywood films could lead to movies with quite different political effects. In Chapter 5, I examine an interesting case of a filmmaker who tries to alter the political effects of his movies by remaking them: Fritz Lang reached the bitter conclusion that external events had caused his early works to support the rise of Nazism, and so he decided at the end of his life to remake some of those movies to undo their “unintended” politics.

Recently, Colin MacCabe has called for a move away from psychoanalysis towards an analysis that relates movies to social movements. He writes in *High Theory/Low Culture* that the excitement of the oedipal analysis of ideology seems to be dying out, largely because everyone knows what it will reveal: “what I now want to consider is how one might pursue a radical interest in popular culture without limiting in advance the politics that will ensue from that interest.”23 In developing this call for a new kind of criticism, he distinguishes his approach from traditional Marxist approaches, which dismiss popular works as nothing but ideological illusion, and from what he calls the “optimistic” criticism of popular culture, which finds progressive political views in every popular work. These two opposed critical stances toward popular culture are equally useless, MacCabe argues, because they both conclude that the politics in popular works is already visible, already expressed, either in Marxist treatises or in the popular works themselves. In contrast, MacCabe calls for a study of popular culture based on the idea that the politics one seeks is not yet known to the critic nor apparent in popular texts. Rather peculiarly, this puts the critic in almost the same position as the filmmakers I am studying: seeking to understand how something within a work that is not visible to individual consciousness might energize millions of people to move together toward political goals. By analyzing the ways that filmmakers have tried to understand, represent, and control mass political reactions to their works, this book may contribute to critical projects such as MacCabe’s and help critics not simply repeat what filmmakers have done. Critics need to consider how to build upon—or avoid—the historical conceptions of “crowd psychology,” which are encoded into movies and have shaped the way we all understand social movements.
To begin to demonstrate the usefulness for film criticism of paying attention to the historical belief in collective spectatorship, I want to start by providing an alternative reading of a film that has been given one of the most detailed and brilliant explications of psychoanalytic/spectator theory: Young Mr. Lincoln. The editors of Cahiers du Cinema in 1970 produced a powerful Lacanian reading of that movie and found ways to connect its psychoanalytic structures to political issues contemporary with the movie. 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 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, implying that the nation needs 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 his 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.

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 are swept up in a frenzy without any individuals controlling themselves, and those who have settled into being spectators of a performance of individual actions. In Young Mr. Lincoln, the bad
CROWD SCENES

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 be 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 case, 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 bigmouth of the lynch mob, a fellow with the nickname “Big Buck,” takes a central role in this semilegal 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
COLLECTIVE SPECTATORSHIP

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 him to the position of a star and so sets him on the way to being president. As he walks down the hall after the trial, he is told, “They are waiting for you,” 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 the 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 hard cases, 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 hard cases; 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: one brother talks to his girl about getting married as he cuts into a log with the knife that will be the murder weapon, then 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
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 (fig. 1).

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 undermine the believability of its own physical scenes: 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 undoubtedly saw the fight 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 Hays Code asks of Hollywood, letting us experience the power of movies to make us accept 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, giving in to collectivism, and destroying capitalist individualism. Against such a political backdrop, 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. Lincoln is, as the editors of Cahiers du Cinema argue, used to bolster the image of Republicans, but he does so by 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 anticollectivist, anti–New Deal message of the movie in what the lynch mob is specifically trying to do: it would kill
the two brothers who are small farmers. The editors of *Cahiers du Cinema* 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 a la Stalin. Lincoln is closest to Republican rhetoric, then, when he defends farmers against the aroused mob.

Lincoln does not, however, seem to be defending farmers against the mob so much as he is defending the family against the collective emotion of a large social body. The trial turns particularly on trying to distinguish between two brothers who are on trial, and one of the key witnesses is the mother, who, we are led to believe, actually does know which brother committed the crime, but will not speak. In other words, the case seems to be aiming at watching a family break apart, due to murderous impulses related to sexuality within that family. For most of the movie, we are led by cues such as the mother’s behavior to believe that one of the brothers did commit the murder: in other words, the movie itself creates the effect on us of the “mass suggestion” that seems to have infected everyone except Lincoln, to believe that the death of Scrub was a result of the fight. The mother saw almost exactly what we saw. Her refusal to testify is in effect a denial of the “truth” which the movie itself seems to have shown us—a refusal to participate in the movie experience itself. But much as the movie gives the audience the desire to stand with the mother, we are also set up to see her as refusing to accept reality. We cannot simply assert the value of the private family against the public call for justice. And by the end, when the true killer is revealed, the movie has shown us that the private sphere itself has been distorted by the public events: the mother did not see what she thought she saw. Her testimony would actually have been mistaken (as our view of the fight was mistaken). She was in fact caught up in the mass “suggestion” as much as the rest of the town.

So what the movie finally does to restore our belief in the family is not to separate the private and the public, but rather to coordinate the two, to bring the public and the private back into alignment, through a public performance which bequeaths the right kind of private world to the family. And the figure who can orchestrate the public world so that it produces once again the right kind of private sphere is Lincoln, a figure who seems capable of crossing all the bounds between spheres, including
COLLECTIVE SPECTATORSHIP

even the bound between the movie and “real history,” as the last few shots indicate. Lincoln goes up a hill, watches lightning flare up, and then walks off into the flashing light as the *Battle Hymn of the Republic* rises in volume (fig. 2). Then the scene dissolves to the Lincoln Monument, with Lincoln’s eyes like dark holes in the screen (fig. 3). This ending reminds us that Lincoln is going off to his greatest role and to his death, and in doing so he is transcending physical reality as it has been represented in the movie thus far. The ending is not simply the closure of the story but a revision of the very form of this movie, stepping beyond its “realism.” Lincoln goes off to a supernatural realm, a realm where one can see beyond what is visible into the dark realm of truth and monumentally stable morality. This transition takes two steps: first he enters a mysterious natural realm that seems to lead outside of the whole world of the people we have been watching, and then he is transmuted from this extrasocial “nature” into the utterly impersonal realm of a monumental national figure, becoming an image that we already know and already trust more than we trust our own eyes. The ending in effect symbolizes what the Hays Code promises: that before we even enter a Hollywood movie, we can trust that American values will stand behind the story, and thus we can allow the movie to temporarily mislead us and reduce our ability to stand by our own morality (i.e., reduce our “moral resistance”). Hollywood studios do not ask the audience to trust what is shown on the screen; instead they ask viewers to trust the American industry, which agrees to resist the power of the reality portrayed on the screen and provide a moral base outside that reality. At the end of this movie, Lincoln passes into this other reality, becoming in effect an image of the solidity of the entire American film industry, which strives to present itself as monumentally trustworthy, a collective institution that ensures that each individual filmmaker will keep his or her eyes on the darkness where morality is entombed outside all the false lighting of every movie.
CROWD SCENES

Figs 2–3. Lincoln disappearing into the light . . .

and reappearing as a dark monument.