

**Joseph E. Levine: Showmanship, Reputation and Industrial  
Practice 1945 - 1977**

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PhD Thesis submitted to the University of Nottingham

School of American & Canadian Studies

March 2008

## **Acknowledgements**

I would first like to thank my PhD supervisor, Julian Stringer, for his tireless support of this project since its inception. Julian has provided me with extremely valuable advice and guidance as well as allowing me access to his extraordinarily detailed knowledge of film history and scholarship. He also allowed me a great deal of latitude in my approach to researching what turned out to be a very complex project.

I would also like to thank all those I have interviewed for this project: Larry Turman, Albert Maysles, Ray Galton and Alan Simpson.

My thanks also go to the staff of the various libraries and archives I have visited: the staff of the Hallward Library at The University of Nottingham, the staff of the BFI Library in London, the staff of the Howard Gottlieb Research Center in Boston and the staff of the Margaret Herrick Library in Beverly Hills – especially Jenny Romero.

Thanks also to all those at the Department of American and Canadian Studies at The University of Nottingham, particularly Peter Urquhart, Roberta Pearson, Sharon Monteith and Ann McQueen for their help, advice and input.

# Joseph E. Levine: Showmanship, Reputation and Industrial Practice 1945-1977

## Contents

Abstract	i
Introduction	1
Section I: The Emergence of a Showman 1945-1959	
Chapter One: An Unfettered Hustler: Cultural Boundaries and Industrial Reputation	19
Chapter Two: Sniggering at the Past: Context, Re-Creation and Legitimate Appropriation in <i>Gaslight Follies</i> .	66
Chapter Three: Selling Levine Selling <i>Hercules</i> .	87
Section II: Representation of Levine 1960-1964	
Chapter Four: Cultural Intermediary as Celebrity: Media Reception of Levine, 1960-1964	118
Chapter Five: Untangling Stereotypes: Anti-Semitism, Mogul Myths and <i>Showman</i> .	155
Chapter Six: Guilty By Association: Joe Levine, European Cinema and The Culture Clash of <i>Le Mepris</i> .	177
Section III: Industrial Manoeuvres 1964-1977	
Chapter Seven: The Paramount Years: Levine as an Independent Producer, 1963-1966	205
Chapter Eight: Trading on Reputations: Mike Nichols, <i>The Graduate</i> and the Avco Corporation	240
Chapter Nine: A Question of Leadership: <i>A Bridge Too Far</i> .	
Conclusion	317
Appendix I: Figures	325
Appendix II: Select Filmography	333
Appendix III: Timeline	339
Bibliography	341

## Abstract

Joseph E. Levine has been largely neglected by Film Studies, yet he was a uniquely important figure in the US film industry during his lifetime. As an independent producer, distributor and promoter, Levine's influence on the post-War cinematic landscape of the US was wide-ranging and profound. His versatility and multifariousness were unsurpassed during his lifetime and analysis of his abilities, strategies and influence complicates many areas of current film scholarship.

Levine was a very prominent figure in the popular press where he was perceived as a master showman. His prominence and hyperbolic style undermines the traditional understanding of the cultural intermediary, a role usually associated with discretion. Levine's conspicuousness led to him becoming an easily identifiable public figure yet, due to his varied output, he resists the notions of branding that are often associated with prominent figures in the film industry.

Studies of reputation building strategies are often closely aligned to critical approval, yet Levine never courted critical favour. Although Levine's output catered for many niche tastes, his public image was unabashedly populist. He would, however, utilise the critical adulation bestowed on others to bolster his own reputation as a supporter of talent, providing an ideal case study for the complex political interactions of reputational assessment.

As a pioneer of industrial strategy and practice, Levine was hugely influential. He pioneered saturation publicity and opening tactics and was an early advocator of the use of television in movie marketing, and therein he represents a vital missing link in the evolution of blockbuster marketing techniques. He was similarly influential regarding the marketing and distribution of art cinema and, in the 1960s and 1970s, he helped to redefine the role of the independent producer.

All these factors combine to make Levine an ideal vantage point for surveying cultural and filmic mores of the post-War US. His career was one of extraordinary contradictions and complexities. An analysis of his career provides a deepening of understanding of film historiography of this era and calls into question many commonly held scholarly assumptions regarding taste cultures, cultural boundaries and the supposed demarcation between independent and major studio film production.



## Introduction

This is a hard way to make an easy living. Actually, I stole that line off Mike Todd. I've been writing a book about my life, and I thought about using that as a title.<sup>1</sup>

- Joseph E. Levine (Appendix I, *fig.* 1).

This quotation from Joseph E. Levine says a lot about the man and his style. There is a snappy one-liner, an admission of theft, a nod to one of the great showmen of the past and an indication of Levine's belief in having a good title for a project. It comes from a 1978 interview in the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, conducted as part of Levine's massive promotional tour for his production of *Magic* (1978, Richard Attenborough), which saw a 73-year-old Levine visit over twenty cities in the US in barely a month. All of these factors combine to give a glimpse of Levine's public image and Levine himself.

Levine had a penchant for pithy bon mots and his interviews are littered with them. He was frequently, and not unjustifiably, accused of stealing credit where it wasn't deserved; equally, he embraced his image as a huckster and often hinted at ethical or legal transgressions in interviews. He often referenced great showmen of the past, such as Mike Todd or Samuel Goldwyn, in order to position himself as an old-time flim-flam man; and the fact that the interview in question took place in Pittsburgh in the midst of a "back-breaking"<sup>2</sup> tour emphasises Levine's belief in engaging with the press in order to publicise himself and his wares, and leaving metropolitan areas to do so. On the same tour, stopping over in Philadelphia, Levine

complained to Bob Sorolsky, “People don’t hustle anymore.”<sup>3</sup> Levine was a tireless hustler, bequeathing – by his own account – only a handful short of 500 movies with which he was involved in some way: “*A Bridge Too Far* is the 493<sup>rd</sup> picture I have either produced or imported,” Levine told Victor Davis in 1977, adding, “Carlo Ponti says I stole two from him.” Pause. Triumphant grin. “It’s possible!”<sup>4</sup>

From the late 1950s until his death in 1987, Levine was a ubiquitous figure within and without the US film industry, yet he is now all but forgotten. Reporting his death, *The New York Times* correctly referred to him as “A towering figure in movie making.”<sup>5</sup> By contrast, in 2004 Dade Hayes and Jonathan Bing correctly noted, “Levine’s legacy is all but erased from the record books.”<sup>6</sup> That such an influential figure could be so quickly lost to the ages is remarkable in itself. That said, Levine is not entirely absent from film historiography but he usually features as a footnote, anecdote or as an aside; much of what has been written about him is debatable and much else is factually inaccurate.

Given the limitations of much available scholarly material on Levine, the first task of this thesis was to piece together a workable biography of Levine from archival sources. Relevant biographical information will be included throughout the study but a brief discussion of Levine’s background and upbringing is necessary at this stage.

Joseph Edward Levine was born on 9<sup>th</sup> September 1905 in the slums of Boston’s West End, his parents were Russian Jewish immigrants and he was the youngest of six children. Levine’s father, a tailor, died when he was four; his mother remarried to another tailor, who brought an additional five children into the household (“years later we used to refer to it as a merger”),<sup>7</sup> but that marriage broke up when Levine was seven. His childhood was grim; when talking of his upbringing he would often jokingly request a violin to accompany his tale.<sup>8</sup> “I remember the

stink of it. When they had a pogrom in Poland, we'd have one on Billerica Street the next week ... I remember nothing good about Billerica Street.”<sup>9</sup>

Aside from poverty, another blight on Levine's childhood, as hinted at above, was anti-Semitism. Fellow Bostonite Albert Maysles – who made a documentary about Levine with his brother David, entitled *Showman* (1962) – has noted the anti-Semitism he had faced during his own upbringing in Boston and suggested that the situation was much worse during Levine's childhood.<sup>10</sup> For Maysles, Levine was deeply affected by this, though he rarely talked about it in interviews. “Being Jewish ... is like being black,” Levine once told Peter Dunn, who goes on to say that “it is a subject [Levine] never mentions in his interviews with American writers,” observing, “For so garrulous and joyously indiscreet a man it is perhaps a mark of how deeply it hurt him.”<sup>11</sup>

Whilst at school, Levine worked in various jobs and indulged in various nefarious activities to help support his family before leaving school on his fourteenth birthday: “my mother always called me the *brategiber* – the bread giver. When I reached fourteen, I was finally able to quit school. I worked in a dress factory as an errand boy, shipper and finally went on the road as a dress salesman.”<sup>12</sup> Subsequently Levine opened a dress shop with his brothers called Le Vine's: “a sort of a French name,”<sup>13</sup> he told Katherine Hamill. This perhaps indicates an early awareness of the power of branding; equally, it could indicate a desire to sound less Jewish. Later, he moved to New York where he peddled statues of the evangelist Daddy Grace, before returning to Boston to buy into a restaurant called the Wonderbar. “The restaurant business is a funny racket,” he told Gay Talese, “At 8 p.m. a nicely dressed man comes in and says ‘Hi Joe, howaya?’ And at 1 a.m. he's drunk and calling me a dirty

Jew bastard. Funny business.”<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, the experience was a positive one: “it taught me a lot about meeting the public. I liked meeting the public.”<sup>15</sup>

Levine’s experiences at the Wonderbar saw his first steps toward fame in Boston; Levine became known as a “face” in Boston and his name appeared, not infrequently, in the society columns of the Boston press. In 1937 he met Rosalie Harrison, a singer in Rudy Vallee’s band, they became engaged and were married in Boston on 19<sup>th</sup> June 1938. Their wedding earned them a front-page banner headline in the *Boston Times* declaring “Rosalie Gives Up Career For Joie!”<sup>16</sup> a reference to Rosalie leaving Vallee’s band. Presumably, the last word is a pun on the words “Joe” and “joie” – French for “joy.” They later adopted a son, Richard, and a daughter, Tricia.

According to Levine, a condition of the marriage was that he leave the Wonderbar; “she didn’t want me in cafes,”<sup>17</sup> and so Levine became a movie exhibitor. In 1938 he bought the Lincoln Theatre in Boston, which would alternately show arthouse and exploitation films. Early screenings included *Un Carnet de Bal* (1937, Jules Duvivier) and *How To Undress In Front of Your Husband* (1937, Dwain Esper.) Also around this time Levine set up his company, Embassy Pictures, and began distributing films locally;<sup>18</sup> Levine would remain at the helm of Embassy Pictures (changing to Avco Embassy in 1968) until 1974.

After the war, Levine produced his first film, *Gaslight Follies* (1945) and built up relationships with distributors such as Arthur Mayer and Joe Burstyn, and, later, American International Pictures. He also distributed a wide variety of classical exploitation films such as *Ravaged Earth* (a film of Japanese atrocities circa. 1950) and *The Body Beautiful* (1953, Max Nosseck). Of the former, Levine related to Robert Muller of the copy he wrote for the hoardings, “‘See it!’ I wrote, ‘It will make

*you fighting mad! Jap Rats Stop at Nothing! See the Rape of China!*”<sup>19</sup> of the latter he said, “It made me sick, so I got the New England rights and played it up big, and did very well with it.”<sup>20</sup> Through the 1950s, Levine concentrated mostly on exploitation pictures where, he said, “I could give vent to my peculiar talent.”<sup>21</sup> It is the development and diversification of this “peculiar talent” which will be explored in this thesis.

As Levine’s subsequent career demonstrates, his importance for Film Studies lies in his multifariousness. Following his successful national publicity and distribution campaigns of the 1950s, for imports such as *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* (1956, Ishiro Honda and Terry Morse) and *Hercules* (1958, Pietro Francisci), Levine diversified to an astonishing degree, importing, producing and promoting films of all types, from all over the world and from all points on the cultural spectrum, remaining ever defensive of his right to do so. Such an approach challenges traditional scholarly distinctions between art, exploitation, mainstream and blockbuster films. Exemplars of these broad categories from Levine’s career would include the Embassy import *8½* (1963, Federico Fellini), the Embassy funded *Jesse James Meets Frankenstein’s Daughter* (1966, William Beaudine), and Levine’s productions of *The Carpetbaggers* (1964, Edward Dmytryk) and *A Bridge Too Far* (1977, Richard Attenborough).

Moreover, Levine’s visibility on the cultural landscape of the US from the 1950s to the 1980s calls into question notions of branding: Levine’s public image and style were easily identifiable, yet his output remains inscrutable. The Levine brand offers no key to understanding the internal logic of his vast inventory of films. Such a scattergun approach brings with it methodological problems for the researcher, most notably in terms of terminology. It is difficult to write about Levine in a scholarly

way without some way of distinguishing between the *types* of films he dealt in, and two of the most contested terms in Film Studies are “exploitation” and “art.”

Exploitation essentially means the publicity, advertising or marketing associated with films. Prior to the existence of marketing departments, film companies had exploitation departments who carried out the same functions; the only difference is in nomenclature. Yet the word “exploitation film” has a special resonance in film historiography. The term is usually applied to low budget films that offer the audience titillation, shocks, pseudo social commentary or taboo subject matter, accompanied by lurid and hyperbolic advertising. They range from sex hygiene films of World War I to science fiction and teen films of the 1950s to Russ Meyer’s breast-fests of the 1960s and 1970s.

Eric Schaeffer has sought to distinguish between “classical” exploitation films, such as those of Dwain Esper and Kroger Babb, and the output of independents such as AIP, on the grounds that the latter films followed Hollywood modes of narrative.<sup>22</sup> For Schaeffer, the classical exploitation film saw its demise occur through the 1950s, a period that saw a concurrent (though, for Schaeffer, unrelated) rise in a new form of exploitation film which Thomas Doherty has called the “teenpic,” which was defined by low budgets, “controversial, bizarre or timely subject matter,” and a teenage audience.<sup>23</sup> For this thesis, I will be using the term “exploitation film” in its more general sense, encompassing both meanings, although, where necessary, films that conform to Schaeffer’s definition will be accompanied by the term “classical” and those conforming to Doherty’s will more likely be ascribed a sub-category, e.g. “Monster movie” or “creature feature.” “Exploitation” is also my preferred term for a film’s marketing and publicity campaign, as per Levine.

Schaeffer has noted that “the line between art cinema and [classical] exploitation was often a thin one,”<sup>24</sup> and has documented the crossover that occurred between the two fields from the 1930s to 1950s. He notes that the increasing interest in arthouse films led to the decline in classical exploitation films due to the emergence of two distinct audiences after the war and the subsequent domination of the arthouse over classical exploitation.<sup>25</sup> According to Barbara Wilinsky, during the post war period:

[Arthouse] theatres featured art galleries in the lobbies, served coffee, and offered specialized ‘intelligent’ films to a discriminating audience that paid higher admission prices for such distinctions. And many of the people attending art houses did want distinction from their filmgoing experiences.<sup>26</sup>

The great value of Schaeffer’s, Doherty’s and Wilinsky work lies in their respective emphasis on historical context. Much recent scholarship has sought to question cultural distinctions but, as these authors note, in their contemporary settings, classical exploitation films, teenpics and art films populated fields of distinction. As Wilinsky suggests in the above quotation, the art cinema field sought to distinguish itself in terms of exhibition spaces and, as this thesis explores, cultural demarcations surrounding art cinema were very strong during the early 1960s, fortified due to a perceived threat from less reputable cinematic forms. In this thesis, the term “art” will be used to denote films that would have been deemed suitable for exhibition in art houses.

That Levine so ostentatiously transgressed carefully constructed cultural boundaries calls into question a good deal of scholarship regarding the variegated nature of cinema from the 1950s onwards. His transgressions represent far more than the arthouse/exploitation crossover as noted by Schaeffer, or the highbrow/lowbrow juxtapositions highlighted by Joan Hawkins in her study of paracinema.<sup>27</sup> Levine's output represents an across the board cultural transgression which is impossible to categorise and extremely difficult to theorise; as I argue in Chapter One, it is these difficulties that have perhaps led to him being overlooked by Film Studies thus far.

Of his tactics, Levine once commented, "*Hercules* was lousy, wasn't it? Still, I'm not ashamed of it. I'm in this business to survive, you naturally have to cater to different levels of taste."<sup>28</sup> Such a statement can be read as revealing Levine as a flagrant opportunist, concerned only with catering to public demands, but such a reading is limited. Indeed, in addition to recognising industrial pressures Levine is also recognising the development of his own "peculiar talent," exemplified by his versatility: catering to "different levels of taste" is no mean feat.

Another aspect that contributes to an understanding of Levine's multifarious output is one that is all too often overlooked. As I contend throughout this thesis, one of Levine's key motivations was a deep love of cinema. "I like movies, all of them, I find something good in almost every movie,"<sup>29</sup> he once said, and his output bears testament to this fact. Levine was an extraordinarily savvy businessman, yet, among the enormous roster of films produced, imported and/or promoted by Levine there were many which, as Levine surely would have known, simply would not sell. Even as an enormously successful and wealthy independent, Levine continued to seek out cinematic curios of limited appeal: films that may turn a small profit or, just as likely,



incur a small loss. His catering to “different levels of taste” then, was not simply about survival, it was also about promoting the medium he loved in all its forms.

This thesis will analyse Levine’s career from 1945-1977. 1945 saw Levine’s first production, *Gaslight Follies*, and 1977 saw his most ambitious production, *A Bridge Too Far*. Although Levine’s produced two more films after *A Bridge Too Far*, *Magic* (1978, Richard Attenborough) and *Tattoo* (1981, Bob Brooks), the scale and ambition of *A Bridge Too Far* makes it a fitting cut-off point for this study. His career will be analysed with reference to three broad and related concepts: showmanship, reputation and industrial practice.

Levine was a consummate showman, and therein lay his “peculiar talent.” His showman’s instinct, his engagement of the press and publicity apparatus, is apparent throughout his career. Having produced, imported and funded a huge variety of projects, in 1981 Levine still maintained, “I’m in the exploitation business,”<sup>30</sup> as he revelled in feminist opposition to the posters for *Tattoo*, (see Appendix I, *fig. 2*) clearly pleased that the controversy had brought welcome publicity for his film. Indeed, part of Levine’s showman schtick was to reveal his tactics; Levine did not only sell the magic, he sold the method too. Levine was fond of telling people that the movie business “is a circus business,”<sup>31</sup> and his showman style was to cast himself as a ringmaster, facilitator of movies and orchestrator of the attendant ballyhoo.

Levine’s aptitude for showmanship formed the basis of his reputation. His penchant for hyperbole, saturation tactics<sup>32</sup> and transgression of cultural boundaries brought him negative criticism during his lifetime, yet he was warmly received by much of the press. An analysis of Levine’s reputation, and how it was formed, brings many methodological problems, particularly interpretive ones. In analysing contemporary sources from Levine’s admirers, critics, profile writers and Levine

himself, I have endeavoured to give the reader a comprehensive picture of how Levine presented himself and how he was perceived, thus illuminating wider concepts of how journalistic and critical politics, public image and press perception contribute to the process of reputation building.

Levine's approach to industrial practice was also informed by his showmanship. Levine never courted critical approval and always thought in terms of audience. Levine pioneered techniques in the areas of saturation openings, independent production<sup>33</sup> and foreign film importing and promotion.<sup>34</sup> He supported many new talents during his career; he was an independent producer and promoter who had many homes: in addition to Embassy Pictures he entered into many deals with major studios and independent production companies.<sup>35</sup> He was one of the most influential figures in Hollywood yet remained outside the system. Levine's influence on the industrial practices of US cinema from the 1950s-1970s has been overlooked by Film Studies yet he is a very valuable figure for scholarship. Given his maverick and gadfly tendencies, analysis of his career enables a detailed survey the very broad and diversified cultural developments of post-War America.

My research is rooted in archival and primary research material culled, for the most part, from the British Film Institute Library and Special Collections in London, the Margaret Herrick Library in Los Angeles and the Howard Gottlieb Research Center in Boston, as well as a wide variety of other sources. Much of the archive material came in the form of clippings or photocopies of varying quality. Unfortunately, the first casualty of archival research is page numbers, followed by author, title, date and publication. I have endeavoured to include as much information as is available to me.

The thesis is split into three sections; though the structure is broadly chronological: each section, consisting of three chapters, foregrounds a titular concept. As I have stated, the concepts should be perceived as interrelated.

### **Section I: The Emergence of a Showman 1945-1959**

Chapter One discusses Levine's role as showman, packager and cultural intermediary. The role of the cultural intermediary calls into question many commonly held assumptions regarding taste and taste cultures, given that such a figure undermines the act of discovery, and Levine's conspicuousness on the US cultural landscape from the 1950s-1980s serves to make such an undermining more evident. By analysing Levine in terms of scholarly work on art cinema, paracinema and industrial figures I argue that Levine's maverick tendencies have led to him being overlooked and that introducing Levine into these areas of film scholarship shows that the boundaries surrounding these areas are rather more porous than they may appear.

Chapter Two deals with Levine's first film as producer, the little-known *Gaslight Follies* from 1945. This film is a comedy compilation film, made up mostly of footage from the silent days of cinema. It is one of a cycle of such films made at this time, which have received short shrift from film scholars and archivists, who often dismiss such films as evidence of an uncultivated time in terms of film appreciation. I argue that much of the criticism directed at such films ignores their post-War historical context and that *Gaslight Follies's* appropriation of material from the past for the purposes of gentle mockery was part of a perfectly valid tradition and one that continues to this day. Moreover, Levine's strategy of re-creating atmosphere of cinema's past was, for its time, very innovative, and such a strategy is still

employed by filmmakers of note, as in the recent *Grindhouse* (2007, Quentin Tarantino, Roberto Rodriguez, et al.) An analysis of Levine's work on *Gaslight Follies* also serves to raise many issues discussed in subsequent chapters, notably taste cultures and cultural propriety, as well as defining Levine in his role as a cultural packager.

Chapter Three provides an analysis of the *Hercules* campaign, a hugely successful one and one that made Levine famous throughout the US. For this campaign Levine appropriated and modified techniques of the past in order to build a vast crusade, with him at the centre, which saw him capitalise on contemporary industry mores and introduce revolutionary elements into the practices of film marketing and distribution. I argue that Levine's *Hercules* campaign represents a vital missing link in the study of the evolution of saturation marketing and release strategies.

## **Section II: Representations of Levine 1960-1964**

Chapter Four analyses Levine's public image and his emergence as a celebrity. Levine was a proficient handler of the press and a tireless master of self-promotion; his public image was constructed to keep himself and his wares in the public eye. This chapter demonstrates the importance of studying ancillary materials in order to provide a deeper understanding of cinema history. I argue that Levine's orchestration of the popular press was a key factor in his promotional tactics and that, during the 1960s, Levine was able to capitalise on debates surrounding cultural borders and transgressions thereof.

Chapter Five provides an analysis of the Maysles brothers' documentary film about Levine, *Showman*. The film will be analysed with reference to the various stereotypes to be found in the attendant anecdotes and literature: allegations of anti-Semitism and the movie mogul stereotype. *Showman* is often interpreted as being an attack on Levine but I argue that the film's strength lies in its sympathetic portrait of its subject. Much of the writing on this film is infused by criticism of Levine; I argue that many of these criticisms are informed by the ingrained image of the mogul stereotype and that such readings offer not only a misrepresentation of Levine and the film, but also reveal the restrictions inherent in taking a purely textual approach to film analysis, particularly in the case of a historical document.

Chapter Six provides an overview of Levine's work as a producer of European films, and a close analysis of his production of *Le Mepris* (1964, Jean-Luc Godard.) Much has been written on *Le Mepris* and scholarly work relating to this film often makes much of associated extra-textual information regarding its production. The standard view of *Le Mepris* is that Godard produced a work of genius despite interference from its philistine producers – Carlo Ponti and, most notably, Levine, who is often taken to represent the bugbear that is Hollywood. In this chapter I argue that Levine has been unfairly misrepresented in much of the scholarly and popular writing pertaining to *Le Mepris*, which is usually grounded in a reductive art-versus-commerce debate. By placing *Le Mepris* in its contemporary industrial context I will analyse what cultural prejudices inform the film and, indeed, subsequent scholarship regarding the cultural status of art cinema and commerce, such as the prioritising of the director over the producer and the perceived threat to European cinema that the US represented in the 1960s.

### Section III: Industrial Manoeuvres 1964-1977

Chapter Seven deals with Levine's work as an independent producer at Paramount from 1963-1966. I argue that Levine's work whilst at Paramount challenges many of the commonly held assumptions regarding independent productions at this time, thus providing a greater illumination to this area of scholarship. I also argue that the restrictions placed on Levine by the troubled studio resulted in many thwarted ambitions for Levine, and challenge the dismissive stance taken by film scholars to Levine's Paramount output.

Chapter Eight engages with Embassy's production of *The Graduate* (1967, Mike Nichols). Having left Paramount in 1966 Levine pursued a wide variety of projects and *The Graduate* was Embassy's first significant success of the post-Paramount years. The film will be discussed with reference to its industrial and cultural context. The Hollywood Renaissance of the late 1960s has been widely romanticised by popular film writers and scholars alike and Levine's involvement with one of the Hollywood Renaissance's key films undermines many assumptions regarding the supposed generational sea-change occurring in US cinema at that time. It also calls into question traditional scholarly notions regarding production contexts and the independent/major studio distinction related to this period. This chapter also demonstrates Levine's adeptness at utilising the reputations of others to his own ends. The success of *The Graduate* put Levine in a commanding position when negotiating a merger between his Embassy company and the Avco Corporation. Scholarship pertaining to the conglomeration of the studios during this period is often dominated by Gulf and Western's takeover of the troubled Paramount. As a successful independent company, a case study of Embassy's merger with provides a new

perspective on this period, helping to emphasise the value of the independent company over the studios, the importance of television and the enhanced reputational benefits for both sides of this particular merger.

Chapter Nine provides a detailed analysis of the production of *A Bridge Too Far*. This was a massive undertaking on which Levine embarked soon after leaving Avco, where he had felt constricted by corporate stricture. The film's production and marketing will be analysed with particular emphasis on Levine's leadership qualities during the project. *A Bridge Too Far* was Levine's most ambitious project and was greatly defined by his own role as an independent producer. It was a labour of love for Levine yet its production exemplifies Levine's extraordinary capacity for trust and delegation. I argue that Levine's work on *A Bridge Too Far* represents a significant authorial contribution and that the authorial contribution of the producer, as well as the multi-authored project, should be better recognised in Film Studies.

In the Conclusion I provide an assessment of Levine's importance for Film Studies and propose what profit can be made for the discipline by engaging in greater analysis of hitherto marginalized figures from film history.

Of the film industry, Levine once wrote:

I love this business which is not really a business. The film industry is composed of an indescribable collection of dreamers and schemers, geniuses and phonies, sharpshooters and lunatics. It's action, on the screen and off. I hope that when my time comes it'll happen not in bed, but in that suite in Rome, or on a plane, or on the back lot of a studio in Hollywood, Paris or London.<sup>36</sup>

As if to demonstrate Levine's prominence and inscrutability during his lifetime, the editorial that accompanied this article from the *New York Times* is revealing. Underneath the article, in the space reserved for a short biography of a guest author, read the words, "Joseph E. Levine is ... well ... Joseph E. Levine."<sup>37</sup> Levine's love of cinema and the film industry are all too often overlooked, his influence has been almost forgotten, yet his passion, multifariousness and innovative techniques in many areas of cinema make him an ideal vantage point from which to survey and develop a greater understanding of the complexities of all aspects of the post-war US film industry. Indeed, Levine not only complicates many areas of Film Studies, he reinvigorates them.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Joe Levine, Still Adapting – And Cashing In,' *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, Weekend Magazine, 17<sup>th</sup> November 1978, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> "Here are the tickets for you and Mrs. Levine for your back-breaking tour. Just take it easy." Letter from Mike Hutner (National Publicity Director 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, distributors of *Magic*) to Joseph E. Levine, October 13<sup>th</sup> 1978.

<sup>3</sup> Bob Sorolsky, 'Whatever Became of All That Glamour?' *Philadelphia Bulletin*, 5<sup>th</sup> November 1978, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Victor Davies, 'How The Bridge at Arnhem Came To Be Paved With Gold,' *Daily Express*, 7<sup>th</sup> February 1977.

<sup>5</sup> Nan Robertson, 'Joseph E. Levine, A Towering Figure In Movie Making, Is Dead,' *The New York Times* (Late Final Edition), 1<sup>st</sup> August 1987, p. 36.

<sup>6</sup> Dade Hayes and Jonathan Bing, *Open Wide: How Hollywood Box Office Became a National Obsession* (New York: Miramax Book 2004) p. 232.

<sup>7</sup> Katherine Hamill, 'The Supercolossal – Well, Pretty Good – World of Joe Levine,' *Fortune*, March 1964, p. 178.

<sup>8</sup> Gay Talese, 'Joe Levine Unchained,' *Esquire*, January 1961, p. 66; Paul O'Neil, 'Super Salesman of Supercolossals,' *Life*, 27<sup>th</sup> July 1962, p. 79; Katherine Hamill, 'The Supercolossal – Well, Pretty Good – World of Joe Levine,' *Fortune*, March 1964, p. 178.

<sup>9</sup> Paul O'Neil, 'Super Salesman of Supercolossals,' *Life*, 27<sup>th</sup> July 1962, p. 79

<sup>10</sup> Mathew Hays, 'Keeping It Real: Legendary Director Albert Maysles on the Truth About Documentary Filmmaking', <http://www.newsworld.cbc.ca/arts/film/maysles.html> (accessed 10th March 2008.)

<sup>11</sup> Peter Dunn, 'The Last Movie Mogul,' *Sunday Times*, 5<sup>th</sup> February 1978.

<sup>12</sup> Gay Talese, 'Joe Levine Unchained,' *Esquire*, January 1961, p. 66

<sup>13</sup> Katherine Hamill, 'The Supercolossal – Well, Pretty Good – World of Joe Levine,' *Fortune*, March 1964, p. 178.

<sup>14</sup> Gay Talese, 'Joe Levine Unchained,' *Esquire*, January 1961, p. 66.

<sup>15</sup> Katherine Hamill, 'The Supercolossal – Well, Pretty Good – World of Joe Levine,' *Fortune*, March 1964, p. 178.

<sup>16</sup> 'Rosalie Gives Up Career For Joie,' *Boston Times* Banner Headline, circa June 1938, p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Katherine Hamill, 'The Supercolossal – Well, Pretty Good – World of Joe Levine,' *Fortune*, March 1964, p. 178.



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- <sup>18</sup> The earliest reference I can find for Embassy Pictures is in the form of a company cheque dated 1938.
- <sup>19</sup> Robert Muller, 'Breakfast With The Great Joe,' *Daily Mail*, circa. 1961. (Italics in original.)
- <sup>20</sup> Katherine Hamill, 'The Supercolossal – Well, Pretty Good – World of Joe Levine,' *Fortune*, March 1964, p. 180.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>22</sup> Eric Schaeffer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!* (Durham and London: Duke University Press 1999), p. 331. For Schaeffer's definition of the "classical" exploitation film see *ibid.*, p. 4-9
- <sup>23</sup> Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 2002), p. 7.
- <sup>24</sup> Eric Schaeffer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!* p. 331
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 331-337.
- <sup>26</sup> Barbara Wilinsky, *Sure Seaters: The Emergence of Arthouse Cinema* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press 2001), p. 2.
- <sup>27</sup> Joan Hawkins, *Cutting Edge: Art-Horror and the Horrific Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press 2000), p. 3-32.
- <sup>28</sup> 'Razzle Dazzle Showman,' *New York Times*, 26<sup>th</sup> October 1965, p. 3
- <sup>29</sup> The Last of the Movie Barons, *Newsweek*, 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1966.
- <sup>30</sup> Sal Manna, 'Levine Revels in Tattoo Scars,' *LA Herald Examiner*, 4<sup>th</sup> October 1981.
- <sup>31</sup> Joe Unchained, *Time*, 24<sup>th</sup> February 1961.
- <sup>32</sup> For example, *Hercules*, *Atilla* (1954, Pietro Francisci) and *Godzilla: King of the Monsters*. See Chapter Three for a detailed discussion of this.
- <sup>33</sup> For example *A Bridge Too Far*, discussed in Chapter Nine. Also, Levine's work as an independent producer at Paramount is discussed in Chapter Seven.
- <sup>34</sup> For example, *8½* (1963, Federico Fellini) and *Two Women* (1960, Vittorio de Sica), discussed in Chapter One.
- <sup>35</sup> Mapping Levine's associations with other companies is a labyrinthine undertaking. Most notably, he worked with Paramount in the mid 1960s as an independent producer and Embassy merged with Avco in 1968. He and Embassy had distribution deals with Warner Bros., MGM and Paramount at various times. The mid-1960s brought production deals with Circle Production and Videocraft, among many others. Levine had deals with Galatea and Lux films in Italy, as well as deals with Carlo Ponti, Vittorio de Sica and Marcello Mastroianni during the 1960s. In addition to Embassy, Levine also operated a distribution company Motion Picture Ventures, which he formed with Max Rosenberg, which dealt with New England states' rights distribution of Arthur Mayer and Joseph Burstyn's imports, for example *The Bicycle Thief* (1948, Vittorio de Sica) and *Paisan* (1946, Roberto Rossellini). Notably, Burstyn split from Mayer in the around the early 1950s to concentrate of his own distribution company, Joseph Burstyn Inc. Burstyn died in 1953 and Levine was rumoured to be taking over the company. (See George Clarke, 'Boy Film Star, 8, Has Fast Quip At Hub Greeting,' *Boston Daily Record*, 14<sup>th</sup> December 1953.) Levine certainly distributed the Burstyn import *Little Fugitive* (1953, Ray Ashley, Morris Engle and Ruth Orkin) in New England in 1953, and a few other films were imported by Joseph Burstyn Inc. after Burstyn's death but I am unsure as to whether Levine was involved. Levine also created another nationwide distribution company called Transworld, which he formed in 1956 with Edward Barrison, though this venture only lasted around two years. Even in the supposed "age of the independent producer" his associations were extraordinarily varied and complex.
- <sup>36</sup> Joseph E. Levine, 'Ars Longa, Vita Brevis,' *New York Times*, 8<sup>th</sup> October 1974, p. 41.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid. Italics in original.

## **Section I**

### **The Emergence of a Showman 1945-1959**

# Chapter One

## An Unfettered Hustler: Cultural Boundaries and Industrial Reputation

### Introduction

Given the choice, most would prefer to discover love by chance encounter than by Internet dating. The end result may be the same, the love just as deep, but the purposeful machinations of the World Wide Web are altogether less mysterious, less romantic, than the vagaries of fate. So it is with art. A great book lent by a close friend or, even better, found in an unfamiliar laundrette, will carry a deeper resonance than one recommended by Richard and Judy, Oprah Winfrey or amazon.com.

This chapter explores Levine's role as a showman, cultural packager and industrial figure. Perhaps Levine did not represent the cinematic equivalent of an Internet dating site but the role of the showman, to a certain extent, will always undermine the holy act of discovery. The difference between discovering a work of art by chance or hype is similar to the difference between first encountering a love due to eyes meeting across a crowded room or being fixed up by an online intermediary.

Pierre Bourdieu's extensive and influential research on taste cultures tends to emphasise the inevitability of taste. It is at once deeply academic and rather romantic, emphasising that often one is drawn to the object of one's taste by fate – that fate being tempered by such factors as class, education, geographical location, etc., but

still there is little or no allowance for the fact that consumer and product may be, as it were, fixed up.

[I]t is the logic of the homologies, not cynical calculation, which causes works to be adjusted to the expectations of their audience. The partial objectifications of which intellectuals and artists indulge in the course of their battles omit what is essential by describing as the conscious pursuit of success with an audience with what is in fact the result of a pre-established harmony between two systems of interests ... or, more precisely, of the structural and functional homology between a given writer's or artist's position in the field of production and the position of his audience in the field of the classes and class factions.<sup>1</sup>

In attempting to balance the argument, Bourdieu here is guilty of omission when he fails to acknowledge the role of the cultural intermediary and the importance of marketplace visibility.

In the first section of this chapter discusses the role of Levine the showman in the promotion of the art film, in this case *8½*. In Howard S. Becker's analysis of art distribution he notes that those who sell art directly to the public seek to maintain "orderly and predictable" operations.<sup>2</sup> For Becker, the role of a cultural intermediary is a discreet one and therein he highlights a key difference between a cultural intermediary and a showman, prominence. As a showman, Levine was brash, as a cultural intermediary, he lacked decorum.

In 1963 Embassy Pictures imported and distributed *8½*, in Canada and the US, to considerable critical acclaim and, for an art film, commercial success. Using the work of cultural commentators Steven M. L. Aronson and Dwight MacDonald I highlight how Levine and his tactics were seen as a transgression of cultural boundaries and thus viewed with suspicion by some who felt themselves to be more legitimate consumers of high culture, and who felt that his hyping tactics had a sullyng effect on the art world by compromising Bourdieuan notions of “cultural capital:” the status and legitimacy associated with a notionally pure appreciation of art, something that “may only be acquired by means of a sort of withdrawal from economic necessity.”<sup>3</sup> Moreover, I use the work of Bourdieu to illustrate how Levine the showman complicates his research and exposes its shortcomings.

The second section of the chapter deals with the world of paracinema. Described by Jeffrey Sconce as a loose coalition of “disparate subgenres,”<sup>4</sup> paracinema is perhaps best interpreted in terms of cultural capital or, more precisely, subcultural capital. It stands in opposition to a barely defined enemy – the mainstream – and is subject to an ever-developing set of seemingly contradictory internal logics. As a field of fandom and study it is defined not only by the material that forms its canon but also by the space between that material. Seeming incongruities of taste and artful juxtapositional choices are as much part of paracinematic culture as the films themselves, as evidenced by Sconce’s emphasising of the disparate.

This area of study is also complicated by Levine; again, cultural transgression is key. In paracinema, perhaps more than any other field, cult status is very often a helpful precursor to academic consideration, given that academics usually qualify as fans also. Paracinematic and trash film culture has elevated figures such as Sam Arkoff, William Castle and Ed Wood to positions whereby they and their work is

considered worthy of study. Levine, given his transgression of cultural boundaries, has not only failed to achieve the cult status often required to achieve importance in this field but also that his introduction into this field exposes the inherent conservatism of supposedly oppositional taste cultures. In a field where cultural transgressions are apparently prized, Levine's wilful disregard of cultural boundaries mean that subcultural capital is compromised by his demonstrating the porous nature of cultural borders, thereby undermining the notion of an "oppositional" taste culture, one that seeks to distinguish itself by fortifying, rather than truly challenging, cultural borders.

The third section positions Levine as an industrial figure of importance both in film history and for film scholarship; once again, he complicates the canon and, again, cultural transgressions are key. The industrial history of US cinema tends to be understood in systematic terms. It is an area of study where Becker's orderliness and predictability can help to conflate individual actions into systems, trends and movements. Levine's industrial nous helped to place him at the vanguard of many significant developments in US post war cinema – for example distribution tactics, peplum imports, foreign art cinema, independent production, the Hollywood renaissance and the blockbuster – yet he was never defined by them, the diversity of his roles and the multifariousness of his appetites make him difficult to pigeonhole, leading to his influence and importance being rather overlooked.

As if defined by contradiction, Levine resurrected the myth of the moguls and borrowed their legend, yet he balked at the idea of running a studio. At various times during his career, Levine appeared as part Zanuck, part Goldwyn and part Ponti, yet he remained unique. As a showman, his manipulation of publicity and the press is

unsurpassed yet he is now all but forgotten. He worked tirelessly for the films with which he was involved yet stole credit where perhaps it wasn't deserved.

“The moguls,” wrote Bernard F. Dick, “are [best] explained in terms of myth and literature. The irony is that they probably never read the myths and literature that explains them.”<sup>5</sup> Levine was different, as a master manipulator of the press he created his own myths and image and certainly borrowed from the myths and images of others. Indeed, to begin to understand Levine one must first begin to understand his relationship with the press, a relationship which will be a key theme of this thesis, and it is his mogulish posturing with regard to critics which will be investigated in this section, thereby analysing key questions regarding cultural territoriality.

Mathew Bernstein's book on Walter Wanger emphasises his typicality, a trait, claims Bernstein, which enables greater illumination “of how the movie producer functioned in Hollywood's classical era.”<sup>6</sup> By contrast, Levine certainly wasn't typical; but his extraordinarily diverse output and work as an independent producer/promoter who occasionally used a studio base provides an ideal vantage point for surveying the diversified landscape of US cinema in the post studio age. He was certainly not, for the most part, a hands-on producer like Wanger yet his extraordinary gifts for assembling projects and personnel, often followed by an equally extraordinary capacity for trust and delegation, gives a clear indication of the fleet-footedness required to be a successful independent in the post-studio era.

## **Hyping Art**

In 1983 Steven M.L. Aronson published *Hype*, a book that purported to provide an:

X-ray of hype, which this book has defined as ‘the merchandising of a product – be it an object, a person or an idea – in an artificially engendered atmosphere of hysteria, in order to create a demand for it or to inflate such a demand as already exists.’ Together, the chapters reveal a persistent pattern that speaks of a sorely menaced culture.<sup>7</sup>

On the dust jacket, along with the book’s rather hopeful subtitle (*The Names and Faces You Know So Well Will Never Look So Good To You Again*) are words of praise from America’s notables. Andy Warhol claimed that the book would be of use to all those who wish to stretch their allocated fifteen minutes of fame out to twenty; Dwight MacDonald found the book to be “extremely clever and thoroughly researched;” whilst noted lawyer Roy Cohn predicted that the book will “set off tremors in the inner sanctums of the powerful all over America” – an unlikely assertion, yet such an occurrence *could* explain why such an incendiary tome has been out of print since 1984.

In seeking to expose the barely hidden world of hype, Aronson adopts a shrieking style that provides fascinating evidence of how some can be driven to spluttering distraction by an enemy who is difficult to define, seemingly impossible to engage with, yet ubiquitous. In amongst the railing against the barely defined hype machine, the interviews with celebrity hairdressers and make-up artists, the remarkably unchivalrous attacks on Cheryl Tiegs and Barbara Cartland, and the various titbits of gossip, the author takes aim at Levine.

Aronson’s strategy regarding Levine is intriguing. Throughout the book his reportage regarding other public figures, such as Tiegs, Cartland or Jackie Kennedy, is littered with nasty asides regarding intellectual capacity, age or appearance. In order



to expose Levine as one of “Hype’s Hired Guns,”<sup>8</sup> however, Aronson is seemingly content to allow him to be hoisted by his own petard.

Aronson invites the reader to imagine a conference call featuring Levine, literary agent Swifty Lazar, political PR man Howard J. Rubenstein, corporate PR man Herb Schmertz, and show business agents John Springer and Bobby Zarem. Aronson had interviewed each of the participants individually and presents the results as if his interviewees were talking to each other. Aronson assures the reader that each communicant “uttered each word herein ascribed to him,” and explains that the purpose of this “harmony of hyperbole” is to help the reader to realise that “the best way to understand how disproportionate most PR is is to listen to its superstar promoters and hear the gobbledegook that is their speech.”<sup>9</sup>

Levine’s contribution to the proceedings is, for those acquainted with the man and his style, familiar territory. There are tales of hustling (“When I made *Magic* ... I visited twenty-eight cities in the United States”), stock Levine-isms (“Like I always said, a *little* advertising is a dangerous thing”), claims of careers built (Sophia Loren, Mike Nichols, Dustin Hoffman, Mel Brooks), stories of success ( $8\frac{1}{2}$ ), stories of disaster (*Jack the Ripper* (1959, Robert S. Baker and Monty Berman)), name-dropping (“*all* I ever *read* about is Joe Levine, Joe Levine, Joe Levine” quoth President Kennedy), and iconoclasm (“Fellini ... was phoney as a glass eye as far as I was concerned.”)<sup>10</sup>

“Had the call actually taken place,” Aronson informs us,

[the participants] would all certainly have taped it. And later, playing it back, they would have listened to their vapid generalisations, glib over simplifications, circumlocutions, distortions, distinguished

incoherence, rodomontades, and inflated presentations of self –  
listened to but, of course, not heard.<sup>11</sup>

Aronson fails to expand on the precise meaning of his final comment. The accusation seems to be that Levine and Co. display a lack of insight into, or awareness of, their own pomposity; they are, for Aronson, deluded by their own artifice. It could be argued, however, that Aronson displays a similar lack of insight and that the very same accusation could be levelled at him. Had he not been so obtuse he could have left his thesaurus on the shelf; to quote John Waters, “Liberace had a word for it. So did *Variety*. The word is ‘Showmanship.’”<sup>12</sup>

Levine is an interesting inclusion into Aronson’s cautionary tome regarding the pernicious new development of hype. In 1983 Levine was 78 and only four years away from the grave. Although he remained an industry loudmouth until his death, an occurrence that scuppered some unmade projects, Levine hyped his last film in 1981 with *Tattoo*. Although it could be argued that Levine was included due to his influence on hype as a modern phenomenon, it’s worth noting that the year *Hype* was published also saw John Waters wondering, “Whose to follow in the footsteps of the great low-rent Samuel Z. Arkoffs and Joseph E. Levines who used to hype films?”<sup>13</sup> For Aronson, Levine represents a malignant force, an unwelcome interloper whose influence is injurious to art. For Waters, Levine was one of a dying breed, a Showman, one of a soon to be forgotten tribe whose absence leaves culture just a little duller.

Waters’s essay ‘Whatever Happened To Showmanship?’, is predominantly about the king of the low-rent gimmick, William Castle, he also mentions Sam Arkoff and Kroger Babb. Levine distinguishes himself in such company as he, unlike the

others, often found himself subject to attacks from respectable cultural commentators. Along with Aronson, during his lifetime Levine found himself in the firing line of such luminaries as Dwight MacDonald, Jean Luc Godard, Philip K. Scheuer and Bosley Crowther to name a few. Indeed, since his death he is still subject to the occasional dig, parenthetically derided in Philip Lopate's notes to the Criterion DVD release of *Contempt* (aka *Le Mepris*) as "the distributor of *Hercules* and other schlock," and contextualised as a "social-climbing vulgarian"<sup>14</sup> in Paul Sherman's review of *Boccaccio 70* (1962, Vittorio De Sica, Federico Fellini, Luchino Visconti, Mario Monicelli.)<sup>15</sup>

So, what was Levine's crime that he should warrant so much attention? Throughout his career, Levine presented himself as the public face of every film he was involved in and expended a good deal of time, effort and money to keep himself and his wares in the public eye, so a certain amount of criticism is to be expected, given his prominence. But there seems to be deeper concerns at play too. Notably, Waters's other showmen, Arkoff, Babb and Castle, throughout their careers, remained associated with predominantly low-rent fare: trash, exploitation, weirdies; that which Jeffrey Sconce has dubbed "paracinema" and Michael Weldon has dubbed "psychotronic;"<sup>16</sup> a rich and diverse niche to be sure, which in turn contains many sub-niches within which Levine made many investments, but none of this kind of material would trouble the Bosley Crowthers and Dwight MacDonalds of the world. Levine, however, ostentatiously transgressed established cultural borders and brought his tactics with him as he did so; as Levine proudly announced to David Susskind during a radio interview, "We used exactly the same methods to sell *Hercules* as we did with *Two Women*! We nursed that picture like it was a baby."<sup>17</sup>

Cultural hierarchies, and violations thereof, are clearly of concern to Aronson. In the opening pages of *Hype* he complains that “the distinction between high art and popular entertainment collapses when a Pavarotti performs with a Sinatra.” The problem is not just that Luciano Pavarotti performing with Frank Sinatra represents a breach of taste culture, it is also that a “serious artist” such as Pavarotti should be sullied by the hype machine, that the influence of hype is so pervasive that it has encroached on the world of the high arts, Pavarotti has gone from artist to superstar; “It’s hype that created Pavarotti’s need and made possible its sleazy fulfilment.”<sup>18</sup> The tactics of low culture are apparent in the high.

When Aronson turns his attention to Levine, he reveals a roguish Levine bragging about turned he turned *8½* into an arthouse smash:

I did a helluva job with *Eight and a Half*. Made a profit on it, too, which was unusual for an art film – you better believe it! I had like a *hundred* screenings in New York. I showed it to every egghead professor school that I could find and it became a cocktail picture: “Have you seen *Eight and a Half*?” – you know. I don’t think that half of them understood it. I remember watching it with Fellini in the Festival Theatre, a theatre that *I* built for my own pictures. “Federico,” I says, “what the hell does that mean?” and he says, “*I* don’t know.” Now I don’t know whether he was putting me on or not, but *I* wasn’t putting him on, and I think a lot of that shit he just put in there, like he does now. And the eggheads ate it up. Every egghead found something *different* – like looking at a painting. Now it’s become a picture you teach from. A fuckin’ *classic*.<sup>19</sup>

Aronson doesn't reveal his thoughts on the film itself but his use of this quotation is revealing nonetheless. It's clear that Aronson finds the whole notion of hype unseemly, and all the more vulgar when associated with the highbrow. Levine always presented himself as a showman, and showmanship, it seems, does not mix well with the respectable arts.

As we shall see in chapter 4, Dwight MacDonald, a fellow traveller of Aronson's (given his kind words on the book's dust jacket), has objections to Levine and his tactics that are not based on his work on *Hercules* but rather his move into what MacDonald called the "art scene."<sup>20</sup> MacDonald claimed that *8½* was Fellini's "undisputed masterpiece" yet he is careful in his review to include a sarcastic aside about Levine. In reference to the spacecraft launching tower in the final scenes of *8½* MacDonald tells us "it cost a real \$140,000 in the real film, we are told by the Joseph E. Levine handout which is also real, relatively."<sup>21</sup>

MacDonald is not only pointing out the sloppy copy-editing in the pressbook, he is also disputing the necessity of including budgetary information in the film's promotion, information so gratuitous as to be only "relatively" real. Such tactics of manipulation are, for MacDonald, unseemly in relation to a film of such stature, and the tactics are the work of Levine. What is revealed here is an inversion of the dictum, "Shoot the messenger." Whereas in legend a messenger would be punished for bringing bad news, here Levine acts as the messenger, bringing art of a certain quality, yet the pedigree of the messenger somehow taints the work on offer, and so he is attacked.

Writing in 1979 of the phenomenon of the "taste-maker," Pierre Bourdieu noted:

The manner which designates the infallibility of the ‘taste-maker’ and exposes the uncertain tastes of the possessors of an ‘ill-gotten’ culture is so important, in all [cultural] markets and especially the market which decides the value of literary and artistic works, only because choices always owe part of their value to the value of the chooser, and because, to a large extent, this value makes itself known and recognised through the manner of the choosing.<sup>22</sup>

In applying such an analysis to Levine and MacDonald’s (and, less explicitly, Aronson’s) relationships to *8½* both Levine and MacDonald qualify for the role of ‘taste-maker,’ making it disputed territory. Levine, as importer, distributor and promoter, certainly qualifies for the role of taste-maker, and MacDonald’s comments reveal a certain amount of resentment at this status. MacDonald loves the film but seems annoyed at Levine’s presence – “because choices always owe part of their value to the value of the chooser.”

MacDonald, in his own role as taste-maker, slights Levine, as if to expose him as a possessor of “ill-gotten culture.” Moreover, if a taste-maker distinguishes himself by the “manner of the choosing,” then MacDonald, in a Bourdieuan sense, has a greater claim to legitimacy. For Bourdieu, returns, in the form of cultural capital, on cultural investments made need not be “pursued as profits; and so it brings to those who have legitimate culture as a second nature the supplementary profit of being seen (and seeing themselves) as perfectly disinterested, unblemished by any cynical or mercenary use of culture.”<sup>23</sup> Levine, however, did not run a charity.

For Bourdieu, the fields of production and the fields of consumption form “two relatively independent logics;”<sup>24</sup> represented here by Fellini and MacDonald. Writing

in 1992, Bourdieu makes the startling assertion that, “When a work ‘finds,’ as the saying goes, an audience which understands and appreciates it, this is almost always the effect of a *coincidence*.”<sup>25</sup> Bourdieu’s assertion is not a stand-alone claim, coming, as it does, accompanied by sturdy theoretical grounding regarding class, modes of production and taste cultures,<sup>26</sup> yet Bourdieu can still be accused of over-reliance on the romantic notion of serendipity. Assuming the truth of his claim of there being two “relatively independent logics,” surely somebody must be employed to do the fetching and carrying, taking the goods to market, as it were. In this particular case it is Levine who serves as the conduit.

A reliance on the romantic notion of serendipity would be dismissed by Levine as wholly impractical and foolhardy. Talking of his techniques in 1961 he told Gay Talese, “When I lay out all this money for advertising, it’s because I want people to know my picture is playing ... Would the Palmolive people spend millions on advertising soap and then not have soap in all the stores?”<sup>27</sup> Speaking specifically of *8½* in 1978 he told James Powers, “The only place it did any business was the United States and Canada, because we promoted the hell out of it. It became a picture that one had to see.”<sup>28</sup>

The critical *and* commercial success of *8½* brings a disruptive element into Bourdieu’s theories. Bourdieu identifies two poles of artistic production as being the “*subfield of restricted production*” and the “*subfield of large-scale production*.” Put simply, the latter is mass culture and former a more rarefied, uncompromising form of culture; the latter follows the “*principle of external hierarchization*” whereby success is measured by “indices of commercial success” and “pre-eminence belongs to artists (etc.) who are known and recognized by the ‘general public;’” the former, by contrast, follows the “*principle of internal hierarchization* ... [that] favours artists (etc.) who

are known and recognized by their peers ...and who owe their prestige ... to the fact that they make no concessions to the demands of the general public.”<sup>29</sup>

In Bourdieu’s model, a fellow artist is a *peer*, he does not belong to the general public and therefore respects the lack of concessions made on their behalf. No doubt many artists would object to being artificially removed from the masses, evidenced by the oft-cited artists’ maxim, “Of course I think about the audience. I *am* the audience.” Levine’s role, however, was not to *be* the audience, but to *know* the audience. For Bourdieu:

adjustment to the audience is never completely the result of a *conscious transaction* between producers and consumers, and still less of a deliberate search for adjustment, except perhaps in the case of the most heteronomous enterprises of cultural production (which, for this very reason, are correctly called commercial.)<sup>30</sup>

If this is the case, the fact that there is no conscious transaction between producers and consumers does not mean that there is no conscious transaction at all. There is, and in the case of  $8\frac{1}{2}$  this transaction occurred after the fact and was negotiated by Levine. Moreover, Bourdieu makes problematic use of the slippery term “commercial.”

For Bourdieu, cultural capital invokes the principle of “*loser takes all*.” Cultural artefacts appreciated by the “general public” find commercial success but are left “*symbolically ... discredited*,” due to their commercial nature; art which is less commercial – because it makes fewer concession to the demands of the masses – achieves greater symbolic capital if appreciated by the artists’ peers and a cultured



few.<sup>31</sup> This presumes both that art that is commercially successful is compromised and also the existence of art that is inherently commercial. Does the success of *8½* prove that it was a commercial film and therefore compromised?

As the promoter and distributor of *8½* in the US it was Levine's role to find an audience for the film rather than relying on Bourdieu's "coincidence." Bourdieu's failure to recognise the role of the promoter in the artworld complicates his model. By only recognising the consumer and producer it is easier to make a case for commercially successful art to have been commercially inspired. Levine's role as spanner in the works exposes Bourdieu's shortcomings. Levine's job was not to make commercial art but to make art commercial.

As I will detail in subsequent chapters, Levine, as a producer, would often introduce elements into a film to make it more commercially appealing. However, Levine had no creative input into *8½*, his input came after the fact when he identified his audience and sold them the film. The fact that the film was commercially viable does not necessarily mean that the film was, in a Bourdieuan sense, commercial – i.e. compromised. Moreover, one could argue that a film or artwork only becomes commercial once its commercial potential is unlocked, a process often performed by an agent outside of the producer/consumer model. A showman.

Furthermore, by the time *8½* was released, Levine's biggest commercial successes had been the *Hercules* films (*Hercules* and *Hercules Unchained* (1959, Pietro Francisci) both of these were imported by Levine). Again, this could be due to the fact that the films were inherently commercial, designed for a mass audience. However, one should acknowledge that the *Hercules* films were very low budget, foreign, badly dubbed, the acting was wooden, the special effects were very primitive by US standards and the closest thing they had to a star was former Mr. Universe

Steve Reeves, whose previous film experience was very limited, including a cameo role in a Jane Powell/Debbie Reynolds vehicle, *Athena* (1954, Richard Thorpe), and a part in exploitation king Ed Wood's *Jail Bait* (1955).

The idea of *Hercules* being a purely commercial enterprise is further compromised by the fact that all the major US studios had seen the film and rejected it for distribution. *Hercules* was made, no doubt, to make money and therefore for commercial reasons but Bourdieu's use of the term commercial implies mass-appeal, acceptance from the "general public." *Hercules*, however, followed the logic of the exploitation film or the b-picture, a low budget cash-in on the success of the bigger budget, star driven spectacles such as *Samson and Delilah* (1949, Cecil B. De Mille), *Ulysses* (1955, Mario Camerini) and the forthcoming *Ben Hur* (1959, William Wyler) which featured Victor Mature, Kirk Douglas and Charlton Heston respectively. *Hercules* was, therefore, like *8½*, a film whose market was essentially niche, turned into a success by the actions of its promoter, Levine.

Levine's approach to his role of cultural intermediary also undermines Becker's analysis of the art world. For Becker:

Dealers, critics and collectors develop a consensus about the worth of a work and how it can be appreciated. When that happens, we may say that the dealer has created an audience for the work he handles, an audience ... cultivated with respect to that body of work.<sup>32</sup>

Here Becker is emphasising a harmonious, co-operative relationship that leads to the development of taste or appreciation of art. Levine, as an intermediary and showman, always placed emphasis on the importance of audience identification rather

that audience cultivation. For Levine, the audience for a particular work was already there – he just had to find them, and therein lay the source of his showman tactics.

Levine did not contribute to viewing strategies.

Writing of showmen, John Waters wondered,

What's happened to the ludicrous but innovative marketing techniques of yesteryear that used to fool audiences into thinking they were having a good time even if the film stunk? Did the audiences care? Hell No. They may have hated the picture, but they loved the gimmick, and that's all they ended up remembering anyway.<sup>33</sup>

In this passage Waters is expressing delight at being hoodwinked by a huckster – an art in itself and, for Waters, something that gave greater pleasure than the spectacle on offer. In popular culture, hype can be part of a wider experience, a willingness to give credence a break; it can help sugar the pill. For the high arts, hype has a sullyng effect, a fly in the ointment. Levine, as I have said, was the public face of every film he was involved with, of *8½* just as much as *Hercules*, and his brand of showmanship seemed misplaced in the world of the serious artist and critic.

One of Levine's heroes, Mike Todd, was perfectly aware of such cultural demarcations. In 1939 Todd produced and directed *The Hot Mikado* on Broadway; desirous of a positive critical response and fearful that the show's image would be tarnished by his own huckster reputation, he hired the respected director Hassard Short as a "front" in order to sway the critics.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, Robert E. Kapsis has persuasively argued that Alfred Hitchcock's reputation amongst serious critics was impeded by his own showman antics.<sup>35</sup>

Levine, Todd and Hitchcock, I would argue, would have all felt resistance with regards their acceptance in certain quarters for the same reasons. All of them undermine Bourdieu's romantic and hopeful supposition that, "Taste is what brings together people and things that go together."<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, all had been involved in disreputable practices of hype and self-promotion, thereby sullyng the work with which they were associated.

Aleister Crowley, who owed his fame and notoriety in no small part to showmanship and playing to the gallery, once wrote:

If one had to worry about one's actions in respect of other people's ideas, one might as well be buried alive in an antheap or married to an ambitious violinist. Whether that man is the Prime Minister, modifying his opinions to catch votes, or a bourgeois in terror lest some harmless act be misunderstood and outrage some petty convention, that man is an inferior man and I do not want to have anything to do with him any more than I want to eat canned salmon.<sup>37</sup>

One could argue that a filmmaker or promoter chasing approval from the general public would fall into the "Prime Minister" category. More interesting, however, is Crowley's next example, especially if one considers the serious art connoisseur to be the "bourgeois in terror," and the "harmless act" to be being seduced, or even appearing to be seduced, by hype, showmanship or a disreputable figure such as Levine.

## **Levine and Paracinema**

Paracinema has been described as an “elastic textual category,” by Jeffrey Sconce, and one that “would include entries from such seemingly disparate subgenres as ‘bad film’, splatterpunk, ‘mondo’ films, sword and sandal epics, Elvis flicks, governmental hygiene films, Japanese monster movies, beach party musicals and just about every other manifestation of exploitation cinema from juvenile delinquency documentaries to soft core pornography.”<sup>38</sup> Sconce recognises that the disparate elements that constitute paracinema lead to the term being somewhat problematic. Indeed, since the publication of Sconce’s essay, the term has become even more nebulous.

When ‘Trashing the Academy’ was first published in 1995 the “cultural detritus” Sconce spoke of still had the distinction of being relatively eschewed by the academy; with this no longer being the case, the term becomes even less distinct.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, given recent developments in the world of film studies, Sconce’s essay not only serves as a valuable insight into taste cultures, but also as a historical document revealing how much work has been done on this subject in recent times and how much things have changed, providing evidence of a time when academically perceived binary oppositions between high and low culture were only beginning to be challenged.

Since 1995 Sconce’s “elastic” term has been stretched, refined and modified much further, most notably by Joan Hawkins. For Hawkins, “Paracinema consumption can be understood ... as American art cinema consumption has often been understood, as a reaction against the hegemonic and normalizing practices of mainstream, dominant Hollywood production.”<sup>40</sup> While Sconce has noted the

similarity between art film consumption and paracinema consumption, he still makes a distinction between the two on political grounds, positioning paracinema as the more radical of the two forms. Hawkins, by effectively embracing the art film on the same terms as the paracinema film is not merely stretching Sconce's term to add to the canon, she is also implicitly recognising a mutually beneficial relationship resulting from the outbreak of peace between two former adversaries.

By placing paracinema in opposition to European counter cinema and arthouse material, Sconce made a strong case for the its scholarly legitimisation. However, the study of art cinema too has found advantages in the exploitation and paracinema study, which have seen new approaches brought into the field. Mark Betz has noted the benefits for art cinema scholarship brought to light by this emerging entente-cordiale. Having noted that "the state of art cinema scholarship has been stuck in the same rut for decades,"<sup>41</sup> he cites the work of Hawkins and Eric Schaeffer as examples of how he anticipates his own study of that field to be reinvigorated by using "the kinds of extratextual materials that are so much a part of current film and media historiography."<sup>42</sup>

Levine worked extensively in both the paracinema and art cinema fields in various roles such as importer, producer, funder; but always as a promoter. As such, his career has bequeathed an extraordinary amount of extratextual material, which can provide the scholar with many valuable insights into various individual films, a fact duly noted by Betz who provides an analysis of Embassy's pressbook for *Boccaccio 70* in his piece;<sup>43</sup> yet whether or not Levine can be permitted entry into paracinema's congregation of canonical figures is an intriguing question, and one that tests the limits of the debates surrounding paracinema.

Sconce's 1990s paracinema viewer would prefer to watch a "bootlegged McDonald's training film" than Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929).<sup>44</sup> Hawkins's paracinema viewer, however, would probably watch both. At a grass roots level Hawkins has documented the apparent disregard for supposedly established cultural boundaries in mail order catalogues that sell paracinema material.

In the world of horror and cult fanzines and mail-order catalogs, what Carol J. Clover calls 'the high-end' of the horror genre mingles indiscriminately with 'the low end.' Here Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1921) and Dreyer's *Vampyr* (1931) appear alongside such drive-in favorites as *Tower of the Screaming Virgins* (1971) and *Jail Bait* (1955).<sup>45</sup>

On the face of it, Levine would seem to be an ideal addition to the paracinema canon. Hawkins notes that paracinema catalogues' method of listing films alphabetically or chronologically throws up some notable culture clashes, the former method seeing Godard's *Weekend* (1967) listed next to *The Werewolf and the Yeti* (1975, Miguel Iglesias); the latter seeing Godard's *Alphaville* (1965) beside Larry Buchanan's *Zontar, The Thing From Venus* (1966). Utilizing the same methods to peruse Levine's filmography would see similar anomalies, the former method placing the Embassy funded, *Billy the Kid Versus Dracula* (1966, William Beaudine) near the Levine produced *Contempt (Le Mepris)* and the latter placing the Levine production *Santa Claus Conquers the Martians* (1964, Nicholas Webster) no more than a few doors away from *8½*.

During an interview in 1966, the following exchange took place:

**Joseph E. Levine** – We just finished *Romeo and Juliet* with Nureyev and Fontayne. It's a ballet and it will be a gas. And probably we'll do *Faustus* with Taylor and Burton. We make many an egghead picture. Also, we just finished *Santa Claus Conquers the Martians*.

**Dick Griffin** – How do you reconcile *Santa Claus Conquers the Martians* with *Romeo and Juliet*?

**Joseph E. Levine** – Don't reconcile them! Don't reconcile them! I make movies.<sup>46</sup>

What is noteworthy here is Levine's claim that *Santa Claus Conquers The Martians* had just been finished – it had, in fact, been finished and released over 18 months beforehand, and so has seemingly been chosen by Levine as an ideal counterbalance for the weightier projects he was involved with. Levine, therefore, despite his protestations, seems to be revelling in the incongruities of the intermingling of high and low culture, the very same incongruities which serve as the basis for Hawkins's work.

Levine relished the paradox of being involved with schlock and high art at the same time, and being associated with both, especially as he knew many respectable critics and writers took exception to his presence in the art world and, equally, because he was fully aware of the confusion and consternation such cross-pollination would cause, playfully prefiguring Bourdieu's assertion that, "The most intolerable thing for those who regard themselves as the possessors of legitimate culture is the sacrilegious reuniting of tastes which taste dictates shall be separated."<sup>47</sup> Notably, Sconce uses this quotation to position paracinematic culture in 'Trashing The Academy,' suggesting:



It is a calculated strategy of shock and confrontation against fellow cultural elites, not unlike Duchamp's notorious unveiling of a urinal in an art gallery ... [the paracinematic] community is, in effect, renouncing its cultural 'pedigree' and attempting to distance itself from what it perceives as elite (and elitist) taste.<sup>48</sup>

Sconce recognises the similarities between the paracinema fan base and the perceived "elite," yet still emphasises their differences in terms of a political opposition. Mark Jancovich is unconvinced of this opposition, claiming that "what Sconce calls 'paracinema' is a species of bourgeois aesthetic, not a challenge to it,"<sup>49</sup> indeed, Sconce's referencing of Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* is revelatory in this context. The "unveiling" of Duchamp's 1917 piece famously never happened and *Fountain*'s subsequent claims to notoriety were largely occasioned by Duchamp's own flair for showmanship wherein, far from "renouncing [his] cultural 'pedigree,'" he capitalised on it; had *Fountain* really been submitted to the Society of Independent Artists' 1917 exhibition by R. Mutt (Duchamp's pseudonym for the piece), its reputation as a revolutionary work would have been less assured.<sup>50</sup> If, as Sconce does, one sees *Fountain* as analogous to paracinema and the art gallery as analogous with the cinematic elite it is a small wonder that these two similar species should coalesce, as per Hawkins's research. Far from being oppositional, the intermingling of the disparate through the application of viewing strategies finds more resonance with Becker's notion of consensus than any notion of conflict.

As we have seen with the art world of the 1960s-1980s, Levine was not welcomed, there was something a little disreputable about him which led to him being

treated with suspicion. I can't help but feel that such would also be the case among the paracinema community whose structure and attitude is very similar to the academic and arthouse elite. Put simply, he lacks required cultural pedigree.

Hawkins's work on the intersection of high and low culture in the world of paracinema does not, as one would imagine, highlight the porousness of cultural boundaries, but rather a political manoeuvre that sees cultural boundaries fortified. Hawkins illustrates,

The way that consumers of both low and high culture, during the postwar period, attempted to define themselves in opposition to a dominant mainstream taste aesthetic and the interest that both mainstream and, occasionally, high culture have had in policing taste.<sup>51</sup>

Hawkins shows that paracinema catalogues' method of alphabetising films *appears* revolutionary in that high and low art intermingle, apparently without cultural barriers. Yet such barriers *are* apparent because high mixes with low. Bring on the middlebrow and then the cultural barriers truly disappear but the field is left without distinction, less rarefied, less elitist, without pedigree. The alphabetisation of films in the DVD racks of HMV may throw up the kind of juxtapositions that fascinate Hawkins yet they are engulfed by the user-friendliness of the system. Moreover, as I have demonstrated, applying the system of alphabetisation to a selection of Levine's output can also throw up some intriguing culture clashes; applied to the whole of his output, however, and the culture jarring is less apparent – *Billy the Kid Versus*

*Dracula* alongside *Contempt* and *The Carpetbaggers*; or *8½*, alongside *Godzilla* and *The Graduate* sees once apparent cultural distinctions diluted.

The mingling of high and low culture, therefore, is synergistic and creates a complimentary and consolidated taste culture defined by a common enemy that exists in the form of another problematic term – the mainstream. Jancovich has expressed his frustration with such loose definitions and unsure rivalries:

In fact, cult movie audiences are less an internally coherent ‘taste culture’ than a series of frequently opposed and contradictory reading strategies that are defined through a sense of their difference to an equally incoherently imagined ‘normality’, a loose conglomeration of corporate power, lower middle class conformity and prudishness, academic elitism and political conspiracy.<sup>52</sup>

In order to illustrate his arguments Jancovich draws on Sarah Thornton’s work on the rave scene. In her work Thornton makes passing reference to the Northern Soul scene of the 1970s and 1980s, which she calls “the first fully fledged *archival* dance culture.”<sup>53</sup> Northern Soul’s position as “archival” mirrors paracinema (and, indeed, cinephilia generally) and makes for enlightening comparison. The snobbiest of music scenes, the perfect Northern Soul club record was a track that *nobody* had heard before and *everybody* would dance to, a marriage of obscurity and quality, rarity and irresistibility. When playing their greatest finds, top Northern Soul DJs would often put a false label on the disk, sending peering tyro DJs on wild goose chases for the wrong record. As Manchester legend has it, Northern Soul DJs would also cash in on the gullible by selling off the records they considered to be substandard to the

unenlightened – usually DJs from Essex – who bought up Northern Soul’s cast offs and went back to the south east and started their own soul scene with records that weren’t wanted in the North. As with paracinema, rarity, knowledge and exclusivity were prized. In the present, with Northern Soul compilations in Virgin’s bargain bin and *Santa Claus Conquers the Martians* on YouTube, where is such subcultural capital to be found?

Jancovich, I feel, may have put his finger on the answer to that question. By demanding coherence within taste cultures and fuller definition of their enemies, Jancovich has, perhaps unwittingly, identified an area of colonisation for cults and elites. In a world where culture – esoteric or mainstream – is ever more accessible, the rules of cultural assessment must change in order to perpetuate oppositional taste. *High Fidelity* (2000, Stephen Frears), from Nick Hornby’s 1996 novel, highlights the politics of list making amongst the subcultural elite.<sup>54</sup> The film tells the tale of the lives of record shop employees, and their shared love of music plays a key role. In one of their many “Top 5” games, Barry (played by Jack Black) challenges his friend and boss, Rob (played by John Cusack) to name his top 5 track 1 side 1 LP tracks; Rob’s first choice – Nirvana’s *Smells Like Teen Spirit* from *Nevermind* – brings howls of derision from Barry:

Oh, that’s not obvious enough, Rob! How about The Beatles!?! Or  
fucking ... fucking Beethoven!?! Side one track one of the Fifth  
Symphony! ... How can someone with no interest in music own a  
record store?

Rob's top five completed, Barry mockingly deconstructs what he perceives to be a display of self-conscious eclecticism, decoding a series of discreet political gestures where the juxtapositions are as relevant as the individual choices. Notably, *Smells Like Teen Spirit* is not ridiculed in terms of quality but obviousness; Barry's derisive snorts do not constitute an evaluation of taste. In a similar vein, given paracinema's emphasis on a "calculated strategy of shock and confrontation" what subcultural capital would be gained from putting *The Graduate* in a top five? Moreover, in the light of Jancovich's demands for coherence, it should be noted that in this context, "obscure" is not necessarily the correct antonym for "obvious" - "surprising," "intriguing" or "anomalous" function better. In the light of Sconce's misappropriation of Duchamp's *Fountain* to illustrate paracinema's oppositional nature it is worth noting that Duchamp's own calculated strategy was, given his cultural pedigree, more of an elitist gesture than a signifier of conflict.

Modern taste cultures revel in their incoherence and seeming capriciousness; like the diktats of fashion, etiquette or political correctness, ever evolving and contradictory internal logics serve to engender inclusivity and confound the hapless outsider. In the world of paracinema, the transgression of cultural borders is welcomed; Levine, however, transgressed them in the wrong way. His transgressions were broader, thereby softening juxtapositions.

In 1995, Sconce's use of Bourdieu's assertion regarding the "sacrilegious reuniting of tastes" was used to position paracinema in opposition to conventional academia. Contrarily, over a decade later, Sconce's use of Bourdieu helps to illuminate the inherent conservatism of paracinematic culture. Having embraced a former adversary, the art film, paracinema still seeks to define itself "in opposition to Hollywood cinema and the mainstream US culture it represents;"<sup>55</sup> perversely,

paracinema's resistance to the so-called mainstream exposes its conservatism. As Jancovich has pointed out, the study of paracinema:

Requires a re-examination of one of the most problematic concepts within film studies – ‘the mainstream, commercial cinema’ – and the ways in which its inconsistent and contradictory uses arise from its function as the Other, the construction of which allows for the production of distinctions and a sense of cultural superiority.<sup>56</sup>

Sconce's use of Bourdieu's assertion to claim renegade status for paracinema is rendered ineffective by that community's opposition to Hollywood. Throughout his career Levine defended his right to cater for “different levels of taste,”<sup>57</sup> and was proud of his ability to do so. His output represented an across-the-board cultural transgression that denied exclusivity and satisfying juxtapositions. Whatever cultural spectrum one cares to use, whether you consider Mike Nichols, Ingmar Bergman, William “one shot” Beaudine or anybody else to represent the high, low or middling water mark of cinema, Levine catered, at one time or another, to every point on the cultural spectrum and thus it is he, not paracinema fans, who represents the true renegade embodiment of Bourdieu's notion of sacrilege.

### **An Industrial Figure**

An extraordinary brigand called Joe Levine. Joseph E. Levine.

- Richard Attenborough.<sup>58</sup>

The above quotation comes from a documentary in which Richard Attenborough remembers, with evident fondness, Joe Levine, for whom he directed *A Bridge Too Far* and *Magic*. His playful dubbing of Levine as a “brigand” is interesting. A brigand is, of course, a thief or, more precisely, one of a band of thieves, yet Attenborough chooses not to use such blunt terms, preferring a more rarefied word with romantic connotations. Indeed, in 1978 a British newspaper quoted Attenborough as having referred to Levine as “a pirate,”<sup>59</sup> Attenborough immediately wrote to Levine to assure him that such was not the case, he had, in fact, used the word “buccaneer.”<sup>60</sup>

Levine once claimed to have “gotten along with most people along the way, except that actress, what’s her name? Who I starred in *Harlow*.”<sup>61</sup> Carroll Baker, to whom Levine is referring, was certainly not the only enemy Levine made during his career. Max Rosenberg, a one-time collaborator of Levine’s, once confessed, “I was fascinated by him, but not for too long.”<sup>62</sup> Cary Grant, on the subject of *A Touch of Class* (1973, Mel Frank), told Guy Flatley in 1973:

Despite what it says on the billboards, Joe Levine did *not* produce the movie ... If anyone is responsible for *A Touch of Class*, it is Mel Frank, the man who wrote it and directed it. I like Joe Levine but I do believe it is a habit of his to take credit where he really shouldn’t, something that applies even to *The Graduate*.<sup>63</sup>

Lawrence Turman, the producer of *The Graduate* has also expressed anger at Levine’s credit stealing,<sup>64</sup> as has film importer Arthur Mayer.<sup>65</sup> Countless people took him to court. In *A Filmmaker Remembers*, Richard Attenborough praises Levine’s tireless dedication to *A Bridge Too Far* yet elsewhere has expressed sorrow at the

acrimonious end to the professional relationship and “profound friendship.”<sup>66</sup> Jean Luc Godard didn’t like him either.

Levine was probably not the nicest man in showbusiness, not a gentleman producer in the mould of Hal B. Wallis, but neither did he have the monstrous reputation of Harry Cohn. Levine was more of a rascal than an ogre. Just as cult status is often a helpful precursor to academic consideration, so, in the case of cinema’s industrial figures, sleaze, scandal and gossip are helpful preliminaries; sometimes it’s helpful to have something to look beyond. In paracinema it is the perceived low quality of the films that has arguably inspired their re-investigation; and although Kapsis has argued that Hitchcock’s flair for showmanship hampered his reputation amongst serious critics, the very fact that there was something to battle against may, at least in part, explain the zealotry of disciples such as Sarris and Truffaut.

I would argue that unsavoury bibliographical and extratextual material, including myths and downright lies, has certainly aided the reputation building of many key figures in cinema, be it Hitchcock’s sexual proclivities, Leni Reifenstahl’s Nazism, Harry Cohn’s casting couch, Howard Hughes and Louis B. Mayer’s obsessiveness, Sam Spiegel’s gambling, Walter Wanger’s crime of passion or Zanuck’s alcoholism and desertion of his wife. By contrast, Levine was happily married to Rosalie from 1938 until his death in 1987, and the evidence suggests that he worshipped her and had good relationships with his adopted children. To the best of my knowledge, Levine was not unfaithful, nor was he a womaniser, alcoholic, gambler, chocoholic, homosexual, paedophile, communist, Nazi or fascist. His sensitivity left him vulnerable to temper but he was not a bully like Cohn; he was egotistical but not a control freak like Louis B. Mayer; he often ballooned in weight and then slimmed down, but was not a slave to faddish diets à la Hughes.



Notably, in *Harry Cohn of Columbia Pictures*, Bernard F. Dick pays tribute to Bob Thomas's influential biography *King Cohn* yet also notes that his own research has enabled him to correct, or cast doubt on, some of Thomas's assumptions.<sup>67</sup> In George F. Custen's study of Darryl F. Zanuck he stresses his unwillingness to "replicate the obsessions with ... biographical trivia."<sup>68</sup> He also notes,

[B]ecause so much of what has been written about moguls portrays them as ruthless, almost atavistic, creatures with one goal – power – we end up seeing producer Zanuck as a series of shifting nouns attached to one adjective, *simple*: simple power, simple vulgarity, simple instinct.<sup>69</sup>

To see Zanuck as merely a mogul, then, presents a simplification of the man and his work. In Levine's case, given the fact that he has largely faded from view, the comparison is, by contrast, illustrative; still a simplification but a good starting point.

The moguls were, originally, those who ruled India from the 16<sup>th</sup> Century to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century following the invasion of India in 1526 by the forces of Zahir al-Din Muhammed Babur, which marked the beginning of the Mughal Empire. The moguls, then, were conquerors and rulers. Today the meaning has been expanded, or diluted, to mean "an important or influential person," according to the Oxford English Dictionary. In cinematic terms, the word retains its romanticism and has positive and negative connotations. The moguls were, for the most part, the heads and heads of production at the major studios prior to the collapse of the studio system through the 1950s and 1960s. It wasn't necessarily direct involvement with the film making process that earned them the moniker, the moguls weren't always filmmakers; they

were the men who created the conditions whereby filmmaking could flourish. They were the expeditors of cinema.

However, just as a buccaneer is a pirate but a pirate is not necessarily a buccaneer, so a mogul is a film executive but a film executive is not necessarily of mogul. The rulers of the studios could mostly be described as moguls, Cohn at Columbia, Zanuck at Fox, Jack Warner at Warner Bros, etc., yet Arthur Krim and Robert Benjamin, the two lawyers who took over United Artists in 1951, don't seem to fit. Indeed, UA's original owners – Charlie Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford and D. W. Griffith – also seem to occupy disputed territory, not only because of the on-screen visibility of the first three, but also due to the industrial politics inherent in the formation of UA, which was formed, as its name suggests, as an artists' response to the growing power of the emerging moguls and studio system.

The example of UA is illustrative; tussles between studio heads and artists are well documented in cinema historiography, so much so that these power struggles have led to moguls often being defined, to a certain extent, by their enemies. As we have seen, Levine has been subject to his fair share of criticism from those he worked with. Moreover, publicly he strongly adhered to what Robert Sklar has called “the traditional conception” of the moguls, in which ‘the intellectuals’ were their antagonists and ‘the people’ their friends.”<sup>70</sup> Throughout his career Levine was very defensive of the audience for his more populist fare whilst at the same time railing against critics and intellectuals. Speaking in 1960 he said:

What he [the public] wants is what the critics call “corny.” I say I like it or I don't like it. But I'm in business. People from 8 to 80 who like

those pictures are the ones who support the movies – not the intellectuals.<sup>71</sup>

As we have seen from his comments regarding *8½*, whilst being defensive of some of his audience he also sought to playfully undermine the audience for his more highbrow fare, who he termed “eggheads” and portrayed as gullible. It’s worth noting that the account of his promotion of *8½* quoted earlier was certainly not the first time Levine had told that particular tale.

Levine, ever conscious of his public image, certainly seemed to be posing as a mogul by adopting such an anti-intellectual position, borrowing the legend, so to speak. Attenborough wrote of Levine:

He enjoys greatly giving the impression that many things are beyond his comprehension. “No use sending me the script. I can’t read,” he is always saying.

Nothing is farther from the truth. He studies every subject in which he is involved meticulously, whether it be his next production or the most recent acquisition for his walls.<sup>72</sup>

Similarly, Goldwyn would be happy to be thought of as a buffoon due to his highly publicized mangling of the English language with a lexicon of malapropisms that, one suspects, was bolstered with additions composed for him by his press agents. Also, Dick has noted that Cohn would downplay his excellent command of the English language in public.<sup>73</sup> The perpetuation of such an image among cinema’s powerful figures can be seen as an application of the grifter’s maxim “always let the

other guy think he's smarter than you," yet also reveals the interplay between mogulish reputations and the industrial nature of cinema in the US.

Bourdieu asserts that the subfield of restricted production "excludes the quest for profit and ... guarantees no correspondence of any kind between monetary investments and revenues."<sup>74</sup> Following this logic, he suggests, "It can be understood ... at least in certain sectors of the field of painting at certain times, the absence of any training or scholarly consecration may appear as a form of glory."<sup>75</sup> Substituting the field of cinema for Bourdieu's field of painting presents a paradox. By adopting the moguls' position, downplaying formal training and ability, Levine is emphasising an instinctive ability, the "simple instinct" of Custen's mogul myth. The same can be said of Bourdieu's example, yet for him instinctive ability is that which is more likely to be recognised and respected by peers – following the principle of internal hierarchization; for the mogul, it represents the "common touch" and thereby is designed to appeal to a wider crowd. For Bourdieu, in the subfield of restricted production peer approval is privileged over mass approval; in the cinema, given its industrial nature, peer recognition is a step towards mass approval; as Levine told Aronson, "selling the public isn't enough, the industry's gotta be sold too."<sup>76</sup>

Levine's distaste for intellectuals may sound like mere mogulish posturing yet that would be a simplification. As Levine moved into the arthouse market in the early 1960s he grew to resent the control that critics had over the market whereby a couple of bad reviews could all but destroy a film. Arthur Knight wrote about this phenomenon in 1959:

For good or ill, it is in the field of the art film that the critical confraternity swings the most appreciable weight. And the distributors

and exhibitors of such films, unfortunately, seem to ponder their reviews with a far greater intensity than for the audience for which they were written. A favourable notice from Bosley Crowther or John McCarten, they know, will bring in the crowds; if the notices are unfavourable, they realize that they might as well just bring in another picture.<sup>77</sup>

Levine, speaking in 1967, echoed these sentiments:

I think my company brought more art house films here [the US] than any other company ... You don't bring them here and be at the mercy of a couple of critics in New York. If they don't like an art film you're dead. If a commercial film is panned by the critics nobody pays any attention.<sup>78</sup>

Levine's referencing of the volume of art films brought to the US by Embassy amounts to a proprietorial claim over the film world and is used as circumstantial evidence to justify his resentment of critics. Indeed, in the article he blames critics' power for the death of arthouse cinema in the US. For Levine, it is the critics who are the interlopers, not him.

Levine had always had a frosty relationship with critics; this 1970 interview shows Levine in fiery form:

Renata Adler? Ah, for Crissakes. Did you read her reviews? Did you understand them? She don't like movies. Vincent Canby seems to like

pitchas made in Czechoslovakia. What the hell do I know about pitchas made in Czechoslovakia? Pauline Kael is a sonafabitch. You think she loves movies? When was the last time she said anything good? OK, about some pitcha made in Czechoslovakia. Well who cares who sees it? This is a free country. The majority rules. The majority should rule in the movies.<sup>79</sup>

Quite apart from Levine's specious claims regarding democracy, what is interesting here is how Levine asserts a moral authority over the movie world, claiming that the critics he mentions don't even like movies, in contrast to his own boast of "I like movies, all of them, I find something good in almost every movie."<sup>80</sup>

By the time *The Night Porter*, which Levine imported, was released in the US in 1973, Levine was to be found berating, indeed undermining, critics in a rather more playful, almost satirical, manner by advertising his film with quotes cannibalised from Vincent Canby's review, as the author explains:

The quote in question took the headline of my piece ("*The Night Porter* is romantic pornography") added a bit of a sentence from the first paragraph ("... a hectic love affair") and then a long sentence from the seventh paragraph ("Among the film's various definitions of decadence is a strong preference to do on a floor what most people would do on a chair, table or bed"), winding up with a phrase from the ninth paragraph ("what a kinky turn-on!") ... What Levine knew – and the critics did not – was that *The Night Porter* was the kind of silly

movie that could excite the public's imagination by being accurately described ... Junk presented as junk still sells.<sup>81</sup>

Of *The Night Porter* reviews Levine told Charles Champlin:

Nora Sayre reviewed it in *The New York Times* and she really tore it apart. Then, just in case it was still alive and twitching there on the floor, Vincent Canby did a Sunday piece and shot it through the head<sup>82</sup>

Of the ad-copy constructed from Canby's comments slating the film Levine boasted "we didn't even have to lift them out of context,"<sup>83</sup> a fact duly noted by Canby in his own article. Indeed, Canby seems to take the subverting of his review in good humour. Seeming to honour unspoken rules of engagement with Levine, he adopts a palms-out "ya-got-me" demeanour, even expressing admiration for his tormentor:

My admiration for Joe Levine as a picker of movies may not be great, but I do admire the boldness of his full frontal assault on the critics. Like a character in a Tom and Jerry cartoon he has neatly folded back the barrels of the critic's guns so that the buckshot hits them in *their* faces, not his.<sup>84</sup>

Canby's good humour is revealing. Despite Levine's repeated broadsides against critics, intellectuals and eggheads, much of the press treated Levine kindly, even with fondness, as if his carefully constructed public image had left him tamed;

for all his boisterous bluster, he was a known quantity. Ever quotable, Levine gave good copy and I am yet to read an interview with Levine (Aronson's aside) in which the interviewer did not warm to him.

Levine was a tireless courter of the press, something which no doubt explains his proficient handling of interviewers. Whilst alienating eggheads and critics was part of his shtick, he also worked hard maintaining his profile in other sections of the media. In the trade press, *Variety* was especially kind to him – small wonder, given the vast amounts Levine would lay out for publicity. His image was also no doubt aided by a close friendship with Abel Green, editor of *Variety* from 1933-1973. Beyond the trade press Levine was treated to profiles in magazines such as *Esquire*, *Life*, *Fortune* and *The New Yorker* and Levine-related stories were semi-regular fixtures in the popular press, in everything from the *LA Times* and *The New York Times* to *Women's Wear Daily*. Local press was catered for too; the release of *Magic* was pre-figured by an enormous publicity tour that saw a 73-year-old Levine visit over 20 cities, often proffering his observation that “People don't hustle anymore.”<sup>85</sup>

If it is the hallmark of a mogul to have a field of influence that extends beyond the film world then Levine surely qualifies. During his time he met Popes, royalty and Presidents. His frequent references to his meetings with the powerful could be seen as confirmation of Paul Sherman's assessment of Levine as a “social climbing vulgarian,” but that is more than a little harsh, if not snobbish. Indeed, coming from Levine's background, up is the only sensible way to go, and Levine's name dropping was always more giddy than smug. Notably, he seemed to have the respect of America's powerful. As President-elect, John F. Kennedy wrote a tribute to him for *Variety*,<sup>86</sup> Lyndon Johnson invited him to the Whitehouse for the signing of The National Endowment on the Arts and the Humanities Act in September 1965,



presenting him with the pen he used afterwards; and Richard M. Nixon, as President-elect, wrote to him for advice:

As you may know, I have pledged to bring into this administration men and women who by their qualities ... can make a significant contribution to this country.

You, as a leader, are in a position to recommend exceptional individuals.<sup>87</sup>

Correspondence from the early 1970s reveals that Levine was involved with both the Republican and Democrat parties.<sup>88</sup> Overall, I would suggest that Levine was politically liberal. He expressed admiration for Kennedy and Embassy distributed a documentary about him, *John F. Kennedy: Years of Lightning, Day of Drums* (1966, Bruce Herschensohn), for free. In the late 1970s, when the unions were coming under heavy fire from the film industry, he expressed his sympathy for them.<sup>89</sup> Most importantly, though, he always envisaged the audience for many of his films to be the working class and he was fiercely defensive of them. No doubt such support worked in his favour, yet he was always sympathetic to “the people;” he never patronised them and attacked those who did – whether those attacks be real or imagined.

Of *The Night Porter* Levine said, “It’s a people’s picture, just like *Hercules* was, and critics should remember that.”<sup>90</sup> Films such as *The Night Porter* and *Hercules* have now achieved cult status, appreciated by paracinema fans and cultists alike. Upon their original release, however, Levine set his sights on the masses, the general public, the mainstream – paracinema’s nemesis. Indeed, this again brings Sconce’s work into question. For him, paracinema is “primarily a male, white, middle class and

[possessing an] ‘educated’ perspective on the cinema.”<sup>91</sup> This is an extraordinary generalisation, one that borders on snobbery, smacks of cultural appropriation and one that ignores the original audience along with vast swathes of the current paracinematic fanbase.

Taken as a whole, Levine’s output seems multifarious to the point of being scattergun. Most of the studio-era moguls could be understood through their studios, or vice versa, each having its own personality or hallmark. Even the independent moguls, Goldwyn and Selznick, associated themselves ostensibly with the prestige picture. For Dick, the exception to the rule is Harry Cohn and Columbia,<sup>92</sup> whose wide-ranging production schedule made them difficult to characterize; yet their output was American. If Levine (and, by extension, Embassy/Avco-Embassy/Joseph E. Levine Presents) could be compared to a studio it would have to be post-1951 United Artists – the studio without a studio.

But Levine always presented himself as a one-man band, the public face of a pipeline, sometimes a producer, often a presenter, always a promoter, though he certainly had the conceit of a mogul. A tireless and unblushing self-promoter, Levine was always a company man, not a studio man, and the company was, essentially, Levine. In 1965 he bragged, “My business is loose. I can go anywhere, do anything, and do it right away. Who needs a board of directors? Five years ago I had only three people in my office – four including my wife.”<sup>93</sup> That same year Embassy was rumoured to be planning a merger with MGM, rumours that proved to be unfounded, “I’m not geared to run a studio,”<sup>94</sup> he told Hedda Hopper. Rumours of Levine taking over the reigns at Paramount were also rife in the mid-1960s; in 1964 he became their largest shareholder, but he sold his shares in 1966. When Levine finally sold Embassy to Avco in 1968, he, significantly, embarked on the quietest period of his career.

Retained by Avco to run Avco-Embassy, Levine left in 1974, a year before his contract was due to expire, telling *Variety* “I didn’t like being an executive, I like to make pictures, I like to wheel and deal.”<sup>95</sup>

William Goldman wrote that, “It’s kind of ironic that Levine, maybe the archetypal Hollywood mogul, has always been acutely uncomfortable in Hollywood,”<sup>96</sup> yet such an assessment makes a peculiar kind of sense. Levine, due to the diversity of his roles and output, stands a better comparison to the great Italian producers such as Carlo Ponti or Dino De Laurentiis than his counterparts from the US, yet Levine and his brash ballyhoo style are unmistakably American. He represents all sorts of contradictions; he was a regular fixture in the trade and popular press for more thirty years yet there is no internal coherence to his output; he adopted the pose of a movie mogul yet didn’t like big organisations; he loved movies and the movie industry but hated Hollywood.

Goldman also wrote of Levine, “it’s my guess that when the long term history of the sound era is written, Levine’s importance will be that, in a crazy way, he helped keep [the movie business] alive.”<sup>97</sup> Such a bold statement is not without merit. Levine is, in my view, a key linking figure in film historiography, illuminating many aspects of industrial practice from the decline of the studio era to the New Hollywood of the 1970s and 1980s. His influence can be found in modern day blockbuster marketing, the US Indie film, the arthouse blockbuster and foreign film distribution. The hyperbole of Goldman’s assessment is also noteworthy, and it is fitting that it appeared in a book whose purpose was to promote a Levine production – *A Bridge Too Far* – and that Goldman was paid by Levine to write it, thereby providing a claim that, to borrow MacDonald’s phrase, is real, relatively.

Levine, despite being a known quantity to the press during his lifetime, is difficult to quantify in terms of film historiography. In Custen's book about Zanuck, he claims that "after the death of MGM's Irving Thalberg [Zanuck became] the most important figure and pacesetter in the film industry,"<sup>98</sup> Bernard F. Dick argues that Hal B. Wallis was "one of Hollywood's most creative producers."<sup>99</sup> Such assessments can arguably be applied to Levine but Levine was of a different stripe. And, quite simply, he does not have the producer's pedigree.

Levine was no Zanuck, he did not possess Zanuck's extraordinary ability in just about every aspect of film making. He did, however, possess the studio boss's gift for juggling multiple projects and can lay claim to being an industry pacesetter. Levine pioneered saturation marketing and openings with Italian peplum films in the 1950s, yet, despite the success of *Hercules* (or perhaps because of its quality) such tactics remained disreputable until the 1970s and *Jaws* (1974, Steven Spielberg). Notably, when Fox threatened to issue Zanuck's *The Longest Day* (1962, Ken Annakin, Andrew Marton, Berhard Wicki) nationwide, as opposed to roadshowing it, Zanuck, incensed that his masterpiece could be treated so shabbily, returned from Europe and re-took control of the studio.

Levine also changed the rules for art film marketing with films such as *Two Women* and *8½*. Alisa Perren has written of how *sex, lies and videotape* (1989, Steven Soderburgh) marked a "turning point"<sup>100</sup> in US indie cinema, revolutionising the marketing of art films. She quotes Harvey Weinstein of Miramax (who distributed the film):

Although we make artistic films, we don't use the starving artist mentality in our releases. Other distributors slap out a movie, put an ad

in the newspaper – usually not a very good one – and hope that the audience will find it. And most often they don't. It's the distributors' responsibility to find the audience.<sup>101</sup>

Such comments, undermining Bourdieu's notion of "coincidence", find their precursor in the attitude of Levine nearly thirty years previously. As this thesis explores, Levine also placed himself at the vanguard of many other significant developments in post-war US cinema, from monster movies to New Hollywood to the blockbuster. As a public figure, he made it his mission to find an audience for his wares whether by blunderbuss, saturation marketing or more careful, bespoke campaigns. Difficult to categorise, with wide ranging appetites and an irrepressible devotion to showmanship Levine complicates many areas of film studies and it is for this very reason that he is so important.

As we have seen, Levine revelled in his public image as a maverick and transgressor of cultural borders; however, to attribute his tactics and diversity to reputational concerns and self-consciousness would be a mistake. His comments regarding *Romeo and Juliet* and *Santa Claus Conquers The Martians* reveal playfulness and a nod towards the gestural politics of paracinema, and no doubt contributed to Levine's maverick public image. But Levine's cultural contraventions were so many, frequent and varied as to undermine any serious suggestion of contrivance.

Levine's involvement and influence in such a diverse range of cinematic movements and developments leave him difficult to place in terms of taste cultures and cinema historiography. Levine's cultural transgressions, notably devoid of any political or aesthetic manifesto, have led to him being overlooked as a key figure in

post-war US cinema. Nonetheless, contextualising Levine in terms of the areas of film studies he complicates can lead to a reassessment of the boundaries of debate. Therein lies his significance for the academy.

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, Richard Nice (Trans.) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 2002), p. 239-40.

<sup>2</sup> Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley; London: University of Californian Press 1984) p. 108.

<sup>3</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*, p. 53-4.

<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey Sconce, 'Trashing the Academy: Taste, Excess and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style.' *Screen*, Vol. 36, No. 4, p. 372.

<sup>5</sup> Bernard F. Dick, *The Merchant Prince of Poverty Row. Harry Cohn of Columbia Pictures*, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky 1993), p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew Bernstein, *Walter Wanger. Hollywood Independent*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2000), p. xiv.

<sup>7</sup> Steven M. L. Aronson, *Hype: The Names and Faces You Know So Well Will Never Look So Good To You Again*, (New York: Morrow 1983), p. 18.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p. 181.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p. 191.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p. 191-205.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p. 205.

<sup>12</sup> John Waters, 'Whatever Happened to Showmanship?' In John Waters, *Crackpot: The Obsessions of John Waters* (New York: Scribner 2003), p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Sherman, *Boccaccio 70* dvd review, TCM, <http://www.tcmdb.com/title/title.jsp?stid=69274&atid=22766&category=Home%20Video%20Reviews&titleName=Boccaccio%20%6070&menuName=MAIN>. Accessed 1<sup>st</sup> May 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Mario Monicelli's segment, *Renzo e Luciana* was cut from the original 1962 US release and was restored for the 2006 DVD release.

<sup>16</sup> "Psychotronic films range from sincere social commentary to degrading trash. They concern teenagers, rock n roll, juvenile delinquents, monsters, aliens, killers, spies, detectives, bikers, communists, drugs, natural catastrophes, atomic bombs, the prehistoric past, and the projected future. They star ex-models, ex-sports stars, would-be Marilyns, future Presidents (and First Ladies), dead rock stars, and has-beens of all types." Michael Weldon, *The Psychotronic Encyclopaedia of Film* (London: Plexus 1989), p. xii.

<sup>17</sup> See *Showman* (1963, The Maysles Brothers). This line is delivered by Levine during a radio interview in which he appeared to be rather piqued and exasperated – I say "seemed" as such qualities were very much part of Levine's public image – so it can be a little misleading. *Two Women* (1960, Vittorio de Sica) was very well received by critics and widely regarded as something of a return to form for the Neo-Realist pioneer, de Sica. It was promoted in a very different manner to *Hercules*, it was released at select theatres (usually in areas where members of the Academy lived) to gain a positive reputation then, following Loren's Oscar win, it was released nationwide. The key phrase here, however, is "we nursed that picture like it was a baby" indicating Levine's careful consideration of promotional tactics. The point Levine is making is, regardless of the perceived quality of the respective films, they were both carefully and aggressively promoted and the promotion contributed to the success of both films.

<sup>18</sup> Steven M. L. Aronson, *Hype*, p. 16.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p. 196-197.

<sup>20</sup> Dwight MacDonald, *On Movies* (New York: Da Capo 1981) p. 131.

<sup>21</sup> Dwight MacDonald, *On Movies* (New York: Da Capo 1981) p.17.

<sup>22</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*, p. 91.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p. 86.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, p. 230.

<sup>25</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, Susan Emanuel (Trans.), *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Cambridge: Polity Press 1996), p. 249 (Italics in original).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. 214-278. Also *Distinction* p. 226-257.

- <sup>27</sup> Gay Talese. 'Joe Levine Unchained,' *Esquire* January 1961. In reference to Levine's comparison of his own product with Palmolive, Jonathan B. Vogels, who was dismissive of Levine's tactics (see chapter 5) remarked that Levine, as depicted in *Showman* (1963, The Maysles Brothers) "might as well be selling soap." Jonathan B. Vogels, *The Direct Cinema of David and Albert Maysles*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press 2005), p. 30.
- <sup>28</sup> Powers, James, 'Dialogue on Film,' *American Film*, August 1978, p. 43.
- <sup>29</sup> Pierre, Bourdieu, *Rules of Art*, p. 217 (Italics in original).
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 249 (Italics in original).
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 217 (Italics in original).
- <sup>32</sup> Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds*, p. 115.
- <sup>33</sup> John Waters, 'Whatever Happened to Showmanship?' p. 13.
- <sup>34</sup> Art Cohn, *The Nine Lives of Mike Todd*, (London: Hutchinson of London 1959), p. 81-82.
- <sup>35</sup> Robert E. Kapsis, *Hitchcock: The Making of a Reputation* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press 1992), p. 218.
- <sup>36</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*, p. 241.
- <sup>37</sup> Aleister Crowley, *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley. An Autohagiography*, (London: Penguin Arcana 1989), p. 59.
- <sup>38</sup> Jeffrey Sconce, 'Trashing the Academy: Taste, Excess and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style.' *Screen*, Vol. 36, No. 4, p. 372.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid, p. 382. Sconce does point out that the paracinema fan base is beginning, in 1995, to lose its outsider distinction: "Paracinema vitriol often ignores the fact that low-budget exploitation films have increasingly become legitimised as a field of study within the academy." Moreover, he also acknowledges the effects of trash cinema fans entering academia as grad students, noting the possible tensions between the two states.
- <sup>40</sup> Joan Hawkins, *Cutting Edge: Art Horror and The Horrific Avant Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2000), p. 7.
- <sup>41</sup> Mark Betz, 'Art, Exploitation, Underground.' In *Defining Cult Movies: The Cultural Politics of Oppositional Taste* (eds) Mark Jancovich, Antonio Lazaro Reboli, Julian Stringer and Andrew Willis (Manchester: Manchester University Press), p. 203.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid, p. 205.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid, 208-10.
- <sup>44</sup> Jeffrey Sconce, 'Trashing the Academy,' p. 372. Sconce does point out the significance of the fact that a paracinema fan would be familiar with Vertov's film. Such an assertion could mean that his hypothetical audience would be appreciative of it but, given Sconce's oppositional model, it could be equally, if not more, effectively argued that such a familiarity would be based on 'knowing one's enemy.'
- <sup>45</sup> Joan Hawkins, *Cutting Edge*, p. 3-4.
- <sup>46</sup> Dick Griffin, 'Levine: Huckster with a Heart,' *LA Times* June 21 1966, p. C9.
- <sup>47</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*, p. 56-7.
- <sup>48</sup> Jeffrey Sconce, 'Trashing the Academy,' p. 376-7.
- <sup>49</sup> Mark Jancovich, 'Cult Fictions: Cult Movies, Subcultural Capital and the Production of Cultural Distinctions,' *Cultural Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 2, 2002, p. 311-12.
- <sup>50</sup> Marcel Duchamp submitted *Fountain* – a mass-produced urinal in which he had no authorial input, one of series of what he called "readymades" – to the Society of Independent Artists' 1917 Exhibition, signing the work R. Mutt. The directors of the exhibition, of which Duchamp was one, had promised to exhibit every work of art submitted so long as the artist included a \$6 fee. The directors of the exhibition, who were almost certainly aware that Duchamp had submitted *Fountain*, rejected the piece from the exhibition – therefore it was not included or "unveiled" as per Sconce (though some accounts suggest that it was hidden from view as opposed to being rejected.) *Fountain*'s attendant controversies began with Duchamp's resignation from the Society and articles relating to the "controversy" appearing in the Duchamp-edited *Blindman*, No. 2, 1917. See <http://sdr.lib.uiowa.edu/dada/blindman/index.htm>, (accessed 16th February 2008).
- <sup>51</sup> Joan Hawkins, *Cutting Edge*, p. 205.
- <sup>52</sup> Mark Jancovich, 'Cult Fictions,' p. 315.
- <sup>53</sup> Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*, (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press 1996), p. 69.
- <sup>54</sup> For an interesting study of the habit of list making amongst subcultures – in this case video nasty fans – see Kate Egan, 'The Amateur Historian and the Electronic Archive: Identity, Power and the Function of Lists, Facts and Memories on "Video Nasty" Themed Websites,' *Intensities. The Journal*

- of *Cult Media*, Issue 3, <http://davidlavery.net/Intensities/PDF/Egan.pdf>, (accessed 25<sup>th</sup> May 2007). Egan's study illustrates, to a certain extent, the kind of cultural "boutiqueism" (a word suggested to me by Melanie Selfe) that I am speaking of here.
- <sup>55</sup> Ibid, p. 381.
- <sup>56</sup> Mark Jancovich, 'Cult Fictions,' p. 320-1.
- <sup>57</sup> "Hercules was lousy, wasn't it? Still, I'm not ashamed of it. I'm in this business to survive, you naturally have to cater to different levels of taste." 'Razzle Dazzle Showman,' *New York Times*, 26<sup>th</sup> October 1965, p. 3.
- <sup>58</sup> *Richard Attenborough: A Filmmaker Remembers*, Disk Two, *A Bridge Too Far*, Special Edition DVD, MGM DVD.
- <sup>59</sup> Victor Davis, 'Sir Dickie's Epic Dozen,' *Daily Express*, 12<sup>th</sup> February 1976.
- <sup>60</sup> Letter from Richard Attenborough to Joseph E. Levine, circa 1978..
- <sup>61</sup> Briget Byne, 'Jolting Joe Levine,' *Women's Wear Daily*, 31<sup>st</sup> November 1981.
- <sup>62</sup> Patrick Goldstein, 'The Big Picture. The Art of Horror Movies,' *LA Times Calender*, 29<sup>th</sup> July 2003, p. 2.
- <sup>63</sup> Guy Flatley, 'Cary – From Mae To September,' *The New York Times*, 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1973, p. AL89. *A Touch of Class* was co-produced by JEL Presents and Brut Productions – the latter company was a subsidiary of Faberge, of whom Grant was a director. When Flatley interviewed Levine in 1977 he reported Levine to be "still smarting from an old wound," quoting Levine, "Cary was a friend ... I don't know what prompted him to say that." Guy Flatley, 'At The Movies,' *The New York Times*, 10<sup>th</sup> June 1977, p. 61. Notably, the billboards for both *A Touch of Class* and *The Graduate* read "Joseph E. Levine Presents." He received neither producer not exec-producer credit on either project. That said, his high public profile may have caused confusion in the minds of the public, which Levine did little to dispel. Also, it is a fair comment to say that Levine often claimed credit unjustifiably.
- <sup>64</sup> Personal correspondence with author, 2006.
- <sup>65</sup> Arthur Mayer, *LA Times*, Calendar, Letters, 24<sup>th</sup> November 1974, p. O30
- <sup>66</sup> See Richard Attenborough, *In Search of Gandhi* (London: Bodley Head 1982), p. 181-4.
- <sup>67</sup> Bernard F. Dick, *The Merchant Prince of Poverty Row. Harry Cohn of Columbia Pictures*, p. 5 + 211. Also Bob Thomas, *King Cohn*, (London: Barrie and Rockliffe 1967).
- <sup>68</sup> George F. Custen, *Twentieth Century's Fox. Darryl F. Zanuck and the Culture of Hollywood*, (New York: Basic Books 1997), p. 18.
- <sup>69</sup> Ibid, p. 12.
- <sup>70</sup> Robert Sklar, *Movie Made America. A Cultural History of American Movies*, (New York: Vintage Books 1994) p, 271.
- <sup>71</sup> 'Hail Joe Levine, 'Pioneer of the Year'', *Variety* 16<sup>th</sup> August 1960.
- <sup>72</sup> From Richard Attenborough's Introduction to Joseph E. Levine, *A Bridge Too Far. Notes From a Filmmaker*, (New York: Joseph E. Levine Presents 1977).
- <sup>73</sup> Bernard F. Dick, *The Merchant Prince of Poverty Row*, p. 14.
- <sup>74</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, p. 217.
- <sup>75</sup> Ibid, 381.
- <sup>76</sup> Steven M. L. Aronson, *Hype*, p. 194.
- <sup>77</sup> Arthur Knight, 'For Eggheads Only?' In Robert Hughes (ed). *Film Book 1: The Audience and the Filmmaker*. (New York: Grove Press 1959), p. 26.
- <sup>78</sup> William Tusher, 'Levine's Nix To Family Pix,' *The Film Daily*, 30<sup>th</sup> June 1967.
- <sup>79</sup> Chuck Kramer, 'You Seen My Art Pitchas?' *Phoenix Star*, May 1970.
- <sup>80</sup> 'The Last of the Movie Barons,' *Newsweek*, 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1966.
- <sup>81</sup> Vincent Canby, 'Turning a Negative Film Review Into Good Ad Copy,' *LA Herald Examiner*, 27<sup>th</sup> October 1974.
- <sup>82</sup> Charles Champlin, 'He's Banking on the Last Laugh,' *LA Times*, 1<sup>st</sup> November 1974, p. H1.
- <sup>83</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>84</sup> Vincent Canby, 'Turning a Negative Film Review Into Good Ad Copy,' *LA Herald Examiner*, 27<sup>th</sup> October 1974 (Italics in original).
- <sup>85</sup> Bob Sorolsky, 'Whatever Became of All That Glamour?' *Philadelphia Bulletin*, 5<sup>th</sup> November 1978, p. 1. The first leg of Levine's *Magic* saw him visit 9 cities in barely two weeks (17<sup>th</sup> October – 3<sup>rd</sup> November), Joseph E. Levine Presents Inter-Office Communication from Irene Walker to Joseph E. Levine.
- <sup>86</sup> J. F. Kennedy's *Variety* article is quoted in David Nathan, 'The Man Who Sold Hercules,' *Daily Herald*, 7<sup>th</sup> December 1960.
- <sup>87</sup> Telex from Richard M. Nixon to Joseph E. Levine, 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1968.



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- <sup>88</sup> There was plenty of correspondence between Stephen E. Smith, of *The New Democratic Magazine*, and Levine in 1970 and 1971. Also, letter from Spiro Agnew to JEL thanking him for his participation in a Republican Party fundraiser, 31<sup>st</sup> March 1970.
- <sup>89</sup> “Sure, production cost are high ... but how can you get away from that? You can’t blame the unions. Their people have to make a living too.” Bob Sorolsky, ‘Whatever Became of All That Glamour?’ *Philadelphia Bulletin*, 5<sup>th</sup> November 1978, p. 1-2.
- <sup>90</sup> Champlin, Charles, ‘He’s Banking on the Last Laugh,’ 1<sup>st</sup> November 1974, p. H1.
- <sup>91</sup> Jeffrey Sconce, ‘Trashing the Academy,’ p. 375.
- <sup>92</sup> Bernard F. Dick, *The Merchant Prince of Poverty Row*, p. 14-15.
- <sup>93</sup> Murphy, Art. ‘Joe Levine Unchained, or, How *Hercules* Made Hollywood Tremble.’ *Swank* c. 1965. (From a clipping held in the Howard Gottlieb Archival Research Centre, Boston University).
- <sup>94</sup> Hedda Hopper, ‘MGM Rumours Untrue,’ *LA Times*, 25<sup>th</sup> September 1965, p. B9.
- <sup>95</sup> ‘Joseph E. Levine Presents Himself. Takes Powder as AvEmb Official,’ *Variety* 29<sup>th</sup> May 1974.
- <sup>96</sup> William Goldman, *Adventures in the Screen Trade*, (London: Futura 1985), p. 277.
- <sup>97</sup> William Goldman, *The Story of a Bridge Too Far*, (New York: Dell 1977). No page numbers.
- <sup>98</sup> George F. Custen, *20th Century’s Fox*, p. 20.
- <sup>99</sup> Bernard F. Dick, *Hal Wallis: Producer To The Stars* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky 2004), p. x.
- <sup>100</sup> Alisa Perren, ‘sex, lies and marketing. Miramax and the Development of the Quality Indie Blockbuster,’ *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 55, No. 2, p. 30.
- <sup>101</sup> Quoted in *ibid*, p. 34.

## Chapter Two

### Sniggering at the Past: Context, Re-Creation and Legitimate

#### Appropriation in *Gaslight Follies*

##### Introduction

1945's *Gaslight Follies* represents Levine's first foray into filmmaking. Already a prominent distributor in New England, the film marks Levine's first move from distribution to production, sharing the producer credit with Max Finn. There is very little literature about this film and, in all of my research, I have rarely come across a mention of it either by Levine himself or in any articles relating to him.

Much of the film is recycled footage, usually accompanied by a voiceover. It opens with a section entitled "Stars of Yesteryear" which contains footage of silent movie greats. This section consists of clips of silent movie stars with a narrator, Ben Grauer, introducing each one. The clips are very short – we meet a hundred or so stars in around twenty minutes – and are sometimes culled from features or shorts but often merely stock or publicity shots. The next section is entitled "Time Marches Back;" narrated by John B. Kennedy, this section is a compilation of old news footage including footage from 1908 of Theodore Roosevelt in Cuba, 1901 footage of steel magnate Andrew Carnegie, Woodrow Wilson at a baseball game, and a boxing match from 1899. Following these items is a subsection – "For The Ladies" – of fashions from 1901 and 1905, accompanied by an irreverent narration from Ethel Owen. Following this is an edited version of *The Drunkard* (1935, Albert Herman); the only section of the film that contains synchronised sound, this is a film of a stage production of Al Martin's popular play. Lastly there is a "heckled" version of *East*

*Lynne* (1915, Travers Vale) accompanied by offbeat, gently mocking, narration from Milton Cross and Ethel Owen.

With the emphasis on nostalgia, the film was advertised as “The funniest screen show in years. 110 giddy glowing golden minutes of the lush old gaslight days!” Audiences were assured, “You’ll wake up in the middle of the night chuckling at the fun of it all;” and were promised, “It’s the funniest-corniest thing you’ve seen on film.”

*Gaslight Follies* is an interesting development in a particular filmic tradition of its time; that of recycling films from the silent days. Levine was certainly not the first to capitalise on footage rendered seemingly obsolete by the coming of sound. As early as 1933 MGM were recycling silent newsreel footage with irreverent voiceovers, presented as “Metrophony” newsreels, under the general title of *Goofy Movies*, a series of shorts narrated by Pete Smith. Towards the end of World War II Richard Fleischer began making his own humorous short films, with similarly humorous commentary, entitled *Flicker Flashbacks*, using footage culled from the vaults of RKO. *Gaslight Follies*, however, was, if not the first, certainly an early example of the use of such recycling techniques to make a full feature. Indeed, the most notable examples of entire features made from silent footage did not arrive until the 1950s, most notably with the films of Robert Youngson.

Despite its obscurity, *Gaslight Follies* is an illuminating addition to the Levine canon, not least because it was the first film for which he acted as producer, but also because it reveals early examples of themes that dominated Levine’s career and will dominate this thesis, themes of cultural packaging, taste cultures, cultural propriety and showmanship. It is also an example of Levine’s innovativeness and his seeming

ability to package the unsellable and turn a profit by putting his own particular spin on a current trend and opportunistically exploit the right demographic at the right time.

The first section of this chapter contextualises *Gaslight Follies* in terms of its historical moment. In his work on *Pop Up Video*,<sup>1</sup> Gary Burns contemplated the future of the show:

Ten years from now, will the series be rerun as part of a ‘90s flashback’? If so, we might find ourselves in the curious position of watching a thirty year-old video with a fifteen-year-old commentary. Which will seem more quaint, out-of-date, or stupid? It’s hard to say, but what does seem likely is that the show itself will require contexting.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, what the modern viewer will see when watching *Gaslight Follies* is a 1945 presentation of earlier material. In terms of contextualisation the predominant view seems to be accusatory – the 1945 audiences’ did not understand the films they were watching. Using the work of Jay Leyda and Kevin Brownlow, in addition to modern and contemporary reviews of *Gaslight Follies*, I argue that demanding a faithful recreation of past cinematic endeavours overlooks and undermines *Gaslight Follies*’s 1945 context.

The second section of this chapter examines *Gaslight Follies* in terms of what Andrew Ross has called “cultural competence.” This section discusses questions regarding cultural propriety, asking what level of reverence should be bestowed on cinema’s past and whether certain motivations behind the re-interpretation of “found footage” are more acceptable than others.

Writing of cultural movements at the turn of the Twentieth century, Lawrence Levine has noted:

[W]hile there was never a total monopoly of access, there was tight control over the terms of access. The taste that ... prevailed was that of one segment of the social and economic spectrum which convinced itself and the nation at large that its way of seeing, understanding, and appreciating music, theatre and art was the only legitimate one; that *this* was the way Shakespeare, Beethoven, and Greek sculpture were meant to be experienced and in fact *had* been experienced always by those of culture and discernment. The accomplishment of the patrons of culture at the turn of the century was not only that they were able to experience the expressive culture they appreciated, performed and presented in ways they thought proper, but that everyone had to experience them in these ways as well.<sup>3</sup>

Such an analysis finds great resonances in the debates surrounding a film such as *Gaslight Follies*. Indeed, with relation to debates surrounding avant-garde films, what is revealed is the implication that in addition to there being a legitimate way to understand culture, there is also a legitimate way to undermine it.

Moreover, it is not merely scholars and experts who exert control over cinema's past; sentimentality and an over-developed sense of reverence for "old movies" can also lead to misinterpretation and misrepresentation.<sup>4</sup> Such over-protectiveness represents not only a move toward cultural appropriation on the grounds of expertise, but it is also more than a little condescending to the original artefact.

## Context and Re-Creation

Little has been written about the compilation film since Jay Leyda tackled the subject in 1964 with his book *Films Beget Films*. *Gaslight Follies* escapes mention in Leyda's work and would, no doubt, have received short shrift had it been included. Leyda's mission was to further the understanding of the artistry and historical importance of a certain type of compilation film, not to redeem the producers and audiences of the humorous and irreverent compilation as represented by *Gaslight Follies*. Quite the opposite in fact; for Leyda:

The need to ridicule the used and make room for the current product reached its height with the introduction of the sound film, when it was almost unthinkable to pay admission to see a silent film. The ideal victim for this tendency was the film of the dim past, and the first smart fellow to apply a joking commentary to an old newsreel or melodrama had a good thing – and started an avalanche ... Quantity made habit, audiences became so conditioned that the appearance of any old film, accompanied by the sound of a tinkly piano, would start laughter before there was anything to laugh at, so eager were we all to separate ourselves from the unfashionable past. It was in these circumstances that it became impossible to present old footage for any serious purpose. A new generation who did not feel it incumbent on them to giggle had to appear before the form was fully revived in America.<sup>5</sup>

The repackaging of silent material has long been a bone of contention among film archivists and scholars. In the above quotation, Leyda paints a portrait of an entire generation unable to appreciate silent film, whilst film archivist Kevin Brownlow has devoted much time to correcting what he sees as a fundamental misunderstanding and wilful distortion of the past. Commenting on Richard Fleisher's *Flicker Flashbacks*, he complained to Christopher Wood:

In that era, the general run of cinemagoers had contempt for silent cinema: 'ludicrously acted, jerky, flickery, badly made' et cetera. Indeed, when silent films were reissued they tended to look like that. There were also *Flicker Flashbacks*; they used to put a silent film on and have a commentator sending them up, and people would roar with laughter. There was a tremendous prejudice. I felt like someone on a one-man crusade to show that the technicians of the past weren't idiots.<sup>6</sup>

For Leyda and Brownlow the laughter was derisive and disrespectful, the product of ignorance and incited by conditioning and contempt. To be sure, recycled silents were often shown in compilation form – thereby excising the original rhythm and pacing – using below-par prints played at the wrong speed and with gratuitous narration and sound effects. Yet what emerges from their arguments is the idea that there is a “correct” way of exhibiting and consuming culture. Aspersions are cast on supposedly untutored exhibitors and audiences for whom ridicule is privileged over entertainment – as if the two were mutually exclusive – and their laughter is seen as a form of denigration in a political, generational sense.

Leyda and Brownlow both object to silent material being offered up for derision, something made possible by the fact that it is shorn of its original context. Similarly, what the modern viewer will see when watching *Gaslight Follies* is a 1945 presentation of earlier material and the context provided is often weighted against the 1945 audience and producers. For Brownlow, the producers deliberately sought to misrepresent earlier filmmakers; for Leyda, the audience had been conditioned; for Hal Erickson, in one of the few modern reviews of *Gaslight Follies*:

*Follies* mocks its silent material, re-editing the old footage to make it look as ridiculous as possible, then adding stupid sound effects and inappropriate music. The film's vintage ... clips are presented in a manner that robs them of all their entertainment value. The film concludes with a lengthy excerpt from *East Lynne*, an old-fashioned and overly sentimental melodrama which nonetheless does not deserve the cruel and condescending treatment Joseph Levine has given it here. *Gaslight Follies* was put together in the mid-1940s, an era in which silent movies were regarded as 'antiques,' worthy only of derisive laughter; as such, this compilation is a must to avoid.<sup>7</sup>

Again, *Gaslight Follies* is contextualised here in terms of its apparently untutored and philistine audience and producers. Erickson not only attacks the film but also the 1940s, the supposedly unenlightened time of its production. *Gaslight Follies* is not contextualised in terms of its historical post-WWII moment, but in terms of its emergence during a supposedly unsophisticated era in film appreciation



that sought to undermine the primitive past and, consequently, valorise technical progress.

*Gaslight Follies*, however, was released in September 1945, a time when the very notion of progress was being questioned. In summer 1945 the war in the Pacific was brought to a shattering end when, on August 6<sup>th</sup>, the US dropped the world's first atomic bomb – “Little Boy” – on Hiroshima. Three days later another atomic weapon – “Fat Man” – was dropped on Nagasaki; on the 15<sup>th</sup> August Japan announced its unconditional surrender and World War II was over. The atomic attacks on Japanese cities surely represent two of the most startling punctuation marks of human history, ushering in the newly birthed Atomic Age and provoking contradictory emotions in the press – relief at the war's end and consternation at the mass slaughter. The future in such an age was also faced with some trepidation, as Hanson W. Baldwin noted in the *LA Times*: “Newly discovered force may lead to world brotherhood or obliterate civilization.”<sup>8</sup>

Scientific progress, accelerated by the war years, had provided mankind with the means to destroy itself and, whilst others looked to the future with uncertainty, Levine presented the paying public with a version of the past. During my research I have encountered nothing in the way of production information for *Gaslight Follies*; it would, however, be interesting to know when the film was completed. There are three possibilities, it was either thrown together and released after the war in order to capitalise on a spirit of demob happiness; or completed before the end of the war and held back in order to capitalise on the spirit of demob happiness that the war's end would bring; or the close proximity of the ending of World War II and the release of *Gaslight Follies* was merely a happy coincidence.

Whether close proximity of the film's release to VJ day was a result of engineering or fortuity, one notable fact is that Levine used recent world events to help market the film. The exploitation material explicitly referenced the recent carnage in Japan: "*Gaslight Follies* is the Greatest Atomic Laugh-Bomb To Hit a Movie Theatre!" proclaimed the posters. Such a millennial slogan neatly combined the apocalyptic with the humorous; using the deaths of over 200,000 people to advertise a comedy film, so close to the explosions themselves, is gallows humour at its darkest.

What is remarkable is the sheer audacity of the irreverence of the pitch, an offer of escapism that directly references a brand new source of anguish. Indeed, previous months had seen not only the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but also the emerging truth about the horror of the Nazi death camps and the barbarism of Japanese POW camps; relief at the war's end was tempered by tales involving all manner of human degradation, much of which, as John Gray has observed, had been made possible by technological progress.<sup>9</sup> By contrast, the cinematic world of pre-World War II (indeed, most of the footage is pre-WWI from a US perspective), as manipulated and presented in *Gaslight Follies*, represented a primitive world, light years away from the Teutonic efficiency of the holocaust or the scientific virtuosity that produced the atomic bomb.

Svetlana Boym has drawn a useful distinction between what she calls "restorative" and "reflective" nostalgia. For the former, "The past ... is a value for the present; the past is not a duration but a perfect snapshot. Moreover, the past is not supposed to reveal any signs of decay;" the latter form of nostalgic, however, "resist[s] the pressure of external efficiency and take[s] sensual delight in the texture of time not measurable by clocks and calendars." *Gaslight Follies* fits comfortably

into the category of reflective nostalgia, displaying an impressionistic view of a decayed past. For Boym, “Restorative nostalgia takes itself dead seriously. Reflective nostalgia can be ironic and humorous.”<sup>10</sup>

Given its historical moment, *Gaslight Follies* represented an opportunity for an audience to eschew the slick mechanisms and equations of the new age for a re-creation, however manipulated, of the clumsy technological restrictions of cinematic olden days. Brownlow and Leyda’s dismissal of the strategy of repackaging silent films in order to incite irreverent amusement, however noble, is indicative of a notable recurring theme in Levine’s career, that of cultural propriety. For them, such a film would be deemed grossly misrepresentative; Levine’s concern, however, lay with the 1945 audience.

Despite presenting the films in *Gaslight Follies* as objects of fun, Levine’s comments at the time reveal sympathy for the material, telling one reporter, “We’re intrigued by the fact that old films, made 30 to 40 years ago, stand up to the test of time so they can be shown over and over again, and still give the viewer pleasure.”<sup>11</sup> His sympathy for the original material was, however, clearly overridden by his concern for the viewers’ pleasure – which would, of course, translate into profit. The irreverent packaging and presentation of material from by gone days would become a bete-noir for future critics and commentators, but received a warm response in 1945. The *LA Times*’ critic was certainly impressed by Levine’s efforts:

If you’re so old that nostalgia involuntarily mingles with laughter at viewing the screen stars of your grandma’s day, or so young that your film education needs completing by seeing them, you shouldn’t miss the show called *Gaslight Follies*.<sup>12</sup>

*Gaslight Follies* does not only function as a representation, or misrepresentation, of old film, but also as an impressionistic recreation of the cinematic experience of the olden days. Erickson may find the treatment of *East Lynne* to be “cruel and condescending,” notably attributing these crimes to Levine, yet he fails to understand that Cross and Owen do not necessarily represent sneering sophisticates of 1945, they also function as a recreation of the “peanut gallery” of vaudeville’s and cinema’s earlier times.

Notorious among pre-WWI cinemas were the nickelodeons, described by Lewis Jacobs in 1939: “Concentrated largely in poor shopping districts and slum neighborhoods, nickelodeons were disdained by the well-to-do. But the workmen and their families who patronised the movies did not mind the crowded, unsanitary, and hazardous accommodations most of the nickelodeons offered.”<sup>13</sup> To be sure, this view of the disreputable nickelodeon has been questioned and, to a certain extent, debunked by recent film scholarship,<sup>14</sup> yet, for Ben Singer, it is this view that “exemplifies the traditional scenario;”<sup>15</sup> and it is the traditional scenario that Levine was seeking to create with *Gaslight Follies*, not a meticulous, faithful recreation as per Boym’s restorative nostalgia but rather the nostalgia of the reflective kind, a sanitised re-creation of an imagined past.

### **Appropriating Pop Culture**

The precondition for kitsch, a condition without which kitsch would be impossible, is the availability close at hand of a fully matured cultural tradition, whose discoveries, acquisitions, and perfected self-

consciousness kitsch can take advantage of for its own ends. It borrows from devices, tricks, stratagems, rules of thumb, themes, converts them into a system, and discards the rest. It draws its life blood, so to speak, from this reservoir of accumulated experience. This is what is really meant when it is said that the popular art and literature of today were once the daring esoteric art and literature of yesterday. Of course, no such thing is true. What is meant is that when enough time had elapsed the new is looted for new “twists,” which are then watered down and served up as kitsch.<sup>16</sup>

Writing in 1939, Greenberg here is warning his readers not to be seduced or hoodwinked by kitsch, a parasitic art form that leeches off the established arts, the very antithesis of the avant-garde. Curiously, when taken out of context, Greenberg’s comments could be read as praising the purveyors for their innovation and resourcefulness, and it is this paradox that leads to complications when contextualising *Gaslight Follies* and, in particular, the *East Lynne* section.

Upon its release, *Gaslight Follies* was praised in the local press for its inventiveness. The *Portland Evening Express* said that the film was a “definite departure from the usual type film,”<sup>17</sup> with the *Hartford Daily Courant* expressing admiration along similar lines<sup>18</sup> and the *Chicago Times* suggesting that, “Hollywood is fearing a revival of old silents (with sound added) because of the fortune being reaped in the East by *Gaslight Follies*.”<sup>19</sup> Many of the reviews singled out the *East Lynne* section for special praise; “It’s chief asset, besides its unconscious comicality,” wrote G.K. in the *LA Times*, is the hilarious narrative of Ethel Owen and Milton Cross.”<sup>20</sup> Despite contemporary praise, however, the irreverent packaging and

presentation of such material would become a bone of contention for future critics and commentators.

The print of *East Lynne* used for *Gaslight Follies* is of inferior quality, it has scratches, missing frames and is shown too slow. There are two staged mishaps during the film's pseudo-screening, which take the form of simulated film "breaks." Part way through *East Lynne* an intertitle appears with the words ONE MOMENT PLEASE! The intertitle remains in place until the projectionist has, supposedly, repaired the film and begun running it again. Later on, the film supposedly breaks again, this time the intertitle reads, "Sorry! The plot is strong but the film is weak!" Furthermore, the film is accompanied by a running derogatory commentary by two virtual audience members, who are introduced by a preceding intertitle:

Now Folks Sit Back And Relax And Pretend That Milton Cross And  
Ethel Owen Are Sitting Next To You Kidding The Movies.

Much of this was quite innovative for its time and many of these techniques would become increasingly familiar to future generations of ironists. 2007's *Grindhouse*. seeks to recreate the atmosphere of the 1970s grindhouse experience and so features films complete with simulated scratches, missing frames and even missing reels. *Grindhouse*, however, saw the directors distress and bastardise films they themselves had made for that very purpose; that Levine had overseen the corruption of another's work sees him transgressing cultural borders. As suggested by Lawrence Levine in the introduction to this chapter, monopolising the terms of access was the preserve of the elite and Levine represented a challenge to that moral authority. For Andrew Ross:

Insofar as [cultural] antagonism can be thought of, for the sake of shorthand, as an abstractly objective relation between “intellectuals” and “ordinary people,” it is fractionated, in reality, into countless arrangements of minute differences of taste and consumption, each covered by the authority of cultural competence, whether inherited or else *explained* by reference to an occupational hierarchy based on education and training.<sup>21</sup>

Although Ross emphasises his use of “shorthand” and distances his theories from overly simplistic assumptions based on social class, there is still the sticky notion of “cultural competence.” Despite valuable contributions to the study of cinema, why should we accept Brownlow’s view that early cinema is misrepresented, or Leyda’s notion that 1930s audiences viewing silent material had been conditioned? Their expertise is beyond doubt but only offers a limited interpretation of old material. There is, after all, a fine line between the archivist’s cry “they’re showing it wrong,” and the elitist’s cry, “they’re watching it wrong.” Thus questions are raised about the appropriate level of reverence, if any at all, which should be applied to the moving image and appropriated footage.

William C. Wees has written on this matter with relation to the use of “found footage” of Hollywood stars in avant-garde cinema. For him, the avant-garde filmmakers who use such footage gain their cultural competence through the oppositional nature of its appropriation; the results, he argues, “invest the stars’ original auras with a new, more ambiguous significance.”<sup>22</sup> One film discussed by Wees is *Rock Hudson’s Home Movies* (1992, Mark Rappaport) which features a

compilation of suggestive clips featuring Hudson in homo-erotic situations and in which the eponymous star is lampooned by an on screen narrator, Eric Farr. For Wees, the film imparts an important political message, it “challenges Hudson’s personal integrity” by emphasising the fact that Hudson remained a closeted homosexual until his death, thereby capitalising on, and colluding with, the homophobic Hollywood machine. By contrast, *Gaslight Follies* has no such pedigree, the heckling by Cross and Owen do not point to a re-examination of the material nor constitute a political gesture, it is lampoon for the sake of lampoon.

The process of heckling movies will be familiar to many, not least from their own lives, but also from pop cultural touchstones such as *Mystery Science Theater 3000*<sup>23</sup>, *Beavis and Butthead*<sup>24</sup> and *Pop Up Video*,<sup>25</sup> which feature characters who mock and ridicule artefacts of popular culture in degrees varying from affection to scorn. Unlike the avant-garde filmmaking discussed by Wees, these shows do not constitute an appropriation of popular culture for the purposes of opposition, but rather represent an incorporation of popular culture into a wider pop culture exercise. Indeed, the popularity of the programmes mentioned often greatly outweighed the popularity of the videos or films being ridiculed, many of which remained undiscovered, or had been forgotten, by the mass audience, as was the case with *East Lynne*.

As a pop-culture phenomenon, it is difficult to over estimate the importance of *East Lynne* in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth Century. The novel, written by English author Mrs Henry Wood (Ellen Price Wood), was first published in 1861 and proved to be fantastically popular. Subsequently it was adapted innumerable times into stage plays and filmed over a dozen times in the UK and US. In 1931 the *New York Times*, in an article about film revivals of the old favourite, reported,



“Conservative estimates place the number of persons who have either read the book or seen the play at 100,000,000 in the larger countries of the world, the United States and England leading.”<sup>26</sup> Cultural echoes of *East Lynne* sounded even deeper into the twentieth century, with the play’s iconic phrase (which does not appear in the book or, to my knowledge, film versions), Lady Isabella’s anguished cry of “Dead! Dead! And never called me mother!” cropping up in comedy sketches by The Goons and The Monty Python Team.

By the time of *Gaslight Follies* release, *East Lynne* had already been lampooned on screen on at least two occasions. 1919 audiences saw the source material lampooned by slapstick master Mack Sennett and his star Ben Turpin in *East Lynne With Variations*, whilst in 1931 a film called *East Lynne on the Western Front* (George Pearson) depicted a bored group of WWI soldiers producing a burlesque version of the play. Indeed, given that Wood, and subsequently her estate, had no real copyright control over the material, the stage adaptations were many and varied and the idea that every permutation of the *East Lynne* phenomenon was treated with reverence is extraordinarily unlikely, especially given its potential kitsch value. Levine, then, knowingly or not, was taking part in a tradition of mockery, one that helps to illuminate and expose the shortcomings of postmodern debates regarding the ironic or irreverent consumption of popular culture.

Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio’s work on early film adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays provides a useful reference point here. Shakespeare’s plays tend to be layered, textured, wordy and complex yet were adapted for silent films which often lasted no more than fifteen minutes. Similarly, *East Lynne* is a gigantic doorstop of a book and was adapted for films that ran for thirty minutes or less – the version that Levine used was originally half an hour but *Gaslight Follies* shows only twenty

minutes or so. One way in which to convey such stories in their original incarnations, given technological limitations, was to rely on the common knowledge of the audience. For this, Shakespeare was well served by the public school curricula and other assorted ephemera.<sup>27</sup> *East Lynne* would have benefited from the enormous number of plays based on the novel, not to mention plays based on the other plays, plays using the general storyline and the various film adaptations. Like Shakespeare, *East Lynne* would have benefited from the familiarity resulting from cultural osmosis.

By 1915 *East Lynne* was something of an industry to itself and, the book having fallen from favour, the original text would not have been privileged and protected in the way it would have been for Shakespeare, so different audiences brought with them a different *East Lynne* as a frame of reference, depending on what source they acquired their knowledge from. For the Bard's adaptations, "Shakespeare would have had a range of associations, ranging from the hegemonic to the parodic."<sup>28</sup> *East Lynne's* associations, arguably, would have been even more diverse, so one cannot discount, as Erickson seems to do, the possibility of one of those associations involving the ridiculous. Even if every single play and film adaptation of *East Lynne* had been utterly reverential, however unlikely that may be, it still does not follow that all audiences received them in that way, and to criticise Levine for his irreverent approach betrays a misunderstanding of the material.

By 1945, it is fair to say, *East Lynne* had dropped off the cultural radar – the last film adaptation prior to *Gaslight Follies* came in 1931. Somehow a print of the 1915 version found its way into Levine's hands and wound up as the final turn in *Gaslight Follies*. Levine and Finn would not have been able to count on the common cultural knowledge of the audience and, without that, the film is pretty much incomprehensible.

Barbara Klinger has written of how viewing strategies for popular films can be aided by promotional discourses, “the success of commodification relies on a personalization or privatisation of what are originally public discourses; the further a text can be extended into the social and individual realm by promotional discourses, the better its commercial destiny.”<sup>29</sup> The kind of epiphenomena Klinger is referring to – discourses concerning stars, production personnel, behind the scenes reports, etc. – were unavailable to Levine; *East Lynne* had lost its status as a pop-culture phenomenon, the stars of the film (Alan Hale and Louise Vale) had lost their lustre, the director was dead and part of no canon. In the absence of such extratextual material Levine sought to capitalise on an appetite for nostalgia and anxieties about the present in order to better position the film in the “social and individual realm.”

If Levine and Co. were guilty of anything in their presentation of *East Lynne* it was narrowing the field of possible interpretation, or, monopolising the terms of access – the preserve of the experts. In its original form, such a film would have offered the viewer a range of interpretations, to be seen as a companion piece to the novel or play, to be entranced or enchanted, to chuckle or blub. *East Lynne* would have benefited in 1915 from a common cultural knowledge brought to the film by the audience, which would aid and inform their understanding. In 1945, *East Lynne* needed to be rendered comprehensible for its audience and so was presented as ridiculous; perhaps a cheap shot, but one must recognise that this was an accentuation of the existing material and not an invention. In this sense, Levine sought to capitalise on an audience’s desire to connect with an imaginary past, as opposed to Leyda’s assertion regarding separation from “the unfashionable past.”

The opening lines of Philip Larkin’s 1967 poem, *Annus Mirabilis* have since become one of literature’s most famous invocations of generational conceitedness.

Sexual intercourse began

In 1963

(Which was rather late for me) -

Between the end of Lady Chatterley's ban

And the Beatles first LP

Along with sex, there seems to be a general assumption that certain viewing strategies, such as camp and ironic detachment, were discovered around the same time – some time after the publication of Susan Sontag's *Notes on Camp* (1964) and before the emergence of *Reefer Madness* (Louis J. Gasnier, 1936) as a cult classic in the 1970s – and have since become the preserve of baby-boomers, who have now been succeeded by Generation X-ers, who will no doubt be succeeded by another generational grouping. When Burns asks of pop-ups and music clips of *Pop-Up Video* “Which will seem more quaint, out-of-date, or stupid?”, one must answer with a question – “To whom?”

Recent incarnations of the *Gaslight Follies* strategy have enjoyed both popularity and derision, provoking sniggering enjoyment and outrage in unequal measures. In her work on *Beavis and Butthead* Melanie Nash deconstructs the arguments for and against various viewing strategies associated with the programme, noting the “smug but rather fine distinction between the *cognoscenti* and the dumb-asses” in media coverage of the show.<sup>30</sup> *Mystery Science Theater*, also, has not been without its critics, notably from the stars and makers of the films lampooned on the show.<sup>31</sup>

Both these programmes are direct descendents of a tradition of which *Gaslight Follies* is a part and, I would argue, a perfectly valid tradition. My point is that revisionist history and a fostering of respect for other cultures, including those of the past, while admirable, should not serve to shut down debate about viewing strategies and artistic freedom regarding recycled footage; however questionable, clumsy or mercenary it may appear from a modern, educated perspective.

*Gaslight Follies*, and its attendant criticism, demonstrates many of the themes which will be explored in this thesis. Levine's "peculiar talent" is demonstrated throughout this thesis by his expertise in packaging culture and capitalising on emerging trends and cultural mores. Moreover, the criticisms levelled at *Gaslight Follies* and others of its ilk resonate with the criticisms of Levine's later career; most notably those that are rooted in notions of artistic purity, cultural hierarchies and propriety, and, as I detailed in Chapter One, resentments regarding the role and function of the cultural packager.

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<sup>1</sup> Running from 1998-2002, this show featured music videos with pop-ups – coloured ovals containing nuggets of trivia or sarcastic comments about the video being played.

<sup>2</sup> Gary Burns, 'Pop Up Video: The New Historicism,' *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, Summer 2004. See <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G1-119370964.html> (accessed 27th February 2008),

<sup>3</sup> Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow. The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press 1988), p. 231,

<sup>4</sup> This phenomenon is illustrated, fictionally, in *Gods and Monsters* (1998, Bill Condon). The film tells the story of the final days of James Whale and his young gardener, Clayton Boone. Watching one of Whale's films, *The Bride of Frankenstein*, with his friends, Boone is angered by his friends' irreverent snickering throughout. Later, he complains of this to Whale who assures him that the film had been intended as camp.

<sup>5</sup> Jay Leyda, *Films Beget Films: Compilation Films From Propaganda To Drama*, (Liverpool, London and Prescott: George Allen and Unwin 1964), p. 37.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Wood, 'Let's Hear It For Silent Film Hero Of An Epic Quest,' *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 25<sup>th</sup> February 2005, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Hal Erikson, 'Gaslight Follies,' <http://www.vh1.com/movies/movie/85817/plot.jhtml> (accessed 31st December 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Hanson W. Baldwin, 'Atom Bomb Wins Victory, But Sows Whirlwind,' *LA Times*, 10<sup>th</sup> August 1945, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> "[W]ithout the railways, the telegraph and poison gas there could have been no Holocaust ... Humanity's worst crimes were made possible only by modern technology." John Gray, *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (London: Granta 2002), p. 14.

<sup>10</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books 2001), p. 49.

<sup>11</sup> 'Old Movies Stand Test, Producer Says,' *Rochester Times-Union*, 28<sup>th</sup> March 1946.

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- <sup>12</sup> G.K., 'Old Times On Parade,' *LA Times*, 8<sup>th</sup> June 1946, p A5.
- <sup>13</sup> Lewis Jacobs quoted in Ben Singer, 'Manhattan Nickleodeons: New Data on Audiences and Exhibition,' *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 34, No. 3. (Spring 1995), p. 9.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, *passim*.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p. 9.
- <sup>16</sup> Clement Greenberg, 'The Avant Garde and Kitsch,' in John O'Brian (ed.) *Clement Greenberg. The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 1, Perceptions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1986), p. 12-13.
- <sup>17</sup> *Portland Evening Express*, 21<sup>st</sup> November 1945.
- <sup>18</sup> 'Informing You,' *Hartford Daily Courant*, 26<sup>th</sup> September 1945.
- <sup>19</sup> Irv Kupcinet, 'Kup's Column,' *Chicago Times*, 29<sup>th</sup> October 1945.
- <sup>20</sup> G.K., 'Old Times On Parade,' *LA Times*, 8<sup>th</sup> June 1946, p A5.
- <sup>21</sup> Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture*, (London: Routledge 1989), p. 5.
- <sup>22</sup> William C. Wees, 'The Ambiguous Aura of Hollywood Stars in Avant-Garde Found-Footage Films,' *Cinema Journal*, Vol, 41, No. 2 (Winter 2002), p. 3.
- <sup>23</sup> Running from 1988-1999, the conceit of this show is that a human – "Joel" played by Joel Robinson, later replaced by "Mike" played by Mike Nelson – and two alien robots are trapped in a spaceship and forced to endure bad movies. The films are shown in their entirety accompanied by quips and comments from the human prisoner and his two robot buddies. Notably, three of Levine's efforts made it on to the show, *Hercules*, *Hercules Unchained* and *Santa Claus Conquers The Martians*.
- <sup>24</sup> Running from 1993-1997, this show featured two cartoon slacker-idiots who watch a lot of TV and pass irreverent comment on pop videos.
- <sup>25</sup> Running from 1998-2002, this show featured music videos with pop-ups – coloured ovals containing nuggets of trivia or sarcastic comments about the video being played.
- <sup>26</sup> 'East Lynne's Long History,' *The New York Times*, March 3<sup>rd</sup> 1931, pX7
- <sup>27</sup> Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio, 'How Many Times Shall Caesar Bleed in Sport?' Shakespeare and the Cultural Debate About Moving Pictures, in Lee Grievson and Peter Kramer (eds.) *The Silent Cinema Reader* (London: Routledge 2003) p. 160-163.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, p. 165.
- <sup>29</sup> Barbara Klinger, 'Digressions at the Cinema: Reception and Mass Culture,' *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 28, No. 4, (Summer 1989), p 17.
- <sup>30</sup> Melanie Nash, "'Beavis is just confused.' Ideologies, Intertexts, Audiences,' *Velvet Light Trap*, No. 43, 1999, p. 13.
- <sup>31</sup> Most notably the actor Joe Don Baker and director Joe Dante. See <http://www.mst3k.com/satnews/sketchfest/index.html>.

## Chapter Three

### Selling Levine Selling *Hercules* (1958, Pietro Francisci)

#### Introduction

The study of distribution practices in the US, particularly saturation distribution, is dominated in Film Studies by the case of *Jaws*. According to Justin Wyatt, “*Jaws*’s opening was viewed as ... bold; opening in a fairly wide (for the time) 409 theatres.”<sup>1</sup> Notably, however, in 1958 Levine had opened *Atilla* (1954, Pietro Francisci), distributed by Embassy, with around 500 prints. Subsequently Levine broke records for the number of prints in simultaneous circulation with *Hercules* (over 600 prints),<sup>2</sup> *Jack The Ripper* (700 prints)<sup>3</sup> and *Hercules Unchained* (over 1,000 prints). Indeed, in 1960 Levine opened *Hercules Unchained* in the UK alone with a record 500 prints.<sup>4</sup>

Alongside studies of saturation openings come studies of saturation marketing. Again, Levine’s work in the 1950s brings the totemic case of *Jaws* into question. For Douglas Gomery, the marketing of *Jaws*, guided by Universal boss Lew Wasserman, “initiated a new way of doing business” in Hollywood, with a campaign distinguished by a massive multi-media marketing blitz that notably included the film industry’s “rival,” television.<sup>5</sup> Again, Levine, among other pioneers of the 1950s, got there first. Indeed, the importance of television in motion picture marketing in the 1950s has been very much overlooked by Film Studies; this is notable due to the fact that the marketing of feature films on television at this time did not constitute a tentative or experimental dalliance. On the contrary, in many quarters television advertising was seen as a fundamental component of exploitation campaigns.

Recent scholarship has gone some way to identifying Levine as a pioneer of now standard movie marketing techniques<sup>6</sup> yet, as this chapter explores, his techniques owed a great deal to the showmen of the past. Levine's technique of massive exploitation campaigns preceding a nationwide saturation opening have indeed been influential in providing a blueprint for the marketing and release of the modern day, post-*Jaws* blockbuster film. Yet, in order to gain a fuller understanding of the emergence of such techniques one must take account of how much, and in what ways, Levine was influenced by the methods of the past, as well as contemporary industrial conditions.

Due analysis and contextualisation of the *Hercules* campaign helps to position Levine as one of the missing links of marketing and exploitation, linking classical exploitation, studio era A-pictures, teenpics, creature features and high concept movies. Levine's promotion, his apparent "explosion,"<sup>7</sup> of *Hercules*, when analysed, reveals itself to be the product of his imagination, magpie tendencies and cinematic pedigree as an exhibitor and states' right distributor, which combined to produce a remarkably successful, ad-hoc campaign which was far less indiscriminate than it may appear at first glance.

According to Janet Staiger, the 1950s was the decade that saw the rise of the market research approach to film promotion. According to Staiger, following the Paramount antitrust case of 1948, which saw the end to vertical integration and the studios divested of their theatre chains, film companies adopted a more careful approach to their investments: "Polling firms took over more of the standard information gathering, including the analysis of audiences responses to previews. By 1949, marketing analyses stretched back to pre-production financing ... Declining



audiences in the 1950s accelerated this practice.”<sup>8</sup> Levine’s work on *Hercules* at least complicates such an assessment, if not outright contradicting it.

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of Staiger’s assessment is its basis in a corporate, bureaucratic model. Market research was indeed rife in the 1950s but often did not follow Staiger’s model of outsourcing such activity to specialised firms. For example, according to Sam Arkoff, American International Pictures would present titles and publicity artwork to groups of teens (their intended audiences) and exhibitors to see if they would be enticed to see the as yet unmade film. A positive response meant that they would pursue a project based on the exploitation material.<sup>9</sup> Such an anecdote suggests a rather more freewheeling approach to market research than Staiger’s model allows.

Similarly, Levine claimed to use a drive-in venue of his in Boston to “test films for audience reaction.”<sup>10</sup> Again, Staiger’s notion of preview audiences is seemingly confirmed yet Levine’s approach sits outside of her systematic model. As this chapter explains, drive-in audiences were not representative of the typical cinemagoer. Indeed, the existence of the non-typical cinemagoer, who represented a lucrative market, rather compromises Staiger’s assessment of niche marketing as it existed in the 1950s. Moreover, Staiger’s model ignores the importance of the mass media, especially radio and television, and its ability to transcend niche audiences due to its wide footprint. Of course, one may draw a distinction between the large studio organisations and smaller, independent companies such as AIP or Embassy, yet it should be recognised that Warner Bros., a major studio, was one of the pioneers of saturation release and marketing in the 1950s, thus demonstrating that not *all* the major studios were averse to experimentation, innovation and risk at this time.

*Hercules* was essentially a children's movie, one that wouldn't have looked out of place at a Saturday kiddy matinee; "one for the small fry"<sup>11</sup> as one critic put it. Levine's *Hercules* campaign, however, was a publicity blitz that recognised few boundaries; it was not the result of analysis of polling firm statistics and focussed marketing. Yet the campaign did seek to identify certain audiences that lay outside of its essential demographic; Levine firstly targeted exhibitors and, subsequently, demographics that may not have constituted *Hercules*'s natural audience. However, Levine's targeting of multiple markets does not constitute a reliance on, or conformation to, market research data, as per Staiger, but rather an exercise in showmanship in which Levine sought to utilize every exploitation possibility afforded by *Hercules*. To contradict Staiger, the marketing was tailored, not the film; and the marketing was general, though it incorporated niches.

The first section of this chapter analyses the emergence of the saturation opening strategy in the US in the 1940s and 1950s. In the 1940s, this strategy was pioneered by David O. Selznick, who used it to open *Duel in the Sun* (1946, King Vidor) quickly and widely across the US. *Duel in the Sun* was a star packed, high budget, prestige picture; by the 1950s, however, saturation tactics became more closely associated with low budget science fiction shockers. The section discusses the importance of *Duel in the Sun*, films such as *King Kong* (1933, Merian C. Cooper), *The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms* (1953, Eugene Lourie), *Them!* (1954, Gordon Douglas) and *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* well as Warner Bros. adoption of saturation strategies in laying the groundwork for *Hercules*.

The second section deals with the *Hercules* campaign. This campaign is significant not only because of the unprecedented barrage of publicity, but also because it was the first campaign that saw Levine place himself at the forefront;

indeed, his visibility in the campaign made him integral to it. This section analyses how Levine adopted the techniques and mythology of the cinema's past in order to capitalise on contemporary industrial mores, notably targeting groups often overlooked by many film companies – exhibitors, drive-in audiences and homosexuals. Such targeting were hallmarks of a much broader campaign that saw Levine targeting pretty much everyone whilst positioning himself in the role of circus ringmaster.

My contention is that Levine pioneered forms of industrial practice that are now ubiquitous in term of marketing and distribution. He did this by resurrecting and amalgamating techniques of the past, as well as displaying a shrewd understanding of the contemporary state of the US film industry, in order to achieve a remarkable success with *Hercules*, as well as cementing his own reputation as one of the US's premier showmen.

### **Saturation Openings and the Path To *Hercules***

For Thomas Schatz *Duel in the Sun* represents “the prototype New Hollywood blockbuster:

A ‘pre-sold’ spectacle (based on a popular historical novel) with top stars, an excessive budget, a sprawling story, and state-of-the-art production values. Selznick himself termed *Duel* ‘an exercise in making a big grossing film.’<sup>12</sup>

Prior to its release *Duel in the Sun* had been suffering from negative word of mouth. As a way of countering this, Selznick engaged the services of Neil Agnew – described by Donald M. Nelson as “one of the best distribution men in the country”<sup>13</sup> – and formed his own distribution company, Selznick Releasing Organisation,<sup>14</sup> and opened the film in a then-novel saturation pattern. Mixed reviews notwithstanding, the tactic proved to be a great success, so much so that MGM copied the technique the following year with another starry vehicle, *The Hucksters* (1947, Jack Conway). Notably, Levine bought the New England distribution rights for *Duel in the Sun* from Selznick in 1952, aggressively advertised the film and opened it widely across the territory to considerable success. Nonetheless, subsequent years saw the studios’ tentative experiments in saturation marketing scaled back.

1948 saw the divorcement decreed by the Paramount decision and exhibitors were, ironically, the biggest losers. According to Lincoln Freeman:

Delivered of the ‘ruinous’ obligation to buy an entire program of pictures (block-booking), the theatre man suddenly discovered that he had lost his inventory. Then he complained that not only was he unable to forecast what picture he would be showing next April; in order to have one to show at all, he had to enter into ‘ruinous’ competitive bidding for a commodity that, he was convinced, was produced in minimum quantities so a higher film rental could be squeezed out of him.<sup>15</sup>

Whether producers were deliberately reducing supply to increase demand is debatable. Diminishing audiences made film production riskier, caution led to fewer

productions, which, as in a self-fulfilling prophecy, led to diminishing audiences. In 1957 Thomas M. Pryor noted that producers were “attempting, each time they go in to bat, to hit the equivalent of a home run.”<sup>16</sup>

Such caution was not good news for exhibitors. In 1953 Leonard H. Goldenston, President of American Broadcasting-Paramount Theatres, warned the Theatre Owners of America that high rental prices and film shortages represented a greater threat to the film industry than television, before delivering a doom-laden prediction of “less patrons, less money, less theatres, and so less production and therefore, self-destruction.”<sup>17</sup>

These comments reveal the frustrations of exhibitors of the time regarding a lack of back up from distributors with relation to product and exploitation. In terms of publicity, high end, high budget roadshow films were well catered for; lavish spectacles such as *Quo Vadis* (1951, Mervyn Le Roy), *The Robe* (1953, Henry Koster) and *Ben Hur* were well publicised and benefited from a range of innovative exploitation techniques.<sup>18</sup> The rise in such productions was noted by the *New York Times*, as was the rise in arthouses; both were portrayed as positive developments in, notably, *metropolitan* cinema going and exhibition. Yet Milton Esterow’s article is not without its caveats, “As Broadway seeks to win back old friends and influence new ones, it finds that the average or “in-between” film can rarely survive the first runs.”<sup>19</sup> As a consequence, according to Staiger, subsequent run theatres began to be overlooked by distributors<sup>20</sup> and roadshow films assumed the responsibilities of tent-pole productions – films whose profits could off-set losses incurred by a studio on its less profitable films.

An assessment of these circumstances helps to illuminate Staiger’s claims that the US film industry was conforming to market-research trends that were becoming

dominant in all advertising fields. No doubt this is true, but the bureaucratisation of movie exploitation was also a way of cutting corners – eschewing across-board exploitation in favour of identifying and targeting a niche audience brought advertising costs down. Contracting polling and market-research firms to identify niches and demographics seems to follow the model of spend-a-dollar-to-save-a-cent, indicative of an almost superstitious belief in the efficacy of social science and its application to marketing.

Widespread industrial caution aside, however, the 1950s brought significant developments that would help lay the groundwork for the success of *Hercules*, namely the re-releases of *King Kong* in 1952 and 1956, and the slew of creature-features that followed in its wake. The first of these was *The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms*, which was produced by Mutual Pictures of California and, significantly, distributed by Warner Bros., who would later distribute *Hercules* for Levine. Also significant was Warners' strategy of opening wide with a barrage of publicity in the press, radio and television. Having scored a hit, Warners repeated the strategy with another creature-feature, *Them!*, which Warners produced as well as distributed.

The cinematic influences of *King Kong*, *The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms* and *Them!* can be found in great abundance in Levine's first nationwide success, *Godzilla: King of the Monsters*.<sup>21</sup> *Godzilla* was fashioned from the Japanese film *Gojira*; the original film was re-edited and extra scenes were added of an American reporter, Steve Martin (played by Raymond Burr), who narrated the action for the US audience. Levine opened the film on 110 screens in Boston alone before taking it nationwide with a massive campaign,<sup>22</sup> the lavish 17-inch by 11-inch pressbook promised saturation TV and radio publicity and the posters referenced *Godzilla*'s inspiration with the promise that the eponymous lizard "Makes *King Kong* look like a

midget” (see Appendix I, *fig. 3.*) Notably, *Godzilla*’s release coincided with *King Kong*’s 1956 re-release.<sup>23</sup>

A key linking figure here is Terry Turner. Turner joined RKO as exploitation director in the late 1920s/early 1930s and so would certainly have been involved with the publicity for *King Kong*’s original release, and the *LA Times* credited him with the success of the 1952 re-release. Upon resigning from RKO in 1952 he was employed by Levine and was responsible for the publicity for *Gangbusters* (1955, Bill Karn)<sup>24</sup> and *Godzilla*. Prior to *Godzilla* he had worked on the exploitation campaign for *The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms*; following *Godzilla* he worked on the *Hercules* campaign.

Rather undermining Gomery’s crediting of Wasserman with being an early adopter of television in publicity campaigns, Turner was undoubtedly one of the tube’s pioneering proponents. In 1954, he wrote in *Variety* “I am more convinced than ever that television (as a solid sales instrument and not as an exploitation gimmick) is here to stay.”<sup>25</sup> Indeed, Turner was speaking from experience; of his 1952 *King Kong* campaign he claimed, “In a lot of places where television didn’t reach, our grosses on *King Kong* were off,” adding that in areas with no TV or radio coverage, the film had to be pulled.<sup>26</sup> For Turner, then, television was essential, rather than desirable, for a good campaign. Throughout his career, Levine was a strong supporter of television and it is not unlikely that Turner was the original source for this enthusiasm.

*Godzilla* started a significant trend for Japanese monster movies such as *Rodan* (1956, Ishiro Honda) (released in the US in 1957 by Distributors Corporation of America) and *Gigantis the Fire Monster* (1955, Motoyoshi Oda) (1959 by Warner Bros.) Perhaps due to this trend, Levine’s import of *The Mysterians* (1957, Ishiro Honda), distributed by MGM in 1959, was not the success it might have been, despite

a strong campaign.<sup>27</sup> By this time, however, Levine had begun mining a more fruitful seam in Italian peplum imports, beginning with *Atilla The Hun*, (1954, Pietro Francisci) which was released through Embassy to great success in 1958, despite its producers dismissing it as a “dog.”<sup>28</sup> Next up was *Hercules*.

## **The Campaign**

In one respect the movie business never changes: When all else fails, you can still import an Italian Spectacle and clean up.

This has been going on as far back as the 1910s. As a boy I remember being impressed by such Roman super-dupers as *Quo Vadis?*, *Cabiria* and *The Last Days of Pompeii*. In fact, *Quo Vadis* was the first film ever to play two-a-day in this country. *Cabiria* featured a giant muscleman named Maciste who snapped chains, cracked bones and toppled columns, all without apparent effort.

Today, nearly half a century later, we have *Hercules* and Steve Reeves.

And Joe Levine. Mr. Levine, who has big write-ups in *Variety* and *Time*, is being called the new Mike Todd.<sup>29</sup>

The months preceding Levine’s spectacular unveiling of *Hercules* saw the deaths of two of the film industry’s most notable showmen. Cecil B. DeMille died at the age of 77 in January 1959, whilst Mike Todd had been killed in a plane crash in March of the



previous year; the influences of both of these pioneering showmen can be found in Levine's "explosion" of *Hercules*.

Like Todd – to whom Levine was most often compared – and DeMille, Levine was a tireless self-promoter. In selling *Hercules*, he was also selling himself, placing himself at the forefront of the campaign. Notably, following Todd's death Levine secured the services of two of his press agents, Bill Watters and, most notably, Bill Doll, who was already a legend in film and theatre and would remain so.

Art Cohn, Todd's biographer, notes a vital lesson learned by Todd early in his career, "*People are impressed by bigness, regardless of content,*"<sup>30</sup> a lesson Levine seemed to take on board and applied with gusto to his *Hercules* campaign. DeMille, of course, was a notable pioneer of the "spectacle;" with films such as *The Ten Commandments* (1923) and *The King of Kings* (1927) he helped to develop the genre he would return to later in his career with films such as *Samson and Delilah* (1949) and *The Ten Commandments* (1956), films that introduced a new audience to the cinema of the spectacular, thereby being notable precursors to *Hercules* and the peplum<sup>31</sup> deluge that followed.

There were differences, however. Indeed, it could be argued that, of the three, Levine was the "pure" showman – Todd and DeMille being notable technicians and creatives. Todd had been a driving force in the development of widescreen processes in the 1950s, with Cinerama and, subsequently, Todd-AO. DeMille had also been a driving force in the furtherance of filmic techniques and technology. He had also, as is argued by Sumiko Higashi, been instrumental in furthering cinema's acceptance as a legitimate art form, thus enabling himself to find an audience amongst the middle class.<sup>32</sup> In this sense, DeMille appears as the antithesis of Levine, DeMille's courting of genteel patrons runs counter to Levine's exclamation, "We're reminding everyone

that this is a circus business.”<sup>33</sup> Indeed, in seeking to establish his own reputation in the 1920s, DeMille found the ballyhoo associated with his spectacles counter-productive, the foregrounding of his films’ scale in promotional material overshadowing his own artistry and technical expertise in other areas.<sup>34</sup> By contrast, with *Hercules*, Levine’s reputation would stand or fall by his abilities as a showman, nothing else.

*Hercules* was produced in Italy by Galatea Films and distributed by Lux Films, and how Levine came across it is difficult to say. Levine had already had dealings with Lux as they were the European distributors of *Atilla*, which Embassy Pictures imported and distributed in the US in 1958. Regarding *Hercules*, Levine told Louella Parsons:

When I was told about *Hercules* ... I flew over [to Italy] to look at it. The picture broke down when we were showing it, but there was something about it that made me realize there was a potential fortune in it.<sup>35</sup>

According to Steve Reeves, the star of *Hercules*, however,

[Levine’s] friend told him that *Hercules* was outselling every other picture, and that the people who made it had sold it to every country in the world except America, and that in Bombay it had played four times a day for two years. Knowing it was a winner in other countries, he bought it for the States.<sup>36</sup>

Whatever the truth, Reeves is certainly mistaken with his contention that it had been playing in Bombay for two years by the time Levine picked it up. Not only was *Hercules* playing in US theatres 18 months after the Italian release date of February 1958, reports of Levine planning the *Hercules* campaign were in the press by September 1958.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, there were reports of Levine flying to Europe in April/May of that year.<sup>38</sup> I would hazard a guess that it was on one of these trips that Levine secured the rights to *Hercules*. Levine himself was playing his cards close to his chest: when a reporter asked for details of the film he was looking to purchase, Levine replied, “These things I can’t tell you ... If I did, I’d have nine competitors on the plane with me. I’ve got a seven-day option now. I want to make it permanent ... Maybe.”<sup>39</sup>

Though *Hercules* was not Levine’s first success, it was the film that got his name known; thanks to *Hercules* Levine went from being a Boston local hero to industry big shot, from trade paper oddity to a force to be reckoned with. The success of *Hercules*, and the exploitation campaign that preceded its release, made Levine the most recognisable showman in show business.

With the trend in movie exploitation moving from mass marketing to targeted marketing, Levine was seemingly happy to buck it. He bought the distribution rights for *Hercules* for \$120,000,<sup>40</sup> spent around \$120,000<sup>41</sup> on re-editing and dubbing, before spending around \$1,000,000<sup>42</sup> on promoting the film in a massive, unmissable exploitation campaign that ran for 21 days before and during the film’s initial release, distributed by Warner Bros.<sup>43</sup> The film opened nationwide with over 600 prints – the largest order Eastman-Pathe laboratories had ever had.<sup>44</sup> “Wherever You Are, You Are Never Far From *HERCULES!*” screamed the ads, without fear of contradiction.

The *Hercules* campaign was not, however, as blunderbuss as it may appear; there was method in the seemingly scattergun approach, which sought to sell two products – *Hercules* and Levine – to two broad groups – the public and the industry. Levine was always conscious that selling a product to the film industry was an important part of film exploitation generally, and with *Hercules* he set out to woo the exhibitors – perhaps the most frustrated and overlooked section of the film world at the time.

The Theatre Owners of America had held a meeting in 1956 on “ways of selling motion pictures to the public more profitably.” The TOA’s pledge to “develop useful selling tools”<sup>45</sup> at their 1956 caucus, some eight years after the Paramount decision, may give the impression of an organisation that was a little slow on the uptake or, at least, a delayed reaction. Yet, as, Berne Schneyer observed in 1959, “one of the basic flaws in industry relations [is the] failure by the distributors to face the fact that the majority of exhibitors are *businessmen* not *showmen*,” an observation which came in response to one evidently pleased exhibitor’s comments regarding *Hercules*, “Levine didn’t ask us to put over this picture. He went out and did it himself!”<sup>46</sup>

A rhetorical question posed by one exhibitor regarding *Hercules* illustrates the cynicism with which the major film companies were now viewed: “Suppose a major film company had taken on the job of promoting *Hercules*; what do you think they would have spent on it?” The unnamed exhibitor goes on to recall Paramount’s *Ulysses* (1955, Mario Camerini), a film that contained similar exploitable elements, as well as a major star in Kirk Douglas. Schneyer notes that “Paramount spent only a fraction of the *Hercules* [promotional] budget on *Ulysses* [and] let it slip in somewhat lacklustre fashion,” while the exhibitor concludes, “It was a helluva lot better picture than Levine’s.”<sup>47</sup>

Perhaps cognizant of exhibitors complaints of a lack of forewarning regarding upcoming product<sup>48</sup> Levine began his courtship of the exhibitors over four months before *Hercules* was due to be released. On March 20<sup>th</sup> 1959, Levine hosted a massive “Explosion” luncheon for exhibitors at the Waldorf Astoria in New York City, which took place with 1200 attendees. Those who were not able to attend received a missive, from Levine to “Friend Exhibitor,” detailing the plan of action for the 10 day “explosion” that was to happen in July, including information on print runs, listings of the magazines which would contain (full page) ads for the film, as well as a prediction of “The Greatest TV Saturation in Every Local Market” (see Appendix I, *fig. 4*).

Those that did attend the luncheon were treated to a lavish affair, the cost of which was estimated at \$15, 000.<sup>49</sup> Exhibitors were given a taste of the exploitation material that would feature in the campaign, such as trailers for TV and cinemas, and information on magazine sponsorship, and each attendee was given a pressbook. The pressbook measured 30-inches by 40-inches, a gigantic affair, measuring 60-inches when opened; most pressbooks were considerably smaller, maybe 15-inches by 10, larger ones may have reached 25-inches square. They were presented to exhibitors by pretty models in togas; entertainment came in the form of Vaughn Munroe who, backed by the Meyer Davis Orchestra, sang the *Hercules* theme song – which was soon to be made available as a single through RCA. Levine, the star of the show, made a speech hammering home the vastness of the campaign; 2000 bookings had already been taken from exhibitors for the July release before the luncheon had even begun, after only one week of selling.<sup>50</sup>

Unusually for the 1950s, both exhibitors and distributors seemed happy with the turn of events. “Exhibition leaders,” according to Charles A. Aaronson, “were

unanimous in their tributes to the Levine genius for doing something in a big way. ‘We need more of this kind of showmanship,’ was the basic thought behind their words.”<sup>51</sup> Charles Boasberg, general sales manager for Warner Bros. concurred: “This luncheon is in itself one of the greatest showmanship jobs I’ve ever seen,” whilst also noting the effect on the primary purpose of the event: “it’s the easiest picture to sell we’ve ever had.”<sup>52</sup>

In reports of the event no mention is made of how many of the exhibitor attendees came from drive-ins. The drive-in, or “ozoner,” was one of the few sections of the movie business that was enjoying a boom time in the 1950s; it was also, in many ways, the spiritual home of *Hercules*.<sup>53</sup> Drive-ins, for obvious reasons, did most of their business in the summer months, so the July release date of *Hercules* made it ideal for the ozoner. Moreover, due to battles with the industry, ozoners were very rarely used for first run features,<sup>54</sup> another trend Levine was happy to buck; by his own account, Levine was “a great believer in outdoor theatres.” He emphasised the importance of the ozoner in enabling him to turn a healthy profit on the New England re-release of *Duel in the Sun*, and told Louella Parsons that he no longer owned any theatres except for a drive-in in Boston which he would use to preview films.

Showmanship and ballyhoo were in no short supply at the drive-ins. According to Sam Arkoff, the running gag about drive-ins in the 1950s was, “They play last run movies, right after drug stores.”<sup>55</sup> Drive-in operators, therefore, encouraged attendance by provision of other attractions and activities: laundrettes, kiddies’ playgrounds, funfairs, talent shows, concerts, as well as the food and drink concession stands, all made appearances on the drive-in scene in its heyday.<sup>56</sup> Paradoxically, drive-in operators were, for the most part, not showmen and had few connections with the film industry. By the 1950s, chains of drive-ins existed, such as Pacific, which

were owned and operated by film industry men, but the vast majority of ozoners were owned and operated by independent entrepreneurs, comparative amateurs who, according to one 1956 article, “did not know what was in the book and what wasn’t [and therefore] resorted to gimmicks to lure patrons that are rated as downright unethical by veteran motion picture exhibitors.”<sup>57</sup>

Independence, entrepreneurial spirit and a willingness to act counter to accepted industrial practice resulted, on the drive-in circuit, in gimmickry and showmanship, thereby drive-in operators were reproducing locally what Levine was doing nationally. Yet these were not the only reasons why *Hercules*’s spiritual home would be the ozoner. In assessing what kind of movie would most appeal to the outdoor movie fan Frank J. Taylor settled on “action pictures in color.” Colour, he notes, is desirable because of better visibility in the outdoors; and action, because, according to one exhibitor, “Critic pictures don’t pull in drive-in customers ... [they] like westerns, or any picture with action that fits into the holiday mood.”<sup>58</sup> *Hercules* was no critic picture, and it certainly had adventure and colour. Moreover, Levine’s campaign for the film had little precedent and the “holiday mood” created by the campaign could be capitalised on by ozoner operators and their patrons, thereby counteracting a regular complaint of ozoner attendees that films shown at drive-ins were too old.<sup>59</sup>

Despite complaints from patrons that drive-in movies were too old or “less desirable”<sup>60</sup> than pictures shown at the indoor houses, such complaints seem to have gone unheeded. Segrave quotes correspondents from the 1950s that suggest drive-in customers were “not greatly concerned with the age of the pictures;” and that “drive-in fans are far less choosy than the indoor variety.”<sup>61</sup> Perhaps such claims were not the truisms they are presented as but drive-in operators could do little about the age and quality of the films on offer due to high rental fees. Drive-ins showed late runs

and hyped the concession stands – which is where they made their profit. Such tactics would have led to the derogatory comments about drive-ins such as that referred to by Arkoff. Levine, then, would have been able to capitalise on the lowered cinematic expectations of the drive-in crowd, providing a campaign and saturation release pattern that was inclusive of the drive-in operators and their patrons.

It is also worth speculating on what is meant by a “less desirable” film, and where *Hercules* fits. Regardless of its merits, *Hercules* was not a slick Hollywood production – it was foreign, badly dubbed and the closest thing it had to a star was Steve Reeves; whatever it had going for it, it certainly would not have been to everyone’s taste. When, in *Showman*, Levine asks David Susskind if he has seen *Hercules*, he emits a groan and answers in the affirmative, muttering something about “my kids.” No doubt the *Hercules* audience contained more than its fair share of people who did not want to see the film and the drive-in was an ideal place to go to the movies and not watch the film, considering all the other distractions on offer. As Kerry Segrave has observed, “More and more drive-ins turned to selling an evening of fun in which the film being screened was only a part – and not necessarily the most important one.”<sup>62</sup>

Segrave’s assessment of the drive-in experience is telling, not least because such a description resonates with similar findings in other fields of film studies, findings that help situate Levine and *Hercules* as missing links between exploitation film and high concept cinema. The notion of a film being integral to, rather than the focus of, a wider experience is a hallmark of both exploitation and high concept historiographies. For Justin Wyatt, the high concept film is distinguished, in part, “through an integration with marketing and merchandising;”<sup>63</sup> whilst Eric Schaeffer notes that, for the exploiters:



A film could be completely misrepresented by the advertising and could disappoint spectators, yet the ballyhoo that preceded it was part of the overall entertainment experience, a fact that the audience evidently recognised and appreciated and in which they were complicit.<sup>64</sup>

In relation to *Hercules*, recognition and complicity with the outlandish claims of showmanship is evidenced by a comment from Aaronson who, in reference to the ubiquitous and hyperbolic use of the word “colossal” in the *Hercules* campaign, notes that with Levine’s explodation luncheon, “He very nearly made the word “colossal” accurate, for once.”<sup>65</sup>

As with the classical exploitation film and the high concept film, *Hercules* functioned as the epicentre of a larger experience, a multimedia roadshow involving the print press, television, radio, lavish luncheons and merchandising. All of this emanated from a product carrying an easily recognisable and easily understood title, something Levine was keen to point out, “It had a good title ... I mean, whoever heard of Ben-Hur? But you go out in the street and lift up a manhole cover and ask, ‘Who was Hercules?’ and you’ll get an answer.”<sup>66</sup>

For the classical exploiter, titles were all important; as with *Hercules*, the title was the centre of the ballyhoo: titles such as *Cocaine Fiends* aka *The Pace That Kills* (1935, William A. O’Conner), *One Way Ticket To Hell* aka *Teenage Devil Dolls* (1955, Bamlet Price Jnr.) or *How To Undress In Front of Your Husband* gave the potential audience a clear idea of what to expect (as opposed to what they would actually get.) If a title was not racy enough, the producer or exhibitor would change it;

the 1953 US release of Ingmar Bergman's *Summer With Monica* saw distributor Kroger Babb bestowing the more enticing title of *Monica: Story of a Bad Girl* on his re-edited version. Similarly, for the 1960 release of the Australian import, *Walk Into Paradise* (1956, Marcello Pagliero and Lee Robinson), Levine chose the more pungent title *Walk Into Hell* for the US. Though *Hercules* was not aimed primarily at the classical exploitation crowd, the principle is the same – utilise an exploitable title that communicates to a potential audience the content of the film, thereby ensuring that dollars earmarked for advertising are spent on promoting the film rather than explaining the title or content.

*Hercules* was a known quantity, a mythical hero from a bygone age who was being sold to a public who had grown accustomed to sword and sandal epics such as *Samson and Delilah* and *Ulysses*. Moreover, eponymous gods and monsters were a key hallmark of 1950s cinematic culture. *King Kong*, whose title had proved to be a sticking point for producer David Selznick back in 1933,<sup>67</sup> was on its way to icon status by the 1950s, and was re-released to great success in 1952 and 1956 – the 1956 release being especially successful at drive-ins, “for which” according to Cynthia Erb, “the film was deemed a natural.”<sup>68</sup> In addition, *King Kong* (whose television rights had been sold in 1955) and horror films from the likes of Universal were in heavy rotation on television, and 1950s audiences acquainted with *Dracula* (1931, Tod Browning) and *Frankenstein* (1931, James Whale) could see them resurrected in colour due to imports of British Hammer films *Dracula* (US Title, *The Horror of Dracula* (1958, Terrence Fisher)) and *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1957, Terrence Fisher) – the latter described by Doherty as “a blessing”<sup>69</sup> for exploitation filmmakers and was, like *Hercules*, distributed in the US by Warner Bros.

The eponymous Hercules, then, functions as a pre-sold property, a character that needs little introduction, like the Hammer villains of the 1950s and *Jaws* in the 1970s, whose name was already well known by the time of the film's release thank to Peter Benchley's blockbusting airport novel. One key benefit of the pre-sold property, particularly for the low budget film, was the ability to circumvent the need for stars. "I tell you," Levine told Robert Muller, "it wouldn't matter who played Hercules as long as it was a man with a tremendous body. Stars, they're not important. It's the story and the title that count."<sup>70</sup> Schneyer concurred, "'Who's in it?' is a thing of the past," he wrote of Levine's *Hercules* campaign: "Proper promotion will overcome the lack of star names almost every time – and exhibitors can be convinced of that fact when showmanship is offered as a substitute for stars."<sup>71</sup>

However, Levine was not only offering showmanship in lieu of a star, but also a showman; if there were to be a star of *Hercules* Levine ensured that it was he, not Reeves, who assumed the mantle. Speaking in 1994, Reeves told Roy Frumkes of a run-in with Levine prior to the release of *Hercules* at a party in Rome. Reeves, as star of the film, demanded that his name be 70% the size of the title:

Joe Levine wanted his name as big as mine or bigger, and I said 'No way. You made the contract, I'm the star of this picture.' So he got ticked off and threw his spaghetti up in the air, and it was hanging off the crystal chandelier.<sup>72</sup>

Levine, of course, had his name prominently displayed over the title; Reeves had to be content with his name in a box in the bottom left hand corner of most

posters (see Appendix I, *fig. 5*). Also, Reeves was a notable absentee from Levine's exploitation luncheon. "I had no misgivings about *Hercules*," Levine told Gay Talese:

It had something for everybody. It had a dragon for kids, musclemen for growing boys, a shipwreck scene for waiters and clerks. Who doesn't dream of getting stuck on an island with some broads? And the picture had Steve Reeves. He appealed to women.<sup>73</sup>

Interestingly, Levine redelivered this piece of salesman's patter, almost word for word, to Pat O'Haire in 1974, the only significant difference was that in addition to appealing to women, Reeves also appealed to "some men"<sup>74</sup> This is significant because it further underscores Reeves's position as an object – as opposed to a star or actor – as well as giving a hint as to the extent of the *Hercules* campaign, which included the gay market.<sup>75</sup>

Essentially, *Hercules* was a children's movie, yet this didn't stop Levine wringing every possible exploitation possibility out of the film, presenting "something for everybody." As Levine's comments above suggest, the gay market was targeted with ads being placed in beefcake magazines; Reeves's muscular frame, masculinity and sexuality were explicitly referenced in campaign material: "Hercules! Gifted with a God's Body! A God's Wrath! And a Man's Desires." Titillation and destructive female sexuality were also foregrounded – presumably in an attempt to woo teenage boys and some of the classical exploitation crowd. At the same time it sought to sugar the pill for the disgruntled father cajoled into accompanying his offspring to the theatre or drive-in, promising a "Lusty and Licentious!" adventure in which the audience will "See Hercules rip down the Age of Orgy's lavish palace of lustful

pleasure,” and “See the seductive Amazons lure men to voluptuous revels and violent deaths!” Further bombastic promises were made regarding the film’s ‘colossal’ pedigree, “Produced On A Scale So Lavish, So Spectacular, Only The Huge Motion Picture Screen Can Do It Justice!”, and its rather dubious status as an exotic, historical travelogue: “Actually Filmed Amid The Pagan Playgrounds of the Mystic Mediterranean Where Legend Tells Us Hercules Lived and Lusted ... In The Barbaric Splendour That Marked The Dawn of the Western World!”

Such wide-range marketing runs contrary to Staiger’s assessment of the exploitation practices that dominated the 1950s; and Levine did seem to be a man out of his time. The massive publicity blitz and nationwide opening would become a Hollywood blockbuster template from the 1970s onward, yet the ballyhoo and showmanship came from the past. Levine was keen to associate himself with Hollywood’s Golden Age, telling the *Mirror News*, “I’m really no genius ... It’s all been done before. It’s just that Hollywood was tired. Too many people were making speeches about what should be done and not doing anything about anything.”<sup>76</sup>

Indeed, there were many who were keen to carry Levine’s message for him. Heavy press attendance at the explodation luncheon meant that coverage of the events was littered with soundbites from the pampered attendees. Sol Schwartz, President of the RKO Theatre chain, noted that Levine’s explodation luncheon was “reminiscent of the big selling days;” Samuel Rosen of Stanley Warner Theatres remarked “We need more men like him ... I hope he sets an example;”<sup>77</sup> whilst Charles Boasberg noted, “This industry needs more Joe Levines.”<sup>78</sup> Reporters covering the event were also not immune to Levine’s charm offensive, and the offerings of the luncheon, with Aaronson commenting, “the whole affair was one to inspire the use of adjectives, big ones, and to lead to the prediction that this film is indeed likely to rack up a pile of

records when it gets into release;”<sup>79</sup> whilst the declaration by the unnamed correspondent of the *Film Bulletin* makes one wonder if Levine could have penned better himself:

Exhibitors, and anyone else watching the skies for another showman comet to replace the late Mike Todd, might well have blinked their eyes in wonder and anticipation last week. From all celestial indications, it had appeared again – in the person of an affable, dynamic, 53 year old New Englander with the physique of a Notre Dame “watch charm” guard. His name: Joseph E. Levine.<sup>80</sup>

Levine’s strategy, then, was to “become the news.” An unmissable exploitation campaign became news in itself and, with the industry onside, it became easier to seduce the press, who would do his work for him. With Levine having two products to sell – his film and himself – potential punters could take one or the other. Notably, three days after Scheuer published his admiring assessment of Levine’s career to date, cited earlier, he wrote an entertainingly dismissive review of the film Levine was peddling, entitled: “This *Hercules* Just Tarzan In A Tunic.”<sup>81</sup>

Of Levine’s saturation techniques, Gay Talese commented, “There are those who say that Levine’s blockbuster campaigns and his technique of opening films in hundreds of theatres simultaneously is merely a shrewd way of getting in and out of town quickly, like a dirty carnival.”<sup>82</sup> The “dirty carnival” simile can be applied to cinematic traditions and conjures up the romantic idea of the itinerant exploitation film exhibitor who arrives in town with a blaze of publicity in order to sell his titillating cinematic curios. Such a reading provides a link between the local, short-

lived publicity blitzes of the exploiter and the national campaigns orchestrated by Levine.<sup>83</sup> “This isn’t true,” was Levine’s response to Talese’s suggestion:

When I lay out all this money for advertising, it’s because I want people to know my picture is playing. Too many films drop dead because people don’t know they’re playing. Some films are advertised when they reach Broadway, but by the time they get out to the neighborhoods people have forgotten them. Would the Palmolive Soap people spend millions on advertising soap and then not have soap in all the stores?<sup>84</sup>

Here Levine hits on some of the issues explored in this chapter, such as ensuring availability and awareness of product, as well as hinting at the metropolitan bias that hit provincial cinemas hardest through the 1950s. However, his apparently common sense assessment of his techniques overlooks the fact that, in the 1950s, saturation releasing patterns were not considered a reputable way to distribute films.

Levine told *Newsweek* in 1960, “Other people try to do what I do ... but in Hollywood too many people have to make a decision. They chicken out;”<sup>85</sup> yet in the 1950s, a saturation release pattern could often be seen as “chickening out.” William Paul has noted that in 1946, David Selznick opted for a saturation release pattern for *Duel In The Sun*, “as a way of capitalizing on advance audience interest and countering bad word of mouth.”<sup>86</sup> Paul reports how Selznick regretted this decision as it contradicted his “former *Tiffany* standards.”<sup>87</sup> Indeed, as I detailed in chapter 1, in 1962, when Fox contemplated releasing Darryl F. Zanuck’s *The Longest Day* as a saturation release, Zanuck was so appalled that he re-took control of the studio. So

disreputable was the practice that it was not until *Jaws* that a major studio (Universal) was prepared to wholeheartedly back such a strategy for a major release. One should, however, recognise the similarities between *Jaws* and *Hercules*.

*Duel in the Sun* and *The Longest Day* were both packed with stars. The former was helmed by a major director, the latter a producer-led project by the most significant producer of his generation. Both were prestige pictures. *Jaws*, by contrast, was helmed by a comparative unknown, as was *Hercules*; like *Hercules* the stars were not featured in promotional material anything like as heavily as the eponymous monster,<sup>88</sup> and lastly, it was a creature-feature. It is certainly fitting that Hollywood's first significant jump into saturation releasing should be with an old-fashioned monster movie. As this thesis explores, Levine was not religiously devoted to his own technique, using it only for suitable projects.

Also significant is that the saturation release of *Jaws* was the result of emerging trends within the film industry. Justin Wyatt has detailed how such a pattern came to dominate the US film industry through the 1970s and 1980s, beginning with the success of the "four-walling" technique used for *Billy Jack* (1971, Tom Laughlin), through to the relatively modest saturation openings of superstar vehicles *Magnum Force* (1973, Ted Post), starring Clint Eastwood and *Breakout* (1975, Tom Gries), starring Charles Bronson,<sup>89</sup> before the large scale saturation releases of *Jaws* and beyond. The first two films were distributed by Warner Bros., the others by Columbia and Universal respectively and constituted a tentatively emerging trend within the industry as a whole. By contrast, the major saturation releases of the 1950s were all guided by Levine's hand.

To be sure, saturation openings were not new in 1959, and Levine had a debt to pay to the showmen of the past – a debt he was happy to acknowledge. Yet he



forged ahead with a strategy he developed and kept pushing it further and further with ever more innovative gimmicks and bigger and bigger gambles. Whether or not Hollywood's tentative adoption of his techniques in the 1970s represents admirable caution or "chickening out," it was, nonetheless, twenty years before major studios were prepared to match the audacity, if not the flair, of Levine's explosions.

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<sup>1</sup> Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Austin: University of Texas Press 1994), p. 111.

<sup>2</sup> 'Levine Would Double 350G TV *Hercules* Bally On Right Pic,' *Variety* 9 July 1959.

<sup>3</sup> 'A Simple Guy,' *Newsweek*, 22<sup>nd</sup> February 1960.

<sup>4</sup> David Nathan, 'The Man Who Sold Hercules,' *Daily Herald*, 7<sup>th</sup> December 1960.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas Gomery, 'The Hollywood Blockbuster: Industrial Analysis and Practice,' in Julian Stringer (ed.) *Movie Blockbusters* (London: Routledge 2003), p. 74.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics. The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 2002) p. 139. Peter Lev, *History of American Cinema 7: The Fifties. Transforming the Screen* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons 2003), p. 211, and Sheldon Hall, 'Blockbusters in the 1970s' in Michael Hammond and Linda Ruth Williams (eds.) *Contemporary American Cinema* (Berkshire: McGraw Hill Education 2006) p. 170.

<sup>7</sup> This portmanteau word was apparently coined by Levine having been told by Samuel Rosen, Executive Vice President of Stanley Warner Theatres, "You're going to launch this picture, you're going to explode it!" 'Hercules Reveals A Ballyhoo Strongman,' *Film Bulletin*, 30<sup>th</sup> March 1959, p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> Janet Staiger, 'Announcing Wares, Winning Patrons, Voicing Ideals: Thinking About the History and Theory of Film Advertising,' *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 29, No. 3. (Spring 1990), p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> Sam Arkoff with Richard Trubo, *Flying Through Hollywood By The Seat Of My Pants*, (New York: Birch Lane Press 1992), p. 38-9. NB. Notably, Levine, who acted as a distributor for AIP material in New England, was so enticed by the exploitation material for *The Beast With 1,000,000 Eyes* (1955, David Kramarsky and Lou Place) that he promised Arkoff that he could sell the picture to a big LA distributor. Having seen the film, Levine reportedly offered Arkoff £100,000 for the title and publicity on the condition that the film be scrapped and Levine could make another himself. Arkoff demurred. Ibid, p. 2-3.

<sup>10</sup> Louella Parsons, 'How to get into the Movie\$', *Los Angeles Examiner. Pictorial Living*, 20<sup>th</sup> September 1959.

<sup>11</sup> Dick Williams, 'Muscular Hercules Is Raising Cain,' *Mirror News*, 30<sup>th</sup> July 1959.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Schatz, 'The New Hollywood,' in Julian Stringer (ed.), *Movie Blockbusters* (London: Routledge 2003), p. 18.

<sup>13</sup> Donald M. Nelson, 'The Independent Producer,' *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, Vol. 254, (November 1947), p. 54.

<sup>14</sup> According to Nelson, the SRO acronym stood for Standing Room Only. Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Lincoln Freeman, 'The Comeback of the Movies,' in Tino Balio (ed.) *The American Film Industry* p. 377 Article first published in *Fortune*, February 1955.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas M. Pryor, 'Hollywood Report. Exhibitors Veer Toward Production,' *New York Times*, 7<sup>th</sup> April 1957, p. 133.

<sup>17</sup> 'High Film Rentals Scored in Chicago. Goldenson Also Tells Theatre Owners' Meeting Shortage of Movies Hurts Industry. Also *New York Times*, 4<sup>th</sup> November, 1953, p. 29

<sup>18</sup> Steve Neale, 'Hollywood Blockbusters: Historical Dimensions,' in Julian Stringer (ed.), *Movie Blockbusters*, p. 48-52.

<sup>19</sup> Milton Esterow, 'Adult Films, New Comfort Revive City's Moviegoing,' *New York Times*, p. 5<sup>th</sup> May 1958, p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> Janet Staiger, 'Announcing Wares, Winning Patrons, Voicing Ideals: Thinking About the History and Theory of Film Advertising,' p. 18.

<sup>21</sup> Attempting to unpick precisely who did what during *Gojira's* transformation into *Godzilla* is notoriously difficult. Often, Levine is credited with importing the film and re-editing it. More often, he is blamed for Americanising and bastardising a classic. Many people have claimed credit for buying

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rights to *Gojira* from Toho but the safest bet seems to be Edmund Goldman, given that he had close ties with Toho at the time. 'Goldman First With *Godzilla* in the States,' *Variety* 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1980. Dick Kay (who also claims credit for the initial transaction with Toho) and Harry Ross re-edited the film and then, according to Kay, sold the rights to Levine. Maria Matzer, 'How *Godzilla* Made His Way To the US' *LA Times* 22 May 1998, p. 21. Levine has reportedly claimed credit for giving the US version its title, Alan Veitch, 'Who's Bigger Than Bond?' *The Age* 18<sup>th</sup> September 2002. As for distribution, the film was distributed by Transworld Releasing Corporation which was a distribution company set up by Levine and headed by Edward Barison, to handle *Godzilla* and some subsequent productions from Dick Kay's Jewell Productions, 'Barison, Levine Finalizing New Company Plans,' *Hollywood Reporter*, 27<sup>th</sup> February 1956.

<sup>22</sup> 'Barison, Levine Finalizing New Company Plans,' *Hollywood Reporter*, 27<sup>th</sup> February 1956.

<sup>23</sup> 'Studio Briefs,' *LA Times* 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1952, p. A7.

<sup>24</sup> I know very little about this film other than that Levine was somehow involved in its production and distribution (according to Imdb it was distributed by Visual Drama Inc.) and that Turner was involved in its promotion, see 'Terry Turner, 79, Publicity Agent,' *New York Times*, Obituary, 1<sup>st</sup> December 1971, p. 50. The film itself is three episodes of the *Gang Busters* television show combined for a theatrical release.

<sup>25</sup> Terry Turner quoted in Dade Hayes and Jonathan Bing, *Open Wide: How Hollywood Box Office Became a National Obsession* (New York: Miramax Books 2004) p. 149.

<sup>26</sup> <http://greenbriarpictureshows.blogspot.com/2008/01/mighty-monarch-of-melodramas-king-kong.html> (accessed 21st February 2008.) The quote in question comes from *The Motion Picture Herald* c. 1952.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Doherty has suggested that Levine had been scooped by *Rodan* which was subject to a "Levine-like" campaign. Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics*, p. 139. *The Mysterians* is also subject to a dispute over who originally bought the rights from Toho. Edmund Goldman has claimed credit, 'Goldman First With *Godzilla* in the States,' *Variety* 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1980; as has Levine, who claimed that he acquired the rights after impressing the owner of Toho with a 16 card trick. Peggy Doyle, 'Card Trick Swung Film Deal,' *Boston Evening American* 19<sup>th</sup> April 1958.

<sup>28</sup> Louella Parsons, 'How to get into the Movie\$', *Los Angeles Examiner. Pictorial Living*, 20<sup>th</sup> September 1959. NB – There are other accounts of the film's producers (Carlo Ponti and Dino De Laurentiis) referring to Attila this way – see 'A Simple Guy,' *Newsweek*, 22<sup>nd</sup> February 1960, p. 100 – yet one cannot discount the possibility that the story originated from Levine himself.

<sup>29</sup> Philip K. Scheuer, 'Meet Joe Levine, Super (Sales) Man!' *LA Times* 27 July 1959, p. C13

<sup>30</sup> Art Cohn, *The Nine Lives of Mike Todd* (London: Hutchinson and Co. 1959) p. 38. (Italics in original.)

<sup>31</sup> The word 'peplum' is derived from a Latin word for tunic and is widely used to define a genre of fantasy and adventure films set in ancient times in which the hero wears such a garment. Also known as Sword and Sandal films.

<sup>32</sup> Sumiko Higashi, *Cecil B. DeMille and American Culture: The Silent Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1994), p. 7-33.

<sup>33</sup> 'Joe Unchained,' *Time*, 24<sup>th</sup> February 1961.

<sup>34</sup> Sumiko Higashi, *Cecil B. DeMille and American Culture: The Silent Era*, p. 175.

<sup>35</sup> Louella Parsons, 'How To Get Into The Movie\$', *LA Herald Examiner, Pictorial Living*, 20<sup>th</sup> September 1959.

<sup>36</sup> Roy Frumkes, 'Interview with Steve Reeves,' *The Perfect Vision*, Vol. 6, 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1994. Also <http://www.drkrm.com/reeves.html> (Part 1) and <http://www.drkrm.com/reeves2.html> (Part 2), accessed 1st September 2007.

<sup>37</sup> 'Levine Plans 2<sup>nd</sup> Mighty Campaign For *Hercules*,' *Motion Picture Herald*, 13<sup>th</sup> September 1958.

<sup>38</sup> Harold L. Gail, 'Meet Joe Levine,' *Portland Evening Express*, 28<sup>th</sup> April 1958. See also 'Rome Bound,' *Boston Traveller*, 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1958. 'Globe Circling Joseph E. Levine,' *Boston Daily Globe*, 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1958.

<sup>39</sup> George W. Clarke, 'TV To Exhaust All Films In Four Years,' *Boston Daily Record*, 19<sup>th</sup> April 1958.

<sup>40</sup> Dick Williams, 'Muscular *Hercules* Is Raising Coin,' *Mirror News*, 30<sup>th</sup> July 1959.

<sup>41</sup> Louella Parsons, 'How To Get Into The Movie\$', *LA Herald Examiner. Pictorial Living*, 20<sup>th</sup> September 1959, p. 38.

<sup>42</sup> "A reputed \$1 million" Berne Schneyer, 'Showmanship: It Still Pays Off!' *Film Bulletin*, 20<sup>th</sup> July 1959, p. 11, "1.1 million" Philip K. Scheuer, 'Meet Joe Levine, Super (Sales) Man!' *LA Times* 27 July 1959, p. C13.

- <sup>43</sup> It is difficult to ascertain precisely when Warner Bros. came on board with *Hercules*. When the campaign first began to be publicised, no mention is made of Warners acting as distributor. 'Levine Plans 2<sup>nd</sup> Might Campaign, for *Hercules*,' *Motion Picture Herald* 13<sup>th</sup> September 1958. It is likely, then, that Levine presented the film and his campaign plans to Warners as a package sometime after this date, as opposed to being in Warners' employ from the beginning.
- <sup>44</sup> 'Levine Would Double 350G TV *Hercules* Bally On Right Pic.' *Variety* 9 July 1959.
- <sup>45</sup> Oscar Godbout, 'Hollywood Scene, Theatre-Owners Group Seeks Methods For More Profitable Exhibition,' *New York Times*, 8<sup>th</sup> July, 1956, p. 73.
- <sup>46</sup> Berne Schneyer, 'Showmanship: It Still Pays Off!' *Film Bulletin*, 20<sup>th</sup> July 1959, p. 11.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>48</sup> Oscar Godbout, 'Hollywood Scene, Theatre-Owners Group Seeks Methods For More Profitable Exhibition,' *New York Times*, 8<sup>th</sup> July, 1956, p. 73.
- <sup>49</sup> '*Hercules* Reveals A Ballyhoo Strongman,' *Film Bulletin*, 30<sup>th</sup> March 1959, p. 12 + 15.
- <sup>50</sup> Charles A. Aaronson, 'Hard Sell "Explodation" Party Gives *Hercules* Rousing Sendoff,' *Motion Picture Herald*, 28<sup>th</sup> March 1959, p. 14-15 and '*Hercules* Reveals A Ballyhoo Strongman,' *Film Bulletin*, 30<sup>th</sup> March 1959, p. 12 + 15.
- <sup>51</sup> Charles A. Aaronson, 'Hard Sell "Explodation" Party Gives *Hercules* Rousing Sendoff,' *Motion Picture Herald*, 28<sup>th</sup> March 1959, p. 14.
- <sup>52</sup> '*Hercules* Reveals A Ballyhoo Strongman,' *Film Bulletin*, 30<sup>th</sup> March 1959, p. 15.
- <sup>53</sup> *Hercules* films feature prominently in drive-in related retro fan sites such as [dvddrivein.com](http://dvddrivein.com) and [briansdriveintheatre.com](http://briansdriveintheatre.com). Also, Aljean Harmetz, 'Museum Celebrates 'Drive-in' Movies; 'Drive-in' Movies Come Of Age in Museum Festival,' *New York Times*, p. 27 July 1979 reports on a festival of drive in movies at MOMA in New York. Though all the films are AIP releases, the festival notably includes *Goliath and The Barbarians* (1959, Carlo Campogalliani) and *Goliath and the Dragon* (1960, Vittorio Cottafavi), both of which were films from the *Hercules* cycle, starring Steve Reeves – whose character was dubbed by AIP as Goliath in their US release to avoid confusion/legal action.
- <sup>54</sup> Kerry Segrave, *Drive-In Theaters. A History From Their Inception in 1933* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland 1993), p. 52-59. Levine probably was not the first to note that summer releases and providing drive-ins with first run features would be a mutually beneficial situation; in his autobiography, AIP chief Samuel Z. Arkoff claims that AIP benefited greatly from such gaps in the market. See, Samuel Z. Arkoff, *Flying Through Hollywood By The Seat Of My Pants* (New York: Birch Lane Press 1992), p. 41 + 58-59. Also, Thomas Doherty has noted drive-in operators adoption of multiple bill movies aimed at teenagers in the late 1950s, *Teenagers and Teenpics*, p. 91-93.
- <sup>55</sup> Samuel Z. Arkoff, *Flying Through Hollywood By The Seat Of My Pants*, p. 58
- <sup>56</sup> For an account of showmanship in the drive-in industry of the 1950s see, Kerry Segrave, *Drive-In Theaters. A History From Their Inception in 1933*, p. 78-88.
- <sup>57</sup> Frank J. Taylor, 'Big Boom In Outdoor Movies,' *Saturday Evening Post*, 29<sup>th</sup> September 1956, reprinted in Gregory A Waller (ed.) *Moviegoing In America*, (Malden, M.A.: Blackwell 2002), p. 248.
- <sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 251.
- <sup>59</sup> Kerry Segrave, *Drive-In Theaters. A History From Their Inception in 1933*, p. 144 (NB. From a survey conducted in 1949-50.)
- <sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.
- <sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.
- <sup>63</sup> Justin Wyatt, *High Concept. Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Austin: University of Texas Press 1994), p. 7.
- <sup>64</sup> Eric Schaeffer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True! A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959* (Durham and London: Duke University Press 1999), p. 111.
- <sup>65</sup> Charles A. Aaronson, 'Hard Sell "Explodation" Party Gives *Hercules* Rousing Sendoff,' *Motion Picture Herald*, 28<sup>th</sup> March 1959, p. 15.
- <sup>66</sup> 'A Simple Guy,' *Newsweek*, February 22 1960, p. 100.
- <sup>67</sup> Cynthia Erb, *Tracking King Kong. A Hollywood Icon In World Culture*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press 1998), p. 53.
- <sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.
- <sup>69</sup> Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics*, p. 115. NB. *The Horror of Dracula* was distributed in the US by Universal.
- <sup>70</sup> Robert Muller, 'The Great Joe,' *Daily Mail* c.1960 (date illegible).
- <sup>71</sup> Berne Schneyer, 'Showmanship: It Still Pays Off!' *Film Bulletin*, 20<sup>th</sup> July 1959, p. 12.

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- <sup>72</sup> Roy Frumkes, 'Interview with Steve Reeves,' *The Perfect Vision*, Vol. 6, 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1994. Also <http://www.drkrm.com/reeves.html> (Part 1) and <http://www.drkrm.com/reeves2.html> (Part 2), accessed 1st September 2007.
- <sup>73</sup> Gay Talese, Joe Levine Unchained, *Esquire*, January 1961, p. 68.
- <sup>74</sup> Pat O'Haire, 'This Levine Guy – He's a Real Joe,' *Sunday News – New York's Picture Newspaper*, September 29 1974. The only other change is that "clerks" become "cab drivers."
- <sup>75</sup> Calvin Tomkins, 'The Very Rich Hours of Joe Levine,' *The New Yorker*, 16<sup>th</sup> September 1967, p. 56.
- <sup>76</sup> *Mirror-News* 29 June 1960.
- <sup>77</sup> Charles A. Aaronson, 'Hard Sell "Explodation" Party Gives *Hercules* Rousing Sendoff,' *Motion Picture Herald*, 28<sup>th</sup> March 1959, p. 15.
- <sup>78</sup> 'Hercules Reveals A Ballyhoo Strongman,' *Film Bulletin*, 30<sup>th</sup> March 1959, p. 15.
- <sup>79</sup> Charles A. Aaronson, 'Hard Sell "Explodation" Party Gives *Hercules* Rousing Sendoff,' *Motion Picture Herald*, 28<sup>th</sup> March 1959, p. 14.
- <sup>80</sup> 'Hercules Reveals A Ballyhoo Strongman,' *Film Bulletin*, 30<sup>th</sup> March 1959, p. 12. "Watch charm" is a reference to Bert Metzger, a diminutive American Football player who played in the guard position for the University of Notre Dame in the late 1920s.
- <sup>81</sup> Philip K. Scheuer, 'This *Hercules* Just Tarzan In A Tunic,' *LA Times*, 30<sup>th</sup> July 1959, p. B9.
- <sup>82</sup> Gay Talese, Joe Levine Unchained, *Esquire*, January 1961, p. 68.
- <sup>83</sup> I would certainly suggest that, given Levine's exploitation background, there is certainly a linking thread between the "roadshowing" of exploitation films and the blockbuster campaign of *Hercules*. For an analysis of this method of exploitation film exhibition see, Eric Schaeffer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!* p. 99-103. For a more romantic, personal account of this activity see, David F. Friedman, *A Youth In Babylon: Confessions of a Trash Film King* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books 1990)
- <sup>84</sup> Gay Talese, 'Joe Levine Unchained,' *Esquire*, January 1961, p. 68.
- <sup>85</sup> 'A Simple Guy,' *Newsweek*, 22<sup>nd</sup> February 1960.
- <sup>86</sup> William Paul, 'The K-Mart Audience At The Mall Movies,' in Gregory A. Waller (ed.) *Moviegoing In America*, p. 284. Originally published in *Film History* 6 (1994).
- <sup>87</sup> David O. Selznick, quoted in *Ibid*.
- <sup>88</sup> In Justin Wyatt, *High Concept*, Wyatt provides a thorough analysis of the marketing of *Jaws*, p. 113-117. Notably he mentions neither Robert Shaw nor Richard Dreyfus. Significantly, the film's other star, Roy Schneider, is only mentioned in relation to *Jaws* once in the book, Wyatt noting that "his name alone could not 'open' a film," even after the successes of *Jaws* and *The French Connection* (1971, William Friedkin.)
- <sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, p. 112.

## **Section II**

Representation of Levine 1960-1964

## Chapter Four

### Cultural Intermediary as Celebrity: Media Reception of Levine, 1960-1964

#### Introduction

The first task that the history of art undertook was, in effect, the restitution of intermediaries ... The work behind the genius became apparent, the negotiation behind the beauty, the whole political game behind creation. Art is not beautiful without experts. There is no value without merchants. Art could not span centuries and continents without bridges being built.<sup>1</sup>

For Hennion, to understand the history of art it is essential to understand the role of intermediaries; contexts and connections provide the basis for study. The understanding of cultural intermediaries is almost always understood on a systematic level. In art, systems of patronage, systems of dealers;<sup>2</sup> and in film, systems of production, systems of distribution and exhibition. It is very rare indeed that a figure from one of these systems should become a prominent figure outside of the industry, let alone a celebrity in his own right, who is often more recognisable than the product he is promoting. Indeed it is rarer still for that celebrity to have had little or no creative input into the cultural artefact with which he is associated., as was true of Levine's early successes.

This chapter examines Levine's emergence as a public figure through the years 1960-64, a time when he began to be featured heavily in the US popular press and

mainstream magazines. As explored in the last chapter, Levine was an assiduous and ardent courter of the press and by 1960 his tactics had paid off handsomely in that he and his star persona had such momentum that the press would carry reports about Levine and his activities, along with commentaries, as matters of public interest. In his study of reputation building, Robert E. Kapsis has written of Alfred Hitchcock's efforts to remain in the public eye through the 1940s and 1950s: "One effective way of doing this," observes Kapsis, "involved lecturing audiences about the art of suspense."<sup>3</sup> Levine's approach was similar, lecturing audiences, through the press, about his own area of expertise, what he called "my peculiar talent"<sup>4</sup> – movie exploitation.

Barbara Klinger<sup>5</sup> and Martin Barker<sup>6</sup> have written of the importance of studying ancillary materials – campaign material and other attendant publicity – in order to gain a fuller understanding of a particular film. For Klinger, "digressions" such as promotional material, "provides background stories ... with an emphasis on a behind-the-scenes view of the making of a film that testifies to authorial and technical achievement."<sup>7</sup> In Levine's case, however, much of the promotional material for *Hercules* was not an insight into how the film was made but how the promotional campaign itself was constructed – how much was spent, number of prints made, target audiences, and so on.

Barker's stated concern is the study of such material in "their anticipatory and thus prefigurative capacity."<sup>8</sup> The *Hercules* campaign, however, can be understood, as in this chapter, in a post-figurative capacity; the campaign's relevance did not end with *Hercules*'s run, but continued on to form a fundamental component of Levine's public image. What in most cases, then, would constitute ephemera, for Levine

functioned as a behind-the-scenes narrative that “testifies to authorial and technical achievement” and as a basis for promoting future projects.

Richard Dyer’s work on stars is illustrative here. Though I would hesitate to call Levine a “star,” his reputation was constructed in the popular press along the lines of Dyer’s “star” persona, which emphasises four necessary qualities: “Ordinariness is the hallmark of the star; ... [T]he system rewards talent and ‘specialness;’ ... [L]uck, ‘breaks,’ which may happen to anyone typify the career of the star; ... [H]ard work and professionalism are necessary.”<sup>9</sup> All of these aspects were apparent in Levine-related publicity in the mainstream press. Taken respectively, Levine was happily married with two children; had a “peculiar talent” for showmanship; discovered *Hercules* when it had been rejected by everyone else; was tireless in his endeavours. To be sure, such a narrative could broadly apply to many public figures, but for a cultural intermediary, such narrative construction is rather unusual.

The first section of this chapter deals with Levine’s transition from being a feature of the trade press to featuring prominently in the popular press. From being virtually unknown in 1959, subsequent years saw Levine and his campaigns reported in national newspapers, affectionately satirised in *Mad*<sup>10</sup> magazine as well as extended profiles on Levine appearing in *Esquire*,<sup>11</sup> *Life*<sup>12</sup> and *Fortune*.<sup>13</sup> This section assesses how such items contributed to Levine’s public image and ensured the maintenance of his prominence on the cultural landscape of the US.

The second section deals with criticisms of Levine from two of his most notable detractors, the *New York Times*’s Bosley Crowther and cultural commentator Dwight MacDonald; that Levine should attract such criticism was undoubtedly due to his conspicuousness. Andrew Ross writes that MacDonald’s work should be understood as an attempt to “preserve the channels of power through which intellectual authority



is exercised.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, much the same could be said of Crowther, as is explored in this section. My contention is that Levine represented a threat to the cultural authority of both men, by virtue of his transgressions of accepted industrial and cultural boundaries, thereby exposing the militant territoriality and insecurities of the self-proclaimed expert at this time. Furthermore, I address the Sophoclean irony that arises from my contention that by decrying Levine in an attempt to preserve standards in their chosen fields, Crowther and MacDonald may well have been guilty of contributing to the destruction of that which they were trying to save.

What is revealed in this chapter is that not only did Levine benefit from the amount of attention afforded to him by the press, but also that he was a beneficiary of contemporary tussles over cultural propriety and borders.

### **The Emergence of Levine’s Public Image**

In 1951, the *New York Times* ran an article written by Howard Dietz, Vice President of Loew’s Inc. and Head of Promotion at MGM, in which he seeks to defend the business practices and practitioners associated with cinema. For Dietz:

It is implied that the business men in the movies demand a second-rate article on a low mental level. Salesmen and exhibitors, it is conveyed, are uncultured apaches and their advertising and publicity men, although they ought to know better, are shameless in their exaggerations.<sup>15</sup>

Dietz notes that while on occasion the movie tastes of the critic and the salesmen converge – for example *An American In Paris* (1951, Vincente Minnelli) – it is the more usual position that these two systems of interests are at loggerheads, for example *Samson and Delilah*. Moreover, Dietz suggests that the influence of “advertising men” in the film industry “is much overemphasized. The public has a sixth sense about these things.”<sup>16</sup> Though one could point to the *Hercules* campaign as proof to the contrary, the suggestion is not without merit, as Levine discovered to his cost with a subsequent release, *Jack The Ripper*.

The rights to *Jack The Ripper* – a British production from Mid Century Productions, scripted by regular Hammer scribe Jimmy Sangster – were acquired by Embassy in 1959; sound effects and music were added, and the film was released with another blockbuster Levine campaign. The film was distributed in the US by Paramount with a record-breaking 700 prints. As with *Hercules*, the campaign was lavish, and it began with bonanza luncheons for the exhibitors, one of which, at the Plaza Hotel in New York, saw Levine performing the show-stopping trick of literally unveiling the advertising budget for his latest project:

At a banquet, you tell them you’re going to spend a million dollars on promotion, and they don’t even look up from their plates. They turn around and ask the guy at the next table for a light. And you’re talking about a million, one million dollars. I wanted to make it real to them. What’s a million? Everybody talks about a million, *but no one ever sees it!* A million is just some numbers in an accountant’s book.<sup>17</sup>

In order to “make it real” Levine borrowed \$1 million, in cash, from a bank in Boston and unveiled it at an exhibitors’ promotional luncheon for *Jack The Ripper*; “That got their noses up from their plates,”<sup>18</sup> commented Levine. Of his stunt, Levine told *Newsweek*:

Adolph Zukor was standing next to the showcase where I had the money, and, you know, he has millions. ‘Is that real, Levine?’ he asked he. ‘Yeah it’s real,’ I said. ‘You know,’ he said, ‘I never saw a million dollars in cash before.’ Well that was the whole point. It cost me \$3,000 dollars to borrow, but I got \$100,000 worth of publicity out of it. It even made the papers in Australia!<sup>19</sup>

Despite his best efforts, *Jack The Ripper* bombed. Levine later commented that the film was “admittedly a piece of shit,” and told of how “it dropped dead in every theatre, in *spite* of a mammoth campaign. Because the public didn’t want to see it. They smelled it out even before the reviews.”<sup>20</sup>

Recalling his exploits in 1967, Levine’s memories had, perhaps, been adjusted for inflation; “You know the value of the publicity I got? I would estimate that to be at least a million.”<sup>21</sup> But one thing noticeably had not changed between his 1960 account and his 1967 account: *Jack The Ripper* was not the stated beneficiary of the stunt in either account, but Joe Levine’s “I.” This fact is accentuated by the failure of the film and the increasing success of its importer and promoter. The wide reporting of his stunt was repeated in echo through subsequent years with Levine’s name often featuring more prominently than the film the stunt purported to promote. The paying public may have had, as per Dietz, a “sixth sense” about the movie, but the stunt did

nothing to dampen Levine's reputation and celebrity; media reports of the Levine phenomenon maintained a wide-eyed wonderment as commentators continued, "tasting the wrapper rather than the biscuit,"<sup>22</sup> to borrow a phrase from JG Ballard.

Levine was also able to capitalise on the success, or otherwise, of films he had nothing whatever to do with. One happy by-product of the success of *Hercules* was that other US film companies began to follow suit, buying up cheap spear-and-sandals pictures in Italy for distribution in the US. America at the turn of the decade was seemingly engulfed by a flood of peplum and articles reporting on the phenomenon positioned Levine as its pioneer:

*Hercules* has set a new high water mark in mass response for a comparatively cheap film of its kind. It has forced American and Italian companies to launch crash programs for the production of legendary and Biblical spectacles, and it has sent American distributors scurrying to Italy to buy up gimmick films that can be adapted to the hard sell that Mr. Levine has revived with a vengeance.<sup>23</sup>

Whether one was impressed, dismayed or unconcerned by the phenomenon, a reporter would always place Levine's name in pole position. For a cultural intermediary to enjoy such celebrity is unusual, to say the least, and was so even in the ballyhoo-laden 1950s. As discussed in the previous chapter, great showmen like Todd and De Mille were not mere intermediaries, having great technical and creative input into the projects they sold. The same was true of Levine's contemporaries; William Castle who, according to Thomas Doherty, "is generally credited with

kicking off the horror and exploitation wars,”<sup>24</sup> was also a director and producer in addition to being a master flim-flam man. By contrast, Levine had little to no creative input into the films that initially made his name, yet he was ubiquitous in the press. If Levine’s strategy had been to promote himself as well as his wares with *Hercules*, by the time of *Hercules Unchained*, the mainstream press seemed happy to publish Levine-related stories unbidden.

As Levine’s huge publicity blitzes became news stories in themselves, subsequent publicity blitzes afforded reporters the chance to recap on previous campaigns. The vastness of 1959’s *Hercules* campaign gave Robert Alden a contextualising touchstone for his reports on the vastness of the *Hercules Unchained* campaign the following year; he even seems to acknowledge that his own report is rather more wrapper than biscuit. “It is important to remember that at the center of this maelstrom of promotion, publicity, advertising and box office receipts was the movie *Hercules*, a film that even Mr. Levine calls ‘this little picture.’”<sup>25</sup> Notably, Alden does not explain precisely *why* the film is important, and the article is dominantly about the ballyhoo and the orchestrator thereof; that said, *Hercules Unchained* received a healthy plug in the form of a large illustration of its promotional poster, taglines and all, that stretches across a full page.

Though Levine’s saturation ballyhoo techniques had received attention in the trade press, Alden’s article provides early evidence of an appetite for such extra-textual information in the popular press. Alden gives the reader a nuts-and-bolts rundown of Levine’s techniques, highlighting the massive amounts Levine spent on publicity for the *Hercules* campaign and a breakdown therein - \$40,000 on exhibitors luncheons, \$250,000 on TV and radio advertising, \$350,000 on print media advertising – as well as emphasising the campaign’s, and Levine’s, uniqueness by

contrasting Levine's operation with what would "normally" happen in the industry; for example, the more usual case of 250-350 prints of a film being circulated as opposed to over 600 for *Hercules*.<sup>26</sup>

For Klinger, this sort of "behind the scenes" information provides "yet another means for fetishizing the text in question," by facilitating "digressions."<sup>27</sup> Yet the text in question in Alden's piece is the *campaigns* rather than the films; the usually hidden world of the cultural intermediary is being exposed. Capitalising on the curiosity aroused by the extraordinary success of *Hercules*, the film itself becomes a digression related to the wider story of the industrial practices pioneered by Levine.

Qualitative judgements regarding *Hercules* and its sequel aside, Levine's role as intermediary, and his delivery techniques, became a divisive issue in the press. Shortly after *Hercules Unchained* was released across the US, it was released across the UK, with 500 prints, making Levine's saturation techniques international, and Alden pondered how the "conservative Britons"<sup>28</sup> will respond to the Levine technique. The stuffy Brits responded favourably, which caused dismay among the serious film critics at *Films and Filming*, as David Nathan reported:

'In our opinion,' says *Films and Filming* mildly, 'the commercial triumph of *Hercules [Unchained]* was attained because the producers spent more money on promotional advertising than for any film ever previously released in Britain. We believe that this is a classic example of the public being forced to like what it gets and being powerless to get what it likes.'<sup>29</sup>

For David Nathan too, writing in the UK's *Daily Herald*, the success of *Hercules Unchained* was all in the selling: "Ballyhoo and Mr. Joseph E. Levine of Boston, Massachusetts, have combined to turn a tenth-rate Italian film into this year's biggest box-office success in Britain. And shown how easy it is to fool us."<sup>30</sup> But Nathan's views are rather different to *Films and Filming's*. Taken out of context, they appear as a jaded criticism of Levine and his gullible patrons yet the article expresses admiration for Levine and his tactics. Nathan seems to take the view that the ballyhoo is part of the overall "entertainment experience" as spoken of by Schaeffer in the previous chapter; some people like to be conned and, in this case, the dupes were willing to be entertained and drawn in by Levine's campaign.

But Nathan's admiration for Levine goes even further as he reveals himself to be something of a disciple. He quotes the criticisms raised by *Films and Filming* and responds to them, calling them "nonsense." He claims that the paying public had "every chance" to see the better regarded films of the year, such as *The Angry Silence* (1960, Guy Green) or *The Apartment* (1960, Billy Wilder). "The public has its choice alright" he contends, "but it was blinded by the ballyhoo, stunned by the sales talk and pummelled by the propaganda until it was led up to the box-office of *Hercules Unchained*. It was like that in Barnum's day. It is like that in Mr. Levine's day."<sup>31</sup>

There is more than a hint of triumphalism and mickey-taking in Nathan's assessment. He notes that *Film and Filming's* objection had been advanced "mildly," thereby seeking to neuter through caricature, stereotyping the views as those of a meek liberal, a letter writer of the green ink brigade. Also, the finality of his comment regarding Barnum and Levine is very strident indeed, a stop-whinging-and-get-used-to-it closedown of the debate. Nathan, then, praises Levine by taking Levine's side in an argument of his own making. Indeed, the divisiveness of the Levine phenomenon

is emphasised by the fact that Levine was often praised and criticised in precisely the same terms. Nathan takes issue with *Films and Filming* by refuting their interpretation of events, not because they are factually incorrect. Moreover, Levine is welcomed by Nathan because, in Nathan's interpretation, he represents a challenge to elite culture, as evidenced by *Film and Filming's* claim that Levine's *Hercules Unchained* techniques left less room for more worthy fare at UK cinemas, and by Nathan's approving emphasising of their attendant exasperation.

As Levine's star ascended in the UK, the speed with which he assumed the status of cultural icon in the US was, for a film importer, truly remarkable. Indeed, 1960 was something of a love-in for Levine in the pages of the trade press and it was only a matter of time before the overflow would hit the mainstream press. Perhaps the moment when Levine could be said to have truly attained icon status was in October 1961 when he was the subject of a lampoon in *Mad* magazine, titled, "Mad Visits Joe LeVenal – Hollywood's Latest Producing Genius." (See Appendix I, *fig. 6.*)

Founded by Harvey Kurtzman and William Gaines, *Mad* began as a comic book in 1952, converting into a magazine in 1955. The magazine was hugely successful throughout the 1950s and 1960s and beyond; to be lampooned in *Mad* was to be *recognised*, even honoured – perhaps today's equivalent would be a guest spot on *The Simpsons*. In the October 1961 issue, the magazine recognises that to appear in the pages of *Mad* was desirable for many, no matter how much they were ridiculed; the front cover reads "This Issue Will Make J.F.K. *MAD*"; under the title, in a smaller typeface, reads, parenthetically, "mainly because he isn't mentioned once!"<sup>32</sup> The strip begins with LeVenal introducing himself:



Hello, I'm Joe LeVenal, the Hollywood genius who's responsible for all the *Hercules* and other wonderful, cheap film extravaganzas that are so popular today. Unlike mercenary producers who are out to rope **everybody** into seeing their films, I cater to a **select** audience – that part of the population which still isn't intelligent enough to understand **television!**<sup>33</sup>

LeVenal acts as the reader's host and guide as he takes us on a tour of his filmmaking process. The process begins with a budget meeting with LeVenal and his board of executives, at which LeVenal announces that his new project will have a budget of \$10 million - \$9,999,500 of which is allocated for advertising and promotion, leaving \$500 to buy the film from the "movie supermarkets" of Italy. Though ostensibly satire, this section helps consolidate Levine's public image by emphasising his by now well-known exploitation techniques.

Once in Italy, LeVenal declines an offer to buy *Hercules in the Land of the Amazon Idiots* on the grounds that it may be "a little too 'egghead' and 'message-y' for my audience,"<sup>34</sup> and settles instead for *Hercules and the Chicken-Fat People*, once again featuring his regular star, Steve Ribs. On the set, LeVenal explains his demands:

Now I want this picture ready by tomorrow afternoon – so for the next 22 hours, just have the cast move in different direction while changing their expressions. Naturally I want the script destroyed; it'll only hold up the story. Actually, it doesn't really matter what anyone says anyway, since I'll be dubbing in an English soundtrack consisting of

English crowd noises, English grunts, and English screams of pain.

Also, don't worry about shooting daylight scenes at night. I'll dub a sun over the moon ... And – oh, yes, I'm dubbing in 36 gorgeous girls over your ugly actors. I realize these girls are a little over-dressed now, but later I'll dub in a lot more flesh and skin.<sup>35</sup>

Back in the US, LeVenal throws parties of Bacchanalian excess (see Appendix I, *fig. 7.*) for the press and launches a huge promotional campaign that includes a billboard advertisement so large that it obscures the Rocky Mountains. Finally, having grossed \$50 million on *Hercules and the Chicken Fat People*, LeVenal reveals that the star Steve Ribs does not actually exist, he is merely LeVenal's twin brother, Irving, whose voice, hair, muscles, teeth, blank expression and courage are all the result of the post-production dubbing process (see Appendix I, *fig. 8.*).

The strip astutely highlights key aspects of Levine's public image, such as the constant bragging about money, the cheapness of a film's initial purchase price and the vastness of the subsequent campaign. The strip also hints at notions of authenticity through its constant referencing of the post-production dubbing process, consistent with Levine's image of a trickster-hustler. The strip's final twist, which reveals that the star Steve Ribs does not even exist, is reminiscent of Levine's own assertion that "stars don't matter" as cited in the previous chapter.

In essence, the strip satirizes the Levine phenomenon by exaggerating Levine's own exaggerations. I doubt if the strip contains anything that Levine himself would not have approved of;<sup>36</sup> the public image Levine sought to create for himself had merely been enforced – and given a wide audience – through *Mad's* intervention.

Levine's detractors *and* fans could both easily find plenty in the strip to confirm their prejudices or sympathies, respectively.

The success of *Hercules*, and Levine's tireless self-promotion, ensured that he became an ideal target for *Mad* magazine, a mainstream, satirical magazine whose political lampoons were accompanied by pot shots at the various figures and mores of popular culture – the kind of communications culture that barely existed until after World War II. The rise of mass communications meant that politics and political figures became popular culture figures, so political satire, which would have been an elitist or minority affair in earlier times, became acceptable to the mainstream. The fact that much of the satire in *Mad* was political also had the affect of lending gravitas to the publication, gravitas that Levine was able to capitalise on. After all, to be lampooned alongside JFK is rather more desirable than being lampooned alongside, say, Fabian.

Such tentative steps at dismantling cultural barriers are also in evidence in another 1961 piece about Levine, from *Esquire*, written by Gay Talese: an early article from a writer who would subsequently be associated with the emerging school of New Journalism. Tom Wolfe, perhaps the most famous of its practitioners welcomed New Journalism's embrace of popular culture. Ideologically, he saw it as a rebellion against the "aristocratic aesthetic" of "the educated classes," an embrace of the perceived low culture that "nobody even seems to bother to record, much less analyse."<sup>37</sup>

How Talese came by Levine is unknown but Marc Weingarten notes that Talese, whilst working as a reporter for the *New York Times*, "started to pitch stories to Harold Hayes at *Esquire* in February 1960,"<sup>38</sup> so it is likely that the piece was the result of a pitch rather than an assignment, and therefore likely that Levine held some

kind of fascination for Talese. Much of the information in Talese's article, especially the details, was appearing for the first time in the mainstream press. Levine tells of his poverty-blighted childhood in the West End of Boston, speaks movingly about his adopted son and tells some anecdotes about the various jobs he had whilst growing up, whilst Talese fills in the blanks with extra biographical information.

Talese seems seduced by Levine and his public image and his eager sympathy makes him sound, for much of the piece, more like a supporter than a reporter, conforming to Wolfe's assessment of the politics of the New Journalism. Like David Nathan, he welcomes Levine as a renegade and portrays detractors as stuffy. As in Nathan's piece, there is triumphalism, for example when Talese suggests that it was to "the astonishment of the movie industry, and the dismay of the critics, [that] *Hercules* made over \$5,000,000." He goes on to suggest that, due to the success of *Hercules Unchained* "all the sachems in Hollywood, who had hitherto been rather condescending to Mr. Levine, now began to wonder how he did it."<sup>39</sup> Talese neglects to mention that a major Hollywood studio had distributed both *Hercules* films; it was, therefore, the "sachems" that had enlisted Levine and his talents, but by emphasising oppositional ideology over inconvenient facts, Talese bolsters Levine's rebellious public image.

Talese presents Levine much as Levine presented himself – as a hustler and huckster. Talese scores with Levine's moving accounts of his childhood and his son, thereby allowing the reader to access the human face of the showman, Dyer's "ordinariness." He also goes some way to embracing mass culture, as per Wolfe, but analysis is notable in Talese's article by its almost complete absence. Talese is clearly swept up by the Levine hyperbole, to the extent that he joins in and aids Levine in battles against vague enemies – critics, Hollywood "sachems" and the "smart,

sophisticated fifteen per cent of America.”<sup>40</sup> Like others before him, he exalts Levine by decrying his wares. He describes Levine’s films as “compellingly ridiculous, ridiculously compelling,”<sup>41</sup> “some of the worst films in captivity” and “just plain awful.”<sup>42</sup> The focus of the article is on Levine as a maverick outsider; if Levine was looking for someone to help consolidate his public image he found an ideal acolyte in Talese who, in experimenting with a new form, obliged his subject by imbuing him with an almost mythical significance.

There is some reticence in Talese’s tribute to Levine, however, seemingly occasioned by his feeling that Levine may be a short-lived phenomenon: “Whether or not Levine can continue to excite people is the big question in the film industry these days.”<sup>43</sup> A notable concern is whether Levine could make the transition to art cinema with the Embassy import, *Where The Hot Wind Blows* (1960, Jules Dassin.) Such concerns had seemingly been answered by the time further profiles in mass-circulation magazines appeared. In an article in *Fortune* in 1964 Katherine Hamill quotes film financier Herbert Golden: “[Levine is] past being a flash in the pan. He’s settled down to being a steady flame.”<sup>44</sup> Levine’s position in the film world fortified, articles in *Life*<sup>45</sup> and *Fortune* are rather less partisan; more profile than tribute. *Life*’s Paul O’Neil makes room for more in-depth contextualising information than Talese with a more detailed account of Levine’s poverty stricken upbringing and his first steps into the film world through to the big successes of *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* and *Hercules*. O’Neil also emphasises the variety of Levine’s current roster, writing of the “sweeping display of versatility” which see Levine “peddling ‘prestige’ pictures in between his spectaculars,” accompanied by a still of Sophia Loren from *Boccaccio 70*.<sup>46</sup>

Much of the biographical information from *Life* is replicated in Katherine Hamill's piece for *Fortune*. Given *Fortune*'s position as a leading business magazine, the emphasis is more on Levine the businessman than in previous articles; Levine is contextualised in terms of a resurgent film industry, capitalising on conditions he helped to create.

These later articles emphasise Levine's uniqueness, maverick tendencies and entrepreneurial spirit yet, for both O'Neil and Hamill, Levine is no longer a novelty, he is a firm fixture in the cinematic landscape. The shadow of *Hercules* is cast over both pieces but its presence is diluted by a greater emphasis on biographical information and more recent films produced, promoted or imported by Levine. Also notable is Levine's apparent respectability. O'Neil seeks to undercut Levine's "flamboyant public image," by emphasising his ordinariness, as per Dyer:

Levine is actually a far more modest, sensible and industrious fellow than many of his contemporaries realize. He is contentedly married ... has two children ... [and] refuses ... to sell the pleasant, garden bordered but less than ostentatious house which has been his home, for years, in Boston.<sup>47</sup>

By contrast, Katherine Hamill uses more rarefied reference points to distinguish Levine. Hamill notes Levine's relationships with Robert Kennedy and the late President Kennedy, calling to mind Dyer's assessment of the aspirational qualities inherent in star personas<sup>48</sup> and Barry King's suggestion that stars are "models of rapid social mobility through salary."<sup>49</sup>

All of the items referred to in this section contributed in some way to the fortification of Levine's celebrity and public image. He is variously portrayed as a sympathetic caricature, mercurial threat to the status quo, huckster, magician, family man and all American success story; none of this would have done any harm to his public image. Taken together, they form a narrative of how Levine's star persona was constructed in the popular press. Nonetheless, his prominence, success and persona meant that he, as a public figure, was very divisive, and his conspicuousness left him vulnerable to attack from those who saw him as an unwelcome intruder, as the next section explores.

### **Art, Commerce, Expertise**

For Lawrence Levine, cultural hierarchies became more stratified, and the barriers between them more fortified, during the late Nineteenth Century, a process that continued into the Century. John Ralston Saul has noted the rise of expertise, particularly in the literary field, as a development that bolstered claims of cultural propriety among elites. Saul sees the publication of James Joyce's *Ulysses* in the 1930s as a key turning point.<sup>50</sup> Where Lawrence Levine saw a "sacrilization"<sup>51</sup> Saul saw theft.

As explored in the previous section, the 1960s saw cultural barriers being challenged, leading to a valorisation of popular culture in certain quarters, as in Talese's article; as well as popular culture figures being considered alongside more legitimate public figures as in *MAD*. Nonetheless, cultural territoriality in the 1960s was rife with borders more likely fortified than enfeebled due to perceived trespassers

such as Levine, whose prominence attracted a good deal of attention from critics guarding their area of expertise.

Of Levine's critics, one of the most vocal and consistent was Bosley Crowther. He dismissed Levine's first national success, *Godzilla: King of the Monsters*, as "incredibly awful," concluding, "it is too bad that a respectable theatre [Loew's State] has to lure children and gullible grown-ups with such fare."<sup>52</sup> This review, as with much of his criticism, is infused with Crowther's own morality; his problem is not just with the film, but also that such a film can be shown in "respectable" surroundings. Levine, it should be noted, had not yet achieved national prominence so Crowther's concern is with general cultural mores, as opposed to any particular party.

Nor was Crowther aware of Levine as the *Hercules* campaign emerged from its embryonic phase, a development that Crowther referenced as part of a more general argument suggesting that recent developments in US cinema boded well for its future:

A few weeks ago, a new promoter threw a luncheon of Lucullan scope ... to start things going for a new film *Hercules*. While it wasn't particularly modest, it indicated a rampant urge to sell. Sometime this summer, we can tell you, the public's stomach is going to be stuffed with *Hercules*.<sup>53</sup>

Crowther's tentative welcome for the "new promoter," however, soon turned to foreboding. In 1961, he noted of the *Hercules* phenomenon:



As much as it can spank anybody, the American motion-picture industry can spank Joseph E. Levine for Judas goating it down a path of commerce that may take it – or elements of it – to the brink of ruin. For it was he, a former drive-in manger, who ran the cheap Italian picture, *Hercules*, into a fabulous money-maker in the American market by promoting it five times as much as it was worth and thereby led the sheep in the business to go gambling for similar cheap adventure films.<sup>54</sup>

As a critic, Crowther often turned his attention to emergent trends in the industry, particularly those he felt were damaging it. In the case of *Hercules* and the subsequent peplum boom, Crowther was able to direct his ire toward a specific person; Levine, due to his conspicuousness in the industry, provided an ideal target.

Crowther spent a good deal of the 1960s being angry with Levine. As a general rule of thumb, if Crowther admired a film with which Levine was involved, for example the Embassy imports, *8½*<sup>55</sup> or *Two Women*,<sup>56</sup> Levine's name would not appear in the body of the review. However, if Levine was involved with a film that Levine didn't like, Levine's name would feature prominently, usually accompanied by moralising about the nature of the film in question. For example, he accused the Levine produced, *The Carpetbaggers* of "merely lading out dirt for dirt's sake,"<sup>57</sup> and wrote that Embassy import *Darling* was a "totally corrosive film."<sup>58</sup>

It is difficult to say for certain that Crowther was pursuing a vendetta against Levine at this time but by name checking Levine along with the films he finds objectionable, Crowther makes Levine guilty by association. This guilt was made all the more palpable by Crowther's consistent failure to mention Levine's work on the

films he enjoyed, and compounded by his writing elsewhere of “such obvious compendia of smut as Joseph E. Levine’s productions.”<sup>59</sup> In this way, Crowther sought to position himself as having a moral authority over the US film industry whilst portraying Levine as an interloper and a menace.

Levine’s actions in the fields of smut and peplum were not the only causes for Crowther’s concern; in a 1964 piece he also criticised Levine’s importing of foreign made art films. Crowther lists “Joe Levine’s” Embassy, along with Continental, United Artists, MGM and Fox, as representative of a “large intrusion by ... big money operators”<sup>60</sup> into the world of art film distribution. Embassy’s (and, indeed, Continental’s) inclusion in Crowther’s list is startlingly incongruous, given that it sits alongside three major studios. Moreover, Embassy had been distributing foreign art films since its inception in 1938, regionally at first, and then nationally with films such as *Where The Hot Wind Blows* and *Two Women*, so the implication that Embassy represented an intruder in the field is very misleading.

But there are deeper concerns at play. As noted in Chapter One, the field of art cinema is one in which respected critics such as Crowther could legitimately claim to have influence and authority, claims whose legitimacy were perhaps being eroded by the contemporary state of play. Crowther complains that companies such as Embassy are able to snap up the cream of foreign imports by “guaranteeing big promotion;” such promotion would, no doubt, compromise the influence of the critic by attracting audiences through exploitation as opposed to reviews. Moreover, the public’s appetite for foreign fare had led, in New York at least, to an unwelcome (for Crowther) influx of foreign art films:

There are many more theatres here [New York] ... than there are high-grade films to go around ... inferior films are getting into the best 'art' theatres, inflating the numerical representation but deflating the enthusiasm of customers ... discriminating patrons are getting discouraged and bored. The prestige of the medium is suffering.<sup>61</sup>

The apparent increase in demand for foreign art films in New York would seem to contradict Crowther's assessment of a dampening of enthusiasm among patrons. Moreover, the apparently indiscriminate appetite of the art house circuit in New York arguably compromises Crowther's authority as a "quality controller" in the field where his influence was strongest, with the influx of art house fare creating an unmanageable situation, which would lead to films going un-reviewed and reviews going unread, thus eroding the critic's influence.

Of the companies listed, Embassy was the most prolific and multifaceted. In 1965, Michael Mayer (son of Arthur Mayer) wrote of "that outstanding and versatile American, Joseph E. Levine, who has contributed so much to the popularisation of foreign films."<sup>62</sup> During these years Levine and Embassy were heavily involved in the importing, distribution and production of foreign cinema. In addition to the fruits of contracts and deals with Carlo Ponti, Vittorio de Sica and Marcello Mastroianni, Embassy imported many other films from Italy, including an early Spaghetti Western, *A Pistol For Ringo* (1965, Duccio Tessari).<sup>63</sup> French cinema was also well catered for. Further afield, Embassy entered into co-production deals to produce a film in South Africa – *Dingaka* (1965, Jamie Uys<sup>64</sup>) – and even the Soviet Union – *Italiani Brava Gente* (1965, Giuseppe De Santis.) To suggest that such prolificacy and diversity undermines cinema itself is disingenuous, indicating that Crowther's concern is that it

is the medium of film criticism that is in danger of being undermined, rather than the medium of film.

In contrast to Crowther's long-standing irritation at Levine, Dwight MacDonald's comments regarding Levine were confined to a single item in *Esquire*, for whom he served as film critic. In his March 1963 column he expressed his concern about Levine, a seemingly new arrival in the field of art cinema in the US. Given Levine's huckster pedigree, MacDonald engages in a general discussion of Levine's motives for wanting "to make the art scene,"<sup>65</sup> as well as addressing specific concerns regarding Levine's decision to abridge the film version of *A Long Day's Journey Into Night* (1963, Sidney Lumet); these discussions take place under the looming shadow cast by the redoubtable success of *Hercules*.

MacDonald implies that the *Hercules* films are beneath his concern, yet gives a run down of the films ("quickie spectaculars that make *Ben Hur* look like *Citizen Kane*"), and the Levine method of saturation marketing and release (a "cynical tactic"), but this is presented in order to contextualise Levine. That said, in dismissing the films he attributes geography and exhibition space as integral to their success, as the films "paid off handsomely in the hinterlands – the films were especially suitable for drive ins;"<sup>66</sup> these notions of provincialism and suitable exhibition spaces were often key factors in MacDonald's film criticism.

MacDonald jealously guarded his area of expertise, as is evidenced by his gentle ribbing of Bosley Crowther – who he accused of liking *La Notte* (1961, Michelangelo Antonioni) and *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961, Alain Resnais) in an effort to appear fashionable<sup>67</sup> – and his furious denunciation of the appointment of Andrew Sarris as a critic for *Film Quarterly*, an appointment which led to MacDonald's resignation.<sup>68</sup> MacDonald's assessment of Levine's appearance in the field of the art cinema is

delivered with characteristic concern at the potential erosion of cultural values and a questioning of motives. It is rather more than the gentle ribbing MacDonald lobbed at Crowther, but far short of the vitriolic attack reserved for the likes of Sarris. Having noted Levine's *Hercules* pedigree he suggests:

Mr. Levine aspires to more than just profits; he wants to make the art scene too. His ambitions, nourished by the millions he made out of *Hercules-Reeves*, are now flowering like some exotic plant, say the Venus Fly Trap. Among the films that his Embassy now has in hand are: *Seven Capitol Sins* (episodes directed by Godard, De Broca, Chabrol, among others); *Love at Twenty* (Truffaut and Wajda among others); *Boccaccio 70* (Fellini, Visconti, De Sica).<sup>69</sup>

MacDonald is again guarding his own area of expertise, likely soon to be compromised by Levine's "flourishing" ambitions. By caricaturing Levine as an opportunist who now desires the respectability and cultural capital associated with the highbrow, MacDonald is guilty of ascribing intentionality and so MacDonald's assumed role of cultural guardian compromises his role as critic.

Motives, however, were important to MacDonald. In his aforementioned teasing of Crowther, it is important to note that the films he uses as exemplars of Crowther's emerging trendiness were films that MacDonald himself enjoyed; in his angry attack on Andrew Sarris he also takes (a less venomous) aim at Ian Cameron's praise for Michelangelo Antonioni, commenting "those *auteur* pundits are most depressing when they praise a director one admires."<sup>70</sup> MacDonald criticises Crowther and Cameron *because* of, as opposed to in spite of, the fact he liked the work himself. In

reference to Levine, MacDonald's parenthesising of the great and the good of contemporary Euro-art cinema can be read in a similar fashion, serving as more than mere information. Coming swiftly after MacDonald's account of Levine's "cynical tactic" vis-à-vis *Hercules*, the directors' names serve to illustrate Levine's unsuitability for the "art scene," fitting into MacDonald's caricature of Levine as a dilettante.

But the tales of *Hercules* and accusations of harbouring lofty ambitions serve as background illustration, the summation of a persona and contextualisation for MacDonald's principal gripe, that being Levine's decision to cut an hour from the film version of *Long Day's Journey Into Night* for its distribution in the provinces.<sup>71</sup> Given its cultural pedigree, any hint of tinkering with Eugene O'Neill's masterpiece was always going to provide a flashpoint for highbrow cultural commentators.

The play was written by O'Neill in 1940 but, feeling that it was too painfully autobiographical, he kept its existence a secret until his death in 1951, with instructions that the play should not be produced for 25 years after that event; despite this the play was first produced in 1956. So, not only was the play regarded as a masterpiece, it also carried a special cultural resonance as an undiscovered treasure from a dead legend of American literature. For MacDonald, *Long Day's Journey Into Night* was "probably our greatest play," and the original three hour cut was, "not unworthy of the original, and I can think of no higher praise."<sup>72</sup> With the exception of a few caveats, his assessment of the film is unflinchingly enthusiastic. Bowdlerisation of the film is, for MacDonald, a crime, with Levine as culprit.

On reading MacDonald's assessment one could be forgiven for thinking that Levine's role on the film began and ended with the decision to cut the film and that it was he and he alone who was responsible for the abridgement. Elsewhere Levine had

been praised for the adaptation, the theatre critic John Gassner noting that the film had been “honourably and scrupulously produced by Joseph E. Levine and Embassy Pictures.”<sup>73</sup> This is perhaps an overstatement, ignoring the efforts of the producer Ely Landau and Levine’s fellow Exec-Producer, Jack J. Dreyfus Jnr., yet nowhere does MacDonald give credit to Levine, or Landau and Dreyfus, for bringing to the screen the film that he holds in such high regard; nor does he provide any analysis of the industrial conditions that may have brought about the decision to cut the film, resorting instead to an *ad hominem* style of argument.

For Mark Jancovich, MacDonald’s objection to Levine’s involvement in art cinema “is precisely that cultural legitimacy is supposed to be free of economic conditions, and Levine’s ambitions threaten to reveal that which MacDonald’s whole position seeks to deny: that the art cinema is not outside the political economy of culture.”<sup>74</sup> MacDonald, however, was not wholly naïve. He was, however, an idealist and intolerant of the industrial nature of the US cinema in particular. In his position as a critic, he was often given to denounce what he felt was the compromising effect that commerce and other external factors had on artistic standards. In the case of *Lolita* (1962, Stanley Kubrick) for example:

Major complaint: the ... charm of the novel is its celebration of the erotic, and Kubrick has deliberately eliminated this. I see the commercial reasons – to placate the Legion of Decency and to get the MPAA seal of approval which unlocks the golden doors of neighborhood box offices. But I’m interested in Kubrick the artist rather than the entrepreneur, and I’m sorry he bowdlerized.<sup>75</sup>

Though he clearly does not approve of Kubrick bowing to industrial and economic concerns, he uses these concerns to contextualise his “major complaint.” He affords no such courtesy to Levine. MacDonald was never an auteurist, yet in giving Kubrick the benefit of the doubt through contextualisation he conforms to standard notions of artistic hierarchies in the film world: director = good; producer = bad. Indeed, MacDonald even ascribes ownership of *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* to its director, “I wonder what Sidney Lumet thinks of Mr. Levine’s plan for improving *his* film.”<sup>76</sup>

Throughout his tenure as film critic for *Esquire* Macdonald remained sceptical about the American art film, often to the point of being Euro-centric. “One of the worst effects of the post-1945 upgrading of our culture,” he wrote in 1962, “is that the ‘art film’ is beginning to influence Hollywood. One gets the worst of both – the pretensions of one and the superficiality of the other.”<sup>77</sup> Moreover, in 1966 he asked of America “why can’t we make movies anymore?” He suggests that,

None of the important post-war schools or directors have been American ... When I began this column in 1960, there was still hopeful talk about the artistic liberation of Hollywood through the ‘revolution of the independents.’ But nobody talks about it anymore ... The ‘independents,’ bold enough as businessmen, are not very independent as artists; they have been too well schooled in the old Hollywood to take advantage of their economic freedom.<sup>78</sup>

*Long Day’s Journey Into Night* should have been the kind of production that would elicit a favourable political response from MacDonald and, given his concerns,



one could have expected MacDonald to use his voice to highlight the industrial and economic pressures facing independent producers, pressures that doomed such a film to apparent failure. His argument that modern producers had been “too well drilled in the old Hollywood” could well be applied to himself also, his prejudices apparently proving indelible.

Having wandered into the field of High Culture, Levine provided an opportune target for MacDonald. MacDonald’s dislike of Hollywood money men and Levine’s own mogulish posturing allows MacDonald to make an unfair comparison between Levine and Louis B. Mayer,<sup>79</sup> the former MGM boss who MacDonald had referred to elsewhere as “the great symbol of all that was vulgar, mindless, the old Hollywood.”<sup>80</sup> Moreover, MacDonald had a great fondness for quoting publicity material in his critiques;<sup>81</sup> in this instance the material takes the form of an article from the *Boston Globe*, sent to MacDonald by his son:

‘The O’Neill devotees are screaming their heads off,’ says Levine, ‘but wouldn’t it be a greater crime if this classic were not commercially successful? It’s a great picture in its entirety. It will be greater with an hour cut.’<sup>82</sup>

MacDonald responds thus:

The answer to Mr. Levine’s question – “wouldn’t it be a greater crime if this classic were not commercially successful?” – is No. I’m glad he realizes that what he proposes *is* a crime, even though a lesser one than not giving O’Neill’s masterpiece a chance to do well at provincial box

offices. It's too bad O'Neill wrote his play without benefit of Mr.

Levine's advice; he could have made a great play into a greater one.<sup>83</sup>

MacDonald's typical scrupulousness allows him to make profit from an unfortunate choice of words from Levine. Levine appears to reveal his mercenary side by expressing a desire for the film to become "*commercially* successful;" perhaps it would have been more mindful to say "widely seen and appreciated" or, failing that, to have omitted the word "commercially." But even the most consummate showman can slip up occasionally; by doing so on this occasion, Levine gives the impression of seeking monetary gain for himself, as opposed to cultural gain for a mass audience. MacDonald appears to contradict himself by admitting that an abridged *Long Day's Journey Into Night* is better than none at all but, thanks to Levine's slip, his motives appear purer.

MacDonald is also able to follow his instinct for sarcastic indulgences thanks to Levine's claim that the film will be "greater" with an hour excised. Although when recounting Levine's *Hercules* tactics, he notes that Levine made his money because he "recognized that *selling* the product is the point,"<sup>84</sup> he refuses to recognise that that is precisely what Levine is doing here. Levine's claim is certainly hyperbolic, maybe unconvincing and probably dishonest but it is salesmanship. It is not in the showman's nature to promote a product by apologising for its shortcomings.

It seems that MacDonald has, in an odd way, been rather seduced by Levine's prominence, stardom and rhetoric. There are numerous examples in MacDonald's work of his tactic of incorporating the blusterous salesmanship and hyperbolic publicity material of those he was attacking into his own critical work to great effect.<sup>85</sup> In the case of Levine, however, his penchant for this tactic reveals little about

anything beyond his own prejudices and polemical style. He gently lampoons Levine but he does so at the expense of any serious considerations regarding independent filmmaking and art film exhibition in the US, areas of interest that he had a good deal of emotional investment in.

In 'Masscult and Midcult,' MacDonald referred to "a recent discovery," that demonstrated:

[T]here is not One Big Audience but rather a number of smaller, more specialized audiences that may still be commercially profitable ... The mass audience is divisible, we have discovered – and the more divided it is, the better.<sup>86</sup>

Despite his antipathy toward the effects of commerce on the art world, MacDonald here nonetheless expresses a hope that cultural distinctions can be fortified by a market economy. For Levine, however, such an assertion would not be mere wishful thinking but just plain wrong:

You take an art picture. It opens in big cities. It may do great. But it doesn't get bookings anywhere else in the United States. The exhibitors will not get behind a foreign film. They have not learned to accept them. The United States and England are the only countries in which foreign films are classified as art films.

You cannot stay in business by making O'Neill pictures. I will never get my money out of *Long Day's Journey Into Night*.<sup>87</sup>

Not only does Levine express the view that the audience for art films is not sustainable, he also lays much of the blame for the situation with those who insist on making cultural distinctions, calling into question many of MacDonald's principal concerns, whilst also implying that his area of expertise is fallacious.

In 'Masscult and Midcult' MacDonald protested, "For some reason, objections to giving-the-public-what-it-wants line are often attacked as undemocratic and snobbish. Yet it is precisely because I do believe in the potentialities of ordinary people that I criticize Masscult."<sup>88</sup> Such concerns are evident in his piece on Levine:

I am ... bewildered by Mr. Levine's decision to butcher O'Neill's masterpiece ... How will the provinces smarten up about Culture, as Mr. Levine has, if they are fobbed off with a truncated road-show version? Is he kicking down the ladder by which he rose?<sup>89</sup>

MacDonald here, albeit in a snotty way, is expressing concern that people in the provinces will not be afforded a chance to see the film which he holds in such high regard, and this he attributes to the actions of Levine. However, his claim to be "bewildered" by the decision is unconvincing, if not disingenuous. By laying blame for the abridgment of *Long Day's Journey Into Night* entirely at the feet of Levine, and by refusing to acknowledge industrial and economic pressures, MacDonald manages to exonerate himself. Even comparatively low budget films need a wide audience in order that such films continue to be made; MacDonald's solution of a divided audience will not do.

Cultural distinctions, while useful for the critic and theorist, create psychological barriers in practice – if not for the general audience then certainly for

many in the industry, notably provincial exhibitors who may not be able to stay in business catering to high-minded ideals, be they real or imagined. Moreover, to question if Levine is “kicking down the ladder by which he rose,” is rather silly – what businessman would wish to deprive a mass audience of the very culture he is selling? By contrast, MacDonald’s, and indeed Crowther’s, insistence on engaging and re-engaging in cultural cartography may indeed have had the effect of starving High Culture of the very sustenance it needs to survive.

As I noted in Chapter One Levine, like the moguls, was defined partly by his enemies. His ongoing war with “eggheads” was integral to his public image so it is doubtful that criticisms from Crowther and MacDonald would have done anything to compromise this image. Indeed, such criticisms may have bolstered his image, adding legitimacy to his own stance. Levine’s inflammatory comments regarding critics and “eggheads” would have seemed like mere mogulish posturing, had he not been attacked in return, but the fact that he had the distinction of being singled out for criticism as a bad influence would have served to fortify his rebel persona.

If a successful construction of a public image is to be measured by the amount of printers’ ink spilt over a personality then Levine’s endeavours in public image formation must certainly be considered a success. For Richard Dyer, commentaries and criticism of stars “contribute to the shaping of public opinion” adding the caveat “the relationship of what the media calls ‘public opinion’ to the opinion of the public must always remain problematic.”<sup>90</sup> Indeed, it is difficult, if not impossible, to know what the public opinion was of Levine in the 1960s.

There are, however, some hints. Paul O’Neil’s profile in *Life* generated two responses. One reader sarcastically praised *Life* for “exposing this sort of thing,” adding “I for one will be sure to stay away from the advertised colossals and keep my

children away from them too.<sup>91</sup> Another reader noted that he could “gaze upon [Levine] and admire this living monument to poor taste and gullibility.”<sup>92</sup> Notably, both these letters come in response to an article that emphasised Levine’s “sweeping versatility,” thereby providing evidence that Levine’s image as a huckster of schlock was difficult to overcome.

As for praise, the nearest thing I can find to a fan letter from this time is from 1965, and appeared in the personals column of *Variety*, entitled, ‘Open Letter To Joseph E. Levine:’ “I want to work for YOU ... the most dynamic man in the movie industry today. I am an ambitious, aggressive, creative, imaginative, resourceful, capable young man. Can we get together?”<sup>93</sup> An interesting, if hopeful, curio, demonstrating that Levine, if nothing else, appeared to be accessible.

Levine, as already noted, was a tireless courter of the press and his public image was fuelled by his own persona and his ubiquity fuelled by his own recognition of the value of publicity – and, perhaps, his ego. It is, however, difficult to ascertain the effect his ubiquity and public image would have had on box office receipts. Would a fan of *Hercules*, for example, have gone to see *Where The Hot Wind Blows* on the strength of both films being promoted by the same man? Indeed, though Levine’s public image had been consolidated by the mid 1960s, that image does not add any internal logic to his multifarious output.

That said, in addition to playing up his role of huckster in interviews, talking up past triumphs and future conquests, he would always be sure to inform the interviewer and reader of what projects were in the pipeline, accompanied with excitement, fulsome praise or a jolly one-liner. Of his production of *Zulu* (1964, Cy Enfield), Levine told Paul O’Neil:

I think we've got ourselves a post office picture here. With some pictures you have to worry about the weather ... but with a post office picture, if you get the advertising right, neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom at night will keep the customers from tearing the box office right off the front of the building. Saturation!<sup>94</sup>

Joe Wanamaker, a New York department store owner in the early part of the twentieth century, is reported to have once said, "Half the money I spend on advertising is wasted. The trouble is I don't know which half!"<sup>95</sup> Levine adopted much the same approach with both advertising and publicity, seeking out press attention in order that his wares be known to the public; thereby going some way to circumventing his own negative press and allowing him to exercise his own abilities as a showman. Levine's interviews are filled with streetwise hyperbolic statements, one-liners, put downs and bon-mots, many replicated in this thesis. He gave good copy to journalists, many of whom were clearly charmed and entertained by him, he was a huckster who enjoyed being a huckster, an art in itself, and his dealings with the press allowed him to exercise this "peculiar talent."

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<sup>1</sup> Antoine Hennion, 'An Intermediary Between Production and Consumption: The Producer of Popular Music,' *Science, Technology and Human Values*, Vol. 14, No. 4, Autumn 1989, p. 403.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Harold Becker, *Art Worlds* (Los Angeles: University of California Press 1984), p. 93-131.

<sup>3</sup> Robert E. Kapsis, *Hitchcock: The Making of a Reputation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press 1992), p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> Katherine Hamill, 'The Super Colossal – Well, Pretty Good – World of Joe Levine,' *Fortune* March 1964, p. 180.

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Klinger, 'Digressions at the Cinema: Reception and Mass Culture,' *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 28, No. 4, (Summer 1989), p. 3-19.

<sup>6</sup> Martin Barker, 'News, Reviews, Interviews, and other Ancillary Materials – A Critique and Research Proposal,' *Scope: An Online Journal of Film Studies*, February 2004, <http://www.scope.nottingham.ac.uk/article.php?issue=feb2004&id=246&section=article> (accessed 5<sup>th</sup> March 2008)

<sup>7</sup> Barbara Klinger, 'Digressions at the Cinema: Reception and Mass Culture,' p. 13.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Barker, 'News, Reviews, Interviews, and Other Ancillary Materials – A Critique and Research Proposal.'

<sup>9</sup> Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: British Film Institute 1998 (First published 1979)), p. 42.

- <sup>10</sup> Mort Drucker (artist) and Larry Siegal (writer), 'Mad Visits Joe LeVenal: Hollywood's Latest Producing Genius,' *Mad*, October 1961, No. 66, no page numbers.
- <sup>11</sup> Gay Talese, 'Joe Levine Unchained: A Candid Portrait of a Spectacular Showman,' *Esquire*, January 1961,' p. 64-8.
- <sup>12</sup> Paul O'Neil, 'The Super Salesman of Super Colossals,' *Life* 27<sup>th</sup> July 1962, p. 76-82.
- <sup>13</sup> Katherine Hamill, 'The Super Colossal – Well, Pretty Good – World of Joe Levine,' *Fortune* March 1964, p. 130-132 and 178-180 and 185.
- <sup>14</sup> Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (London: Routledge 1989), p. 60.
- <sup>15</sup> Howard Dietz, 'Case For The Malignant Salesmen Or, a Few Arguments To Illustrate That Picture Purveyors And Promoters Are Attuned To The Public's Film Tastes,' *New York Times*, 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1951, p. 125.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>17</sup> 'The Power of Cash,' *Saturday Evening Post* 30<sup>th</sup> December 1967 (Emphasis in original).
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>19</sup> 'A Simple Guy,' *Newsweek*, 22<sup>nd</sup> February 1960
- <sup>20</sup> Steven M. L. Aronson, *Hype* (New York: William Morrow and Company 1983) p. 197. NB. I have no figures for *Jack The Ripper*; it certainly did not do well but, given Levine's fondness for hyperbole, it is possible that he could be exaggerating the extent of its failure.
- <sup>21</sup> 'The Power of Cash,' *Saturday Evening Post* 30<sup>th</sup> December 1967.
- <sup>22</sup> J. G. Ballard, *Kingdom Come*, (London: Harper Perennial 2006) p. 3.
- <sup>23</sup> Richard Nason, 'Hercules Starts Flood Movies,' *New York Times*, 24<sup>th</sup> October 1959, p. 13
- <sup>24</sup> Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 2002), p. 137
- <sup>25</sup> Robert Alden, 'Advertising: Hard Sell For Motion Pictures,' *New York Times*, 29<sup>th</sup> May 1960, p. F10.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>27</sup> Barbara Klinger, 'Digressions at the Cinema: Reception and Mass Culture,' *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 28, No. 4. (Summer 1989), p. 15.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>29</sup> David Nathan, 'The Man Who Sold Hercules,' *Daily Herald*, 7<sup>th</sup> December 1960.
- <sup>30</sup> Robert Alden, 'Advertising: Hard Sell For Motion Pictures,' *New York Times*, 29<sup>th</sup> May 1960, p. F10.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>32</sup> *Mad Magazine*, October 1961, No. 66, front cover.
- <sup>33</sup> Mort Drucker (artist) and Larry Siegal (writer), 'Mad Visits Joe LeVenal: Hollywood's Latest Producing Genius,' *Mad*, October 1961, No. 66, (Emphasis in original.)
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* (Emphasis in original.)
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>36</sup> I can't be sure how Levine would have responded to his cartoon doppelganger but the 'Joe LeVenal' strip wouldn't have done his public image any harm. Also, I first came across this particular issue of *Mad* whilst rifling through Levine's personal papers, so there is a good chance that he, or a member of his family, kept the copy.
- <sup>37</sup> Tom Wolfe, Introduction to *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*. In Weber, Ronald (ed.) *The Reporter as Artist* (Hastings House: New York, 1974), p. 32-33
- <sup>38</sup> Marc Weingarten, *The Gang That Wouldn't Write Straight: Wolfe, Thompson, Didion, and the New Journalism Revolution* (Westminster, MD: Crown Publishing Group Inc. 2005), p. 62
- <sup>39</sup> Gay Talese, 'Joe Levine Unchained: A Candid Portrait of a Spectacular Showman,' *Esquire*, January 1961,' p. 65.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.
- <sup>44</sup> Katherine Hamill, 'The Super Colossal – Well, Pretty Good – World of Joe Levine,' *Fortune* March 1964, p. 180.
- <sup>45</sup> Paul O'Neil, 'The Super Salesman of Super Colossals,' *Life* 27<sup>th</sup> July 1962, p. 76-82.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.
- <sup>48</sup> Richard Dyer, *Stars*, p. 42-3.
- <sup>49</sup> Barry King quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 42.



- <sup>50</sup> John Ralston Saul, *Voltaire's Bastards: The Dictatorship of Reason in the West* (Maryborough, Vic.: Penguin 1992), p. 559-60.
- <sup>51</sup> Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (1988, Harvard University Press: Cambridge), p. 86.
- <sup>52</sup> Bosley Crowther, 'Screen: Horror Import. *Godzilla*, a Japanese Film, Is at State,' *The New York Times*, 28<sup>th</sup> April 1956, p. 11.
- <sup>53</sup> Bosley Crowther, 'Putting Movies Across,' *The New York Times*, 12<sup>th</sup> April 1959, p. X1
- <sup>54</sup> Bosley Crowther, 'Spears and Sandals. Flood of Cheap Costume Films Causes Dismay,' *New York Times*, 12<sup>th</sup> March 1961, p. X1.
- <sup>55</sup> Bosley Crowther, 'Screen: Fellini's Contemplation of a Director's Life; 8½ Is Showing at Festival Theatre; Japanese Film opens at New Yorker,' *New York Times*, 26<sup>th</sup> June 1963, p. 36.
- <sup>56</sup> Bosley Crowther, 'Screen: Sophia Loren in Old Form; She Is Impressive in de Sica's *Two Women*,' *New York Times*, 9<sup>th</sup> May 1961, p. 43.
- <sup>57</sup> Bosley Crowther, 'Bad Taste in Films,' *The New York Times*, 6<sup>th</sup> September 1964, p. X1.
- <sup>58</sup> Bosley Crowther, 'Screen: *Darling* is Selfish, Fickle and Ambitious,' *New York Times*, 4<sup>th</sup> August 1965, p. 20.
- <sup>59</sup> Bosley Crowther, 'Moral Brinkmanship. Legion of Decency Makes a Point But Doesn't Support It Well,' *New York Times*, 13<sup>th</sup> December 1964, p. X3.
- <sup>60</sup> Bosley Crowther, 'A Quizzical Paradox. Is It Really Boom or Is It Bust in the Field of Foreign Films?' *New York Times*, 7<sup>th</sup> June 1964, p. X1.
- <sup>61</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>62</sup> Michael Mayer, *Foreign Films on American Screens* (New York: Arco Publishing Company Inc. 1965) p. 25
- <sup>63</sup> UA did not release *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964, Sergio Leone) until 1967 due to the fact that they wanted to release the *Dollars* trilogy at four-month increments over that year.
- <sup>64</sup> Uys would later receive international recognition for his documentary, *Beautiful People* (1974) and his feature *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (1980)
- <sup>65</sup> Dwight MacDonald, 'Mr Goldwyn and Mr Levine,' in *On Movies*, (New York: De Capo Press 1981), p. 131.
- <sup>66</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>67</sup> Dwight MacDonald, Preface, *Against The American Grain* (New York: Da Capo Press 1983), p. xi. For more gentle ribbing of Crowther see 'Antonioni: A Position Paper,' in *On Movies*, p. 34-36.
- <sup>68</sup> Dwight MacDonald, 'Films of the Quarter,' *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 17, No. 1, Autumn 1963, p. 55.
- <sup>69</sup> Dwight MacDonald, *On Movies*, p. 131.
- <sup>70</sup> Dwight MacDonald, 'Films of the Quarter,' *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 17, No. 1, Autumn 1963, p. 55.
- <sup>71</sup> In the end, only forty minutes were cut.
- <sup>72</sup> Dwight MacDonald, 'Films of the Quarter,' *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 16. No. 1, Autumn 1962, p. 62.
- <sup>73</sup> John Gassner, 'Broadway In Review,' *Educational Theatre Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 4, December 1962, p. 334.
- <sup>74</sup> Mark Jancovich, 'Dwight MacDonald and the Historical Epic,' In Tasker, Yvonne, (ed.) *Action and Adventure Cinema* (London: Routledge 2004), p. 89
- <sup>75</sup> Dwight MacDonald, Films of the Quarter, *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 16. No. 1, Autumn 1962, p. 62
- <sup>76</sup> Dwight MacDonald, 'Mr. Goldwyn and Mr. Levine,' *On Movies*, p. 131 (emphasis added).
- <sup>77</sup> Dwight MacDonald, *On Movies*, (1981, De Capo Press: New York), p. 322.
- <sup>78</sup> Dwight MacDonald, 'The American Stasis,' in *On Movies*, p. 38.
- <sup>79</sup> Dwight MacDonald, 'Mr. Goldwyn and Mr. Levine,' *On Movies*, p. 131
- <sup>80</sup> Dwight MacDonald, 'No Art and No Box Office,' *Esquire*, March 1959, p. 66.
- <sup>81</sup> See, for example, MacDonald's review of 8½ as referred to in Chapter 1.
- <sup>82</sup> Dwight MacDonald, 'Mr. Goldwyn and Mr. Levine,' *On Movies*, p. 130
- <sup>83</sup> Ibid, p. 130-1 (emphasis in original)
- <sup>84</sup> Ibid, p. 131
- <sup>85</sup> For an excellent example see 'The Book of the Millennium Club + Appendix,' in Dwight MacDonald, *Against The American Grain* (New York: Da Capo Press 1983), p. 243-261
- <sup>86</sup> Dwight MacDonald, 'Masscult and Midcult' in *Against The American Grain*, p 73-4
- <sup>87</sup> Murray Schumach, 'Joseph E. Levine Says Making Of Art Films For US Is Risky,' *New York Times*, 6<sup>th</sup> December 1963, p. 39.
- <sup>88</sup> Dwight MacDonald, Masscult and Midcult in *Against The American Grain*, p 11
- <sup>89</sup> Dwight MacDonald, Mr. Goldwyn and Mr. Levine, *On Movies*, p. 132
- <sup>90</sup> Richard Dyer, *Stars*, p. 63.

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<sup>91</sup> Mrs N. I Klien, *Life*, Letters, 17<sup>th</sup> August 1962.

<sup>92</sup> Skirmante Makaitis, *Life*, Letters, 17<sup>th</sup> August 1962.

<sup>93</sup> 'Open Letter To Joseph E. Levine,' *Variety*, Personals, 7<sup>th</sup> April 1965. (Emphasis and ellipses in original.)

<sup>94</sup> Paul O'Neil, 'The Super Salesman of Super Colossals,' *Life* 27<sup>th</sup> July 1962, p. 82.

<sup>95</sup> <http://www.tmpsxm.com/content/view/60/54/>.

## Chapter Five

### Untangling Stereotypes: Anti-Semitism, Mogul Myths and *Showman*

#### Introduction

In 1962 the Maysles brothers made *Showman*, a startlingly intimate portrait of Levine. Filmed over a period of two weeks, documentary film makers Albert and David Maysles followed Levine from Cannes to the Oscars, from Boston to Italy, meeting Sophia Loren and Kim Novak along the way, in order to make what was to be their first feature-length documentary. The film captures Levine as he goes about his daily business of selling movies and provides a compelling insight into not only Levine, but also Levine's operation and the business of film distribution. Levine, however, was not happy with the finished film:

Those Maysles Brothers, those guys put one over on me ... It's been haunting me for years. I've tried to buy the negative from them ... they can't show it for money but they've shown it to every sonofabitch in the world. I don't know what they get out of this film.<sup>1</sup>

Levine said that he expected the finished film to be suitable for promotional purposes and was therefore angry that the film included some material which was less than flattering. Of particular concern was an "interview" with someone he had fired – a Mort Nathanson.<sup>2</sup> Certainly, Levine's guard was down. According to David Maysles, whilst the film was being made, "Levine thought we were just a couple of nuts from Greenwich Village." Having seen the film, however, his guard was back up.

“When the film was finished,” continues David, “[Levine’s] lawyers delayed its release for six months and even now [1964] it can’t be shown in a cinema.”<sup>3</sup>

Albert Maysles claims that Levine had “mixed feelings” about the film but ultimately the film “got their [Levine and his wife] approval.”<sup>4</sup> Clearly, there is a contradiction here between a film gaining Levine’s approval and him taking legal steps to suppress it yet such seemingly opposing views are not entirely inconsistent. As discussed in the previous chapter, Levine had a carefully constructed public image, and one that welcomed, even relished, criticism; but revelling in critical disapproval and seeming to be unwittingly complicit in a reproval are two quite different matters. Indeed, for two unknowns to be seen to “put one over” on a self-proclaimed hustler would have undoubtedly compromised Levine’s public image. There were, however, much deeper concerns for Levine.

As I wrote in the Introduction, Levine grew up in a very poor neighbourhood in Boston at a time when anti-Semitism was rife. For Albert Maysles, the scars left by prejudice were at the core of Levine’s ambivalent feelings toward the film:

When people in Hollywood saw the film, they thought [Levine] was such a stereotypical Jew that they thought the film was anti-Semitic. He had heard this from so many people that it really left an impression. But he really didn’t know if he should have done the film ... I think he felt like he was a businessman, a fat little Jew ... The anti-Semitism really got into him. He could never make his mind up about the film we did on him.<sup>5</sup>

The first section of this chapter examines *Showman* in the context of the various charges of anti-Semitism levelled against it. For me, the charges are unfounded, and it should be noted that the Maysles brothers were themselves Jewish. This section addresses what ingrained myths and stereotypes contributed to such a negative reaction at the time of its initial showing. I will also discuss Levine's own role in subverting anti-Semitic stereotypes as evidenced by Embassy's funding of *The Producers* (1968, Mel Brooks.)

The second section deals with *Showman* as it relates to the stereotype of the Movie Mogul. For Steven Alan Carr, this particular stereotype evolved from anti-Semitic stereotypes, emerging from popular culture of the depression era. He notes that the figure was even present in children's literature, and that fictional accounts and first hand reports gave greater credence to what he calls "a remarkably cohesive body of observation."<sup>6</sup>

This section addresses the work of Jonathan B. Vogels, who has written the most comprehensive scholarly analysis of the film. *Showman* is rarely seen; as a result, little has been written about it, and the mogul stereotype informs much of the writing. Like *Le Mepris*, discussed in the next chapter, praise for *Showman* is often pervaded by disparagement of its subject. This, I argue, represents a misunderstanding of both the film and Levine, and demonstrates the limitations of taking a purely text-based and uncontextualised approach to film scholarship.

It is certainly a possibility that Levine, aware of entrenched images and stereotypes, instinctively recognised that whilst his screen portrayal may not be wholly negative, it would provide ammunition for a negative viewpoint. Given much of the writing about the film, he would have been right.

## **Anti-Semitism and *Showman***

The initial idea for *Showman* arose from a project being undertaken by television and film producer David Wolper. Wolper was making a series for television which was to feature portraits of American leaders; a friend of David Maysles suggested making a film about Levine. According to Albert Maysles, upon hearing the idea Wolper was dismissive, saying, “We already have too many films of Jews.” This response made the Maysles more determined – “out of spite” – to make the film.<sup>7</sup>

Albert Maysles has further claimed that, upon its completion, the Maysles screened *Showman* for Levine and his wife, the latter reportedly commenting, “Thank God he doesn’t have a Jewish voice.” Later, when the film was submitted to the Academy for consideration for an award the screening was halted after five minutes, at the unanimous request of the judges, for being anti-Semitic. Later still, following a private screening Otto Preminger declared, “Hitler couldn’t have made anything more anti-Semitic.”<sup>8</sup>

Joe Levine was unmistakably Jewish. One can imagine that the image of Levine, as he is depicted in *Showman* – a loudmouth, boisterous, bossy Jew – could have been quite a shock in 1963; such images were rare. Steven Alan Carr has written on the phenomenon of “ethnic absence” in Hollywood films, noting:

By the late 1930s, the overt representations of the Jew in mainstream American film had all but evaporated ... In the burgeoning global marketplace, the specificity of the Jewish stereotype dissolved into the selling of abstract American ideas. In this assimilationist fantasy, ethnic differences mattered little.<sup>9</sup>

In Carr's analysis, the key word is "overt." Carr recognises that there had been many films that depicted Jews during this period (he cites *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1959, George Stevens) and *The Ten Commandments* (1956, Cecil B. De Mille) as examples) yet argues that such films "emphasise how prejudice and intolerance – rather than Jewishness – remain outside the core American experience."<sup>10</sup> Carr's analysis is persuasive; certainly, through the 1950s there was some continuation of the pre-War cinematic tradition of Jewish vaudevillians, for example the Marx Brothers. For the most part, however, depictions of Jews were synonymous with victimhood, something that continued through the 1960s with films such as *The Pawnbroker* (1964, Sidney Lumet).

Carr's findings chime with those of Donald Bogle, whose research regarding the depiction of black people in US cinema of the same period finds a similar pattern; Bogle notes post-War "Negro characters were used for social statements, and they often paid homage to the democratic way of life."<sup>11</sup> In post-war US cinema, then, identifiable ethnic traits – imaginary or otherwise – were filed down in order to present the viewer with a view of assimilation, harmony and homogeneity.

*Showman* seems to resurrect some difficult ideas associated with Jewishness. To the modern viewer, the charges of anti-Semitism levelled at *Showman* may appear unfounded. In 1963, however, less than twenty years after the full extent of the holocaust was realised, coupled with Carr's assertion of "ethnic absence," the opening scenes of *Showman* could understandably have been seen as a giant step back to the kind of paranoid anti-Semitism that was rife in the early Twentieth Century, the type of racism exemplified by the publications of Henry Ford and black propaganda such as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.<sup>12</sup>

*Showman* opens with a shot of Sophia Loren in Cannes, smiling for the paparazzi as they flutter about her, snapping photographs. Then we cut to Levine walking toward a table of colleagues and associates; he sits and begins negotiating immediately. Levine and his colleagues are set apart from the hubbub surrounding Loren, and positioning Levine behind the scenes gives him and the others a conspiratorial, puppetmaster quality, a shadowy hive-mind controlling the more visible culture, as represented by Loren. The Jewish control of culture and information resurrects a myth found in *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, regarding media control:

[The Jews] will have a hundred hands, and every one of them will have a finger on any one of the public opinions as required. When a pulse quickens these hands will lead opinion in the direction of our aims, for an excited patient loses all power of judgement and easily yields to suggestion.<sup>13</sup>

*The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* was originally issued to warn gentiles of the Jewish ambition to set up a totalitarian state. As if to illustrate the adaptability of anti-Semitism, in Henry Ford's later publication, *The Dearborn Independent*, it is Semitic statelessness or rootlessness that is of primary concern. "Scattered abroad without country or government he [the Jew] yet presents a unity of race continuity which no other people has achieved."<sup>14</sup> In *Showman*, the "wandering Jew" stereotype can be discerned from Norman Rosten's voiceover:<sup>15</sup>



It starts here, in hotel lobbies. Hollywood, New York, Paris, Cannes, Rome ... wherever the deals are made and movie stars gather. These men are here for one purpose. Showmen, promoters, gamblers ... their aim is to get you to the box office.

The men in the opening scene are presented as rootless itinerants yet the ease with which they communicate suggests a sense of belonging, if not to place then to profession. They are, of course, “showmen,” recalling Ford’s warning that the Jews “are supreme in the theatrical world.”<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, they are businessmen who are skilled, as per the cliché, in the art of commerce. According to Albert Maysles, this was a cliché that Levine was particularly sensitive to.

For Ford, “More than any other race [the Jew] exhibits a decided aversion to industrial employment, which he balances by an equally decided adaptability for trade.”<sup>17</sup> Money is a key obsession of the Maysles’s film. The film is littered with the fetishistic twitterings of Levine and his underlings regarding figures, sales and deals; the first audible words we hear from Levine in the film are “Fifty thousand dollars,” followed by a handshake from a colleague. Moreover, Levine is introduced as a “film distributor” who “hunts out films all over the world.” He is, therefore, removed from the industrial process – gathering rags but not making them; living off the labour of others, as per the cliché.

Whether or not *Showman* was anti-Semitic in intent, the phenomenon of “ethnic absence,” coupled with Levine’s unmistakable Jewishness, would have made certain images and ideas in the film all the more powerful, even shocking, for those, such as Levine, with a particular sensitivity to the screen portrayal of Jews. Levine seems to fit into so many of the clichés, stereotypes and caricatures that pervade anti-Semitic

literature that it is no surprise that there were those who interpreted the film to be a racially motivated attack or, at least, clumsy and insensitive.

Given Levine's sensitivity regarding his Semitism, it should be noted that Levine was in large part responsibly for bringing to a close the period of Jewish ethnic absence in the US cinema. Just as Donald Bogle has noted that *Sweet Sweetback's Badaasssss Song* (1971, Melvin Van Peebles), was eagerly received by audiences who felt that it represented a re-appropriation on images of blackness,<sup>18</sup> so a similar claim can be made for *The Producers*.

Levine agreed to bankroll *The Producers*, along with producer Sidney Glazier, after Brooks and Glazier had struggled to find funding for the project. It tells the story of two unmistakably Jewish theatre producers, Max Bialystock (Zero Mostel) and Leo Bloom (Gene Wilder), who attempt to make a fortune by producing a Broadway flop in the form of an ultra-tasteless musical, *Springtime For Hitler*. The film opened to poor reviews and bad box office, before finding an audience and winning Mel Brooks an Oscar for Best Screenplay. Some reports suggest that Levine harboured doubts about the film,<sup>19</sup> perhaps understandably so, given its irreverent depiction of Nazism. Mel Brooks, however, recalls an apologetic Levine, a "wonderful producer," regretfully asking Brooks to come up with a title other than the original *Springtime For Hitler*, due to pressure from exhibitors: "It's not me," he told Brooks, "I would never censor you."<sup>20</sup> Levine expressed pride in the film throughout his career and also regret for having had the title changed.<sup>21</sup> Whatever doubt he may have harboured initially, *The Producers* saw the character of the Jewish huckster-impresario, as perfected by Groucho Marx in the 1930s, returned to the mainstream screen.

As stated earlier, to the modern viewer, accusations of anti-Semitism in *Showman* may appear to be unfounded, perhaps due to the images not being as

shocking today due to the popularity of films such as *The Producers*, a film that undermines the stereotype in order to reconstruct an archetype. Indeed, even in 1963 it is certainly likely that non-Jews and younger Jews may have failed to recognise the kind of stereotypical portrayal that their ancestors had battled with. Stereotypes and cultural obsessions, however, have a habit of evolving.

### **The Mogul Stereotype**

The stereotype of the mogul is well known and deeply ingrained. When *Showman* was shown in Seattle in 1999, the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* described the film as a “profile of cigar-chomping super-producer Joseph E. Levine.”<sup>22</sup> The big cigar is, of course, never far from the mouth of the mogul stereotype. During the course of *Showman*, however, Levine does not smoke a cigar; in fact he never smoked them. Such an assessment of Levine, running contrary to the facts, gives evidence of just how deeply ingrained the mogul stereotype is. For Carr, resentments that grew to form the mogul stereotype find their roots in the early days of cinema, when moving pictures were still a novelty:

The Protestant elite ... created barriers ... keeping immigrants at the margins of culture and employment.

Impositions of such barriers, however, presumed a static culture. Jews ... found easy access to marginal culture, and the cultural margins were quickly migrating toward the centre of popularity.<sup>23</sup>

As detailed in the previous chapter, Levine was often perceived as a purveyor of marginal culture. Bosley Crowther contextualised Levine as a “former drive-in manager,”<sup>24</sup> a letter to *Life* praised the magazine for “exposing” Levine and his tactics;<sup>25</sup> and Dwight MacDonald questioned his suitability for working in “art scene” with regard to his “untutored” pedigree.<sup>26</sup> The notion of Levine’s unsuitability for the world of culture, along with an apparent conviction that the mechanics of the entertainment world require exposing, are central to Jonathan B. Vogels’s analysis of *Showman*.

For Vogels, Levine represents the stereotypical movie mogul and he finds much evidence in *Showman* to support his view. “*Showman* unflinchingly reveals the business side of showbusiness,” he writes, “When Joseph E. Levine pitches movies, he is like any other salesman peddling his wares.”<sup>27</sup> Indeed, as a historical document, *Showman* is revelatory concerning the business practices of film distribution in the early 1960s; in its contemporary setting, however, the film reveals little more than Levine sought to reveal himself and, as discussed in the previous chapter, his techniques were well known, even outside the industry. Certainly, *Showman* details such practices in a more intimate manner, revealing the people and action behind Levine’s public face, yet Vogels’s use of the adverb “unflinchingly” implies that the activity depicted is somehow taboo or distasteful. Furthermore, Vogels does not explain precisely *why* Levine should treat his product differently from any other, yet the fact that he appears not to is presented as an accusation. As is often the case with Levine, cultural borders are key:

Levine might as well be selling soap or breakfast cereal ... [he] refuses to distinguish between or among the various films he has produced

(sic), even though *Hercules*, a frothy epic ... and *Two Women*, a dark contemplation of life in post-war Italy, are markedly different.<sup>28</sup>

What is starkly evident throughout the film is Levine's multifarious appetite and catholic taste. Aside from hyping *Hercules* and *Two Women*, the film shows Levine overseeing the exploitation campaign for *Boccaccio 70*, attempting to acquire the rights to *Mondo Cane* (1962, Paolo Cavara, Gualtiero Jacopetti, Franco E. Prosperi) and bragging about his "big" upcoming projects, namely *The Carpetbaggers*, and the potential fruit of a deal with the Nobel Prize winning author, Pearl Buck. What is evidenced throughout the film, then, is his versatility as a showman. His apparent "refusal" to make cultural distinctions is evidence of his wide-ranging abilities and provides compelling documentation of Levine exercising his "peculiar talent." Unless Vogel's soap analogy infers an extraordinary variety of soaps catering to varied and specific tastes, then it simply does not fit.

In making the distinction between soap, cereal, *Hercules* and *Two Women*, Vogels, like Dwight MacDonald and Bosley Crowther before him, questions Levine's suitability for working in the field of culture. He writes that *Showman* "memorably illuminates [Levine's] adamant regard for profit before artistic merit."<sup>29</sup> Notably, Levine himself made a similar criticism about the state of the movie world of the 1980s, complaining about "guys who are only interested in making money," adding, "I love making money and I'm damn good at it, but I also love making pictures."<sup>30</sup> Levine, however, does not see profit and art as being mutually exclusive, as Vogels seems to. Moreover, nowhere does Vogels allow for the possibility that Levine may be motivated by a love of cinema; as I contend throughout this thesis, a love of cinema was a deep-rooted motivation for Levine, but, due to Levine's unabashed

embrace of the business side of the show, Vogels sees fit to question Levine's credentials, suggesting a mogulish vulgarity.

Distaste for discussing and, indeed, showcasing monetary matters is a long-standing phenomenon and has a special resonance in the film industry. Writing in 1941 Leo Rosten, the Jewish author and scholar wrote:

Aristocracies have always detested the *nouveaux riches*: the war between society and the parvenus has run through history. Self-made men have never 'rated' in the rarefied circles of pomp and prestige ... Hollywood, the very quintessence of the *nouveaux riche*, is the most fertile incubator of parvenus in our time. As such, it symbolizes all that is obnoxious to the old and austere social cliques in the land ... There are no film people among the officers or directors of the Hollywood Bowl Association or the Breakfast Club.<sup>31</sup>

The modern film world conducts itself rather differently than Rosten's analysis of 1940s Hollywood or the Maysles' 1962 portrait of Levine. Certainly, the money matters of the film industry are widely reported in the popular press in the form of stars' salaries, film budgets, opening weekend takings, and studio profits. It is rare indeed, however, for the modern visible representatives of the film world to discuss such matters; stars and directors are likely to discuss their craft, their beliefs, family matters or starving children; money matters are avoided. Vogels's failure to allow for context, then, magnifies the vulgarity he perceives to be on display throughout *Showman*. Just as the historical context of *Showman*'s initial screenings led to the film being perceived as anti-Semitic, so the lack of context in Vogels's reading leads

him to believe that the film supplies a negative critique of Levine, thus revealing the limitations of text-based analysis, particularly where a historical document is concerned.

The problematic concept of “authenticity” is a key theme of Vogels’s analysis of the Maysles’s work. Speaking of The Beatles’<sup>32</sup> and Marlon Brando’s<sup>33</sup> behaviour in their respective portraits, Vogels ascribes intentionality in the form of an agenda to the Maysles and asserts:

Although the artists in these films are human products in the entertainment business, they verify their own authenticity through their implicit and explicit critiques of the celebrity process. The Maysles brothers thereby advance their own position that to be a celebrity who derides or mocks celebrity is to reclaim authenticity ... [by] proving that they see through the blatant commercialism and hucksterism.<sup>34</sup>

Both these films see the stars in question surrounded by paparazzi who fire inane questions at them and, although their respective responses may be appealing, and the stars charismatic, their behaviour is entirely in line with their respective public images. Brando remains the troublesome, enigmatic star seemingly amused by a joke that only he is privy to; The Beatles remain the anarchic, loveable mop-tops, giving flippant answers and sniggering to each other like schoolboys. Admittedly, both The Beatles and Brando go some way to highlighting the daftness of the media circus that surrounds them, but defaulting to a media image is hardly reclaiming authenticity.

The Beatles and Brando are shown engaged in selling themselves and therefore their products – an occupation which, whilst important, is not their primary

occupation. They are placed in an alien, surreal environment and the Maysles's films document their amusement and reaction. By contrast, Levine is shown in his own world, going about his business: "Levine is thoroughly engrossed in his own activities," writes Vogels, adding parenthetically, "(one might say engrossed in himself.)"<sup>35</sup> Surely, had The Beatles been filmed writing or recording music, or Brando had been filmed in the preparation of a role, the resulting films would have depicted characters of greater seriousness, perhaps not so willing to mug for the camera in order to subvert celebrity culture, perhaps less preoccupied with reclaiming "authenticity." For Vogels, with *Showman*, "[The Maysles] ... questioned the dehumanising and money-for-money's sake undercurrent of capitalism."<sup>36</sup> Once again he ascribes intentionality yet it is he who stereotypes, and therefore dehumanises, Levine, not the Maysles.

Vogels, whilst taking a dim view of Levine's supposed mercenary nature, does not characterize Levine as monstrous; he recognises that Levine is "neither a villain nor a saint."<sup>37</sup> Referring to a scene in which Levine returns to the West End of Boston to attend a dinner in his honour, Vogels is impressed by the unpretentious way in which Levine presents himself. Later, when Levine discusses his childhood, "his voice nearly cracks, and his speech becomes animated as he explains at length how much he despised his poverty stricken childhood."<sup>38</sup> Assessing these episodes, Vogels comments:

In these two sequences, Levine is humanised for the first time. These scenes propose that underneath the man's all-business exterior, there is simply a man who, like most human beings, longs for meaningful communication and human connection ... One critic [Peter Graham]



noticed that in these reminiscence scenes, Levine ‘the ruthless film mogul is reduced to human proportions.’ A better way to phrase it ... may be that this is one scene in which Levine is *elevated* to human proportions, in which his human side at last becomes clear.<sup>39</sup>

A peculiar view; for Vogels, just as celebrities are authentic when mugging and pandering to the media, so Levine is only human when recounting tales of misery. In one scene, Levine tells some colleagues a tale about stealing firewood (“as soon as I could lift anything I was stealing”) with his friend, Hilky. He describes Hilky thus: “He was a rich kid ... he had shoes, y’know?” I would argue that if *Showman* contains evidence of “de-humanising” at all it is to be found in this story of poverty and not in Levine’s functioning in a job he is clearly devoted to.

Despite Vogels’s praise of Levine’s unpretentiousness in certain scenes, his interpretation romanticises Levine somewhat. Although Vogels claims that certain scenes “elevate” Levine to human proportions, Vogels’s interpretation conjures up another classic mogul stereotype, the lonely man at the top. Such a stereotype is prevalent throughout US culture, from *Citizen Kane* (1941, Orson Welles) to *ivansxtc* (2000, Bernard Rose) and the real-life myths of Howard Hughes and Elvis Presley: those who had everything but nothing.

Perhaps the most famous fictional Jewish movie mogul of the Twentieth Century would be Munroe Stahr, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s protagonist from his unfinished novel *The Last Tycoon*, a character widely believed to have been based on Irving Thalberg. Stahr’s Jewishness is referenced throughout the novel but his character has depth and is thoughtfully drawn and so does not fully conform to the Jewish movie mogul stereotype of the time. The novel does, however, tap into a familiar theme of

American culture: Stahr is powerful and successful yet empty inside, spiritually unfulfilled and, ultimately, loveless, thus illustrating for the reader the shortcomings of the American Dream.

There are many echoes of *The Last Tycoon* to be found in Vogels's analysis of *Showman*. Fitzgerald emphasises Stahr's frustration and loneliness, "The empty floor stretched around him – the doors with no one sleeping behind;"<sup>40</sup> Vogels emphasises similar characteristics in Levine, noting a segment in which "Levine admits he is exhausted; the tireless seller appears lonely and weak." He also employs simplistic psychology to fortify the stereotype: "often, Levine is portrayed as a vulnerable man, one whose insecurities motivate him as much as his quest for profit does."<sup>41</sup> Again, motivation due to a love of movies does not seem to be a possibility.

Vogels distinguishes between the motives of the Maysles and Levine: "The Maysles ... advocated an art form that would not cater, as do most of Levine's [films] ... to a popular audience without challenging their sensibilities."<sup>42</sup> As I have stated, the variety of film projects Levine is involved with in *Showman* undermines such an assertion. Indeed, I would argue that Vogels himself is not allowing his sensibilities to be challenged by the film as he uses it to confirm prejudices and bolster ingrained stereotypes. Vogels implies that Levine's industrial ambitions cannot run in tandem with an appreciation of art, that the former ambitions must always *override* the latter. For Stephen Mamber too, Levine's ambition is palpable:

If one were to take sides, one could conclude that Levine is either a monster destroying public taste or just a very ambitious guy who has won out over other ambitious guys, but whatever one's opinion of

Levine, it could be supported by the entire film and not just selected scenes.<sup>43</sup>

Levine was certainly ambitious. The ambitions he pursued throughout his career were many and varied and the business and money that plays such a prominent role in *Showman* is some kind of measure of ambition and achievement thereof. However, like Vogels, Mamber does not allow for the possibility that Levine cared about cinema. Indeed, in Mamber's analysis, one possibility is that Levine is simply using movies for nefarious, even sinister, activity, "destroying public taste."<sup>44</sup>

While it should be noted that Mamber is offering this reading as a *possible* interpretation, not necessarily his own, it is still worth considering. Again, there are echoes of Dwight MacDonald here – "kicking down the ladder by which he rose" – and also a portrait of a mogul stereotype whose roots lie in anti-Semitism. Control of public taste plays a significant role in the Jewish Conspiracy, as can be seen in *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Also, anti-Semitism can also be detected in paranoid reactions to a perceived politicisation of cinema, from the anti-isolationist movement during World War II to the Red Scare and the HUAC hearings of the 1950s. But Jewish control of popular culture, for the ever-adaptable anti-Semite, did not always have to have a political motivation. In 1921 Ford's *The Dearborn Independent* carried a headline, "Jewish Jazz – Moron Music – Becomes Our National Music," promising the "Story of Popular Song Control in the United States," inside.<sup>45</sup> The apparent motivation for the Jewish perpetuation of this craze is not entirely political and not entirely commercial, having rather more to do with "destroying public taste."

Mamber's theory does not, of course, carry the anti-Semitic overtones of Ford's scare story but the question is the same: If Levine wishes to destroy public taste, one

must ask, “to what end?” Such an interpretation paints Levine as a malevolent, mischievous force, intent on compromising culture. But the very diversity of Levine’s interests undermine Mamber’s claim that the viewing of Levine as a taste-destroying monster could be supported by evidence found throughout *Showman*.

Unflattering views of Levine pervade what writing there is on *Showman*. As with Mamber, Gerald Peary offers an either/or interpretation: “Is Joe E. Levine a barbarian, philistine jerk? Or is he a shrewd, all-American entrepreneur? The audience decides.”<sup>46</sup> Again, a love of movies does not seem a possibility in Peary’s assessment. Neither is it a possibility for Simon Plant, who embraces cliché, describing *Showman* as “A dark portrait of power which probes Machiavellian movie producer Joseph E. Levine. In a word: unflinching.”<sup>47</sup> Indeed, not only do such views misrepresent Levine, but they also underestimate the film itself. Due to its intimacy and unobtrusiveness, *Showman* provides a far more sympathetic and complex portrait of Levine than can be discerned from most of the associated literature.

Given how entrenched the stereotype of the movie mogul is, I asked Albert Maysles if he felt that he and his brother were trying to de-mystify the caricature of the movie mogul by making *Showman*, pointing out to him that much writing on the film takes a very dim view of Levine and his antics, whereas the film itself is not unsympathetic. His reply was succinct: “People may generalise in all directions but the film was not motivated to generalise.”<sup>48</sup>

It should be noted that the Maysles did not seem to hold mainstream cinema in very high regard. David Maysles has revealed a distinct lack of enthusiasm on the part of both brothers for movies in general: “None of our influences come from the movies ... In fact we think much more as a novelist does as a personal work, as a work of art rather than a show or a piece of entertainment.”<sup>49</sup> It is also worth noting that David

Maysles had direct experience of working in Hollywood, having worked on various productions in a variety of roles, most notably as associate producer on the Marilyn Monroe vehicle, *The Prince and The Showgirl* (1957, Lawrence Olivier.) Albert Maysles was also dismissive of Levine's movie world, expressing distaste at what he saw as "too much money business ... not the reason why we make movies at all."<sup>50</sup> Like his brother, Albert Maysles makes a distinction between his own motivations and inspirations compared to those of Levine. Albert Maysles *distinguishes* between himself and Levine – he does not *condemn* Levine.

The Maysles seem fascinated by celebrity and commerce and have sought to portray Levine in his natural habitat without judgement or agenda. For me, therein lies the film's strength, for *Vogels*, its weakness:

Still experimenting with form and content, the Maysles brothers have produced a film that is uneven and more ambiguous than it might have been. Given their own concerns, they could have made their critique of celebrity-oriented culture much sharper.<sup>51</sup>

Levine's ambivalent feelings regarding the finished product are mirrored in the Maysles' own ambivalence regarding the subject matter. Such feelings are reflected in the ambiguities in the film and it is these ambiguities that make the film so compelling. To be disappointed that the Maysles chose not to attack their subject is to overlook the film's strengths. Indeed, most, if not all, of the Maysles films are defined by sympathy for their subject, and *Showman* is no exception.

As noted in the introduction to this chapter, Levine expressed fury at the Maysles for their film to Peter Dunn. It should be recognised, however, that Levine

was nothing if not given to overstatement and this was a film that aroused profoundly deep-rooted emotions in him. According to Albert Maysles, Levine “really liked us,”<sup>52</sup> and there seem to have been few hard feelings between them following the making and repression of *Showman*. Reflecting Levine’s concerns about his public perception, Albert Maysles tells that “years later [Levine] invited us to his office to view a portrait of him by Jamie Wyeth. He found his own imaginings of stereotypical anti-Semitism in the painting. We quite honestly reputed such false claims,” adding, “Interesting how he valued our opinions.”<sup>53</sup> On viewing *Showman*, it would seem that many have found their own imaginings of stereotypes to be contained in the film. In this chapter, I repute them.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Dunn, ‘The Last Movie Mogul,’ *The Sunday Times* 5<sup>th</sup> February 1978.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. NB. The “interview” Levine refers to is in fact footage of Nathanson speaking to someone on the phone about his firing.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Instant Films,’ *The Sunday Telegraph*, 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1964.

<sup>4</sup> Personal correspondence with author, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Mathew Hays, ‘Keeping It Real: Legendary Director Albert Maysles on the Truth About Documentary Filmmaking,’ <http://www.newsworld.cbc.ca/arts/film/maysles.html> (accessed 10th March 2008.)

<sup>6</sup> Steven Alan Carr, *Hollywood and Anti-Semitism: A Cultural History 1880-1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2001), p. 289.

<sup>7</sup> Personal correspondence with author, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. Notably, the tale of the Academy members halting the screening of *Showman* has found its way onto anti-Semitic websites under the heading ‘Jewish Influence on the Mass Media,’ [http://www.gnosticliberationfront.com/when\\_victims\\_rule9.htm#Jewish%20infl.%20mass%20media%203](http://www.gnosticliberationfront.com/when_victims_rule9.htm#Jewish%20infl.%20mass%20media%203) and <http://www.abc.net/islam/english/jewishp/usa/jtr-24.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> Steven Alan Carr, *Hollywood and Anti-Semitism: A Cultural History 1880-1941*, p. 283.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York; London: Continuum: 2001 (Fourth Edition)), p. 137.

<sup>12</sup> *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* was an anti-Semitic forgery that emerged in Russia in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, produced by anti-revolutionary Russians who sought to expose revolutionary activity as part of a Jewish plot for world domination. The piece was exposed as a hoax in 1921. See Philip Graves, ‘Jewish World Plot.’ An Exposure. The Source of the Protocols. Truth At Last.’ *The Times*, 16<sup>th</sup> August 1921, p. 1. <http://emperor.vwh.net/antisem/first.pdf>, accessed 1<sup>st</sup> April 2007. Nonetheless, the text remained influential. See Edward Rothstein ‘Exhibition Review: The Anti-Semitic Hoax That Refuses To Die,’ *The New York Times*, Arts section, 21<sup>st</sup> April 2006. <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/21/arts/design/21holo.html?scp=1&sq=Anti-Semitic+Text+That+Refuses+To+Die%2C+&st=nyt> (accessed 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2008).

<sup>13</sup> *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, Protocol 12. See [http://www.radioislam.org/protocols/indexen.htm#protocol\\_12](http://www.radioislam.org/protocols/indexen.htm#protocol_12) (accessed 1<sup>st</sup> April 2007).

<sup>14</sup> Henry Ford (with Ernest Liebold and J. Cameron), ‘The International Jew: The World’s Problem,’ *The Dearborn Independent* 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1920, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> It is worth noting here that Rosten’s voiceover in *Showman* is minimal and that this, their first film, was the only time that the Maysles used narration in their films.

- <sup>16</sup> Henry Ford (with Ernest Liebold and J. Cameron), 'The International Jew: The World's Problem,' *The Dearborn Independent* 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1920, p. 1
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup> Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Black in American Films*, p. 236.
- <sup>19</sup> Edward Guthmann, 'Producers Flops Its Way To Success In Real Life, Too,' *San Francisco Chronicle*, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2002, p. 42, and, Jon Bowman, 'The Projector; Takes on Film,' *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 29<sup>th</sup> April 2005, p. PA60. NB. Both these reports, and many others, suggest that it was Peter Sellers who mounted a campaign on behalf of *The Producers*, and encouraged Levine to revise his opinion of the film.
- <sup>20</sup> Mel Brooks quoted in Judith Newmark, 'Mel Brooks' Trust in his "Humour Compass" Keeps 'Em Laughing,' *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 8<sup>th</sup> December 2002, p. G1.
- <sup>21</sup> Steven M. L. Aronson, *Hype: The Names And Faces You Know So Well Will Never Look So Good Again* (New York: William Morrow and Co. 1983), p. 194. Levine says, "I hired Mel Brooks ... on *The Producers* ... I was going to call it *Springtime For Hitler*, but the Jewish groups would've hated me for that, so I called it *The Producers*. Now I'm sorry I didn't use the original title." This serves as evidence of Levine's regret for not going with the original title. However, I would suggest he is overplaying his own role, as was his wont, with regard to the titling of the film. NB. Many reports suggest that prior to taking the project to Levine, Brooks had approached Universal Studios who had suggested the title of *Springtime For Mussolini*. ("Lew Wasserman at Universal apparently suggested: 'Instead of Hitler, make it Mussolini. Mussolini's nicer.'" 'A Film About A Flop That Was A Flop. That Became A Hit; FILM CHOICE The Producers Tonight,' *Independent On Sunday*, 25<sup>th</sup> June 2006, p. 31.) This indicates just how inflammatory the material was at this time and evidences Levine's courage in taking on such a project. Given his own deep-rooted sensitivities, his initial reticence regarding the project is perfectly understandable.
- <sup>22</sup> 'Take a Cinema Verite Look at 60s America,' *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, What's Happening Section, 6<sup>th</sup> August 1999, p.29.
- <sup>23</sup> Steven Alan Carr, *Hollywood and Anti-Semitism: A Cultural History 1880-1941*, p. 4
- <sup>24</sup> Bosley Crowther, 'Spears and Sandals. Flood of Cheap Costume Films Causes Dismay,' *New York Times*, 12<sup>th</sup> March 1961, p. X1.
- <sup>25</sup> Mrs N. I Klien, *Life*, Letters, 17<sup>th</sup> August 1962.
- <sup>26</sup> Dwight MacDonald, 'Mr Goldwyn and Mr Levine,' in *On Movies*, (1981, De Capo Press: New York), p. 130-132.
- <sup>27</sup> Jonathan B. Vogels, *The Direct Cinema of the Maysles Brothers*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press 2005), p. 23.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 30.
- <sup>29</sup> Jonathan B. Vogels, *The Direct Cinema of the Maysles Brothers*, p. 30.
- <sup>30</sup> Donna Rosenthal, 'Self Made Mogul Hangs On. Joseph E. Levine, 82, Is Still Wheeling and Dealing,' *New York Daily News*, 5<sup>th</sup> July 1987. NB. Levine made these comments just a few weeks before his death on 31<sup>st</sup> July 1987.
- <sup>31</sup> Leo C. Rosten, *Hollywood: The Movie Colony, The Movie Makers* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co. 1941), p. 163-4.
- <sup>32</sup> *What's Happening! The Beatles in the USA* (1964).
- <sup>33</sup> *Meet Marlon Brando* (1966).
- <sup>34</sup> Jonathan B. Vogels, *The Direct Cinema of the Maysles Brothers*, p. 43.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid, p. 25.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid, p. 19.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid, p. 27.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid, p. 28.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>40</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Last Tycoon*, (London: Penguin Classics 2001 (First published 1941)), p. 119. NB. The novel is narrated, first person omniscient, by Cecelia Brady.
- <sup>41</sup> Jonathan B. Vogels, *The Direct Cinema of the Maysles Brothers*, p. 27
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid, p. 23.
- <sup>43</sup> Stephen Mamber, *Cinema Verite in America: Studies In Uncontrolled Documentary* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press 1974), p. 145.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>45</sup> *The Dearborn Independent*, 6<sup>th</sup> August 1921.
- <sup>46</sup> <http://www.geraldpeary.com/essays/mno/maysles.html>. (accessed 20th April 2005).

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- <sup>47</sup> Simon Plant, 'The Watcher,' *Herald-Sun*, Weekend Section, 13<sup>th</sup> September 2003, p. W03.
- <sup>48</sup> Personal correspondence between Albert Maysles and the author.
- <sup>49</sup> G. Roy Levin, *Documentary Explorations - 15 Interviews with Film-makers* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday 1971), p. 275.
- <sup>50</sup> This is from a television documentary. Unfortunately I have no more information than that.
- <sup>51</sup> Jonathan B. Vogels, *The Direct Cinema of the Maysles Brothers*, p. 30.
- <sup>52</sup> <http://www.newsworld.cbc.ca/arts/film/maysles.html> (accessed 10th March 2008.)
- <sup>53</sup> Personal correspondence between Albert Maysles and the author. 20<sup>th</sup> March 2007.



## Chapter Six

### Guilty By Association: Joe Levine, European Cinema and The Culture Clash of *Le Mepris*

#### Introduction

The leading personality in the breakthrough of foreign art films to larger audiences in the United States was not Fellini or Resnais ... but rather the French actress and sex symbol Brigitte Bardot.<sup>1</sup>

Here, Peter Lev makes problematic use of the slippery term “art.” Having defined *And God Created Woman* (1956, Roger Vadim) as an art film, he goes on to describe the film’s lead character, Juliette (Brigitte Bardot), as “a kind of female James Dean,” prompting the reader to ponder whether *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955, Nicholas Ray) would fit neatly into the art category. Furthermore, he emphasises the knock-on effect that the success of *And God Created Woman* had on the importing of other foreign and, it is implied, artier fare: “Ingmar Bergman as well as Bardot’s producers benefited.”<sup>2</sup>

If one removes the word “art” from the equation, one could easily suggest that Steve Reeves played an even more important part in facilitating the importing of foreign films; and there is a similar knock-on effect, evidenced by Levine’s subsequent move into the art market. Lev’s concern, as is the concern of this chapter, is what he defines as the “Euro-American art film” which he defines as a “synthesis of the European art film and the American entertainment film with the goal of reaching a much larger audience than the art film normally commands.”<sup>3</sup> But in order to fully

contextualise Levine's involvement in European, particularly Italian, cinema in the early 1960s, it is necessary to look beyond the traditional art film.

As Mira Liehm tells us, "Italo-American collaboration became an important part of the Italian cinematic scene in the early sixties. The thoroughly organized and prearranged Hollywood way of filmmaking merged with Italian craftsmanship, improvisation, and reliance on chance."<sup>4</sup> But the relationship was not always a cosy one, and was fraught with difficulties and resentments.

The first part of this chapter contextualises Levine and his emerging role as a powerful figure in European cinema in the 1960s. Levine was, at this time, still associated in the eyes of the press with the peplum phenomenon, despite art house successes such as *Two Women*. The section focuses mainly on two films, Levine's first art house import, *Where The Hot Wind Blows!* and his final peplum film, *The Last Days of Sodom and Gomorrah* (1962, Robert Aldrich). The former is an example of Lev's Euro-American art film and shows how Levine developed his strategy for targeting marketable yet respectable films. The latter demonstrates Levine as an emerging producer of European films and also stands as an exemplar of the growing disenchantment of the Italian film industry with American co-productions; and it is this disenchantment that forms the basis of the subject of the second section of the chapter, *Le Mepris*, which Levine produced.

Critically derided on its initial release, *Le Mepris* has since been reclaimed as a forgotten masterpiece, thanks to a 1997 re-mastering job and re-release. Much of the film's reputation, for cinephiles at least, rests on Godard's supposedly incisive critique of creeping Americanisation, though I would argue that this is the weakest aspect of the movie as it collapses under Godard's self-righteousness. As someone

once remarked of the James Joyce classic, “There’s a lot of fly food in *Ulysses* and it was put there for the flies,” so the same observation could be made of *Le Mepris*.<sup>5</sup>

Though Levine is largely forgotten now, Godardians know well who he is. The character of Prokosch, the philistine American producer played by Jack Palance, is widely believed to be a lampoon of Levine. *Le Mepris*, therefore, is an extremely important film to engage with, as Levine’s association with this film, as well as his association with the character of Prokosch, have been extremely impactful on his posthumous reputation. As noted by James Verniere, among many many others, “Palance’s producer is a stab in the back of *Contempt*’s legendary vulgarian producer Joseph E. Levine.”<sup>6</sup>

Much of the myth surrounding *Le Mepris* is based around assumptions that ascribe lurid intentionality to the “tacky American producer Joseph E. Levine,<sup>7</sup>” and Godard’s supposed outflanking of him. “American tycoon Joseph E. Levine,” ran one article in *The Observer* “wanted a sexy art-house production. Godard ... deliberately shot Bardot’s nude scenes unerotically and sent up Levine as the ignorant Hollywood mogul played by Jack Palance.”<sup>8</sup>

Again and again in writing concerning this film, a cultural gulf is implied between Godard and Levine, with Godard always associated with art and Levine associated with the unsavoury. It should also be noted that, in the film itself, Prokosch is explicitly connected to Levine when he is called to the telephone to take a call from Levine, supposedly ringing from New York.

So important is the extra-textual mythology surrounding *Le Mepris*, so deep is are its roots, that it has almost become a viewing strategy: “For those not in the know,” runs one listings article, “Palance’s performance as a loathsome producer (based not so loosely on the film’s actual producer, Joseph E. Levine) is a delight.”<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps more worryingly, the mythology surrounding *Le Mepris* has found its way into scholarship regarding the film, often without being questioned.

Gore Vidal once opined, “It is curious ... how entirely the idea of the working producer has vanished. He is no longer remembered except as the butt of familiar stories: fragile artist treated cruelly by insensitive cigar smoking producer.”<sup>10</sup> *Le Mepris* had three producers, Georges de Beauregard, Carlo Ponti and Levine, yet it is Levine who is most often the butt of the not unfamiliar stories circulating within and without *Le Mepris*. In this chapter I aim to unscramble fact from fiction and assess whether or not Godard was justified in making such an angry polemic directed at Levine, and what, if anything, Levine is guilty of.

Jacques Aumont has described *Le Mepris* as “a giant *J'accuse ...!* which portrays [producers] as dealers of death,”<sup>11</sup> and that is an accurate assessment. Given the anger in the film and the fact that Levine’s Embassy Pictures provided most of the funding, one cannot help being reminded of a (possibly apocryphal) story which sees Ford Madox Ford advising a friend on how to deal with the famously temperamental Wyndham Lewis: “If Wyndham Lewis asks you to lend him a hundred pounds,” Ford is said to have counselled, “Don’t do it. He’ll never forgive you!”

Given de Beauregard’s announcement prior to the film’s production that the film was to feature “the sharp, personalized filmmaking concepts of Godard ... wedded to important box-office values,”<sup>12</sup> an examination of the evidence seems to suggest that it was Godard who sabotaged Levine’s project, not vice-versa.

### **A Farewell To Spears and Sandals**

In 1961, MGM distributed *The Wonders of Aladdin* (Henry Levin and Mario

Bava), which Levine produced, alongside Massimo Patrizi. Upon its release Eugene Archer poured scorn on the picture and, notably, its producer:

Who would have thought, when Italian neo-realism was in full crescendo, that Vittorio de Sica, the dour director of *The Bicycle Thief*, and Aldo Fabrizi, the tragic priest of *Open City*, would one day be playing second fiddle in one of the hackneyed costume fantasies from the dubbing chambers of Joseph E. Levine? ...Signor de Sica, as a genie with invisible feet, dangles awkwardly in outer space, looking for all the world as if Mr. Levine had hung him out to dry.<sup>13</sup>

The implication here is that Levine has somehow led astray two of the more respectable figures of Italian cinema, enticing them into his “dubbing chambers.” Archer contextualises this action by emphasising the roles de Sica and Fabrizi had played in the influential and well regarded Italian cinematic school of Neo-Realism, highlighting films made thirteen and sixteen years previously. Of course, Archer is entitled to disapprove of the involvement of such influential figures in Levine’s Christmas offering, but his attempt to reify de Sica and Fabrizi into icons was, even in 1961, unconvincing. A cursory glance at the dozens of films that made up both actors’ filmographies demonstrates that neither actor limited himself exclusively to critically acceptable fare, yet it is their involvement with the ground-breaking Neo-Realist classics of the 1940s that allows Archer to fallaciously imbue them with totemic qualities. Notably, Archer’s tactic of foregrounding Levine’s disreputable nature by emphasising the others’ pedigree finds parallels with similar tactics adopted by Dwight MacDonald as discussed in Chapter Four.

Levine is similarly misrepresented. Here Levine is not only a purveyor of “hackneyed costume fantasies” he is also somebody who has hung de Sica “out to dry,” helplessly suspended following an implied fall from grace facilitated by the warden of the “dubbing chambers.” No mention is made of the most notable connection between Levine and de Sica at this time, that being that Levine’s Embassy had imported and distributed de Sica’s *Two Women*, a film that was very highly regarded on its release and one which would secure an Academy Award for its star, Sophia Loren. In the *New York Times*’s glowing review of *Two Women* Levine’s role in bringing the film to the US goes unremarked;<sup>14</sup> this is notable as its author, Bosley Crowther, was a prominent and vocal critic of Levine until his retirement from the *Times* in 1968.

Archer’s association of Levine with “hackneyed costume fantasies” is also notable as such an association ran contrary to Embassy’s stated policy at the time. In November 1961 *Variety* ran an item which informed readers that Levine was “Going Arty.” The item quoted Levine as saying “I’m going heavy on the art-type stuff. The market is saturated with spears and sandals and I’ve had it.”<sup>15</sup> This is an interesting comment from Levine due to its seeming emphasis on pragmatism. As we have seen, for Dwight MacDonald, Levine’s attempts to “make the art scene” were part of an aspirational plan to achieve cultural legitimacy; by contrast, Levine presents his move into the art market as being motivated by the exhaustion of the peplum genre – economic capital rather than cultural capital providing the inspiration.

Peter Lev has written that the “commercial setbacks” associated with the French New Wave and Italian cinema of the early 1960s led to “American companies ... supporting English-language art films and reducing their investments in French and Italian language films.” Lev goes on to note that Levine – “an opportunistic producer-

distributor” – was probably the first to make the switch, which came in around 1963 with *Le Mepris*, and films such as *The Empty Canvas* (1963, Damiano Damiani) and *The Tenth Victim* (1965, Elio Petri.)<sup>16</sup> However, the industrial conditions that saw Levine investing in a project such as *Le Mepris* were rather more complex than a sudden “switch” that occurred in the early 1960s; and Lev’s labelling of Levine as “opportunistic” is rather misleading. It is true that Levine was versatile enough to capitalise on emerging cultural and industrial mores, but one should remember that in his investments in European productions in the 1960s, Levine was capitalising on conditions he himself helped to create.

Also, Lev, once again, makes problematic use of the term “art.” Even in 1961 the use of such a term was being debated, notably by Philip K. Scheuer, in reference to the Levine import, *Where The Hot Wind Blows!* The film was made by a notable director, Jules Dassin, was based on a well-regarded novel by a notable author, *The Law* by Roger Valliand, and featured prominent European stars, Marcello Mastroianni, Yves Montand and, perhaps more importantly, the Italian Gina Lollobrigida, one of a number of European beauties that won the hearts of US audiences in the arthouses and beyond in the 1950s and 1960s. For Scheuer, this list of ingredients made the film a “perfect example” of a new breed of “hybrid film.”

"For the theatreman as well as the distributor," wrote Scheuer, "such a film may pose a vexing corollary problem: Is it 'art-house' or is it 'commercial'? Are there, indeed, any longer 'two' audiences?"<sup>17</sup> For Levine, the answer to Scheuer’s final query would have been a hopeful “no,” as he sought to imbue the film with a mass appeal to make it profitable beyond the arthouse circuit – the stated goal of Lev’s Euro-American art film. Having changed the title from the rather jejune *The Law* to something racier, Levine opened the film widely with a blockbuster campaign, with

advertising that sought to capitalize on the exploitable aspects of the film – it’s storyline, which concerned sex, power and ritual humiliation in a sweaty village in Southern Italy; and, of course, the film’s sexually appealing star, Gina Lollobrigida, one of a group of Italian actresses known collectively as *maggiorata fisica* (buxom beauties), whose physical characteristics had a noted appeal to the American market.<sup>18</sup>

Levine does note the importance of Dassin in the development of the Euro-American art film, highlighting the success of *Never On A Sunday* (1960) (released in the same month as *Where The Hot Wind Blows!*) as being a key film that encouraged American investment in European art cinema by showing that such ventures could be both “profitable and prestigious.”<sup>19</sup> Yet it is *Where The Hot Wind Blows!* that better illustrates Levine’s emergence as a figure of influence in European cinema.

In the early 1960s the prestige project with commercial potential was high on the Levine agenda. The triumvirate of the noted director, European beauty and respectable source novel that Levine had sought to capitalise on in *Where The Hot Wind Blows!* brought great success the following year with the Embassy distributed *Two Women*, which was directed by de Sica, starred Sophia Loren and was based on a novel by Alberto Moravia. These ingredients would also serve as the base for *Le Mepris*, with Jean-Luc Godard, Brigitte Bardot and Moravia’s *A Ghost at Noon* forming the triad.

Levine also sought to capitalise on the pedigree of European directors by importing multi-director, portmanteau films such as *Love at Twenty* (1962), *Seven Capital Sins* (1962) and *Boccaccio 70* (1962), the latter prompting the observation that “With *Boccaccio 70* Joseph E. Levine has found a just about perfect synthesis of art and commerce,” from the *Hollywood Reporter*.<sup>20</sup> Also at this time Levine sought to capitalise on the reputation of Ingmar Bergman by buying the rights to two of his



old movies, *The Devil's Wanton* (aka *Prison* – 1949) and *Night is my Future* (aka *Music in Darkness* – 1948), which Embassy released in 1962 and 1963 respectively, branding them “vintage Bergmans.”<sup>21</sup>

Despite his successes, however, Levine was looking to move beyond the mere importing of European films and had his eye on taking a greater role in their production, as reported by *Variety* in February 1961:

[Joe Levine is] finding difficulty in purchasing pictures outright for reasonable amounts, [and so] is concentrating on entering into various co-production deals which would provide a continuous flow of product over the next several years. Unable to uncover ready made films which he can tailor to his exploitation technique, he aims to increase the production values of his films and feels that the only way to do this is to actively participate in the making of them.<sup>22</sup>

At the time of this report Levine was producing *The Last Days of Sodom and Gomorrah*. Upon reporting the news that Levine had bought an “art film” in early 1961, *Time* magazine sought to reassure any potentially worried readers, reporting that “some of [Levine’s] admirers fear that he is going to give up the drum and take up the lute. But with *Sodom and Gomorrah* now shooting in Morocco, Joe seems in no danger.”<sup>23</sup> But this film was to be Levine’s peplum swansong and more than likely the reason he later said he had “had it with spears and sandals.”

Levine pulled out of the project during filming, yet retained an exec-producer credit, and the production was fraught with problems and resentments.<sup>24</sup> Producer Geoffrey Lombardo, assistant director Sergio Leone and Levine all fell out with

director Robert Aldrich. According to Christopher Frayling, Lombardo felt that Aldrich was “out of control”<sup>25</sup> whilst Leone felt that Aldrich “did everything he possibly could to demolish [Lombardo] financially;”<sup>26</sup> indeed, the film, along with financial failure of *The Leopard* (1963, Luchino Visconti) helped cause the collapse of Lombardo’s Titanus Films.

For Frayling:

The longer term legacy of the whole debacle was to confirm certain sections of the Italian film community in their deep cynicism about mercenary American film-makers abroad. As Lombardo put it at the time: ‘They treated us with a certain disdain, as if we were underdogs, from a lower caste. When Italian film culture started to show signs of life, they did all they could to kill it stone dead’ ... ‘Economic conditions,’ Leone remembered, ‘made it virtually impossible to shoot a film in Italy.’ The sound stages at Cinecitta, he added, were like deserts, surrounded by unemployed technicians and extras.<sup>27</sup>

It was against this backdrop of decline and acrimony that Godard would set *Le Mepris*, with much of the initial action taking place in the ghost town of Cinecitta. The foregrounding of the deserted studios allowed Godard to capitalise on existing resentments and prejudices, and point the finger of blame at the opportunistic American producer.

### **The Culture Clash of *Le Mepris***

*Le Mepris* is, on the one hand, the story of the breakdown of a marriage, the tale of Paul Javal (Michel Piccoli), a screenwriter who is unable to understand why his beautiful wife, Camille (Brigitte Bardot), has suddenly been overcome by feelings of contempt for him; on the other hand it is a deeply political film. Set against the backdrop of the Italian film industry, the film explores the themes of art versus commerce, ignorance versus culture, independence versus hegemony, Europe versus America, director versus producer. The film addresses these themes with the broadest of brushes.

*Le Mepris* is an adaptation of Alberto Moravia's 1955 novel, *A Ghost at Noon*. The novel tells the story of a screenwriter, Riccardo Moltini, who is hired to script an adaptation of Homer's *The Odyssey* for a mediocre German director, Rhinegold, and a commercially minded Italian producer named Batista. Largely an interior monologue, the sensitive Moltini is forced throughout the novel to confront not only his wife's increasingly contemptuous attitude toward him, but also his own failures as he compromises his literary ambitions for money.

In order to research *A Ghost at Noon*, Moravia spent time observing the making of *Ulysses*,<sup>28</sup> precisely the kind of Italian super-spectacular envisaged by the producer Batista in his novel.<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, Moltini remarks that the German director is "certainly not in the same class as the Pabsts and Langs."<sup>30</sup> This is notable due to the fact that not only does Fritz Lang play the director in *Le Mepris*, but also for the fact that the original script for *Ulysses* had been written by G. W. Pabst. Having sold the script to Dino De Laurentiis, Pabst was hired to direct but, according to William MacAdams, once Kirk Douglas was cast in the lead role, Paramount came on board and tussles began over the script. Pabst was fired and replaced by Mario

Camerini, whilst the script was reworked by Hugh Gray and the most Hollywood of Hollywood scribes, Ben Hecht.<sup>31</sup>

The novel, then, can be seen as a protest against the dilution of art and cinematic culture. Indeed, Moravia was consistently vocal about what he felt was the compromising of the Italian film industry by external forces, from his critique of peplum films in *A Ghost at Noon* to his criticism of the trend toward spaghetti westerns in the mid 1960s.<sup>32</sup>

Godard was fairly dismissive of source novel for *Le Mepris*:

Moravia's novel is a nice vulgar read for a train journey, full of classical, old fashioned sentiments in spite of the modernity of the situations. But it is with this kind of novel that you can often make the best films.

I have stuck to the main theme, simply altering a few details, on the principle that something filmed is automatically different from something written, and therefore original.<sup>33</sup>

Here Godard distances himself from the source novel in order to emphasise the “originality” of his own work, thereby appearing to maintain his integrity as auteur. Colin MacCabe has noted that the film is a “genuine reworking of Moravia's fiction” and indeed it is, but his claim that the film is “never ‘faithful’ in the tradition of the much loathed ‘cinema de qualite’”<sup>34</sup> is revealing in the context of Godard's above claim. Godard's comments can easily be read as an expression of his anxieties as to how he would be perceived for making an adaptation of a work by one of Italy's best-regarded novelists and his need to explicitly put his own stamp of authenticity on a

high budget, American funded project, in a pre-release interview (notably in *Cahiers du Cinema*), rather than allowing the film to speak for itself.

The story in the novel takes place over a year or so, in the film it is one day. The novel's Italian producer and screenwriter become American (Jeremiah Prokosch played by Jack Palance) and French, respectively; the director Rhinogold remains German but is no longer mediocre, becoming Fritz Lang, played by Fritz Lang. Godard also introduces the new character of a translator, Francesca, played by Georgia Moll. For MacCabe, this means that *Le Mepris*:

is one of the few real examples of European cinema: four of the great European languages – English, French, German and Italian – circulate freely on the set of a production of a Greek story transposed with Roman names. This crucial change from Moravia's novel (in which although the director is German, the story is entirely in Italian) was Godard's.<sup>35</sup>

This is an idealised view of both the film and Godard. Indeed, Godard wanted the roles of Paul and Camille to go to Frank Sinatra and Kim Novak, thereby making the film more American dominated; Carlo Ponti wanted those roles to be played by Marcello Mastroianni and his wife Sophia Loren, thereby retaining the novel's Italian dominance. According to Godard, he and Ponti "remained at an impasse" until Brigitte Bardot came on board. Her presence made the project more enticing to Levine, who stumped up a good deal of the budget. It is, therefore, Levine, not Godard, who is responsible for the film's cosmopolitan flavour.<sup>36</sup>

The four great European languages do not, as is claimed, “circulate freely;” only Lang and Francesca are multi-lingual – hence the inclusion of Francesca, a character who emphasises the film’s theme of miscommunication. Also, the film does not look European; as Peter Lev has noted, making films in colour and widescreen was a fairly widespread practice in the US, but comparatively rare in the European cinema.<sup>37</sup> It was Embassy’s money that allowed for Raoul Coutard’s celebrated photography, prompted, as was the casting of Bardot, by Levine’s eye, ever trained on the worldwide box office.

The film’s Europeanness is most obviously compromised by the fact that not only is one of the main characters American, but also an American archetype. As discussed in the previous chapter, the orgreish, philistine and heartless American producer had, by 1963, become a pop culture cliché, appearing in film such as *The Big Knife* (1955, Robert Aldrich) and *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952, Vincente Minnelli.) Perhaps Euro-centric would be a better adjective; the inclusion of an American archetype compromises the film’s Europeanness but the lampooning of Prokosch adds to the Euro-centricity of the project.

One of the most significant ways in which Godard remoulded the politics of *A Ghost at Noon* was to opt for a more strident approach in his depiction of the producer, offering a less nuanced view. For Moravia’s Moltini:

Batista ... was the kind of man whom his collaborators and dependents, as soon as his back was turned, referred to with charming names such as ‘the brute’, ‘the big ape’, the great beast’, ‘the gorilla.’ I cannot say that these epithets were underserved ... [but] ... these nicknames erred, in my opinion, in not taking into account one of

Batista's highly important qualities – I mean his most unusual artfulness, not to say subtlety, which was always present, though concealed under an apparent brutishness.<sup>38</sup>

Godard's Prokosch, however, is an irretrievable idiot; a boorish, philistine, vulgar buffoon who believes himself to be a Nietzschean superman when he is, in fact, a moron. "I like Gods..." he tells Lang, "I know exactly how they feel ... exactly." Godard, clearly in attack mode, has not only producers in his sights but also, specifically, the producers of this particular film and, more specifically, Levine.

Clearly there was a gulf of understanding between Levine and Godard; as Godard said:

When I was discussing *Le Mepris* with Joseph Levine, I learned little by little that the words did not mean the same thing to him as they did to me. He is not a bad man; but I am not either. When we say 'picture,' it doesn't mean the same thing at all.<sup>39</sup>

Once production began, Godard encountered a whole host of other problems. *Le Mepris* was a fairly big budget production: this meant that the producers required a detailed script and strict shooting schedule; the Italian crew were highly unionised with regulated breaks and working hours; Jack Palance required detailed direction and Brigitte Bardot's star status brought with it more complications and demands. Godard was used to none of this and tensions and aggravations pervaded the making of the film.<sup>40</sup> But it was the relationship with Levine that seemed to rankle most, as Raoul Coutard explains:

Since the Americans were involved we had to follow a set work schedule. We had to send a daily telex to Levine to assure him that things were going as planned. That really upset Godard since he couldn't do exactly as he wanted.<sup>41</sup>

Such interference and lack of understanding of Godard's methods, and the subsequent irritation caused to Godard finds its way onto the screen in the form of a rebuff in Godard's merciless lampooning of Prokosch.

If one is to take, as many do, the character of Prokosch to be a cinematic representation of Levine, then it should be noted that the characterising of Levine as a stereotypical interfering producer does not really fit. As this thesis explores, as a producer Levine had an extraordinary capacity for trust and delegation, and on *Le Mepris* he was a working producer, not merely a financier – surely someone, then, with whom the director would expect to be in regular contact.

As we have seen, Levine had but recently had his fingers burned by an “out of control” director on *The Last Days of Sodom and Gomorrah*, so it is highly likely that he would not be willing to repeat that experience. To my knowledge, the communications between Godard and Levine on this project have not been preserved so it is impossible to say whether Godard was right to consider them upsetting. However, at roughly the same time Levine was acting as exec-producer on *Zulu*, and some of the communications for that film have been preserved. Such communications are illuminating in this context as there are many similarities between the two projects – both were projects shooting in foreign lands whilst Levine was in the US, both directors were shooting in lands unfamiliar to them, both directors were made to



comply with American production procedures and both directors were famously prickly.

Levine's concerns during the shooting of *Zulu* were the running time of the completed film, scheduling, budget and the use (or lack thereof) of the second unit. His views were expressed forcefully but not impolitely; he demanded that the issues and concerns raised be dealt with as a matter of urgency before offering his "kindest personal regards to you and your families."<sup>42</sup>

There was, however, a significant difference between the *Zulu* shoot and the *Le Mepris* shoot in that Stanley Baker, *Zulu*'s producer and star, had an extraordinary knack of writing diplomatic letters that would placate Levine:

I can only tell you Joe that Cy and myself are not out to prove anything to the world through *Zulu* but have the same interests in it as you do, that is to make a good picture of the right length that people will pay to go and see and therefore provide profit to us all.<sup>43</sup>

Apparently, Godard possessed no such facility and the quotation from Coutard suggests that Godard resented the need for correspondence. As we have seen, a good deal of writing about *Le Mepris* makes much of Levine's peplum past and infers that he was somewhat out of his depth in dealing with the European art film, but if one is to suggest that Levine did not understand Godard and his methods it seems to be just as true so suggest that Godard did not understand Levine and *his* methods, and so was also out of his depth on a big budget production. He also saw fit to put his side of the vendetta on film.

Prokosch's methods are, throughout the film, explicitly associated with Nazism; and not as a humorous allusion to a "little Hitler" but very specifically. The comparisons to Nazism are given a ring of authenticity as they are spoken by Fritz Lang, who fled Germany in 1933 rather than head Goebbels's propaganda machine; this occurrence is referred to in the film, bringing the response "This is not 1933, this is 1963 and he will direct what was written," from Prokosch. Later, when Prokosch utters the line, "Whenever I hear the word culture I reach for my chequebook,"<sup>44</sup> Lang responds, "Some years ago ... some terrible years ago, the Nazis used to take out a pistol instead of a chequebook."<sup>45</sup> To be sure, Levine's persistent demands for status updates may well have been irritating, but such a po-faced comparison with the monsters of Nazism is both extreme and unconvincing; not to mention clumsy, given Levine's Semitism.

In a series of smug, elitist gestures, Godard uses Prokosch's outsider status and lack of learning against him. Prokosch is unable to communicate with the other characters without the aid of a translator, Lang on the other hand is able to speak at least three languages fluently; Prokosch reads inappropriate quotations from a little book he carries whereas the cultured Europeans quote Dante and Holderlein at length and discuss the finer points; Prokosch displays brutish, unfocussed energy, Lang exudes sagacious serenity; Lang is regarded by the other Europeans with respectful awe, Lang regards Prokosch with a superior, resigned, impotent disdain.

The casting is significant also – Jack Palance was most famous at the time for his role as the murderous, bullying bad guy in *Shane* (1953, George Stevens) who comes to take over the town. Godard's casting of Lang, also, can be seen as witty, self-reflexive or homage, but Godard's plonking of one of cinema's acknowledged

greats into this milieu as a culturally legitimate artefact and henpecked victim should also be seen as self-serving moral high-grounding.

In short, Lang is a ringer and Prokosch might as well have horns. To be sure, Levine may have needed some mollycoddling and his constant demands for updates may have been tiresome but the petulance of Godard's cinematic rebuttal is quite startling. For Wheeler Winston Dixon, Lang represents "the moral centre of *Le Mepris*,"<sup>46</sup> but I would have to disagree. Godard's parading of Lang and the co-opting of his reputation is a calculated attempt to score ideological points. The producer behaves like a Nazi and the director is anti-Nazi: whose side would you be on?

Perhaps the most celebrated scene in *Le Mepris* is the opening, post-credit, sequence, a scene that, for many, represents the real battleground between Godard and Levine. The scene is one long take; Paul, in vest and shorts, is lying back on a bed, propped up by his elbow. Camille lies beside him on her stomach, entirely nude, questioning Paul about which parts of her body appeal to him as the camera pans slowly down to her toes and back.

Much is made of Levine's request for extra nude scenes of Bardot yet it is difficult to find a reliable source and the tale seems to have become part and parcel of cinematic legend and remains unquestioned. Phillip Lopate's claim that "Carlo Ponti and Joseph E. Levine (the distributor of *Hercules* and other schlock) ... were upset that the rough cut was so chaste. Not a single nude scene with BB – not even a sexy costume!"<sup>47</sup> is both unsourced and demonstrably untrue, given the amount of flesh displayed by Bardot throughout the film. Similarly unsourced is Colin MacCabe's claim that:

Joe Levine saw the Bardot vehicle in which he had invested and discovered to his complete consternation that, despite the fact that this was a film of adultery, and sexual betrayal, there was no shot of Bardot nude. But Bardot *was* nudity – that was what Levine had paid for and that was what he was going to get.<sup>48</sup>

Peter Lev quotes Levine as complaining that “Well, you haven’t got enough ass in it,”<sup>49</sup> but suggests in the footnotes that the quotation – provided by Jean-Pierre Goren – is “hearsay.”<sup>50</sup> Raoul Coutard has also spoken of “the Americans” being “furious ... they wanted to see Bardot’s bottom;” but it is unlikely Levine would have discussed this matter with Coutard, and the nude scene in question was not shot by him but by Alain Legrand. Indeed, as with much of the mythology associated with Godard, all roads lead back to Godard; it was most likely him who popularised this particular tale.

This is not to say that Levine did not demand a nude scene to open the film, but his concerns may not have been as prurient as decades-old Chinese whispers suggest. Opening scenes were important to Levine. John Baxter has written of Levine’s displeasure at first viewing the silent opening sequence of *8½* (1963, Federico Fellini);<sup>51</sup> and the minutes of a script meeting for *Harlow* (1966, Gordon Douglas) reveal Levine pushing for an overdose sequence to open the film in order to “use [the] shock value of opening the audience’s eyes at this time ... I like to open a picture with a blow.”<sup>52</sup> But possibilities that Levine had concerns regarding the film’s structure, coherence and aesthetic qualities rarely find their way into work on *Le Mepris*.

Colin MacCabe, however, notes that the scene – along with other, flashback, inserts of a fully clothed Bardot – was demanded by Levine in order to provide a “psychological explanation” for Camille’s behaviour. He also concedes that *Le Mepris* “would be a much less beautiful and moving film without the long opening scene ... It provide[s] perhaps the most beautiful portrait of Europe’s most photographed woman and a hint of married bliss which will turn to catastrophe in the course of the film.” He thereby takes a grudgingly positive view of Levine’s intervention. But he also stresses the view that Levine was looking for a “pornographic charge,”<sup>53</sup> an assumption tantamount to accusing Levine of thought-crime.

Most other commentators view the scene as an example of Godard outflanking his producer, yet this is done by ascribing lurid intentionality to Levine, building on the well worn caricature of the sleazy, mercenary American producer, as well as the polarised art versus commerce, director versus producer debates that provide the film’s main themes. For Jacques Aumont:

Godard clearly cannot bear the idea that, in the conflict that *always* pits the producer against the director, he should fail to get the upper hand, or at least have the last word. The famous second shot of *Le Mepris* is a fine example of the art of how to have the last word: at the insistence of Levine ... Godard added a long take of the sexy star, but what might have been a fetishistic reification of a body in box office terms is instead an affectionate, almost awestruck moment of contemplation.<sup>54</sup>

This is unconvincing, not least because it seeks to legitimate the polarised debate of Godard's film, and the traditional integrity hierarchy, by referencing "the conflict that *always* pits the producer against the director." Moreover, the suggestion that a paying public would be greater enticed by "fetishistic reification" than an "awestruck moment of contemplation" is an unprovable assumption. The scene is universally praised by academics and cinephiles alike – why would the box office punter be disappointed?

Richard Neupert has noted that Godard has often benefited from generous interpretations of his work:

When Godard took money from Carlo Ponti to make *A Married Woman* (1963) or *Le Mepris* (1963) he was said to parody the studio system, but when Chabrol shot *A Double Tour* (1959), a colour, international co production, his importance for the New Wave was over.<sup>55</sup>

I would suggest that this has more than a little to do with Godard's carefully constructed public image as a rebel. As I have noted, Godard saw fit to pre-empt criticism and distance himself from the *cinema de qualite* to the readers of *Cahier de Cinema*. Subsequent weeks would see Godard play up the anarchist aspects of his public image in the international press, often with Levine and *Le Mepris* in his sights. With his publicity machine seemingly in overdrive, Godard railed publicly against Levine for not submitting *Le Mepris* to the Venice Film Festival,<sup>56</sup> criticised the wastefulness of the American film industry (with specific reference to *Le Mepris*)<sup>57</sup> and praised himself for making *Le Mepris* dub-proof.<sup>58</sup> Curiously, all of these stories

found their way into *Variety* in the week before the New York premier of *Vivre Sa Vie* (1962, Jean-Luc Godard).

In the US, *Le Mepris* was a critical and commercial failure. Many reviews were infused with an irritated, knowing weariness, displaying a soggy disdain for both Bardot's body and Godard. *The New Republic* declared sarcastically, "Those interested in Brigitte Bardot's behind in CinemaScope and in Color will find ample rewards in *Contempt*."<sup>59</sup> Whereas the *Motion Picture Herald* claimed that "aside from the spectacle of Miss Bardot seen nude from the rear and often there is little of commercial or artistic value."<sup>60</sup>

Most of the critics' ire, however, was directed at Godard. *The New Yorker* spoke of his "stunning self-indulgence,"<sup>61</sup> *Time* described the film as "doodling disguised as art"<sup>62</sup> whilst *The New Republic* railed against the film's now celebrated middle segment, calling it "an archetype of arrant egotism and bankrupt imagination in a director."<sup>63</sup>

In October 1963, Godard seemed to be predicting, indeed relishing, the future commercial failure of *Le Mepris*. For Godard, Levine was merely a packager of films, who "doesn't know what's in the package." Godard refutes Levine's recent success with *8½*; "he doesn't know why he had success with [*8½*], and he doesn't know why he won't have success with mine."<sup>64</sup> A little over a year later, Godard overlooks the film's hostile critical reception and takes its failure as evidence that his prediction had been correct, commenting, "*Le Mepris* ... was very badly produced by a distributor because he had no idea what sort of product he was turning out."<sup>65</sup>

Levine, however, had all but disowned the film. The marketing materials were lacklustre and the usual round of interviews befitting such a big budget, starry production did not materialise. In fact, Levine rarely mentioned the film and when he

did so it was usually in response to another's praise for it. In 1965 Levine donated seven films to New York's Museum of Modern Art, and *Le Mepris* was not among them. When asked about the film by a representative of the museum Levine responded:

“He's [Godard] what's wrong with the French film industry.”

“Well, he might be a little difficult.”

“Difficult? He's crazy. His efforts are studies to show his contempt for people. That's why he called the movie *Contempt*. That's why I didn't give it to you.”<sup>66</sup>

Levine certainly had a point. *Le Mepris* is universally recognised as being a film that, at least in part, expresses Godard's contempt for Levine; and whilst this may not necessarily translate to contempt for the wider public, offering an audience a film that is effectively a contribution to a personal, private vendetta demonstrates conceitedness bordering on narcissism. As for Levine's part, the problems encountered during the productions of *Le Mepris* and *The Last Days of Sodom and Gomorrah* were almost certainly key factors in his decision to focus largely on Hollywood productions over the next few years.

For Levine, making *Le Mepris* may have seemed like a sure thing, having assembled an appealing director/star/novel triumvirate. It was a gamble that did not pay off, but Levine was always, and would remain, a gambler. He didn't really have a comfort zone and his career spans out in many different directions, through countries, genres and cultural boundaries, and it is a shame that the scholarship and writings about *Le Mepris* do not recognise this. It is, apparently, more appealing to portray



him as a vulgar fool, more interested in commerce than art – yet a glance at the sheer variety of films Levine brought to the screen would soon disprove such a notion. Repeating tried and tested methods was, for Levine, not an option; he was too much of a gadfly, and therein laid his strength.

When asked about a lecture he had given at Dartmouth College, Levine told Calvin Tomkins that the assembled audience had questioned him about *Le Mepris*:

I told them it was the worst film we ever made – maybe the worst film *anybody* ever made. We lost a million bucks on that lousy film, because the *great* director Jean-Luc Godard refused to follow the script ... He never even answered our cables.”<sup>67</sup>

Nowhere else has Levine spoken with such venom about a film with which he was involved. There are three main bones of contention; script following and cable answering did not really fit into the Godard way of filmmaking, but there is still the overarching question of the “million bucks.” Godard was a director for hire, he was never meant to have an entirely free hand. Levine had paid for something and got something else, so his anger is understandable.

Whatever one’s qualitative opinion of *Le Mepris*, there is little doubt that writing about this film has always tended to be generous to Godard to the detriment of Levine; and the circumstantial evidence used to bolster this view is invariably invokes the stereotype of the American producer along with the myth of the auteur. In order to gain a deeper understanding of this film, its meaning, contexts and the attendant political struggles, I suggest that the time has come to take Levine out of the firing line.

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- <sup>1</sup> Peter Lev, *The Euro-American Cinema* (Austin: The University of Texas Press 1993), p. 13.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 30-1.
- <sup>4</sup> Mira Liehm, *Passion and Defiance: Film In Italy From 1942 To The Present* (Berkeley and Los Angeles University of California Press 1984) p. 182.
- <sup>5</sup> John Ralston Saul, *Voltaire's Bastards: The Dictatorship of Reason in the West*, (London: Penguin Books 1993), p. 560. NB: Saul does not name his source for this quotation.
- <sup>6</sup> James Verniere, 'Film Shows Comic Contempt For The Industry,' *The Boston Herald*, 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1997, p. S04.
- <sup>7</sup> Desson Howe, 'Contempt Film Fatale,' *The Washington Post* Weekend Section, 25<sup>th</sup> July 1997, p. N49.
- <sup>8</sup> 'Godard Only Knows,' *Observer* Review, 26<sup>th</sup> November 2000, p. 11.
- <sup>9</sup> Todd Camp, 'A Celluloid Contender; Dallas Film Festival Shows It's Ready To Play With The Big Boys,' *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, 18<sup>th</sup> April 1997, p. 26.
- <sup>10</sup> Gore Vidal, 'Who Make The Movies?' In *United States: Essays 1952 – 1992* (New York: Random House 1993), p. 1173.
- <sup>11</sup> Jacques Aumont, 'The Fall of the Gods' in Susan Hayward and Ginette Vincendeau, (eds.) *French Film: Texts and Contexts* (London: Routledge 1990), p. 176.
- <sup>12</sup> Peter Lev, *The Euro-American Cinema*, p. 83.
- <sup>13</sup> Eugene Archer, 'Wonders of Aladdin at Two Theatres,' *The New York Times*, 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1961, p. 16.
- <sup>14</sup> Bosley Crowther, 'Screen: Sophia Loren in Old Form; She is Impressive in de Sica's *Two Women*,' *New York Times*, 9<sup>th</sup> May 1961, p. 43.
- <sup>15</sup> 'Levine Going Arty; To Drop Spear and Sandals Films,' *Variety* 9 November 1961.
- <sup>16</sup> Peter Lev, *The Euro-American Cinema*, p. 46
- <sup>17</sup> Philip K. Scheuer, 'Hybrid *Hot Wind*: Art of Box Office?' *Los Angeles Times*, 9<sup>th</sup> October 1960, p. C3.
- <sup>18</sup> Carlo Celli and Marga Cottino-Jones, *A New Guide To Italian Cinema* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan 2007), p. 81
- <sup>19</sup> Peter Lev, *The Euro-American Cinema*, p. 43.
- <sup>20</sup> *Hollywood Reporter* 30 July 1962.
- <sup>21</sup> Paul O'Neil, 'The Super Salesman of Super Colossals,' *Life* 27<sup>th</sup> July 1962 p. 81.
- <sup>22</sup> Edward S. Feldman, 'A Look at Levine's Future Films,' *Variety* 8 February 1961.
- <sup>23</sup> 'Joe Unchained,' *Time*. 24 February 1961.
- <sup>24</sup> For a fuller account of the making of this film see Christopher Frayling, *Sergio Leone. Something To Do With Death* (London: Faber and Faber 2000), p. 110-117.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 114.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 115.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 115-6.
- <sup>28</sup> Robert Stam, Commentry on *Le Mepris* DVD (Criterion Edition).
- <sup>29</sup> Moravia, Alberto. *A Ghost at Noon* (1976, Penguin Books: Middlesex) p. 131.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 66.
- <sup>31</sup> William MacAdams, *Ben Hecht: The Man Behind The Legend* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons 1990), p. 260.
- <sup>32</sup> Christopher Frayling, *Sergio Leone. Something To Do With Death*, p. 118.
- <sup>33</sup> *Cahiers du Cinema* 146, August 1963. Re-printed in Jean Narboni and Tom Milne (eds.) *Godard on Godard* (London: Secker and Warburg 1972), p. 200-201.
- <sup>34</sup> Colin MacCabe, *Godard. A Portrait of the Artist at 70* (London: Bloomsbury 2004), p. 156.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid, p. 160.
- <sup>36</sup> Yvonne Baby, 'Shipwrecked People in the Modern World: Interview with Jean-Luc Godard on *Le Mepris*,' in Royal S. Brown, (ed.) *Focus on Godard* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall 1972), p. 37.
- <sup>37</sup> Peter Lev, *The Euro-American Cinema*, p. 83.
- <sup>38</sup> Alberto Moravia, *A Ghost at Noon* (London: Penguin 1976) p. 66.
- <sup>39</sup> Harvey Feinstein, 'An Interview with Jean Luc Godard,' *Film Quarterly* Spring 1964 p. 9
- <sup>40</sup> For more on this see Colin MacCabe, *Portrait of the Artist at 70*, p. 149-151 and Peter Lev, *The Euro-American Cinema*, p. 84-5.
- <sup>41</sup> Interview with Raoul Coutard on *Le Mepris* DVD.
- <sup>42</sup> Letter from Joseph E. Levine to Cy Endfield and Stanley Baker, 7<sup>th</sup> May 1963.
- <sup>43</sup> Letter from Stanley Baker to Joseph E. Levine 16<sup>th</sup> May 1963.

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- <sup>44</sup> This is a much celebrated line from *Le Mepris*, most likely because it is a play on a Nazi slogan, but it should be noted that in its context it is a complete non-sequitur and seems terribly contrived.
- <sup>45</sup> The maxim “whenever I hear the word culture I reach for my gun” is often attributed to Goebbels but I believe the correct attribution should be Hanns Johst’s *Schlageter*. “When I hear the word ‘culture’ I release the safety catch on my Browning.”
- <sup>46</sup> Wheeler Winston Dixon, *The Films of Jean-Luc Godard* (Albany: State University of New York Press 1997), p. 47.
- <sup>47</sup> Philip Lopate, Liner Notes to *Le Mepris* DVD, criterion edition.
- <sup>48</sup> Colin MacCabe, *Portrait of the Artist at 70*, p. 153.
- <sup>49</sup> Peter Lev, *The Euro-American Cinema*, p. 88.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, p. 136.
- <sup>51</sup> John Baxter, *Fellini* (London: Fourth Estate 1993), p. 192-3.
- <sup>52</sup> Minutes of Harlow story conference, 3<sup>rd</sup> February 1965.
- <sup>53</sup> Colin MacCabe, *Portrait of the Artist at 70*, p. 154-5.
- <sup>54</sup> Jacques Aumont, ‘The Fall of the Gods’ in Susan Hayward and Ginette Vincendeau, (eds.) *French Film: Texts and Contexts* p. 176 (emphasis added).
- <sup>55</sup> Neupert, Richard *A History of the French New Wave* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press 2002), p. 129.
- <sup>56</sup> *Variety* 14<sup>th</sup> August 1963.
- <sup>57</sup> ‘Very Little Left For Production,’ *Ibid*.
- <sup>58</sup> ‘Plot To Rub Out Dub,’ *Ibid*.
- <sup>59</sup> *New Republic* 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1965.
- <sup>60</sup> *Motion Picture Herald* 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1964.
- <sup>61</sup> *The New Yorker* 26<sup>th</sup> December 1964.
- <sup>62</sup> *Time* 8<sup>th</sup> January 1965.
- <sup>63</sup> *New Republic* 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1965.
- <sup>64</sup> *Ibid* p. 9-10.
- <sup>65</sup> Jean Narboni and Tom Milne (eds.) *Godard on Godard*, p. 209.
- <sup>66</sup> Robert Lipsyte, ‘Museum Salutes Levine For Films,’ *New York Times*, 26<sup>th</sup> October 1965, p. 48.
- <sup>67</sup> Calvin Tomkins, ‘The Very Rich Hours of Joe Levine,’ *New Yorker*, 16<sup>th</sup> September 1966, p. 76 (emphasis in original.)

## **Section III**

Industrial Manoeuvres 1964-1977

## Chapter Seven

### The Paramount Years:

#### Levine as an Independent Producer, 1963-1966

##### Introduction

Although the independent producer had been a key figure in Hollywood cinema since its inception, Peter Lev has noted that the 1950s saw a rapid switch in Hollywood production strategies from a studio-based system to independent productions. Such productions are defined by Lev as “individually ‘packaged’ films, in which a ‘package’ consisting of a story and a group of creative personnel was generally put together by a producer or a talent agency;”<sup>1</sup> a system which Janet Staiger has called the “package-unit system.”<sup>2</sup>

If any particular studio could be said to have been the pioneer of this system, it was, as Tino Balio has argued, United Artists. For Balio, during the 1960s there were three categories of independent producers working at UA: talent, creatives and packagers. The first category refers to the producer-director, such as Stanley Kramer; the second is exemplified by Harry Saltzman and Albert “Cubby” Broccoli, whose creative contribution to the James Bond franchise is quite discernable; the third, and for Balio the “most typical,” is exemplified by the Mirisch Corporation, who concentrated on contracting respected directors who would, in turn, attract stars.<sup>3</sup>

Broadly speaking, Levine had most in common with those of the latter category, but to categorize Levine as a straightforward packager in the mould of Mirisch would be a simplification. Indeed, Levine embodied traits of all three of Balio’s models, and then some, arguably placing him in a category of one.

Levine 's relationship with Paramount began in 1963 and ended in 1966. As this chapter details, Paramount were looking to expand their roster of independent producers; Levine was one of the most prominent faces in the industry and was looking to become more involved in film production as opposed to importing, promotion and distribution. He also had two big properties: the right to Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*<sup>4</sup> and Harold Robbins's *The Carpetbaggers*. As noted, the Mirisch Corporation was not only director led – in contrast to Levine's approach – it also remained exclusive to UA throughout the 1960s. Levine, however, maintained many interests outside of Paramount and pursued projects with other companies throughout his Paramount tenure, seemingly placing his loyalties and interests with whoever best suited the project in hand – a trait of the 'talent' producer.

Also, despite juggling multiple projects, as per the packager, Levine placed his own authorial stamp on many of the films with which he was associated during the mid-1960s, particularly the Paramount films, hinting at the traits of the creative producer. As noted by Bernard F. Dick, "predictably, Levine gave Paramount high gloss trash ... sex lacquered to a glossy finish, whose shiny veneer concealed a complete lack of substance."<sup>5</sup> Perhaps not the most sympathetic of assessments but authorial recognition nonetheless.

But cherry-picking traits from the three dominant models of the 1960s independent producer in Hollywood still fails to successfully account for Levine. Even Staiger's broad category of package-units falls short of accounting for Levine's output at this time. Navigating Levine's production and other credits during these years is a very complex task indeed. This period represents a time of extraordinarily frenetic activity on his part, resulting in dozens of projects that Levine produced, exec-produced or presented. Indeed, negotiation of this labyrinth is not helped by

Levine's rather cavalier approach to accreditation, as evidenced by the terms agreed to by Eugene Frenke for the aborted project *Will Adams*:

1. Production credit will be "Produced by Eugene Frenke and Jules Buck."
2. Mr Levine will receive credit as Presenter and Exec-Producer.
3. In the event a director is secured who insists on a production credit then, provided Buck will also agree, Mr Levine will receive credit only as a presenter and Frenke and Buck will receive credit as Exec-Producers.<sup>6</sup>

The practice of credit bargaining had been fairly widespread since the early days of Hollywood, and would remain so; and it does cause something of a headache for the researcher. However, whilst hinting at the potential confusion caused by such a practice, the item quoted above also reveals Levine's own hierarchical perceptions – one thing was never up for discussion, the legend "Joseph E. Levine Presents;" all else could be bargained for.

An evaluation of Levine's role as producer in his various projects during these years is further complicated by Levine's own assessment of his contributions as producer. Speaking of *The Carpetbaggers*, Levine told Katherine Hammil:

There are different schools of thought on what a producer is ... In this case, I bought the book, engaged the screenwriter, got together with Paramount, hired the director and stars. If you are a working producer ... you are on set every day tending to the business of the picture. Here

Paramount is really doing the production, although I am listed as the producer and it's presented by me.<sup>7</sup>

However, as this chapter explores, Levine was not quite as “hands off” a producer as he may appear. Indeed, ever contradictory, Levine later informed Philip K. Scheuer that he had “personally” produced *The Carpetbaggers*.<sup>8</sup>

Industrially, Sheldon Hall suggests a mutually beneficial relationship between Levine and Paramount, with Paramount regarding Levine “as an ally who might help fill the gap left by the death in 1959 of its previous supplier of large scale spectacles, Cecil B. DeMille;” whilst Levine “saw his association with Paramount as a way of easing Embassy’s distribution load as well as a source of financing for his more ambitious ventures.”<sup>9</sup> Such an analysis is not without merit, but was truer in theory than in practice, as there seemed to exist something of a gulf of ambition between Levine and the studio. The Paramount years were, for Levine, littered with many unmade “ambitious ventures,” some of which are discussed in this chapter, and these were doubtless a source of frustration for him.

Levine had little in common with DeMille; he was not, at this time, given to producing one project at a time. Indeed, it was during the mid-1960s, perhaps more than any other time in his career, that Levine displayed his ability to juggle multiple projects and it was this ability, along with his showman’s flair, that Paramount sought to capitalise on, and perhaps relied on rather too much. On his Paramount projects, notably, Levine retained control over exploitation and marketing.

In March 1964, Paramount’s executive vice-president George Weltner said of Levine, “We would have to find a way to leave him free or we would get much less from his talents. He’s something different in this industry and we wouldn’t want to do



anything to change it.”<sup>10</sup> But when, in 1965, Weltner was attacked by longstanding Paramount board member Stanton Griffis for Levine’s “salacious” films, Weltner defended Levine in rather different terms, emphasizing, not Levine’s individual talents, but his ability to turn over product; an ability that Paramount, through no fault of Levine’s, was desperate for.<sup>11</sup>

Levine’s abilities at managing multiple projects distinguish him from the traditional model of the unit-by-unit approach of the independent producer. During the mid-1960s he appeared more like a studio chief than an independent, organising and managing, with various degrees of responsibility, dozens of projects from all over the world, all over the cultural scale and in a variety of media – film, television and theatre. But it was his inherent independence that he most prized. A mogul without a studio, his juggling abilities extended to studios and production companies also, his deal with Paramount was far from exclusive and these years saw him working with over a dozen companies in a variety of production and distribution deals, and combinations thereof. Even during the first flushes of the Embassy/Paramount marriage, Levine was clearly reticent about the idea of a merger:

I just don’t know. If I was sure, neither they nor I would be signing these outside deals. Everything, you see, would be part of the merger. They’re too big for me to swallow, even with my big belly. They’d swallow me. It would frighten me. I like complete autonomy to do what I like, which is impossible with a public company. While they’re thinking about it, we’re doing it.<sup>12</sup>

The relationship between Levine and Paramount was not a traditional relationship in terms of independent production at a major studio at that time. Janet Staiger has noted, “an independent production firm has been defined as a company which was not owned by, or did not own, a distribution organisation.”<sup>13</sup> Yet Embassy was primarily a distribution organisation. The first part of this chapter, therefore, will examine the relationship between Paramount and Levine in the mid 1960s, providing an analysis of the motives for both parties for pursuing the relationship, set against the contemporary industrial backdrop.

The second section of the chapter examines Levine’s artistic and industrial ambitions at this time. Katherine Hamill noted, “Unlike other independents, Levine always keeps a firm hold on the advertising and promotion rights, which is fine by most of his co-producers. In fact, what they are really buying is his showmanship.”<sup>14</sup> Whilst this is true, it is also true to say that Paramount did not take advantage of his versatility as a promoter and as a producer, as a packager in the marketing and industrial sense, instead relying on him to keep the pipeline flowing with formula films. This section will also examine Levine’s role as a producer. What is most often revealed about Levine as a producer is a remarkable capacity for trust and delegation, even with new talent. Whilst taking this into account, I also examine Levine’s filmmaking expertise and leadership qualities and argue that giving directors room to pursue their vision does not necessarily constitute a “hands off” producer.

### **Independent Productions at a Troubled Studio**

By the late 1950s, the once great Paramount Pictures was beset by problems. Critics pointed to a lack of leadership, exacerbated by the heart attack suffered by studio

chief, Y. Frank Freeman, in 1957. Two years later, the 69-year-old Freeman, who was widely perceived as being somewhat out of touch, stepped down and was replaced by Jack Karp. Reporting the change of leadership, Murray Schumach of the *New York Times* noted the recent “persistent criticism in the movie business – some of it within Paramount – that the company was too conservative in its artistic policies.”<sup>15</sup> Looking to the future, Schumach reported that Paramount’s President, Barney Balaban:

made a point of stressing that Paramount had ambitious plans for expansion of its artistic program.

It was considered likely that Paramount would become more aggressive in seeking out new producers, scripts and performers. Critics of Paramount say that in recent years it has been less adventuresome than other studios in taking advantage of the talents of independent producers.<sup>16</sup>

The following year, Paramount seemed to hit the ground running, scoring a massive hit with *Psycho* (1960, Alfred Hitchcock); but this was merely further evidence of Paramount’s artistic conservatism. *Psycho* was the sixth film Hitchcock had made for Paramount and they failed to get fully behind the project. As a result, Hitchcock owned sixty per-cent of the negative, thereby making the film more profitable for him than Paramount.<sup>17</sup> Dissatisfied with his treatment by Paramount, Hitchcock would make his home at Universal for the rest of the 1960s.

As the 1960s began, Paramount’s most significant independent producer was Hal Wallis. Wallis made his name at Warner Bros. before becoming an independent producer for Paramount in 1944. Essentially, Wallis was very much of the old school

and believed whole-heartedly in the power of stars; notably, his autobiography was titled *Starmaker*. Wallis's career at Paramount was certainly not unsuccessful yet was considerably patchier than his years at Warners. Whilst at Paramount he discovered numerous talents such as Lizabeth Scott, Delores Hart and Kristine Millar, talents who, despite their abilities, never really suited the category of "star." The Wallis discoveries that did become stars – Kirk Douglas, Burt Lancaster, Charlton Heston and Shirley MacLaine – did so without much help from Wallis.

Perhaps Wallis's most notable successes had been the cinematic showcasing of Elvis Presley, and of the comedy double act Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis. By 1956, however, Martin and Lewis had parted company and, though both continued to make solo films for Wallis, relations became strained and the profitability of their respective star vehicles lessened considerably. Between 1956 and 1967, Wallis produced nine of Elvis Presley's thirty-three movies. Elvis was always profitable but, throughout the 1960s, it became clear that the formulaic, anodyne spectacles featuring the once dangerously sexual King of Rock n Roll had little mileage. Such films may have been a sure thing with a certain type of patron, but not sure enough to turn around the fortunes of a struggling studio. For Bernard F. Dick:

With Wallis, it was always money. He could never shed the mentality he was brought up with, wondering where the next dollar would come from and making sure that when he had it, it was well spent. Even though Hollywood was experiencing retrenchment in the 1950s, there were still enough studio heads willing to gamble on bringing Broadway to the masses. Wallis, unfortunately, was not a studio head, only an independent producer with a studio base.<sup>18</sup>

Despite his independent status, I would argue that Wallis was, essentially, a studio producer. It is surely not coincidental that many of his biggest successes conformed to a notable Paramount in-house style, the comedy musical, which had been a staple of Paramount's since the days of Jack Benny, Bob Hope and Bing Crosby. Wallis's vehicles for Presley, Martin and Lewis were simply a continuation of this tradition, as well as examples of a seemingly reliable, yet ultimately destructive, conservatism that was stagnating the studio.

Although Dick argues that Wallis's cautiousness was a hangover from his poverty-stricken childhood, one could equally argue that Wallis's lack of adventurousness owed much to the studio mentality he developed at Warner Bros. under the tutelage of such giants as Jack Warner and Darryl F. Zanuck. Moreover, the evidence suggests that during the 1950s, Paramount also experienced great difficulties in adapting to the post-studio system, thereby compounding Wallis's studio-bound mentality. One reason for Hitchcock's departure was his complaint that he "was nothing but a salaried employee,"<sup>19</sup> so he took his services elsewhere. By contrast, between 1945 and 1969 Wallis produced films exclusively for Paramount. He was, essentially, a studio employee, fitting neatly into Paramount's unimaginative and unadventurous incorporation of independents. Dick's comment that Wallis was "*only* an independent producer" seems somewhat incongruous given the 1950s rise of independent production and the immense power wielded by the great independent producers such as Zanuck, Otto Preminger, Sam Spiegel and, indeed, Levine.

As per Balaban's announcement, in the early 1960s Paramount began to court independent talent rather more aggressively. Frank Capra was contracted to helm two films for Paramount, though the plans did not come to fruition;<sup>20</sup> and if Paramount

was looking for a successor to Cecil B. DeMille, it was not, as Hall suggests, Levine, but rather Samuel Bronston, who would produce the DeMillian spectacles, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964, Anthony Mann) and *Circus World* (1964, Henry Hathaway) for Paramount. Otto Preminger was also courted by Paramount at this time; initially contracted to produce three films for the studio, beginning with *In Harm's Way* (1965, Otto Preminger), he would ultimately make five of his last eight films for Paramount.

In such company Levine was, as a producer, relatively untried. As a producer at Columbia and UA, Preminger had barely put a foot wrong; Bronston's epic credentials had been fortified by *King of Kings* (1961, Nicholas Ray) and *El Cid* (1961, Anthony Mann); and Capra had recently emerged from a sojourn making educational films for television to direct and produce vehicles for Frank Sinatra, (*A Hole in the Head* (1959)) and Glenn Ford/Bette Davis (*Pocketful of Miracles* (1961)). By contrast, most Levine productions to date, such as *Morgan The Pirate* (1961, Andre de Toth and Primo Zeglio) or *The Wonders of Aladdin* had been commercial failures and his Hollywood experience was limited to his presentation of the Tony Randall/Kim Novak sex comedy *Boys' Night Out* (1962, Michael Gordon).

Nonetheless, in early 1963 Levine was contracted by Paramount to produce three films for Paramount. Subsequent contracts, agreements as well as industry gossip and hearsay would take that figure into the thirties during his tenure. In August 1964, Peter Bart reported on the rationale behind Levine's ever increasing Paramount roster:

A few days ago someone asked George Weltner, the new president of Paramount Pictures, what he thought would be the biggest problem in

his new job. ‘Packaging,’ he shot back. ‘That is the toughest job of all.’

Having said this, Mr Weltner promptly handed over a substantial portion of his ‘packaging problem’ to a man many regard as a ‘master packager’ – Joseph E. Levine.<sup>21</sup>

According to Dick, Weltner had, as Vice President of Production, been dismayed by the lacklustre approach to advertising displayed by Paramount’s exploitation and sales departments,<sup>22</sup> an assertion backed up by the exhibitor’s complaints of Paramount’s half-hearted campaign for *Ulysses*, as discussed in Chapter Three. Indeed, Levine and Weltner seemed to be on the same page where exploitation was concerned; in 1958, Weltner had written a memo to Balaban and Freeman demanding that more money be spent on advertising films in the suburbs, rather than concentrating marketing in New York, thereby advocating adopting the same kind of strategies Levine was implementing at Embassy around the same time.

As ever, Levine’s own personal agenda intermingled with his recognition that his wares be adequately exploited. Following his own advice of “selling the industry” and his showman tactic of putting himself at the forefront of his campaigns, in April 1964 Levine unleashed an advertising broadside that spread over eighty-three pages of *Variety*. Bookending the succession of 1 or 2 page spreads for Embassy and Embassy/Paramount’s recently or soon to be released products are pages set aside for the great and the good of world cinema to shower praise on Levine, among them Stanley Baker, Vittorio De Sica, Edward Dmytryk and Federico Fellini who, fortifying Levine’s mogul status, wrote:

You know, for years I used to have this image of the American movie mogul: fast, decisive, magnanimous, maybe a little fat, maybe a little impatient, maybe a little sentimental, but a real human being.

Then I came to the states and saw that those men had disappeared. It was a big disappointment, believe me. Now it seems to me that I've found one that meets my image. Thanks, Joe!<sup>23</sup>

The individual pages of advertisements promote the various films on the Embassy roster and, when taken together, they can be seen as a display of Levine's versatility; so the same applies to the tributes. Accolades from respected auteurs such as Fellini and De Sica combined with salutes from a Hollywood legend (Edward Dmytryk), a young gun actor/producer (Stanley Baker), an industry heavyweight (George Weltner) and the legitimate theatre (Sybil Burton of The Establishment Theatre Company), are interspersed with tales of Levine's dynamism, versatility and rise to power from *Variety's* writers and general editor (Abel Green); all of which consolidate to provide an invitation to the US film industry in general, and Paramount in particular, to judge Levine not only by his track record and future prospects but also by the company he keeps and the calibre and range of people who feel it is in their interest to say nice things about him. More than this, such a marketing broadside, which covers over half of the issue, provides a strutting exhibition of Levine and Embassy's confidence, power, success and wealth. After all, eighty-three pages in *Variety* did not come cheap.

By April 1964, Paramount's initial three-picture deal with Levine had risen to eight. In a very public affirmation of faith, George Weltner, then Executive Vice President of Paramount, wrote:



It is my feeling that Joe Levine is far from the zenith of his success, popularity and influence. Paramount is so sure of this that it now has commitments with Joe for eight pictures budgeted at over \$30,000,000. These eight films ... represent the largest number of pictures an individual producer has committed to a major company within a 15 month period.<sup>24</sup>

Behind this public display of confidence, however, Paramount was beset by internal strife. When Levine's contract at Paramount began, it did so as the company seemed to be moving into calmer waters; having lost \$2,800,000 in 1962, the company returned to the black in 1963, and made \$1,041,000 in the first quarter of 1964.<sup>25</sup> However, the studio was experiencing other problems; by the mid 1950s, according to Dick, staff at the studio were:

[P]olarized by a long-standing problem that would make Paramount ripe for takeover in the next decade: age disparity that first caused tension, then factionalism, between the old guard clinging tenaciously to jobs for which they were no longer suited and their replacements waiting impatiently in the wings for vacancies that only death or retirement seemed to create.<sup>26</sup>

Throughout the 1960s, top personnel at Paramount were in a state of flux. As indicated earlier, George Weltner became President of Paramount in 1964, replacing Balaban in June of that year. On the day of Weltner's appointment, Jack Karp

resigned, to be replaced by Howard W. Koch. Neither would see out 1965 in their posts, being replaced by Herbert J. Siegel and Ernest H. Martin. Levine would have known about such struggles and such factors would have, no doubt, been instrumental in fortifying his determination to keep his independence.

Levine's huge self-advertisement in the pages of the industry's leading trade paper can be understood on a tactical level, a display of his strength and influence that would send a message to Paramount that he was not a man to be trifled with. Levine himself had not been immune to Paramount's internal strife and resentments. Notably, less than a week after Levine's Embassy-thon in *Variety*, on 28<sup>th</sup> April 1964, Weltner sent a memo to Balaban demanding that Levine be afforded greater respect. According to Dick:

Apparently, no one had found a permanent office space for Levine, who was being given whatever space was available when he came to the studio.

Weltner's concern was that Levine be accorded preferential treatment, despite the fact that he could only offer Paramount glossy sleaze ... Levine was, as Weltner reminded Balaban, 'as important producer as [Hal Wallis and Otto Preminger] ... and has brought to us ... very important properties.'<sup>27</sup>

Dick takes Weltner's request for office space for Paramount's most industrious independent producer as evidence of the studio being "at the mercy" of relatively unimportant producers, yet the tactics indulged in by Levine and Paramount reveal a rather subtler game of quid-pro-quo.

One can only speculate on how much of Embassy's operations Paramount wished to acquire, or how much Levine was willing to cede, but what is certain is that both organisations were in powerful bargaining positions. One thing that is certain is that Levine's operations and prospectus included films from all over the world and cultural spectrum, demonstrating that Dick is incorrect to suggest that Levine could only offer Paramount, to use his term, "glossy sleaze."

Dick recognises Levine's work in art-house cinema of the early 1960s, commenting, "Levine would not be bringing films of such calibre to Paramount – or, for that matter, to any studio. In the 1960s, no studio would even think of releasing art house products like *Two Women* and Fellini's *8½*,"<sup>28</sup> but this is an overstatement. Cracking the art market remained an attractive proposition for studios in the late 1950s and 1960s, as is evidenced by Columbia's acquisition of the foreign film distributor, Kingsley International, and UA's acquisition of Lopert Pictures, in 1957 and 1958 respectively.

The art market was a risky proposition but could pay dividends in terms of awards, prestige and profits. According to Tino Balio, "Lopert released an average of five pictures a year during the sixties. Almost without exception, they failed to attract an audience."<sup>29</sup> When it came to guiding art films to success, however, few could match the track record of Levine and Embassy. Also, as Balio notes, although few foreign stars had box office staying power, the two exceptions were Marcello Mastroianni and Sophia Loren.<sup>30</sup> In the mid-1960s, Embassy had a seven-film contract with Mastroianni, as well as contracts with Loren's producer husband, Carlo Ponti, and her favourite director, Vittorio de Sica.

The talents of all four of these major Euro-players were brought together in the Embassy release, *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (1963, Vittorio de Sica).

Following the considerable success upon its release in the US, *Variety* announced that its release in the UK would be handled by Paramount; the same agreement would apply with a subsequent release from the same ensemble, *Marriage – Italian Style* (1964, Vittorio de Sica). This deal represented the first time Levine had allowed Paramount to handle any of his foreign made art films.<sup>31</sup> The article notes that because of Levine’s success in handling “top foreign product, his touch has been watched with interest by majors seeking entrance into the foreign distribution field,” before commenting on an intriguing power-play:

Of interest is the fact that Levine is set up to distribute in England and had almost guaranteed success with *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* at least which is already a proven winner. The name of the game could be ‘give a little, get a little’ since Embassy has 10 pix as yet uncommitted which it plans to produce within the next couple of years. But it also demonstrates Paramount’s deeper penetration into Embassy’s operations and a growing willingness on Levine’s part to keep feeding Par bits of bait.<sup>32</sup>

Allowing Paramount to enter into his distribution arrangements for art house films sounds like a concession on the part of Levine, but it is intriguing to see how *Variety* presents the arrangement, as it is Paramount that is made to sound like the eager party. The reference to “bits of bait” could well have been a journalistic flourish, but a later report on Levine’s plans to film *The Graduate* again demonstrates that a certain amount of reticence on Levine’s part was perceived at this time, with

Levine reported to have, “as usual ... allowed room for Paramount to enter the deal at a later date.”<sup>33</sup>

Given such evidence, it is certainly worth considering whether Paramount, and in particular George Weltner, was looking at the bigger picture, at the wide array of projects Levine could potentially provide, as well as providing the skills to sell them. Dick notes that in a meeting of the Paramount board in 1964, Weltner “bristled at being called ‘the father of the Joe Levine deal’” by the disgruntled Stanton Griffis, noting, “that distinction belonged to Jack Karp.”<sup>34</sup> However, according to Carroll Baker, “Jack Karp was forced into early retirement. Rumour had it that Levine was responsible for his ouster (sic).”<sup>35</sup> It is certainly evident that Weltner was very admiring of Levine in public and, even by Dick’s own account, defensive of him in private. Also it was Weltner who acknowledged the need for more penetrative marketing techniques, Levine’s forte. For Dick, Levine was a liability for the studio, one that Weltner had concerns about being associated with, but it seems that the two could or should have been natural allies, and it was Weltner who recognised the potential rewards of a greater involvement with Levine.

As already noted, however, Weltner’s tenure as Paramount’s President was a short-lived affair. Whether Weltner was an ally of Levine or not, there still remains the question of whether or not a wholesale acquisition of Embassy by Paramount, or a greater willingness to cater for Levine’s ambitions, could have turned the fortunes of the studio around. Given the internal struggles that besieged the studio in the 1960s, it seems that little could have prevented the takeover by Gulf and Western in 1966. That said, the Levine/Paramount relationship was certainly profitable for both sides, but it did leave many ambitions unfulfilled for both parties.

## Artistic and Industrial Ambitions

For Peter Lev, “The story of Darryl Zanuck represents in microcosm several key themes of the history of the American film industry in the 1950s;” significant among these themes is “the rise of independent production.” For Lev, Zanuck was becoming increasingly dissatisfied as the boss of Fox and “resented that an independent producer with one big success could make far more money than a studio executive.”<sup>36</sup> In the late 1950s, for a mixture of personal and professional reasons, Zanuck set up as an independent and moved to Europe.

What is important to recognise is Zanuck’s pedigree; he was Hollywood through and through. Although he may have still needed to prove himself as an independent, his track record as a producer was unsurpassed in the industry. Most of the other great independent producers of the 1950s and 1960s follow, to varying degrees, the same model. Preminger had built up a track record at Fox, Wallis at Warner Bros.; Stanley Kramer had been in the industry since the 1930s and worked his way up before forming his own production company; Sam Spiegel, one of Hollywood’s more colourful characters, was rather more of a chancer, yet still made his name in B pictures such as *The Stranger* (1946, Orson Welles), before graduating to the A feature with *The African Queen* (1951, John Huston).

Levine had no such pedigree in Hollywood, but was keen to move into making more commercial ventures. Of his move to Hollywood, Levine told Art Seidenbaum:

I discovered that in order to stay in business I had to distribute my own films. And now to stay in business I’ve got to have product ... The art

house product is not enough to make the exhibitor treat you with the same respect he gives the majors.<sup>37</sup>

In order to better penetrate the commercial market, and earn some of the attendant respect that comes with handling commercially successful films, Levine needed a product; a solid, potentially profitable proposition in lieu of an independent producer's track record. Such a product presented itself in the shape of *The Carpetbaggers*.

By the time Levine acquired the rights to Harold Robbins's novel in 1962, it had sold over five million copies so Levine had the advantage of a pre-sold product. The film would not be the first screen adaptation of Robbins's work, that would be *Never Love a Stranger* (1958, Robert Stevens). Neither was Levine the first producer to adapt Robbins for Paramount; Hal Wallis had previously produced an adaptation of *A Stone For Danny Fisher*, as the Elvis starrer, *King Creole* (1958, Michael Curtiz). But *The Carpetbaggers* was Robbins's raciest, and therefore most controversial, work to date. Of this acquisition, Peter Bart reported:

Mr Levine says his independent status gives him far greater latitude to make snap decisions and rewrite the rules when necessary. He was so eager to acquire *The Carpetbaggers*, for example, that he spent an additional \$100,000 rather than wait ten days for an earlier option to run out.<sup>38</sup>

Such a method of operation would pay dividends for Levine. Having paid \$300,000 for the rights to such a successful, controversial and commercial property,

he had an ideal bit of bait with which to attract Paramount, leading to a co-production deal for *The Carpetbaggers*, which would lead to subsequent multi-picture deals.

The acquisition of *The Carpetbaggers* led not only to Paramount deals, but it also demonstrates Levine's strategy of establishing himself as an independent producer by building up solid, working relationships. Levine's acquisition of the rights led to a close relationship with Robbins throughout the 1960s. Subsequent to *The Carpetbaggers*, Levine would be involved in the productions of *Where Love Has Gone* (Edward Dmytryk), *Nevada Smith* (1966, Henry Hathaway) – all Embassy/Paramount co-productions; *Stiletto* (1969, Bernard L. Kowalski) – with Avco-Embassy; and *The Adventurers* (1970, Lewis Gilbert) – an Avco-Embassy/Paramount co-production; he also bought the rights to *The Dream Merchants*, which was ultimately made into a TV movie in 1980 without Levine's involvement. *The Carpetbaggers* was to become the most successful non-roadshow film in Paramount's history; subsequent to its success, Levine bought the rights to Robbins's *The Adventurers* for \$1 million, before a word of it had even been written.<sup>39</sup>

*The Carpetbaggers* also saw Levine in the role of star-maker, or, more precisely, re-maker. Carroll Baker was no stranger to controversy, having starred in *Baby Doll* (1965, Elia Kazan), a film which was one of the most controversial films of the 1950s in terms of censorship battles;<sup>40</sup> and it was she who Levine felt could inhabit the role of Rina. According to Baker:

I had been at a charity ball in New York before leaving to film *How The West Was Won*, and met Joe Levine for the first time. He said, upon meeting me, 'You're just the girl I want for my next film. It is



the best part you've had since *Baby Doll*, but you have to take my word for that. Without any question, you must accept the part and shake my hand to bind the deal.'

So that is exactly what I did. I shook Joe Levine's hand. It wasn't until months later that I discovered I had agreed to play Rina Marlow in *The Carpetbaggers*. And it was that part in that film which shot me back to the top of my profession. In showbiz circles it was hailed as a remarkable comeback.<sup>41</sup>

It was a comeback facilitated by Levine, and one he profited from greatly, not least in terms of fortifying his position at Paramount. Levine's ability to harness Baker's star power runs contrary to Dick's account of Paramount's other star-maker, Hal Wallis. In accounting for Wallis's relatively patchy career at Paramount, compared to his former mentor's illustrious career at Fox, Dick mitigates Wallis by suggesting that, unlike Zanuck, Wallis:

Did not have the advantage of heading a studio like Fox, with its own firmament of stars ... Wallis had to draw on Paramount's less impressive roster, discover new talent, and negotiate two or three-picture deals with Golden Age icons ... whose star power was diminishing but whose names still meant something at the box office.<sup>42</sup>

Wallis seemed to be utterly beholden to stars, Levine was not, something that gave him greater flexibility and, ironically, made him a more attractive prospect for

the stars themselves. With Levine, the property usually came first, then stars or actors assigned accordingly.

Baker, alongside Levine, was at the forefront of a massive campaign to promote *The Carpetbaggers*. Having tantalised the public with the prospect of Baker appearing nude in the film (a brief scene that was ultimately cut from the US release, but was widely reported in the press), Levine's new star embarked on a gruelling series of personal appearances worldwide. According to Baker, when she was unavailable for an Australian tour to promote the film, in lieu of Baker Levine sent the dress she had worn for the premier of *The Carpetbaggers*, with instructions to organise Carroll Baker lookalike contests at each of the play-dates, with the winner being awarded a chance to wear the dress.<sup>43</sup>

The unleashing of Baker's star potential would surely have fortified Levine's position at Paramount and, with the massive success of *The Carpetbaggers*, Baker looked as if she were being groomed to be Levine's protégé. In early 1965 *Variety* reported, "While Miss Baker has helped bring prosperity to Embassy Pictures, the company has rewarded her well. She [has] signed a seven film contract with Mr. Levine [worth \$3 million]."<sup>44</sup>

Of the projected seven films, only two were made, *Sylvia* (1965, Gordon Douglas) and *Harlow* (1965, Gordon Douglas) and quite how "rewarded" Baker was is not altogether clear. In her autobiography, Baker clearly still harbours resentment at the way she was treated by Levine, some members of the Paramount team and Jack Garfien, her then husband and manager, who all appear to have treated her insensitively, if not cruelly, as did the popular press. The pressures placed upon her in 1965 led to her suffering from "nervous exhaustion,"<sup>45</sup> according to the call sheets for the production, she was not infrequently absent from the *Harlow* set due to illness.

This seemed to arouse suspicion at Paramount, which in turn led to her condition being diagnosed by the studio in the most basic of terms. According to one memo, “The actual cost incurred due to Miss Baker’s illness totals \$58,113.99”<sup>46</sup>

After the relative commercial failure of *Harlow*, Baker was fired from her contract. It is worth noting that, in her autobiography, Baker has few kind words for Levine, yet she attributes her sacking not to him but to Jack Garfien, who she accuses of using her frail condition to manipulate her into making unreasonable demands of Paramount.<sup>47</sup> No doubt the failure of *Harlow* would have made Baker easy to release but, as I have indicated, Levine was not beholden to stars in the way Wallis was and, while he would continue to work with established stars, the Baker contract represents his only real attempt at star making during the Paramount years.

Stars were not unimportant to Levine but for him, unlike Wallis, stars functioned only as part of a package, often more important for publicity purposes than cinematic; other parts of the package, however, were important. In 1964, Levine expressed concern at what he saw as being a dearth of directors in Hollywood, a situation he reportedly “deplored.”<sup>48</sup> Throughout his time at Paramount, Levine sought to build good relationships with above the line talent, working with many of them on numerous occasions in a very short period of time. These included directors such as Edward Dmytryk, Gordon Douglas, and Cy Endfield, the writer John Michael Hayes, the actor/producer Stanley Baker and the production team of Clarence Greene and Russell Rouse. Many of these would shower gushing praise on Levine the producer. According to Edward Dmytryk, whilst working on *The Carpetbaggers*,

[Levine] made it a point, more than once, to let me know that he was only interested in the picture's sales values and the creative end was entirely in my hands.

He's a good producer in that he gives a director complete freedom and autonomy and I must say I've never enjoyed directing more.<sup>49</sup>

For Vittorio de Sica, "From a director's point of view he is a perfect producer. He is understanding and respectful of creative talent and never interferes with artistic concepts."<sup>50</sup> Whilst Stanley Baker noted that he and Cy Endfield,

Had several visits and many conferences with Joe Levine. But they were just that: visits and conferences. Constructive helpful suggestions, yes but otherwise a free hand to produce our picture as we had planned, without hindrance – that was what Joe provided us.<sup>51</sup>

To put these comments into context, it should be noted that these quotations are all culled from the *Variety* issue of 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1964, an issue that, as I have noted, contained over eighty pages of advertisements for Levine's wares, and the Levine related articles in this issue could more correctly be called tributes. This means that the context should be recognised, although equally it does not mean that the words above are without merit. After all, nobody forced these men to write praising Levine.

Also, though Levine had his fair share of critics in the industry, the tenor of these assessments of his qualities as a producer chime with tributes to be found elsewhere. According to Cy Endfield's widow, "Cy always said that *Zulu* was the only film where he'd been left to get on and do what he wanted ... Joe Levine was a

very good producer in that respect.”<sup>52</sup> For Ted Danielewski, who was lined up to direct the aborted project *Imperial Woman*:

Joe can fool you. It was a great surprise to me to find out that he is a very talented man. He has an actual knowledge of what makes a great picture. He has a rare dramatic instinct – which is like having a direct line to people’s hearts.<sup>53</sup>

For reasons outlined in the introduction to this chapter, assessing Levine’s contributions to his various projects can be a tricky task. The traditional unhelpful answer to the oft-asked question “What does a producer do?” is “It depends on the producer.” With Levine, it depends on the particular project. He was notorious for picking up credits that perhaps were not really earned on some projects yet worked extremely closely on the minutiae of others.

It would be an oversimplification to describe him as a “hands off” producer, yet he showed a remarkable capacity for delegation and trust, especially with new talent. Endfield’s and Baker’s praise for Levine’s allowance for their autonomy should be understood in the context that *Zulu* was their first job as producers. Whilst Levine gave them latitude artistically, he was still a key figure in the production team, as this letter from R. H. Harrison (Chairman of Paramount British Pictures) to Jack Karp demonstrates:

Up to the time that Mr Levine visited South Africa ... I had been getting somewhat concerned at the *slow tempo of the scenes* that had been shot and the general pace at which the production seemed to be

moving ... However, *the effect of Mr Levine's visit seems to have been reflected in subsequent scenes*, both in the tempo of the shooting and the number of scenes taken.<sup>54</sup>

This piece of correspondence allows a glimpse of how the sometimes mysterious figure of the producer can make a direct artistic contribution to a film, even when artistic control has been delegated. For Hall, “Baker was full of praise for Levine’s hands-off approach during filming;”<sup>55</sup> yet it would appear that to be a “hands-off” producer is to not be a producer. As discussed in the previous chapter, the figure of the producer is rarely represented sympathetically in popular culture, and “hands-on” is often synonymous with “interfering.”

Yet the artistic vision of the principal filmmakers can no doubt be hampered by unglamorous nuisances such as logistics. These were problems that Levine, given his ability to juggle projects, seemed to have a facility for handling.<sup>56</sup> Levine, then, provided an essential supporting role; a role that, as Harrison’s letter suggests, had a direct impact on the quality of the finished film. Not only had Levine allowed Baker and Endfield the autonomy to pursue their own vision, he also helped create the conditions whereby they could do so. For Colin Lesslie,<sup>57</sup> Levine’s visit to the set of *Zulu*, which, incidentally, lasted less than seventy-two hours,<sup>58</sup> was a question of leadership; “Joe’s visit was a tonic to us all, only it was too brief ... I think his visit was most opportune and did a lot of good. It certainly speeded Cy up.”<sup>59</sup>

Levine seemed proud of *Zulu*, enticing exhibitors by comparing it to *The Bridge On The River Kwai* (1957, David Lean). “Every bit of it is authentic,” he told Katherine Hamill, “There’s not one Zulu in it who isn’t a Zulu.”<sup>60</sup> Unusually for a Paramount/Embassy co-production, it was distributed by Embassy in the US, where it

was a moderate success, its most notable competition coming from the phenomenally successful *The Carpetbaggers*.<sup>61</sup>

*Zulu* is not referred to by Dick in his assessment of Levine's Paramount output, perhaps because it does not quite fit the "sex lacquered to a glossy finish," model. However, though Dick paints Levine as being a liability for the studio, he does not exempt the studio for Levine's seemingly formulaic approach to film making:

Ironically, his integrity as a producer returned when he left Paramount.

Within the next three years, he produced three widely admired films

[*The Graduate*, *The Producers* and *The Lion in Winter* (1968, Anthony Harvey)] ... That Levine could produce three masterpieces for

Embassy after leaving a trail of trash at Paramount was indicative of the depths to which the studio had sunk.<sup>62</sup>

Whether or not one agrees with Dick's assessments of what constitutes a "masterpiece" or "trash," Dick is right to implicate the studio in stifling Levine, but wrong to suggest that the results of Levine's collaborations with Paramount were "predictably" formulaic. What Levine could offer Paramount, and what Paramount failed to capitalise on, was Levine's versatility, and to look, as Dick does, for formulas and models in Levine's output is to almost always misrepresent him.

Away from the sex, sleaze and melodrama, one of the earliest properties Levine brought to Paramount was to be a biopic about the life of Mohandas K. Gandhi. Levine predicted the film would have "the same acclaim and commercial success as *The Ten Commandments*."<sup>63</sup> This aborted project also provides evidence of Levine's faith in new talent. The proposed director, Richard Attenborough, had yet to direct a

feature, but Levine “was so impressed with the work Attenborough had put into it that I decided he should direct it.”<sup>64</sup>

The film was not to be made at Paramount. In c.1965, Attenborough received word that the project was to be shelved; he recalls, “judging from the terms in which this correspondence was couched, my own feeling was that Joe Levine or Paramount, or both, were getting cold feet.”<sup>65</sup> Whatever the truth, it should be remembered that Levine remained attached to the project for the best part of twenty years, into the film’s eventual pre-production stages, pulling out shortly before actual production of the film due to a row with Attenborough.<sup>66</sup>

Hall is correct to suggest that, with his Paramount deals, Levine was seeking a “source of financing for his more ambitious ventures,” most of the projects he brought to Paramount were fairly big budget and complex. Yet there appeared to be, as I noted in the introduction to this chapter, something of a gulf of ambition between Levine and the studio. Aside from the adaptations of blockbuster novels and kiss-and-tell biographies, Levine brought a wide variety of projects to the studio which would remain unmade. Among these projects were Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer*, Pearl Buck’s *Imperial Woman*, *Only Tomorrow* – a big budget sci-fi to be directed by Endfield – and a Broadway musical, *Little Me*.

It may certainly be the case that by forging such a close relationship with Harold Robbins, and achieving great success with the first two adaptations, Levine may have made a rod for his own back, with the studio associating him with a particular kind of product rather than recognising his versatility. According to Dick, at one 1964 meeting Weltner was moved to justify Preminger going wildly over-budget on *In Harm’s Way* by pointing to the fact that this was not unusual for Preminger and stressing that it was his first Paramount film. At the same meeting, he justified



Levine's involvement with the studio on the grounds that, in Dick's words, he "could keep the product flowing."<sup>67</sup>

One should also recognise the enormous stresses individuals and organisations can be placed under in the world of big-budget filmmaking, particularly when the financing is coming from a troubled studio. One intriguing unmade project from Levine's time at Paramount was *The Story of Will Adams*, which was to be a roadshow presentation, telling the story of the first white samurai. The brainchild of producer Eugene Frenke, the film was to star Peter O'Toole, to be scripted by Dalton Trumbo and directed by John Huston. The project collapsed in an extraordinary mess of infighting, grudges, acrimony and clashing egos. Trumbo was moved to complain to Levine about the grudge bearing between Peter O'Toole and producer Jules Buck on one side and Eugene Frenke on the other.<sup>68</sup> Once the project had collapsed, John Huston wrote a furious yet revealing letter to Buck, his now former friend:

Now I'll address myself to you about yourself. What's going on in your shallow spirit. You're pissing with fear, dear Jules, lest your newly won success be snatched out of your hands. You don't really believe in it yet anyway. The past, with its slaps and humiliations, its vast uncertainties, is still too recent. That's why you like to tell about letting Joe Levine, for instance, 'really have it' ... pouring it on until he felt like jumping out of a window to escape your wrath. As though importance could be measured by who you can shout at and get away with it ... You made it a condition of Peter's appearance in *WA* that you would run the show. But the show never got started even. Paramount laid out the dough and time passed and absolutely nothing

happened ... thanks to you own efforts your were in the position of responsibility when the storm broke.<sup>69</sup>

It would be intriguing to know how much of an impression this debacle left on Levine. In a rough, earlier draft of this letter (there were several) Huston accuses Buck of suffering from “vertigo” from having climbed too high too quickly. According to Trumbo, Eugene Frenke had spent seven years trying to get *Will Adams* to be realised on screen – one gets the impression that it was something of a labour of love which was subsequently scuppered by power plays from Buck. In this context, it should be noted that when Levine came to put his own labour of love onto the screen with *A Bridge Too Far*, he did so without ceding any control to any other producer and without any studio backing whatever.

Throughout his time at Paramount, rumours of a merger were rife. By May 1964 Levine was the single largest stockholder in Paramount, with 10,000 shares compared to Balaban’s 8,300.<sup>70</sup> A year later he owned 51,000 shares making him Paramount’s second largest stockholder after Siegal and Martin, the duo who would ultimately guide Paramount toward the Gulf and Western takeover.<sup>71</sup> Within a year, however, Levine had sold all his stock in the company. Speculation was also rife at this time that Levine was to take up a senior position at MGM, rumours that proved to be unfounded; “I’m not geared to run a studio,” he told Hedda Hopper.<sup>72</sup>

Despite his successes, once his deal with Paramount ended, Levine was keen to distance himself from the studio:

The way it worked at Paramount is that I had what they call consultative control. And the way that worked is that somebody would

call up and say ‘what do you think about so-and-so for such-and-such part in the film?’ I would say ‘No.’ They would say ‘Okay,’ and the next day they would go and hire so-and-so for the part. I got consulted on everything.<sup>73</sup>

Artistically, it would seem that many of Levine’s ambitions had been thwarted while at Paramount and Levine was wise to be reticent about ceding control to the studio. Industrially and commercially, this also proved to be an astute move. As the relationship between Embassy and Paramount grew closer in 1964, Katherine Hamill speculated as to whether Levine would sell out for “\$10 million or even \$20 million.” By retaining his independence, and not putting Embassy on the back burner whilst he was at Paramount, Embassy would continue to increase in value. By the time he did sell out, to Avco in 1968, it would be for a whopping \$40 million.

Having achieved national prominence in 1959 as the promoter of *Hercules*, the extent to which Levine had risen in terms of influence in US cinema is perhaps best exemplified by the fact that he was awarded the Cecil B. DeMille award at the Golden Globes Award ceremony in 1964. The recipients of Golden Globe Awards are voted for by the members of the Hollywood Foreign Press Association, which is made up of Hollywood reporters from non-US countries. The Cecil B DeMille Award – named after its first recipient in 1952 – is presented for “outstanding contribution to the world of entertainment.”<sup>74</sup>

Even considering that Levine had only achieved national prominence five years earlier, his inclusion in the list of recipients appears somewhat incongruous. In 1964, he was still best known as a promoter rather than a filmmaker. His receipt of the award is bookended by Judy Garland and Bob Hope (1962 and 1963) on one side and

James Stewart and John Wayne (1965 and 1966) on the other. Hitchcock did not receive the award until 1972, followed by Samuel Goldwyn the next year.

The HFPA website describes Levine thus: “born in direst poverty, a school drop-out at 14. As producer and founder of Embassy Pictures, he knew how to create excitement around his movies.”<sup>75</sup> Given his seeming incongruity in such a list, it is worth considering what reasons may have been behind the voting. As I contended in Chapter Three, Levine’s huge campaigns of ballyhoo can be understood as part of an overall entertainment experience; the “excitement” spoken of in relation to Levine on the HFPA website certainly fits within the remit of a “contribution to the field of entertainment.” But the fact that the award is decided upon by foreign press representatives is surely also significant, given his extensive work in foreign cinema.

In 1964 Levine told Katherine Hamill that he believed in “sex, violence, and action – just the things that sell.”<sup>76</sup> Dick uses this quotation in order to contextualise Levine’s Paramount output, but he has interpreted this particular Levine-ism rather too literally. There are countless films produced or imported by Embassy during these years that do not subscribe in any way to this formula; films without sex, films without violence and films that, as surely Levine would have known, would not sell.

It is, therefore, worth considering precisely what Levine meant when he expressed fears that a merger with Paramount would compromise his independence. As I maintain throughout this thesis, although Levine was a tough and ambitious businessman who devoted much of his time to ensuring a film’s profitability, he also displayed a deep love of cinema in all its forms. The Paramount experience demonstrates that working with a studio, even as an independent, compromised Levine’s versatility as a backer and producer of commercial cinema. There can be little doubt, then, that if Levine had had a closer relationship with Paramount with

regard to his Embassy output, the variety of films bought and backed by Levine would be greatly diminished, the esoterica may have vanished, and perhaps Levine would not have been free to exec-produce such current youtube favourites such as *Santa Claus Conquers The Martians*.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Lev, *Transforming The Screen. History of The American Cinema. Volume 7. The Fifties* (2003, Charles Scribner's Sons: New York), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Janet Staiger, 'The Package-Unit System of Production After 1955,' in 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) p. 330.

<sup>3</sup> Tino Balio, 'New Producers For Old: United Artists and the Shift to Independent Production', in Tino Balio (ed.) *Hollywood in the Age of Television* (London: Unwin Hyman 1990), p. 171-174.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Strick directed *Tropic of Cancer* for Paramount in 1970 without Levine's involvement.

<sup>5</sup> Bernard F. Dick, *Engulfed: The Death of Paramount Pictures and the Birth of Corporate Hollywood* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press 2001), p. 80.

<sup>6</sup> Paramount Inter-Office correspondence to the files of Edmund R. Rosencrantz, 1<sup>st</sup> July 1964.

<sup>7</sup> Katherine Hamill, 'The Supercolossal, Well – Pretty Good – World of Joe Levine,' *Fortune*, March 1964, p. 132.

<sup>8</sup> Philip K. Scheuer, 'Producer Joe Levine: He's in the Import-Export Business,' *LA Times*, 24<sup>th</sup> May 1964, p. C13. NB. It may perhaps be worth noting that this reassessment of his contribution occurred after the film's April 1964 release date.

<sup>9</sup> Sheldon Hall, *Zulu: With Some Guts Behind It. The Making of an Epic Movie*, (Sheffield: Tomahawk Press 2005), p. 130.

<sup>10</sup> Katherine Hamill, 'The Supercolossal, Well – Pretty Good – World of Joe Levine,' *Fortune*, March 1964, p. 185.

<sup>11</sup> Bernard F. Dick, *Engulfed: The Death of Paramount Pictures and the Birth of Corporate Hollywood*, p. 93-95.

<sup>12</sup> Katherine Hamill, 'The Supercolossal, Well – Pretty Good – World of Joe Levine,' *Fortune*, March 1964, p. 185.

<sup>13</sup> Janet Staiger, 'Individualism Versus Collectivism,' *Screen 24*, p. 68-9

<sup>14</sup> Katherine Hamill, 'The Supercolossal, Well – Pretty Good – World of Joe Levine,' *Fortune*, March 1964, p. 180.

<sup>15</sup> Murray Schumach, 'Freeman Gives Up Paramount Post,' *New York Times*, 18<sup>th</sup> May 1959, p. 30.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>17</sup> Bernard F. Dick, *Engulfed: The Death of Paramount Pictures and the Birth of Corporate Hollywood*, p. 74-5.

<sup>18</sup> Bernard F. Dick, *Hal Wallis: Producer To The Stars* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press 2004), p. 184-5.

<sup>19</sup> Correspondence between George Weltner and Barney Balaban, 9<sup>th</sup> November 1961. Quoted in Bernard F. Dick, *Engulfed: The Death of Paramount Pictures and the Birth of Corporate Hollywood*, p. 74.

<sup>20</sup> 'Capra is Signed to Direct Two Films For Paramount,' *New York Times*, 16<sup>th</sup> November 1962. p. 27.

<sup>21</sup> Peter Bart, 'Hollywood Package: Production Formation Probed by a Master,' *New York Times*, 9<sup>th</sup> August 1964, p X7.

<sup>22</sup> Bernard F. Dick, *Engulfed: The Death of Paramount Pictures and the Birth of Corporate Hollywood*, p. 78.

<sup>23</sup> Federico Fellini, 'Open Letter To Joe Levine,' *Variety* 22 April 1964, p. 97.

<sup>24</sup> George Weltner, 'Par's Commercial for Joe Levine's Showmanship: A \$30,000,000 Bankroll,' *Ibid*, p. 15.

<sup>25</sup> *Time*, 12<sup>th</sup> June 1964.

<sup>26</sup> Bernard F. Dick, *Engulfed. The Death of Paramount Pictures and the Birth of Corporate Hollywood*, p. 48.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p. 61.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, p. 80.

- <sup>29</sup> Tino Balio, *United Artists: The Company That Changed The Film Industry* (1987, University of Wisconsin Press: Madison) p. 231-2.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 231-2.
- <sup>31</sup> Paramount did distribute the UK production *Jack The Ripper* in 1960.
- <sup>32</sup> 'Latest in Levine-Paramount Deals: Par Distribs Two Pix in Britain,' *Variety* 6<sup>th</sup> May 1964.
- <sup>33</sup> 'Turman To Film 'Grad' For Levine; Ends Millar Tie,' *Variety* 6<sup>th</sup> October 1964.
- <sup>34</sup> Bernard F. Dick, *Engulfed. The Death of Paramount Pictures and the Birth of Corporate Hollywood*, p. 95
- <sup>35</sup> Carroll Baker, *Baby Doll: An Autobiography* (London: W. H. Allen 1984), p. 278.
- <sup>36</sup> Peter Lev, *Transforming The Screen: History of The American Cinema. Volume 7. The Fifties* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons 2003), p. 2-3.
- <sup>37</sup> Art Seidenbaum, 'Spectator, 1963: Levine Fidgets in Hollywood,' *LA Times*, 1<sup>st</sup> June 1963, p. 15
- <sup>38</sup> Peter Bart, 'Hollywood Package: Production Formation Probed By A Master,' *New York Times*, 9<sup>th</sup> April 1964, p. X7.
- <sup>39</sup> Robert Musel, 'Levine Stuck With \$1 Million Novel?' *LA Times*, 14<sup>th</sup> September, 1965, p. C10.
- <sup>40</sup> For a detailed account of the *Baby Doll* case see Jon Lewis, *Hollywood v. Hardcore* (New York: New York University Press 2000), p. 119-127.
- <sup>41</sup> Carroll Baker, *Baby Doll. An Autobiography*, p. 237.
- <sup>42</sup> Bernard F. Dick, *Hal Wallis: Producer to the Stars*, p. 258-9.
- <sup>43</sup> Carroll Baker, *Baby Doll: An Autobiography*, p. 244.
- <sup>44</sup> Stanley Penn, 'Energetic Joe Levine Climbs Quickly To The Top Ranks of Film Makers,' *Wall Street Journal*, 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1965. NB. There is some dispute here. Although a seven-picture contract is reported, Baker has written that the contract was for seven years. Seven year contract were pretty much obsolete by this time, a fact duly conceded by Baker, and it does seem more likely that an independent producer would sign a star on the basis of films rather than timescale. At this time Levine had a seven-film contract with Mastroianni and a five-film contract with de Sica. However, Baker suggests that Paramount were somehow involved in the Baker/Levine contract also. See Carroll Baker, *Baby Doll*, p. 261.
- <sup>45</sup> Carroll Baker, *Baby Doll*, p. 299.
- <sup>46</sup> Paramount Inter-Office Communication, to Arnold D. Burke from Alex Tovar, 26<sup>th</sup> October 1965.
- <sup>47</sup> Carroll Baker, *Baby Doll*, p. 303-4.
- <sup>48</sup> 'Shortage of Directors Deplored by Levine; CEO. Sidney Stays Mute,' *Variety* 11<sup>th</sup> November 1964.
- <sup>49</sup> Edward Dmytryk, 'Director's Findings: Good Drama Made For Strong Merchandizing,' *Variety* 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1964, p. 97.
- <sup>50</sup> Vittorio de Sica, 'Director's Idea of Typecasting,' Ibid, p. 14.
- <sup>51</sup> Stanley Baker, 'A Handshake Deal That Paid Off,' Ibid.
- <sup>52</sup> Maureen Endfield quoted in Sheldon Hall, *Zulu: With Some Guts Behind It. The Making of an Epic Movie*, p. 83.
- <sup>53</sup> Katherine Hamill, 'The Supercolossal, Well – Pretty Good – World of Joe Levine,' *Fortune*, March 1964, p. 185.
- <sup>54</sup> Letter from R. H. Harrison to Jack Karp, 30<sup>th</sup> April 1963. Emphasis added.
- <sup>55</sup> Sheldon Hall, *Zulu: With Some Guts Behind It. The Making of an Epic Movie*, p. 132.
- <sup>56</sup> In a later letter, Harrison informed Karp "as a result of pressure, no doubt from Mr. Levine, Baker and Endfield agreed that the second unit would shoot all the mass Zulu scenes and the maidens' dance." Letter from R. H. Harrison to Jack Karp, 14<sup>th</sup> May 1963.
- <sup>57</sup> Colin Lesslie was, according to Hall, "brought in by the completion guarantors to see that the film was made on budget and on schedule." Sheldon Hall, *Zulu: With Some Guts Behind It. The Making of an Epic Movie*, p. 162.
- <sup>58</sup> Levine arrived in the evening of 18<sup>th</sup> April 1963 and left 21<sup>st</sup> April 1963. *Zulu* Production Progress Files.
- <sup>59</sup> Telex from Colin Lesslie to Ken Hargreaves, 25<sup>th</sup> April 1963.
- <sup>60</sup> Katherine Hamill, 'The Supercolossal, Well – Pretty Good – World of Joe Levine,' *Fortune*, March 1964, p. 180.
- <sup>61</sup> For an analysis of *Zulu*'s commercial and critical reception in the US, see Sheldon Hall, *Zulu: With Some Guts Behind It. The Making of an Epic Movie*, p. 308-312.
- <sup>62</sup> Bernard F. Dick, *Engulfed: The Death of Paramount Pictures and the Birth of Corporate Hollywood*, p. 81-2.
- <sup>63</sup> 'Levine Sets Plans For 15 New Movies,' *The New York Times*, 30<sup>th</sup> July 1964, p. 16.

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- <sup>64</sup> Peter Bart, 'Hollywood Package: Production Formation by a Master,' *New York Times*, 9<sup>th</sup> August 1964, p. X7.
- <sup>65</sup> Richard Attenborough, *In Search of Gandhi* (London: The Bodley Head 1983) p. 129.
- <sup>66</sup> Gandhi (1982, Richard Attenborough) was enormously successful and scooped eight Oscars, perhaps proving Levine's 1964 claims for the project.
- <sup>67</sup> Bernard F. Dick, *Engulfed: The Death of Paramount Pictures and the Birth of Corporate Hollywood*, p. 95.
- <sup>68</sup> Telegram from Dalton Trumbo to Joseph E. Levine, February 18<sup>th</sup> (no year but almost certainly 1965).
- <sup>69</sup> Letter from John Huston to Jules Buck, 12<sup>th</sup> February 1966.
- <sup>70</sup> 'Joe Levine Owns More Stock than Any Other Director,' *Variety* 6 May 1964.
- <sup>71</sup> 'Levine Won't Discuss Metro Angles, He's Paramount's 2<sup>nd</sup> Largest Owner,' *Variety* 23<sup>rd</sup> June 1965.
- <sup>72</sup> Hedda Hopper, 'MGM Rumours Untrue,' *LA Times* 25<sup>th</sup> September 1965, B9.
- <sup>73</sup> Charles Champlin, 'Levine: Maestro of Hoopla, Hope,' *LA Times* 2 June 1967, p. D10.
- <sup>74</sup> <http://www.hfpa.org/cecilbdemille/index.html> Accessed 5th December 2001.
- <sup>75</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>76</sup> Katherine Hamill, 'The Supercolossal, Well – Pretty Good – World of Joe Levine,' *Fortune*, March 1964, p. 132.

## Chapter Eight

### **Trading on Reputations: Mike Nichols, *The Graduate* and the Avco Corporation**

#### **Introduction**

Bob Dylan once famously said that hearing Elvis Presley for the first time was like “bustin’ out of jail.” In a similar vein, and with reference to the most influential film critic of the 1960s, Robert Benton, a screenwriter on *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967, Arthur Penn), claimed that, “Reading Sarris was like listening to Radio Free Europe.”<sup>1</sup>

Benton’s view of the cinematic upheavals of 1960s Hollywood provides an interesting counterpoint to Dylan’s assessment of the musical upheavals of the 1950s. Benton’s view lacks the energetic dynamism of Dylan’s; Dylan conjures an image of a man running joyfully and desperately toward freedom, whilst the listener in Benton’s simile, presumably somewhere behind the iron curtain, is toiling under the yoke of Communist oppression, listening to CIA propaganda that offers self-serving glorification of a system to replace a system.

Popular and scholarly work on the New Hollywood of the late 1960s and early 1970s is often infused with such oppositional romanticism; the tale of a new, vibrant movement laying siege to the old, stale regime. Some recent scholarship has sought to question the romanticism associated with this era, notably Derek Nystrom’s work which questions the class politics of the New Hollywood and its strategy of undermining technicians’ unions.<sup>2</sup> Whilst such work does go some way to redressing the balance of scholarship in this area, it still emphasises the oppositional.



Joe Levine's presence in this heavily studied area of US cinema complicates a good deal of the scholarship, not least the traditional, oppositional view. This is not to say that there were not cultural and generational conflicts at the time, just that one should recognise the attendant bluster and exaggerations of these conflicts.

*Bonnie and Clyde* is widely perceived to be the watershed film of the New Hollywood. It is also often depicted, as we shall see, as a film that succeeded against the odds, turning a healthy profit in the face of critical hostility and inept distribution and marketing, its success heralding the birth of a new cinematic sensibility in Hollywood and a new generation possessed of it. For Peter Kramer:

[N]otwithstanding some continuities, there was a dramatic generational change among Hollywood's hitmakers in the second half of the 1960s and early 1970s. Most of the older generation ... had spent all their working lives being employed by the major Hollywood studios ... by and large they probably shared a basic outlook with the old studio bosses, seeing the entertainment of the largest number of people ... as their main objective.<sup>3</sup>

Levine, who was 62 by the time another key New Hollywood film, the Embassy funded *The Graduate*, was released, contradicts just about every word of this assessment. Levine had always demonstrated an awareness of the importance of niche audience and spent a good deal of energy catering to them. Moreover, despite his age he had come to a position of power and influence in Hollywood relatively recently and was grounded in independent and foreign production and distribution; he was,

therefore, not institutionalised as Kramer's "studio generation"<sup>4</sup> were, and neither did he represent one of the "continuities" of Kramer's initial caveat.

Levine's industrial ambitions at the time also provide an interesting counterpoint to much writing on the New Hollywood. For Peter Biskind:

[T]he dream of the New Hollywood transcended individual movies. At its most ambitious, the New Hollywood was a movement intended to cut film free of its evil twin, commerce, enabling it to fly high through the thin air of art.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast to this view, *The Graduate* ushered in an era of unprecedented industrial and commercial manoeuvring on Levine's part, culminating in Embassy's sale to the Avco Corporation for \$40 million following an extensive period of reputation building. According to Robert E. Kapsis:

Sociological studies of reputation building tend to emphasize the active role of the self interested other in establishing or advancing the pre-eminence of a particular artist or public figure ... Hitchcock's reputation is thought to have improved during the 1960s and 1970s ... [partly] because ... Francois Truffaut initiated a sincere but hardly disinterested campaign culminating in [his] book *Hitchcock*.<sup>6</sup>

Levine's relationship with Mike Nichols in the 1960s and early 1970s could be described in similar terms – sincere but far from disinterested.

Mutually beneficial relationships between industrial figures and marketable directors had long been a hallmark of Hollywood, and such relationships have received scholarly attention. Bernard F. Dick has noted that Harry Cohn's relationship with Frank Capra was motivated by his belief that Capra was able to communicate effectively to the 1930s audience and provide Columbia with an identity;<sup>7</sup> Leonard Leff has written of how Hitchcock was a director who could lend distinction to Selznick International;<sup>8</sup> and Mathew Bernstein has emphasized the importance of Fritz Lang in distinguishing Walter Wanger's first independent production for United Artists.<sup>9</sup> Levine's relationship with Mike Nichols followed a similar route and, following the enormous success of *The Graduate*, it proved to be an invaluable bargaining chip in his negotiations with Avco.

The first section of this chapter provides an account of Levine's industrial strategies in the 1960s, emphasising the importance of television in the shaping of them and how he was able to enact more ambitious policies following a string of commercial failures. I also analyse the emergence of new critical and market conditions that paved the way for the success of *The Graduate*; conditions Levine helped to create.

The second section deals with how Levine implemented his new strategy at Embassy, an ambitious and expensive policy that concentrated on fewer and more prestigious productions with emerging talent, resulting in a roster that included *The Graduate*, *The Producers* and *A Lion in Winter*. Levine sought to capitalise on Mike Nichols's emerging reputation as a theatre and film director of note, often at the expense of *The Graduate*'s producer, Larry Turman, who had initiated the project. By presenting Nichols as a genius Levine sought to bolster his own reputation as a

discoverer of new talent by casting Nichols as his protégé – which was something of an overstatement but not entirely without basis in fact.

Furthermore, will analyse Levine's contribution to *The Graduate's* commercial success. Justin Wyatt has documented the move away from roadshow film distribution tactics in the late 1960s in favour of emerging innovations from the independent sector.<sup>10</sup> However, Levine drew upon and modified roadshow techniques in order to sell *The Graduate*, and many of the other successes of the time undermine traditional distinctions between independent and major productions.

The final section analyses the acquisition of Embassy by the Avco Corporation in 1968, a move that saw Levine capitalise on his own reputation and the reputations of the films and talents with which he was associated. Though much has been written about the wave of conglomerations that occurred in Hollywood in the late 1960s, a case study of Embassy is revealing. Embassy distinguishes itself in this area because the factors that governed the takeover were, for the most part, different from the reasons the major studios saw themselves corporatised. Most notably, Embassy was a private company and as such did not suffer from the undervaluing of shares that made other studios prime targets. Moreover, due to the success of *The Graduate* Levine was in a very strong negotiating position, one that saw him able to capitalise on the existence of relatively short lived cultural phenomena – namely the youth market and an increased demand for movies from television; and it was the collapse of these markets that led to Hollywood's recession between 1969-1971.

### **A Reversal of Fortune**

In August 1965 Levine told the *Hollywood Reporter* of his intention to expand operations at Embassy:

We're going to produce and distribute with a greater intensity ... we're going to produce and distribute every conceivable type of picture ... American and foreign ... high budget and low budget ... for the entire family and with special themes for adults.<sup>11</sup>

Essentially this announcement was something of a consolidation of previous revelations regarding Embassy's strategies for the future. The previous January Levine had announced that Embassy were preparing four family films for release,<sup>12</sup> these included a portmanteau film of Hans Christian Anderson stories made by Videocraft International called *The Daydreamer* (1966, Jules Bass), which featured stars such as Tallulah Bankhead, Victor Borges and horror legend Boris Karloff, who also appeared in another Videocraft effort, *Mad Monster Party* (1967, Jules Bass). As for low budget fare, Levine announced the following May that he would be embarking on a programme of twenty low budget features over the subsequent eighteen months.<sup>13</sup> This programme yielded such films as *Billy the Kid versus Dracula* and *Jesse James Meets Frankenstein's Daughter*, which were produced by Circle Productions.

Embassy's dabblings in the family and exploitation markets at this time bore little fruit and Levine would subsequently admit that he had judged the market wrongly. In a speech to the New York Sales Executive Club in November 1969 he commented:

It's hard to tell in my business. In 1966 I made seven family films.

Nobody – but nobody – went to see them, including my own family. It was obvious that this wasn't what the public wanted.<sup>14</sup>

Even in 1966 Levine had noted that his strategies regarding family and exploitation films were not working. Levine dismissed his low budget actioners as “an experiment,” and said that he would be making no more films of this type, and predicted a general decline in low budget production.<sup>15</sup>

The motivation behind Levine's decision to produce and import pictures in increasing quantities at this time would have to be television. The low-budget actioners Embassy had underwritten in 1965 were, according to the *Hollywood Reporter*, to be made for “quick liquidation theatrically followed by TV, now suffering from a scarcity of features.”<sup>16</sup> Also, Levine had secured a deal with NBC, who acquired the rights not only to fifty of Embassy's films but also the rights to a number of unmade projects, the announcement coinciding with Levine's declaration of Embassy's planned expansion. For Levine, then, television represented not only a future source of revenue for completed projects, but also a new ally and valuable contributor to the funding of the production process itself.<sup>17</sup> Later that month Levine announced a co-production deal for television product with the UK's Harmony Films,<sup>18</sup> and five months later it was reported that Levine had bought twenty-nine Italian films for television.<sup>19</sup> In 1966, Levine told Calvin Tomkins:

We now have to examine what the possibilities of television are before we make a film, because that's our insurance – we know that even if

the picture doesn't do well in the theatres we'll at least get our money back from television.<sup>20</sup>

Embassy was investing heavily in television at this time. The previous year had seen an announcement of a \$20 million investment in TV to produce series based on the characters of *Hercules* and *D'Artagnan*, to be produced by Carlo Ponti, as well as a US remake of the British TV show, *Steptoe and Son*, to be made by Clarence Greene and Russell Rouse – a project that did not get past the pilot stage.

Whilst Levine was looking to cater for the television audience, however, contemporary youth were, according to Robert Sklar, looking to the movies for inspiration. Sklar contends that during this period audiences were attaining a new level of sophistication regarding cinema, and were:

Oriented to visual media as no previous generation had been ... when members of this new generation began to encounter classic European and Hollywood movies through college courses many were astounded by the wonders of past movies ... in comparison with television shows.<sup>21</sup>

It was against this backdrop of sophistication that films such as *Blow Up* (1966, Michelangelo Antonioni), *Tom Jones* (1963, Tony Richardson), *Alfie* (1966, Lewis Gilbert) and *Morgan! Or A Suitable Case For Treatment* (1966, Karel Riesz) became box office triumphs. These films represented a new generation of European art films whose success with audiences was aided, in no small part, by the fact that they were in English, as well as their smart and savvy treatment of “adult” themes.

Amid this influx of sophisticated fare from across the pond, Levine scored a hit with the Embassy import, *Darling*. *Darling* was self-consciously marketed as an “adult” picture; the posters and radio spots declared it “A powerful motion picture ... made by adults ... with adults ... for adults.” Radio advertising for the film began with a droning refrain of “Shame, shame ... everybody knows your name,” emphasising the complex amorality of the protagonist, Diana Scott, played by Julie Christie. The film won a Best Actress Oscar for Julie Christie and best screenplay for Frederic March, and was also nominated for Best Director and Best Picture at the 1966 Academy Awards.

What is notable about these films is that, although they fit broadly into the arthouse category, they all achieved great success in the US despite receiving mixed reviews or being critically divisive. As already noted, Levine was a keen critic of what he perceived to be the stranglehold critics had over the art market: “Very few art films are now being made,” he told the *Motion Picture Exhibitor* in 1964, “Most of them are being made in Hollywood, and the so-called ‘eggheads’ choose the ones they like and pay not a bit of attention to the others.”<sup>22</sup> Elsewhere, Levine had complained about the critics’ ability to scupper the chances of arthouse imports – here, however, he emphasises the damage he believed was being done to the domestic industry; yet by 1967 a much romanticised yet still significant cultural shift appeared to be underway, a shift best exemplified by *Bonnie and Clyde* and, subsequently, *The Graduate*.

Robert Sklar has highlighted the huge successes of influential films such as *Morgan!* and *Bonnie and Clyde*, noting that the college crowd, unconcerned by critical hostility, flocked to the former film whilst, for *Bonnie and Clyde*:



Audiences understood better than either the distributor or critics the emotional power of the film ... a small victory for the independent judgement of audiences against the guiding advice of mass journalism, and it led to the unusual experience of mass periodicals, not wishing to lose their aura of omniscience, shaming themselves and coming out in favour of the film.<sup>23</sup>

Sklar notes the half-hearted marketing and distribution of *Bonnie and Clyde*, and suggests that the overcoming of these barriers, alongside a willingness to reject critical reception, constituted a triumph indicative of more progressive cultural tides. His comments also demonstrate how romantic notions regarding the cultural developments of 1967 have a tendency to inform not only popular writing on the period, but scholarship also. Notably, his claim that punters flocking to see fashionable films are demonstrating “independent judgement” en masse sounds rather hopeful.

*Bonnie and Clyde* was far from universally condemned; but it was condemned by the right people. Bosley Crowther, who, incidentally, had praised *Morgan!*,<sup>24</sup> *Tom Jones*,<sup>25</sup> and *Blow Up*,<sup>26</sup> wrote three angry reviews of *Bonnie and Clyde* for the *New York Times*.<sup>27</sup> Crowther was hardly the most fashionable of film critics and his reviews of the film would make him even less so. Arguably, his reviews may have done more to help than hinder the film’s success.

*Bonnie and Clyde* was praised by the emerging fashionistas of film criticism, Andrew Sarris and Pauline Kael, who exalted the film with evangelical zeal. According to Peter Biskind:

Print critics had considerably more influence then than they do now ...  
[film criticism] was a gentleman's sport dominated by Crowther's  
middle-brow taste. A bad review from him could kill a picture ...  
[Kael and Sarris were] two reviewers ... waging war on  
'Crowtherism,' as they called it.<sup>28</sup>

As with Sklar's contentions, Biskind's romantic view of the emerging New Hollywood relies, in part, on over-emphasising the influence critics such as Crowther had on film attendance for domestic productions and overlooks Crowther's usefulness as a whipping boy for the new generation of film critics and audiences. In an article in *Time* magazine in December 1967, the author notes that Crowther "was so offended by [*Bonnie and Clyde*] that he reviewed in – negatively – three times." But this is not mere reportage; the article is unashamedly partisan, claiming, "In both conception and execution, *Bonnie and Clyde* is a watershed picture, the kind that signal a new style, a new trend."<sup>29</sup> Given the context, Crowther's negative reviews of the film act as circumstantial evidence for *Bonnie and Clyde*'s revolutionary credentials.

If a war was being waged, most of the aggression came from one side. To be sure, Crowther's attacks on *Bonnie and Clyde* were repeated and somewhat hysterical, and another of the old guard, Dwight MacDonald, who expressed admiration for *Bonnie and Clyde*, fired his own salvo by resigning in protest at Andrew Sarris's appointment as a film critic for *Film Quarterly*; MacDonald claimed that Sarris was not a critic but "a systematic fool. His judgements have nothing to do with criticism, since he merely applies the party line to each movie."<sup>30</sup> But, for the most part, the hip young gun film critics such as Sarris and Kael advanced unhindered, their respective

profiles magnified by repeated and highly public disagreements regarding the merits of auteur theory.

The critical sea change and, more importantly, the different tastes of the new generation was something not lost on Levine, who commented in June 1967: “We spent the last eighteen months making family films which no family saw. My son went to see *Blow Up*.”<sup>31</sup> In November 1967 *Variety* reported that, according to research conducted by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), film attendance figures were declining in all demographics bar the under 30s.<sup>32</sup> Levine was ideally placed to take advantage of the changing climate; the following month, and one week after *Time*’s account of a new, franker, European-influenced Hollywood, Embassy released *The Graduate*.

### ***The Graduate***

Having announced *The Graduate* in October 1964,<sup>33</sup> for it to come to fruition ready for a December 1967 release date was, given the critical atmosphere, market conditions and industrial climate of the time, remarkably fortuitous. Nonetheless, even with Levine’s stars in a seemingly spectacular alignment it would be wrong to attribute such a remarkable turn of events to mere good fortune.

Perhaps the most influential writing on film during the 1960s came from Andrew Sarris and, in particular, his famous “Notes on Auteur Theory in 1962,”<sup>34</sup> published in 1962, a piece influenced by Truffaut’s 1954 essay “A Certain Trend in the French Cinema.” In calling for a new, director focussed, set of criteria by which films should be judged, Sarris generated debate and pointed to a novel way in which films could be viewed by the cinephile. In a less modular way, Levine already knew

the power of the director and, as we have seen, spent much of the early 1960s importing European films by notable directors that provided much sustenance to the serious movie goer. It is no coincidence that two of the films that Sarris uses to demonstrate the viability of auteur theory are Embassy imports – *Boccaccio 70* and *Seven Capital Sins*.<sup>35</sup>

In no small way, then, Levine contributed to the creation of the critical climate that was so influential during the 1960s – a climate he despised, a climate that he claimed was ruinous to arthouse cinema and responsible, in part, for his decision to develop a greater focus on domestic film production during the mid 1960s; yet this decision was also significant to the US’s critical climate. In Sarris’s article, he trots out a list of twenty “auteurs” in order of what he perceives to be their qualitative rank; almost all are European, with half a dozen either from the US or working in Hollywood, and all bar one are at least in their 50s, Jean Vigo providing the fresh face by default given his untimely death.<sup>36</sup> As if calling for a corrective, 1964 saw Levine decrying what he perceived to be a shortage of directors in Hollywood<sup>37</sup> whilst also seeming to solve his own problem by signing the youthful (32) Mike Nichols to direct *The Graduate* as his first feature.

By the time Levine signed Nichols to direct *The Graduate* the latter was attracting a great deal of attention as a theatre director of note. The recording of his first Broadway production with his improvisational comedy partner, *An Evening With Mike Nichols and Elaine May* (1960), had won the 1962 Grammy for Best Comedy Album and his 1963 production of Neil Simon’s *Barefoot in the Grass* had received rave reviews. By 1964, having scored another success with his production of Murray Schisgal’s *Luv*, he was the toast of Broadway. Barney Lefferts of the *New York Times* had this to say about the hotshot young director:

Show folk, like other emotionally disoriented citizens who are forever straining to devise new ways of lassoing still another buck, are quick to notice when one of them becomes a front runner, a fellow possessed of that dark and inexplicable talent that translates ... into box office receipts.<sup>38</sup>

By the time Lefferts made these observations, Levine had already built up a working relationship with Nichols. Aside from having signed up to direct *The Graduate* the previous month, Nichols had directed an off-Broadway Levine-produced play the previous spring, Ann Jellicoe's *The Knack*. Sybil Burton of the Establishment Theatre Company, a UK based company that included David Balding and Peter Cook, came to Levine through her friend Stanley Baker in order to obtain funding for the project. Intriguingly, Burton commented in 1964 that Levine "calls the group 'Reservoir of Talent' and I think that is Levine's greatest quality. He recognises and uses talent."<sup>39</sup>

Nichols's presence in this reservoir of talent appears to have been happenstance but providential for Levine, who was quick to capitalise. "As a result of being involved with *The Knack*," reported the *New York Times* in early 1965, "[Levine] was able to 'get to know Mike' and persuade him to direct the upcoming film *The Graduate*."<sup>40</sup> Although the evidence suggests that it was Nichols and Turman who persuaded Levine of the viability of the project – and, it was Turman who bought the rights to the novel and was the initial driving force behind the project – it is true that Levine was eager to work with Nichols at this time.

For Turman, this eagerness was motivated by factors other than Nichols's talent as a director, suggesting that Levine was keen to advance his own artistic reputation: "*The Graduate* was Levine's entrée into a classier world of film than he was used to ... I think [Levine funded *The Graduate*] to be associated with Mike Nichols, who was already hot stuff in the NY world of chic."<sup>41</sup> This is perhaps an overly cynical view that overlooks Levine's track record of discovering and supporting new talent, but not one without merit. In 1965, *Variety* reported:

It is noted that the now celebrated line JOSEPH E. LEVINE PRESENTS ... has been absent from [Embassy's] low budget entries, and those close to Levine have made it clear that, at this stage in his career, the boss is anxious to have his name associated with "class" product only.<sup>42</sup>

Such an approach represented a change of tack for Levine, who had hitherto gloried in being simultaneously associated with prestige and exploitation pictures – his main sources of pride had always been his multifariousness along with his ability to confound expectations and contravene cultural barriers. Nonetheless, Levine's name was absent from the publicity material for films such as *Jesse James Meets Frankenstein's Daughter* and *Billy The Kid vs. Dracula*; and the article gives hints of the "class" product Levine wished to be associated with, mentioning upcoming director-led Embassy projects such as *Runaway Train* – to be the first US produced, English language production for Akira Kurosawa, though the project eventually fell through<sup>43</sup> – and *The Graduate*.

Aside from grander associative resonances for its president, the article also indicates a radical policy overhaul at Embassy and an adoption of new strategies. With the commercial failure of many of the low budget and family films, Embassy would concentrate its future energies in making “nothing but ‘big’ English language films.”<sup>44</sup> This would mean no more co-productions with indies or majors, and the “end of an era” was signalled by the film *Shoot Loud, Louder ... I Don't Understand* (1966, Eduardo de Filippo) which was to be the last Italian production with which Embassy would be involved.

The willingness and ability to enact such a major about-turn, to completely abandon a policy in favour of a new, more expensive, policy provides good evidence of Levine and Embassy's nimbleness and willingness to take risks, and sits in marked contrast to critics who had accused Levine of being a mere opportunist. Levine's new approach of cutting out imports and co-productions, making fewer films and ensuring the ones made were “expensive and in English,”<sup>45</sup> was a strategy that, for *Variety*, represented the “biggest gamble of his career.”<sup>46</sup> But Levine was notably attuned to cultural and cinematic mores, in spite – or even because – of his recently failed policies at Embassy.

In 1966, Levine told Calvin Tomkins that a film like *Hercules* could not be guided to success in the contemporary market climate: “Of course, that kind of promotion, that kind of picture – you couldn't sell it now. People have become very skilful at smelling out what's good and what's lousy.”<sup>47</sup> The following year, in the wake of *Bonnie and Clyde*, would find Roman Polanski concurring with this view: “TV has changed the world by changing people's attitudes ... When they are born with a TV set in their room – well – you can't fool them any more.”<sup>48</sup> Also, Levine's assessment of the changing audience, “People don't go to the movies, they go to a

movie,”<sup>49</sup> would be echoed by Paramount’s Head of Production, Robert Evans: “Today, people go to see a movie; they no longer go to the movies,” he told *Time*, “We can’t depend on habit anymore. We have to make ‘I’ve got to see that’ pictures.”<sup>50</sup> It is worth remembering that Levine not only got there first with his assessments of the changing market and audience, but also, at 62, was considerably older than Polanski and Evans – who were both in their 30s. This is significant as it complicates the traditional understanding of the New Hollywood industrial shift as being generational.

When Evans implemented a policy overhaul at Paramount, he turned around the studio’s fortunes with films made by veterans – *Love Story* (1970, Arthur Hiller) – and established talent from world cinema – *Rosemary’s Baby* (1970, Roman Polanski) – to complement the supporting of new talents such as Hal Ashby. With *Runaway Train* having fallen through, Levine placed his faith in the relatively untested, Mike Nichols, Mel Brooks and Anthony Harvey.

When Turman and Nichols approached Levine for funding for *The Graduate* the project had, in Turman’s account, been rejected by “every single studio.”<sup>51</sup> According to Turman, Levine agreed to fund the project because, “I told him I could make it for a million bucks, which was my honest hope/intention at the time.”<sup>52</sup> Once completed, the budget had risen to 3.2 million. However, two things had occurred during the intervening years. First, Levine had abandoned his strategy of making low budget films and seemed intent on increasing the production values for Embassy product. Second, Mike Nichols stock as a director, both in theatre and in film, had continued to rise, having had another major hit on Broadway – Neil Simon’s *The Odd Couple* in 1965 – and a notable cinematic success with *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966),



a film which would earn him a Best Director nomination at the 1967 Academy Awards.

Levine allowing Nichols to direct *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* for Warner Bros became the source of a typically self-aggrandising Levine anecdote, reportedly telling Julian Schlossberg, "I let him learn on Jack's money."<sup>53</sup> Though this is something of a Levine-ism, it demonstrates that by the time *The Graduate* began filming Nichols had proved his mettle; and before the film was even made, Levine was calling Nichols "a genius."<sup>54</sup> Admittedly, hyperbole was part and parcel of Levine's approach but what is interesting is how his association with Nichols is presented as a vindication of his new production strategies. Speaking in December 1966 he told Calvin Tomkins:

We won't be doing as many things as we've done in the past, but they'll all be big budget pictures. Like this picture Mike Nichols is doing for us now – *The Graduate*. Mike is a genius, and we may really have ourselves something there. It all depends on how things break of course.<sup>55</sup>

As already noted, the way things broke for *The Graduate* could not have been more opportune. However, Levine always maintained that it was the director who inspired his confidence, rather than the project itself. Speaking in 1979 Levine said Nichols had given him a copy of the novel and he disliked it but agreed to fund the project nonetheless. When asked if the project was a result of him trusting Nichols's judgement, Levine replied, "To a certain extent that's true, plus my own judgement. If the script had not pleased me, I would have dropped it. However, I was confident that

he would be a winner. The rest is history.”<sup>56</sup> Notably, Levine felt that “he” (Nichols) would be a winner as opposed to the source material.

Given the market conditions, *The Graduate* was ideal fare for the emerging audience of the youthful cognoscenti. It provided an accessible mix of freewheeling European filmmaking style and frankness with the jolly cynicism of the British New Wave, alongside gestures toward the counterculture and the generation gap, whilst being steeped in unmistakably American genre traditions. Also, given the film’s influence, importance and political/historical moment, one appealing factor of the film is all too often overlooked – it is very funny.

For Turman, the Euro connection has been rather overplayed, yet he concedes that he “always had a predilection for European movies.”<sup>57</sup> He has also noted that he and Nichols chose to cast Eddra Gale as a homage to Euro-art films due to her appearance in *8½*.<sup>58</sup> Turman is keen to emphasize the film’s American pedigree, noting, “Mike felt it dealt with Hollywood materialism.”<sup>59</sup> However, despite such claims for specificity, *The Graduate* was also a genre film, a romantic/screwball comedy, a fact noted by Sklar<sup>60</sup> and Ray.<sup>61</sup> But the genre had been given a modern twist; it had been repackaged to incorporate the alienated youth motifs of the previous decade’s films such as *Rebel Without a Cause* and *King Creole* and was aimed squarely at the expanding youth market. What Turman and Nichols were doing for Levine was communicating directly with an important segment of the cinema audience, just as Capra had done for Cohn in the 1930s.

Given that *The Graduate* was hardly a low budget film, Levine granted an extraordinary amount of latitude to Turman and Nichols, displaying a great deal of faith in their respective talents. Perhaps even more remarkable than the free hand granted to them in terms of filmmaking, was the fact that they also had a hand in the

marketing of the film in terms of choosing promotional material: “It was Mike and myself . . . who arranged and selected the famous photo that became our logo, that of Dustin’s figure underneath Anne Bancroft’s leg. A Brit designer, Richard Williams, by the way, came up with that.”<sup>62</sup> When it came to the actual selling of the film, however, Turman emphasises that “Joe Levine was a high-powered kick-ass salesman, and he sure sold the hell out of *The Graduate*.”<sup>63</sup>

Justin Wyatt has noted the commercial success of *The Graduate*, suggesting:

Independent companies [such as Embassy] thrived in exploiting market segments ignored by the majors. These smaller studios were able to prosper in this environment through two methods: (1) by working with subject matter untouched by the majors and (2) by operating outside the traditional realm of the majors in terms of distribution.<sup>64</sup>

Yet this analysis fails to provide a comprehensive summation of the industrial situation in the late 1960s as it relies rather too heavily on the supposed radical subject matter of independent productions at this time, as well as overplaying the indie/major distinction. It should be noted that many of the independent films that were so influential in the formation of the New Hollywood were distributed by majors,<sup>65</sup> which suggests that they were eager to engage with youth audiences by dealing with edgier subject matter, yet, for the most part, did so with foreign product.

By the time *The Graduate* was released in December 1967, the success of *Bonnie and Clyde* had created a sympathetic press climate, with writers seemingly

ready to embrace the idea of a New Hollywood, as evidenced here by Stanley Kaufman:

After months of prattle about the 'new' American film (mostly occasioned by the overrated *Bonnie and Clyde*) *The Graduate* gives some substance to the contention that American films are coming of age – of our age.<sup>66</sup>

For Andrew Sarris, the success of the film was organic:

The kids kept standing on line for a) Dustin Hoffman and b) Simon and Garfunkel. Then the adults stood on line to find out why the kids stood on line. Then the deep thinkers on the prestige publications stood on line to find out why the adults stood on line.<sup>67</sup>

The successes of *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Graduate* no doubt contributed to the feeling of a new era in filmmaking – one that seemingly sprung from grass roots cinemagoers, as Biskind contends: “*Bonnie and Clyde* was a movement movie; like *The Graduate*, young audiences recognised it as ‘theirs.’<sup>68</sup> Yet *The Graduate*’s supposed organic evolution to mega-hit status was, in part, an illusion created by Levine. Whereas Levine had saturated the US with *Hercules*, affording the opportunity for anyone with sufficiently aroused curiosity to see it, the strategy for *The Graduate* was to demand some effort on the part of the audience; as noted earlier, Levine recognised that *Hercules* tactics could not be used.

In May 1967 *Variety* hinted at how Levine planned to guide the film to success. “The film will open at Christmas with the usual Levine exploitation,” ran the article, “He may play it hard ticket in smaller theatres ... ‘Word of mouth’ says Levine, ‘is still the best publicity.’”<sup>69</sup> As noted in the introduction to this chapter, Justin Wyatt sees the innovations in distribution practices during the New Hollywood era as representing a move away from the practice of roadshowing, yet with *The Graduate* Levine was drawing on this very technique. Sold out theatres and “hard [to get] ticket” strategies formed the basis of roadshowing. Mike Todd, having invested his fortune in *Around The World in Eighty Days* (1956, Michael Anderson) would, according to legend, stimulate interest in his film by personally placing “Theatre Full” signs outside half empty venues. For *The Graduate* Levine used similar tricks,

I made sure it would kick off in the modern shopping centre cinemas where the kids drive to; also that it would be in smaller houses, for longer sustained runs and the attendant ballyhoo that you ‘can’t get in.’<sup>70</sup>

Whilst such a strategy may not fully account for *The Graduate*’s phenomenal success, it does show that the appearance of the “lines” spoken of by Sarris was no accident. It was these lines that led to the film’s seeming grass roots appeal, the “independent judgement” spoken of by Sklar, as well as bolstering the youth audiences’ claim to ownership of the film, as noted by Biskind, and the ultimate creation of Evans’s “‘I’ve got to see that’ film.”

Levine’s approach to marketing had always been to assume the role of the carny barker, aggressively hyping the films with which he was involved, whilst

concurrently hyping himself and Embassy by presenting himself as the public face of all the projects with which he was involved. As we have seen, at this time Levine was becoming choosier about what he would attach his name to and, following the enormous success of *The Graduate*, he aggressively sought to associate himself, at the expense of the film's producer, with *The Graduate* and its director, as Turman explains:

In my face-to-face negotiation with him [Levine] for *The Graduate* I refused to allow him Executive Producer credit (commonplace today and for him at that time) and then once the film became a big hit he did everything he could to obliterate me, including at our celebratory party attempting to seat me a mile away from himself with Mike Nichols and cast members. Mike had to intervene on my behalf.<sup>71</sup>

Levine's association with Nichols and *The Graduate* remained a frequently exploited source of self-promotion for the remainder of his career. Most significant, however, were the kudos generated by his association with *The Graduate* and its director; kudos that were converted into an extremely valuable bargaining chip when Levine came to sell his company to the Avco Corporation.

### **The Corporatisation of Embassy**

By the beginning of 1967 it became clear that Hollywood was in a remarkable state of upheaval, prompting Vincent Canby to comment, "Not since the Depression years has the motion picture industry – that strange and volatile business – experienced so many

traumas, in number and in kind, as it did in 1966.”<sup>72</sup> The acquisition of Paramount by Gulf and Western was, for Paul Monaco, a “catalyst that propelled the entire motion picture industry in new directions;”<sup>73</sup> subsequent events bear testament to this assertion. The following year saw Transamerica’s acquisition of United Artists and Seven Arts’ buyout of Warner Brothers upon Jack Warner’s retirement; 1968 saw Avco’s acquisition of Embassy Pictures; the following year Seven Arts sold Warner Brothers to Kinney National Services and, also in 1969, came the sale of MGM to real estate magnate Kirk Kerkorian.

By the time of the Gulf and Western buyout, Paramount, as a major studio, was seriously under performing. On 19<sup>th</sup> October 1966 Paramount’s stockholders voted overwhelmingly in favour of a merger with Gulf and Western. Paramount officials defended the merger, according to Leonard Sloane of the *New York Times*, “citing the significance of the merger as a step adding strength, youthfulness and aggressiveness to their company.”<sup>74</sup>

There were, however, objections. At the shareholders’ meeting which approved the sale of Paramount some shareholders voiced concern. “We are exchanging our understated assets for securities whose values we have not been told,” complained one Morton M. Adler, “They know what they’re buying but we don’t know what they are selling and we don’t know what they are getting.”<sup>75</sup> Tino Balio has noted that the undervaluing of the film studios’ stock and the increasing value of their film libraries to cater for the demand from television, along with the valuable real estate owned by many studios, were the key factors behind the corporatisation of Hollywood in the late 1960s.<sup>76</sup> “Historically,” wrote Sloane in 1966, “motion picture stocks have always been sold at low price-earning ratios.”<sup>77</sup> By 1966 the attractiveness of such a situation

was compounded by the rocketing value of the vast film libraries owned by the studios, as Peter Bart noted:

The libraries of old movies controlled by the studios have soared in value, yet the shares in movie companies have continued to sell at price-earning ratios below those of comparable companies in other industries. These depressed prices make them attractive for corporate takeovers.<sup>78</sup>

In the 1950s many in the film industry had seen television as an enemy, but by the mid-1960s the former adversary had apparently revealed itself to be a powerful ally. In 1965 Charles Champlin reported that in the week ending September 5<sup>th</sup> around 235 films had been shown on Los Angeles TV screens and also noted that NBC was adding an extra night of prime time movies, on Tuesdays, to complement its Saturday Night at the Movies strand.<sup>79</sup>

The following year, amid the scramble for more films on the small screen, television began to emerge as the junior partner in a relationship in which movies were gaining the upper hand, a situation exemplified by ABC's decision not to renew Milton "Mr. Television" Berle's contract due to a drop in ratings as TV viewers chose to watch films rather than made-for-TV fare.<sup>80</sup> By 1968, as NBC added a third night of movies to its schedule, feature films were being shown on television every night of the week<sup>81</sup> and the studios, having seemingly conquered television, were fighting in the courts to prevent television companies from making films for theatrical release.<sup>82</sup>

Throughout his career Levine had maintained a belief in the power of television and its capacity to aid, rather than hinder, the development of the motion picture



industry. As early as 1958 Levine was stressing the importance of having a high turnaround of product based on television's rapacious consumption of movies.<sup>83</sup> However, as already noted, by the mid-1960s Levine was beginning to discover that TV was not quite the indiscriminate glutton he had hoped, displaying little appetite for Embassy's lower-end product such as *Jesse James Meets Frankenstein's Daughter*. Indeed, by 1965 a set of criteria began to emerge relating to the chances of a film being well received on the tube. According to Charles Champlin:

Musicals do poorly on television, suffering most from the small screen but also from the fact that the best musicals are denied to television. Foreign films do badly with neither dubbing nor subtitles striking viewers as satisfactory.<sup>84</sup>

Two further developments to be factored into this situation are the arrival of colour television and the relaxation of television censorship. The former development made black and white films less marketable,<sup>85</sup> whilst the latter made films with adult themes more acceptable. By 1967, *Never on a Sunday* had been screened uncut whilst *Tom Jones* and *Blow Up* had been screened with only a little trimming.<sup>86</sup> Levine, then, had been proved correct in his decision to abandon television orientated family product. Tino Balio has observed of this period:

As the relations between [film and television] stabilized, television income became expected and planned for. Few film projects were put into production without assessing their potential on TV and a TV sale was used as collateral in obtaining financing.<sup>87</sup>

The allure of television's appetite for motion pictures may have enticed Levine down something of a blind alley with his move into the low-budget and family markets in 1965, a move indicative of an over-optimism on his part concerning television's uncritical consumption, yet he was nimble enough to regroup and approach the situation from a fresh perspective, pursuing projects of greater prestige such as *The Graduate* and *The Lion In Winter*.

With corporations circling and sniffing around film companies it was natural that Embassy Pictures should attract attention, especially given the dramatic makeover Levine had given his company over the previous months. In March 1967, Levine appeared to be pointedly non-committal about the possibility of a merger, telling *Variety*, "We've had three offers from people who wanted to swallow us up completely, but we're too big to be swallowed;"<sup>88</sup> comments that sit in contrast to the fears he expressed in 1964 about being "swallowed up" by Paramount, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Such confidence, coming nine months or so before the release of *The Graduate*, the film that would become an invaluable bargaining chip for Levine, could be interpreted as typical Joe Levine hyperbole but can also be read as indicative of a cautious confidence that existed in the industry at the time. The case of Paramount, an under-performing studio courting corporate favour as a means of ensuring survival, was not the typical Hollywood story in the late 1960s. Throughout the 1960s Hollywood had been undergoing a period of slow but sure regeneration; the dark days of the 1950s appeared to be gone. Thanks to the college crowd, attendances for movies had been on the ascendant and, although attendances were still nowhere near the figures of the immediate post-war years, box office grosses had, by 1962, regained

their 1948 level, thanks to the doubling of ticket prices since 1945. Subsequent years saw domestic box office records broken.<sup>89</sup>

By the time Avco came to acquire Embassy, Levine's company had scored an enormous success in *The Graduate*. Unlike Paramount, Embassy Pictures was a successful company with a promising future. If Embassy had anything in common with the major studios seeking or attracting corporate interest, it had most in common with United Artists, acquired by TransAmerica in early 1967.

Like Embassy, UA built much of its reputation in the 1960s on foreign films. Following Levine's lead, UA participated in the short-lived peplum craze, investing in films such as the Steve Reeves vehicles *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1959, Mario Bonnard) and *The Minotaur* (1961, Silvio Amadio) before investing in peplum's successor, the spaghetti-westerns of Sergio Leone. Other notable UA successes of the 1960s were The Beatles' vehicle *A Hard Day's Night* (1964, Richard Lester), Oscar winner *Tom Jones* and the James Bond series. Like Levine, UA's Arthur Krim and Robert Benjamin had a strong hand, in terms of cinematic success, to take into the boardroom.

Another aspect of their respective businesses that worked in their favour was the fact of being unburdened by a studio. Levine had told Katherine Hamill in 1964 "I hope I never even own a camera,"<sup>90</sup> and this was precisely the kind of attitude which had contributed to the success of both companies. "In a day of independent production, United Artists is the prime symbol and, indeed, the prime beneficiary," wrote Charles Champlin, "The corporation owns no studio and thus owns no major, continuing real-estate overheads."<sup>91</sup> In the post-studio world of film production, the real estate tied to the major studios was seen as an unwieldy and unnecessary burden. The fact that Embassy was "not weighted down" by such concerns was, according to

James R. Kerr, President of Avco, a key factor in Avco's decision to acquire Embassy.<sup>92</sup>

What made Embassy unique in their field, however, was that, as a concern, it was essentially owner-operated. As mentioned earlier, many of Paramount's stockholders objected, albeit in vain, to the company's merger with Gulf and Western in 1966. That same year when United Artists announced that it would merge with Consolidated Foods, many of UA's stockholders objected and were successful in blocking the merger.<sup>93</sup> As far as Embassy Pictures was concerned, to sell or not to sell was a question Levine had to ask only of himself, and Avco only had to wait on only one man for an answer.

Another important factor is that Embassy, being privately owned, did not have concerns with regards to the undervaluing of stocks which had made the major studios so enticing for the corporations; being privately owned meant that Embassy were under no obligation to make its earnings public. Following the enormous success of *The Graduate*, Levine found himself with an extremely useful bargaining tool. Whereas other companies were selling for less than their true value, Embassy's recent turnaround put the company in a commanding position at the negotiating table and helped to push the asking price up to \$40 million. A few months after the merger James R. Kerr wrote in *Variety*:

The question has been asked: would Avco have been interested in Embassy without *The Graduate*? The answer is an unqualified *yes*. Negotiations were already well advanced by the time *The Graduate* came out of the cutting room. The remarkable success of the film did, on the other hand, affect the eventual financial arrangement. But we

also had some knowledge of what Levine had up his sleeve in the way of projects and forthcoming releases.<sup>94</sup>

The forthcoming releases up Embassy's sleeve were *The Lion in Winter*, which was to star cinematic heavyweights Peter O'Toole and Katherine Hepburn; and *The Producers*, written and directed by the popular television comic Mel Brooks, famous at the time for his partnership with Carl Reiner. Shortly after the merger Kerr expressed his confidence in Levine's company by predicting that Embassy would generate 50 cents per share for the company in the coming year. Levine himself predicted a "record year" for Embassy;<sup>95</sup> well, to quote Mandy-Rice Davies, he would say that, wouldn't he?

For Levine, the deal with Avco meant not only \$40 million and a \$200,000 p.a. salary as president of Avco Embassy Pictures, but also freedom. Levine was granted full control over Avco Embassy<sup>96</sup> and was also able to take advantage of the corporation's assets: "We now have an endless revolving credit with Avco," he told *Variety*. Levine also seemed to be anticipating a more diverse output from his company now that it was part of Avco, explaining, "I'll still make speciality pictures but now we'll have major status."<sup>97</sup> Such a status was granted in September 1968, as Avco Embassy became the MPAA's first new member in twenty-one years.<sup>98</sup>

From James R. Kerr's point of view, "Levine's company provides Avco with an enhanced public image. It strengthens notably our toehold in the leisure time field; it provides a firm base for further development in that field."<sup>99</sup> With such a mutually beneficial relationship the union seemed to be a happy one and the following November, six months after the initial nuptials, the marriage between Avco and Embassy was commemorated, as had Levine's partnership with Paramount six years

earlier, with a gigantic publicity blitz in *Variety*. This blitz allowed Avco to take advantage of its newly “enhanced public image” thanks to its involvement in the glamorous world of moviemaking.

Avco was a highly diversified corporation involved in everything from insurance and banking to the manufacture of farm equipment and weaponry so its association with Embassy Pictures added a much-needed vibrancy to the corporation’s public image. That said, the glamour in the partnership reflected both ways; Avco’s government contracts included some for NASA, thereby associating the corporation with perhaps the most glamorous and exciting endeavour of the Twentieth Century, the Apollo moon shot, proposed for the following year. The twin glamour of tinseltown and space exploration was displayed in the company’s circular logo, the top half of which depicted the moon and the bottom half a film reel, accompanied by the slogan, “Avco EMBASSY. A company on its way to the moon.”

*Variety*’s issue for 13<sup>th</sup> November 1968 was dominated by the Avco Embassy’s tribute to itself. Running from pages 31 to 119 the advertising broadside featured tributes from various influential characters – James R. Kerr, Jack Valenti (President of the MPAA), John V. Lindsay (Mayor of New York) and Senator Jacob K. Javits – as well as a plethora of advertisements which gave Avco a chance to brag about its development of a heat shield for the moon shot, and gave Embassy a chance to brag about its upcoming cinematic endeavours. Pride of place for the film projects was *MN2*, standing for *Mike Nichols Two*, an as yet untitled project that would be Mike Nichols’s second film for Embassy (*Carnal Knowledge*), though his third in total, which would allow Levine to continue to trade on the reputation that had changed the course of his career. “Mike Nichols,” ran the blurb, “Academy Award winning

director of *The Graduate* will make his next film for Avco-Embassy. ENOUGH SAID!”

Nichols was not the only familiar face in Avco Embassy’s starting line up. Sidney Lumet, who had directed *A Long Day’s Journey Into Night* for Levine in 1963, was attached to two projects, Harold Robbins three, Jules Dassin one and John Michael Hayes one. Also included was a notable prestige project, an adaptation of Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* to star Kirk Douglas, along with moderate potboilers such as *The Man Who Had Power Over Women* (1970, John Krish).

Being under the auspices of the Avco Corporation apparently allowed Levine to indulge his multifarious appetites with the promise of security provided by the corporation’s billions, as Joyce Haber reported:

Now Joe Levine’s manicured right hand knows exactly what his scruffy left hand is doing. For example, he has signed Mike Nichols to direct another movie, for which he’ll pay him a record \$1 million. But he also has some left-handers about to break, including something called *The Terrornaughts*. (Subtitle: *The Virgin Sacrifices to the Gods of the Ghastly Galaxies*.)<sup>100</sup>

Levine’s advocacy of the development of a varied roster for Avco Embassy was somewhat out of step with contemporary industry mores, but also prescient. Aniko Bodroghkozy has suggested that Avco Embassy “jump[ed] on the rebellious youth bandwagon”<sup>101</sup> in 1969, but this is quite an overstatement. Certainly Levine saw in the young a market worth tapping, voicing his support for a program of “non-

conformist cinema” at Avco Embassy yet he also warns against placing too much faith in such a market: “I do not intend to stop production for general audiences but I am going ahead to make films for young people and encourage young talent as a program in itself.”<sup>102</sup> Caveats regarding eggs and baskets were made more explicit by Levine a few months later when he noted, “Neither *The Love Bug* or *Airport* is anti-establishment, so producers just can’t afford to set their goals on youngsters.”<sup>103</sup>

Levine’s reticence stood in contrast to the policies being pursued at UA. For Balio, UA’s roster of films at this time was “alarmingly out of sync with the public taste,” as they pursued the dollars and cents associated with fast-fading filmic trends and the targeting of the youth market in particular.<sup>104</sup> Thomas Shatz has observed of this time that “Hollywood’s cultivation of the youth market and penchant for innovation in the late 1960s and early 1970s scarcely indicated a favourable market climate. On the contrary, they reflected the studios’ uncertainty and growing desperation.”<sup>105</sup> Levine seemed aware of this and his comments are notable for their distinction between making films for the youth market and affording opportunities for young filmmakers – a cause he had been banging the drum for since the early 1960s.

For Charles Champlin, movies at the turn of the decade were no longer a mass medium in trouble – as it had been at the beginning of the 1960s – but rather a “newly influential [and] wildly divergent”<sup>106</sup> art form. Yet such divergence was causing headaches for the industry. A few months following Levine’s warning regarding the youth market Paramount saw its fortunes revived by the youthful, sentimental and sugary *Love Story* (Arthur Hiller, 1970), while Avco-Embassy’s youthful, violent, anti-war, allegorical western *Soldier Blue* (Ralph Nelson, 1970) failed to set the box office tills ringing. And while audiences at the box office became ever more inscrutable, the television bubble burst. With movie nights running seven nights a



week by 1968-69 audiences became, according to Balio, more “selective and ratings dropped.” Also, the number of made for TV movies skyrocketed with disastrous results for Hollywood as it faced the prospect of a recession.<sup>107</sup>

Rising box office receipts and the tantalizing prospect of large dividends from a dependant and voracious television had piqued the interest of corporations who had been circling Hollywood in the mid-late 1960s. Within a couple of years audiences had become unruly and television had begun to fight back. A series of unwise moves had left UA with an uncertain future and Fox and Columbia in financial trouble.

Over at MGM, Kirk Kirkorian had appointed Jim Aubrey, dubbed “the smiling cobra” by producer John Houseman,<sup>108</sup> to head operations. Aubrey infuriated directors and producers alike during his tenure, many of whom – notably Robert Altman and Ken Russell – voiced their concerns to the press,<sup>109</sup> incandescent at the kind of interference and micro-management of which his predecessor, Louis B. Mayer, had been such a prime exponent decades before. By 1972 MGM no longer distributed its own product and began selling off its real estate.<sup>110</sup>

Meanwhile, at Paramount, the marriage between the corporate world and the world of film got off to a shaky start before heading off to the stratosphere. Gulf and Western’s Charles Bludhorn sat at the helm, appointing obscure B-movie actor Robert Evans as Head of Production. Evans oversaw such box office disasters as *Paint Your Wagon* (1969, Joshua Logan) before striking gold with *Love Story* and then *The Godfather* (1971, Francis Ford Coppola), the latter largely credited with ending the Hollywood recession and ushering in a new era of confidence in the industry, as evidenced by Paramount’s continued rise and UA’s resurgence in the mid-1970s, kick-started by the success of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1974, Milos

Foreman), a property Avco Embassy had advertised as its own in the pages of *Variety* in 1968.

Following Levine's enormous windfall in May 1968, coming hot on the heels of the phenomenal success of *The Graduate*, Levine's tenure as President of Avco Embassy Pictures was singularly undramatic. Avco Embassy suffered not the dramatic downturn of UA, nor experienced the astonishing rebirth of Paramount or the chaos of MGM. Of the films produced or distributed during Avco Embassy's Levine years few are of any real interest, commercially or artistically.

By the end of his tenure his relationship with Mike Nichols, who had been so instrumental in boosting Levine's stock as a filmmaker, was going off the boil. Nichols, having made *Catch-22* for Paramount in 1970, returned to Avco Embassy to make the commercial and critical success, *Carnal Knowledge* in 1971; this film was followed by the final Levine-Nichols collaboration, *The Day of the Dolphin*, in 1973. The film was a failure both with critics and punters. For Levine, "people went to see the film expecting to see Nichols's grim 'schticula,' but instead saw an adventure film. Mike Nichols name on the film hurt it."<sup>111</sup> Nichols, incidentally, was also dismissive of *Day of the Dolphin*: "It really came about because I needed to find something to get out of my contract with Joe Levine,"<sup>112</sup> he told Gavin Smith in 1999.

As regards the corporatisation of Hollywood, Levine expressed concerns:

This is no business for big business – it's an art form. You can't have endless meetings. Someone's got to have instinct. I never had a meeting in my life before I got here [Avco]. Not because I was opinionated ... but because I had confidence in my judgements.<sup>113</sup>

While such comments may seem self-aggrandizing, one should remember the extraordinary level of confidence Levine showed in Turman and Nichols and the success it brought. Moreover, with regard to *Day of the Dolphin*, one gets the impression that Nichols was not Levine's choice to direct the film,<sup>114</sup> indicating that he was not enjoying the autonomy and independence he was used to.

Levine's comments also reveal a certain level of frustration with the corporate structures within which he was now entangled, frustrations magnified by the fact that these comments were made while Levine was still at Avco. It is also a little ironic to note that during the time of the movie industry's most dramatic convulsions since the coming of sound, Levine's own career had never been – and never would be again – so undramatic and pedestrian.

When one is faced with an appealing and romantic story-arc of siege and takeover by the young and vibrant it can, perhaps, be tempting to submit attention to detail in favour of an over arching drama. *The Graduate* is acknowledged as an extremely important film in the emergence of New Hollywood but is often depicted as an also-ran alongside *Bonnie and Clyde*.

Given closer inspection, it is a film that does not truly fit into the traditional story of the Hollywood renaissance. I would argue, however, that the fact that it does not fit does not diminish its importance in engendering new approaches to Hollywood filmmaking, but rather that a close analysis of its production contexts and success rather suggests that the story of the New Hollywood has been rather romanticised and idealised.

The sale of Embassy to Avco for \$40 million in 1968 demonstrates the importance of independent production companies at this time. The corporatisation of Hollywood has received a good deal of attention from film writers and scholars, but

the discussion of the case of Embassy adds a good deal to the discussion surrounding these events, not least as it contradicts the traditional view regarding the collapse of the decrepit studio system in the late 1960s.

What this chapter has sought to demonstrate is that a rigorous and detailed analysis of complex industrial interactions can lead to a fuller, less mythical, understanding of cinematic developments, particularly when dealing with an era that is so often stratified, factionalised and reduced to notions of movements and mavericks.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How The Sex n Drugs n Rock n Roll Generation Saved Hollywood*, (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> Derek Nystrom, 'Hard Hats and Movie Brats: Auteurs and the Class Politics of the New Hollywood,' *Cinema Journal* 43, No. 3, Spring 2004, p. 18-41.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Kramer, *The New Hollywood: From Bonnie and Clyde to Star Wars* (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2005), p. 83-4.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*, p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> Robert E. Kapsis, *Hitchcock: The Making of a Reputation* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992) p. 69.

<sup>7</sup> Bernard F. Dick, *Harry Cohn of Columbia Pictures: The Merchant Prince of Poverty Row* (Lexington. University of Kentucky Press, 1993), p. 89-119.

<sup>8</sup> Leonard Leff, *Hitchcock and Selznick* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988), p. 24.

<sup>9</sup> Mathew Bernstein, *Walter Wanger: Hollywood Independent* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 120-124.

<sup>10</sup> Justin Wyatt, 'From Roadshowing to Saturation Release: Majors, Independents and Marketing/Distribution Innovations,' in Jon Lewis, (ed) *The New American Cinema*, (London: Duke University Press 1998) p. 64-86.

<sup>11</sup> 'Embassy Expanding Operations; Levine Will Give More Time to Production,' *Hollywood Reporter*, 2<sup>nd</sup> August, 1965.

<sup>12</sup> 'Levine Prepping 4 'Family' Pix; Hopes to Improve Image,' *Variety* 26<sup>th</sup> January 1965.

<sup>13</sup> 'Levine Plans 20 Low Budget Features To Be Made Here,' *Hollywood Reporter* 13<sup>th</sup> May 1965.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Bob Considine, 'Rosy Future for Films,' *LA Herald Examiner*, 26<sup>th</sup> November 1969.

<sup>15</sup> 'Levine Budgets 8 Embassy Pix at \$18 Mil in Next 6 Months,' *Variety* 10<sup>th</sup> August 1966.

<sup>16</sup> 'Levine Plans 20 Low Budget Features To Be Made Here,' *Hollywood Reporter* 13<sup>th</sup> May 1965.

<sup>17</sup> Charles Champlin, 'TV Off and Running in High-Paying Movie Stakes,' *LA Times*, 5<sup>th</sup> September 1965, p. B10.

<sup>18</sup> 'Embassy in Product Tie-Up With UK Firm,' *Film Daily*, 24 March 1965. Also see 'Levine and Maxwell in Co-Production Deal for Theaters, TV,' *Hollywood Reporter*, 29<sup>th</sup> March 1965.

<sup>19</sup> 'Levine Buys 29 Italo Pix For TV,' *Hollywood Reporter*, 22 October 1965.

<sup>20</sup> Tomkins, Calvin, 'Profiles: The Very Rich Hours of Joe Levine,' *The New Yorker*, 16<sup>th</sup> September 1967, p. 103.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America* (New York: Vintage Books 1994) p. 300-1.

<sup>22</sup> 'Producer-Distributor Levine Finds Two Hat Enough; To Sell Theatres,' *Motion Picture Exhibitor*, 12<sup>th</sup> February 1964.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, p. 301.

<sup>24</sup> Bosley Crowther, 'Screen: A Man Who Would Be An Ape; *Morgan!*, British Film, Begins Sutton Run,' *New York Times*, 5<sup>th</sup> April 1966, p. 42.

<sup>25</sup> Bosley Crowther, 'Cinematic *Tom Jones*; Fielding's Classic Novel Made Into Great Film. Bold Method *Wuthering Heights*,' *New York Times*, Art and Leisure Section, 13<sup>th</sup> October 1963, p. 119.

- <sup>26</sup> Bosley Crowther, 'Screen: *Blow-Up* Arrives at Coronet; Hero Switches Between Luxury and Squalor,' *New York Times*, 19<sup>th</sup> December 1966, p. 52
- <sup>27</sup> Bosley Crowther, 'Shoot-Em Up Film Opens World Fete' *Bonnie and Clyde* Cheered by Montreal First-Nighters,' *New York Times*, 7<sup>th</sup> August 1967, p. 32; 'Screen: *Bonnie and Clyde* Arrives' Careers of Murderers Pictured as Farce,' *New York Times*, 14<sup>th</sup> August 1967, p. 36; 'Run *Bonnie and Clyde*' *New York Times*, Arts and Leisure Section, 3<sup>rd</sup> September, p. 57.
- <sup>28</sup> Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*, p. 39-40.
- <sup>29</sup> 'The Shock of Freedom in Films,' *Time* 8<sup>th</sup> December 1967.  
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,844256,00.html> (Accessed 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2008).
- <sup>30</sup> Dwight MacDonald, 'Films of the Quarter,' *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 17, No. 1, Autumn 1963, p. 55.
- <sup>31</sup> William Tusher, 'Levine's Nix To Family Pix,' *The Film Daily*, 30<sup>th</sup> June 1967.
- <sup>32</sup> 'Film a Goddess to Young Collegians But Babysitters Discourage Marrieds,' *Variety* 1<sup>st</sup> November 1967.
- <sup>33</sup> 'Turman To Film *Grad* For Levine,' Ends Millar Tie,' *Variety* 6<sup>th</sup> October 1964
- <sup>34</sup> Andrew Sarris, 'Notes on Auteur Theory in 1962,' re-printed in in Joanne Hollows, Peter Hutchings and Mark Jancovich (eds.) *The Film Studies Reader* (London: Arnold, 2000), p. 68-71.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, p. 70-1.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, p. 70.
- <sup>37</sup> 'Shortage of Directors Deplored by Levine; CEO. Sidney Stays Mute,' *Variety* 11<sup>th</sup> November 1964.
- <sup>38</sup> Barney Lefferts, 'Now The Mike Nichols Touch,' *New York Times*, 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1964, SM34.
- <sup>39</sup> Sybil Burton, 'Euripedes and The Establishment. Film Producer Puts His Money Where His (Legit) Enthusiasm Is,' *Variety* 22 April 1964, p. 15. NB. Apart from the scepticism that should be afforded to any trade article in which a writer praises her benefactor, it should be noted that this article appeared in what amounted to a pro-Levine "tribute" in *Variety*. The context of this feature is discussed in greater depth in Chapter Seven.
- <sup>40</sup> Lewis Funke, 'Actor Studio Theater Outlines Plans,' *New York Times*, 10 January 1965, p.X1.
- <sup>41</sup> Personal correspondence with author, 2006.
- <sup>42</sup> 'Levine Budgets 8 Embassy Pix at \$18 Mil in Next 6 Months,' *Variety* 10<sup>th</sup> August 1966.
- <sup>43</sup> This project was filmed in 1985 – *Runaway Train* (Andrei Konchalovsky) – without Levine or Kurosawa's involvement. Eddie Bunker's screenplay was based on Kurosawa's.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>45</sup> 'Levine Has 'No Comment' On Mad Sq. Merger, Plenty on Other Topics,' *Variety* 29 March 1967.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>47</sup> Calvin Tomkins, 'Profiles: 'The Very Rich Hours of Joe Levine,' *The New Yorker*, 16<sup>th</sup> September 1967, p. 119.
- <sup>48</sup> 'The Shock of Freedom in Films,' *Time* 8<sup>th</sup> December 1967.  
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,844256,00.html> (Accessed 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2008).
- <sup>49</sup> Charles Champlin, 'Levine, Maestro of Hoopla, Hope,' *Los Angeles Times* 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1967, p. D10.
- <sup>50</sup> 'The Shock of Freedom in Films,' *Time* 8<sup>th</sup> December 1967.  
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,844256,00.html> (Accessed 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2008).
- <sup>51</sup> Larry Turman, *So You Want To Be A Producer?* (Three Rivers Press 2005) p. 195.
- <sup>52</sup> Personal correspondence with author.
- <sup>53</sup> Julian Schlossberg, 'Remembering Joe Levine,' *Variety* 28 October 1996.
- <sup>54</sup> Calvin Tomkins, 'Profiles: The Very Rich Hours of Joe Levine,' *The New Yorker*, 16<sup>th</sup> September 1967, p. 135.
- <sup>55</sup> Calvin Tomkins, 'Profiles: The Very Rich Hours of Joe Levine,' *The New Yorker*, 16<sup>th</sup> September 1967, p. 135.
- <sup>56</sup> 'Dialogue on Film,' *American Film*, September 1979, p. 40.
- <sup>57</sup> Personal correspondence with author.
- <sup>58</sup> Larry Turman, *So You Want To Be A Producer?* p. 201.
- <sup>59</sup> Personal correspondence with author.
- <sup>60</sup> Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America* p. 301.
- <sup>61</sup> Robert B. Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press 1985), p. 295.
- <sup>62</sup> Personal correspondence with author.
- <sup>63</sup> Larry Turman, *So You Want To Be A Producer?* p. 210.
- <sup>64</sup> Justin Wyatt, 'From Roadshowing to Saturation Release: Majors, Independents and Marketing/Distribution Innovations,' p. 67.

- <sup>65</sup> *Alfie* was distributed by Paramount, *Blow Up* by Premier (a subsidiary of MGM), *Hard Day's Night* (1964, Richard Lester) by United Artists, *Tom Jones* by Lopert (a subsidiary of UA) and *Easy Rider* (1969, Dennis Hopper) by Columbia. Wyatt uses *Easy Rider* as an example to prove his contention.
- <sup>66</sup> Stanley Kaufman, 'Stanley Kaufman on Films,' *The New Republic*, 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1967, p. 22.
- <sup>67</sup> Andrew Sarris, 'Review of *The Graduate*,' *Village Voice*, 20<sup>th</sup> December 1973.
- <sup>68</sup> Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*, p. 49.
- <sup>69</sup> 'Embassy May Merge/Go Public,' *Hollywood Reporter*, 31<sup>st</sup> May 1967, p. 1.
- <sup>70</sup> Abel Green, 'Levine's Post-Grad Aura. How A Hit Pic Restores Tone,' *Variety* April 3 1968.
- <sup>71</sup> Personal correspondence with author.
- <sup>72</sup> Vincent Canby, 'And in Hollywood, Mergers Are Better Than Ever as Business Community Finds a New Area of Investment,' *New York Times*, 9<sup>th</sup> January 1967, p. 92.
- <sup>73</sup> Paul Monaco, *The Sixties: 1960-1969* (Berkeley: University of California Press 2001), p. 37.
- <sup>74</sup> Leonard Sloane, 'Paramount Pictures Joins Gulf & Western,' *New York Times*, 20<sup>th</sup> October 1966, p. 61.
- <sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>76</sup> Tino Balio, *United Artists: The Company That Changed The Film Industr*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press 1987) p. 303.
- <sup>77</sup> Leonard Sloane, 'Paramount Pictures Joins Gulf & Western,' *New York Times*, 20<sup>th</sup> October 1966, p. 61.
- <sup>78</sup> Peter Bart, 'New Hollywood: New Riches, New Doubts,' *New York Times*, 12<sup>th</sup> December 1966, p. 1.
- <sup>79</sup> Charles Champlin, 'TV Off and Running in High-Paying Movie Stakes,' *LA Times*, 5th September 1965, p. B10.
- <sup>80</sup> "Berle figures he was done in by CBS's new Friday Night at the Movies which teed off with *The Music Man* in two parts on successive evenings, the final one against Berle's second show of the season. Even if he had signed up Gen. Eisenhower, Bob Hope and the late Al Jolson as guests, says Berle, it wouldn't have done him any good." Hal Humphrey, 'Movies Bring End to Miltie's Return,' *LA Times*, 3rd November 1966, p. D18.
- <sup>81</sup> Jack Gould, 'Silver Screen is a Gold Mine,' *New York Times*, 7<sup>th</sup> January 1968, p. D21.
- <sup>82</sup> Jack Gould, 'TV Faces a Fight on Moviemaking,' *New York Times*, 23<sup>rd</sup> October 23, p. 1.
- <sup>83</sup> George W. Clarke, 'TV To Exhaust All Films in 4 Yrs,' *Boston Daily Record*, 19<sup>th</sup> April 1958, p. 25.
- <sup>84</sup> Charles Champlin, 'TV Off and Running in High-Paying Movie Stakes,' *LA Times*, 5th September 1965, p. B10.
- <sup>85</sup> "Ratings suggest that there's only one chance in five that a family with a color set will watch a black-and-white show." *Ibid.*
- <sup>86</sup> Hal Humphrey, 'TV Edgy Over Ribald Movies,' *LA Times*, 11<sup>th</sup> October 1967, p. C22.
- <sup>87</sup> Tino Balio, 'Retrenchment and Reorganisation,' in Tino Balio, (ed.) *The American Film Industry*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press 1985), p. 436.
- <sup>88</sup> 'Levine Has 'No-Comment' on Mad Sq. Merger, Plenty on Other Topics,' *Variety* 29<sup>th</sup> March 1967.
- <sup>89</sup> Charles Champlin, 'New Hollywood: Booming Filmland's Big Turnaround,' *LA Times*, 7<sup>th</sup> November 1965, p. 1 and 4.
- <sup>90</sup> Katherine Hamill, 'The Supercolossal, Well, Pretty Good World of Joe Levine,' *Fortune* March 1964 p. 131.
- <sup>91</sup> Charles Champlin, 'The New Hollywood: United Artists: Filmland's Wave of Future,' *LA Times*, 14 November 1965, B4.
- <sup>92</sup> James R. Kerr, 'Billions Make a Nice Cushion Or, AVCO Goes To Embassy Movies,' *Variety* 13<sup>th</sup> November 1968.
- <sup>93</sup> Tino Balio, *United Artists: The Company That Changed The Film Industry*, p. 304-5.
- <sup>94</sup> James R. Kerr, 'Billions Make a Nice Cushion Or, AVCO Goes To Embassy Movies,' *Variety* 13<sup>th</sup> November 1968.
- <sup>95</sup> 'Embassy's Profits Estimated by Avco,' *New York Times*, 21<sup>st</sup> May 1968, p. 63.
- <sup>96</sup> "Joe runs Embassy without interference from us in all the areas he commands," James R. Kerr, 'Billions Make a Nice Cushion Or, AVCO Goes To Embassy Movies,' *Variety* 13<sup>th</sup> November 1968.
- <sup>97</sup> 'Avco Buys Profitable Embassy,' *Variety* 8<sup>th</sup> May 1968, p. 4.
- <sup>98</sup> 'Avco Embassy Plans 'Plenty' Pics For Hollywood Sites,' *Hollywood Reporter*, 26<sup>th</sup> September 1968.
- <sup>99</sup> James R. Kerr, 'Billions Make a Nice Cushion Or, AVCO Goes To Embassy Movies,' *Variety* 13<sup>th</sup> November 1968.
- <sup>100</sup> Joyce Haber, 'Joe Levine: Call Him Flamboyant,' *LA Times* 13<sup>th</sup> May 1968, p. C25.

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- <sup>101</sup> Aniko Bodroghkozy, 'Reel Revolutionaries: An Examination of Hollywood's Cycle of 1960s Youth Rebellion Films,' *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 3. (Spring 2002), p. 39.
- <sup>102</sup> Hank Werba, 'Joe Levine's Gearing More Pix For Those In 16-30 Age Bracket,' *Variety* 8<sup>th</sup> October 1969.
- <sup>103</sup> Vernon Scott, 'I dig kids' Says Joe Levine,' *Citizen News*, 2 May 1970.
- <sup>104</sup> Tino Balio, *United Artists: The Company That Changed The Film Industry*, p. 312-315.
- <sup>105</sup> Thomas Schatz, 'The New Hollywood', In Julian Stringer (ed.) *Movie Blockbusters*, (London: Routledge, 2003) p. 22.
- <sup>106</sup> Charles Champlin, 'The 1960s: A Revolution in Movie Audiences,' *LA Times* 18<sup>th</sup> January 1970, p. Q1.
- <sup>107</sup> Tino Balio, 'Retrenchment and Reorganisation', in Tino Balio, (ed.) *The American Film Industry* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), p. 437-8.
- <sup>108</sup> Quoted in William Dozier, 'Aubrey: A Living Legend, Showman,' *LA Times*, 10<sup>th</sup> August 1970, p. E15.
- <sup>109</sup> Wayne Warga, 'What's Going on in the Lion's Den at MGM?' *LA Times*, 26<sup>th</sup> December 1971, p. Q1.
- <sup>110</sup> Tino Balio, 'Retrenchment and Reorganisation', in Tino Balio, (ed.) *The American Film Industry* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press 1976), p. 438.
- <sup>111</sup> 'Joe Levine Has B'Way Legit Plans But Won't Be Specific, Unlike Giving Needle To Some Colleagues,' *Variety* 4<sup>th</sup> September 1974.
- <sup>112</sup> Gavin Smith, 'Interview with Mike Nichols,' *Film Comment* May 1999, p. 10.
- <sup>113</sup> James Brady, 'Interview with Joe Levine,' *New York Magazine*, 17<sup>th</sup> December 1973.
- <sup>114</sup> Mike Nichols has suggested that the film was originally developed as a project for Roman Polanski. Gavin Smith, 'Interview with Mike Nichols,' *Film Comment* May 1999, p. 10.

## Chapter Nine

### A Question of Leadership: *A Bridge Too Far*

#### Introduction

In their observations of the logistics of blockbuster film production, Wayne E. Baker and Robert R. Faulkner have noted:

Because search procedures for artistic problems are complex and choices among actions involve a high degree of experimentation, there must be a great deal of mutual coordination between those who supervise the transformation of 'raw materials' and those who provide the expertise and talent for this process. Thus, coordination of role players is a pressing problem.<sup>1</sup>

The problem of coordination is further problematised, in Baker and Faulkner's analysis, by the potentially differing or opposing motives of production personnel, with the writer and director being concerned about art, while the producer is concerned about the bottom line; art versus commerce. This is a familiar caricature of film industry roles and one that relies on the existence of clearly defined boundaries inherent in the blockbuster production's division of labour.

Warren Buckland has gone some way to conflating this division in his work on Steven Spielberg. For Buckland, to be considered an auteur in the blockbuster era requires an assumption of responsibilities beyond the creative, for example entrepreneurial and management roles. With reference to Susan Gillman's to work on



literary authorship, Buckland distinguishes between internal authorship (technical mastery of the filmmaking process) and external authorship (“control of the immediate organizational and economic environment”),<sup>2</sup> and argues that the successful blockbuster auteur is one who is able to straddle both fields. “[Steven] Spielberg is an auteur,” he argues, “*not* because he is working against the Hollywood industry ... [but] because he occupies key positions in the industry (producer, director, studio co-owner, franchise licensee.)”<sup>3</sup> Though Buckland’s thesis draws a boundary that separates art and commerce – represented by the concepts of internal and external authorship – he nonetheless argues that creativity and business acumen can, and must, co-exist.

According to Buckland, then, in order to be a blockbuster auteur one must assume extra responsibilities absorbed from other filmmaking roles, most notably the producer. However, despite Buckland’s contention that a director’s auteurist claim is bolstered by production responsibilities there is often little recognition in Film Studies of the authorial contribution of the producer, despite the producer fulfilling authorship tasks, as per Buckland.

For William Goldman, writer of *A Bridge Too Far*, “regardless of what you’ve been told before, believe it, it’s true – MOVIES ARE A GROUP ENDEAVOR.”<sup>4</sup> Goldman’s capitalization of his message reveals the frustration caused by those who overlook, or demean, the collaborative nature of art production. Such frustrations have revealed themselves in scholarship over the years. As Christine Saxton has observed:

Films became authored texts if the auteur critics liked them and authorless studio pieces if they did not. The collective process was

regarded as one of the inescapable facts of American feature production that the director had to transcend to achieve auteur status.<sup>5</sup>

In Buckland's analysis, such transcendence is achieved when a director successfully adopts production roles, yet this does not address the question of why, or if, such transcendence is necessary. Furthermore, Buckland assumes, as do Baker and Faulkner, that roles are clearly defined, stratified into commercial and artistic systems of interest, but this is simplistic.

For William Goldman, "*Bridge* is Joe's baby. There is simply no way it would have ever seen the light of any day without him."<sup>6</sup> Richard Attenborough, the director, also highlights Levine's input as producer:

We planned everything together. From the selection of the extraordinary star cast to the engagement of the entire crew we were in agreement. Apart from a brief period when his leg failed to stand up to the rigours of shooting on a very tough location, he was with us for the entire period in Holland.<sup>7</sup>

As if reversing the Chinese proverb, "success has many fathers, failure only one," Charles S. Tashiro writes of the benefits that a director can accrue by his association with a critically or commercially successful film. Conversely, when disaster strikes, responsibility is "diffused, muted and deflected to the point of disappearance."<sup>8</sup> What is revealed through Tashiro's work is the notion of authorship as responsibility, and *A Bridge Too Far* was Levine's, more than any others',

responsibility and it is his leadership role that constitutes a significant authorial contribution.

Levine's Avco years were uncharacteristically quiet. Some interesting films were made by Levine and Avco during his tenure but he always claimed he didn't into the corporate structure, having been an independent for so long. He once told Peter Dunn that selling to Avco was the biggest regret of his career and that he felt bound by corporate stricture.<sup>9</sup> On leaving Avco he said that he thought, briefly, of retirement,<sup>10</sup> before returning to the films world, with renewed vigour, as an independent once more.

The first section of this chapter deals with Levine's reputation as a filmmaker and showman in the post-Avco years leading up to *A Bridge Too Far*. Robert E. Kapsis has written of how the auteurist movement aided the rehabilitation of Alfred Hitchcock's reputation in the 1960s; it also reveals Hitchcock's frustration at not being taken seriously by critics – a situation compounded by his reputation as a master of self-promotion. For Kapsis, the over publicising of an artist can have a detrimental effect on their critical reputation.<sup>11</sup>

Publicly at least, Levine never gave the impression of being overly concerned with his critical reputation, quite the opposite in fact. Even if Levine had wished to reinvent himself as a serious artist, it seems that such an option was not open to him. Levine told Pat O'Haire in 1974, "I used to resent criticism, but never outwardly. I learned years ago not to resent openly. Very early I adopted the slogan that he who lives by the sword ... y'know ... and I live by publicity."<sup>12</sup> Given Levine's capacity for revisionism it is unsurprising that he chooses to overlook his many resentful outbursts directed towards his critics but the key word here would be "publicity," notably distinct from critical reputation. This quotation should also be read as

recognition, on Levine's part, of his responsibilities as a filmmaker, responsibilities that constitute the functions of "external authorship" as identified by Buckland.

The second section of this chapter deals with the production of *A Bridge Too Far*. Based on Cornelius Ryan's book, the film tells the story of Operation Market Garden, a failed attempt by the Allies to effect a final big push to end World War II in 1944. That Levine was the driving force behind the project is not in doubt and the fulfilling of his role as producer is distinguished by not only his willingness to adopt a leadership role and assume the attendant responsibilities, but also by his capacity for trust, delegation and a deep respect for the roles of the screenwriter and director.

The third section deals with *A Bridge Too Far*'s promotional campaign and reception. The campaign was huge and expensive, prompting one *New York Times* reader to ponder whether exposure to the relentless campaign constituted "cruel and unusual punishment."<sup>13</sup> As usual, Levine placed himself at the forefront. Much has been written on the connection between auteurism and branding, drawn from Sarris's insistence on a "discernable personality"<sup>14</sup> which functions as the mark of an auteur in their films. Kapsis has noted that, for Hitchcock, working within the constraints of his reputation was important to the formation of his critical reputation;<sup>15</sup> David A. Cook has noted that auteurism became a branding tool for Hollywood directors in the 1970s;<sup>16</sup> and Buckland has noted the importance of a distinguishable Spielberg brand, in his capacities as internal and external author, in his emergence as a true blockbuster auteur.<sup>17</sup> Despite having been a ubiquitous figure in cinema for two decades, the notion of a Levine "brand" does not quite fit.

Levine was a maverick, the very antithesis of a brand. Taken together, the films with which he was involved throughout his career follow no logical pattern; his haphazard approach resists notions of wholesale categorisation. If Levine had a

marketing strategy, it was to always emphasise the uniqueness of a film. *A Bridge Too Far* was the most expensive film ever made at the time, with fourteen stars and an epic theme, a project on a scale of which Levine had not worked on before. The uniqueness of the project would seem to undermine a claim for authorship on Levine's behalf; it is not branded in the same way as the work of auteur directors or arguably auteur producers such as Don Simpson and Jerry Bruckheimer.

Paradoxically, the lack of authorial stamp reveals Levine's strengths as a producer, the ability to lead and shoulder responsibility whilst allowing great latitude to his collaborators is as much a gesture of authorship as ensuring a product conforms to one's public image. In short, authorial contribution should not always be conflated with notions of branding, and vice-versa.

### **A Question of Reputation**

In the early 1960s, upon his move into European art films and weighty adaptations, Levine had faced a sniffy response from figures such as Jean-Luc Godard and Dwight MacDonald. Similarly, in his review of *Magic*, John Desplas wrote:

I suppose it's the tireless lusting after respectability. [Levine] wants to make pictures that appeal to the unwashed masses, but he wants it to look highbrow. The showman's desire for respectability fared much better during the sixties when he would satisfy such urges by importing Fellini's *8½* ... Joe Levine should go back to giving out insurance policies to those attending the latest horror movie. At least if

he didn't believe in *Magic* in the old days, he still believed in keeping the show lively.<sup>18</sup>

Confusing Levine with the 1950s king of the lowbrow gimmick, William Castle, Desplas's comments here echo those of Godard and MacDonald made a decade before: Levine should know his place. But it was not only mischievous film reviewers who commented on what was perceived to be status chasing. Film scholar James Monaco was also moved to comment, albeit less judgementally, when, in 1979, he observed that "recently Levine seemed to be trying to redeem his reputation (*The Carpetbaggers*, *Harlow*) with *A Bridge Too Far*,"<sup>19</sup> but evidence undermines such an assertion.

Upon resigning as President of AVCO Embassy in June 1974 Levine retained close ties with the company. The first films to be released under his new "Joseph E. Levine Presents" banner would be distributed by his former company and, taken together, represent an interesting threesome. Having regained his independent status Levine returned to Italy to find the films that would help to get the ball rolling for his new company. *This Time I'll Make You Rich* (1974, Gianfranco Parolini), *Toute Une Vie* (1974, Claude Lelouch) and *The Night Porter*. Levine bought the rights to all three and Avco handled distribution. They were all Italian co-productions, made with cooperation from West Germany, France and the US, respectively, and serve to provide what almost amounts to a summation of Levine's career in microcosm.

*This Time I'll Make You Rich* was written and directed by a graduate of the peplum craze, which Levine did so much to popularise, and was described by Levine as "an exploitationer, which won't win an Academy Award,"<sup>20</sup> *Toute Une Vie* was a respectable arthouse film by a notable French director and received enthusiastic

reviews in both the *New York Times* and the *LA Times* upon its release.<sup>21</sup> It is the camp and kooky *The Night Porter*, however, which appears the most intriguing of the three.

Using this controversial tale of a kinky relationship that develops between a concentration camp survivor (Charlotte Rampling) and a former Nazi camp guard (Dirk Bogarde as the eponymous Night Porter) in post-war Vienna, Levine sought to re-position himself as the master flim-flam man of Hollywood. Complaining of “a sore lack of showmanship in the current film industry,” he promised that the film he dubbed “*Last Tango In Vienna*” would be opened with “the greatest campaign seen in recent years.”<sup>22</sup> When the film opened to good box-office and bad reviews Levine commented, “The bad reviews all seem to mention the same words – sado-masochistic – I never knew what they meant before. Now I know. It’s money!”<sup>23</sup> So far so Levine.

As noted in Chapter One, the reviews for *The Night Porter* were mixed at best. An interview with Charlie Champlin in November 1974 reveals Levine in defensive mood, particularly with regard to critical response to *The Night Porter*. “It’s a people’s picture, just like *Hercules* was, and critics should remember that,” said Levine, ever protective of his audience, but what follows is a comment that reveals Levine in a rather new light: “I’m not saying I like the picture. But I think there are flashes of genius in it.”<sup>24</sup>

This comment suggests a move away, even if only temporarily, from the usual hyperbole and bluster. Indeed, though Levine compares *The Night Porter* to *Hercules*, Levine never defended the latter film in terms of its artistry. And it is the ubiquitous Italian Super Spectacle that, later in the article, Champlin uses to highlight the vexed question of reputation and Levine’s ongoing war with the critics:

[Levine] finds it exasperating, to say the least, to be identified with *Hercules* rather than *The Bicycle Thief*, *Open City* and *Paisan* – which he imported and which had a revolutionary impact on American ideas about film making – or with *The Graduate* or *A Lion in Winter* among the many other movies he has produced.<sup>25</sup>

Levine did not import *The Bicycle Thief*, *Open City* or *Paisan*, he merely acted as a distributor and promoter of these films in the New England area. The credit for importing these films should correctly be attributed to Arthur Mayer and Joseph Burstyn; indeed, Champlin's article prompted a furious letter from Mayer on behalf of himself and his dead partner.<sup>26</sup> Whilst Mayer may be correct in that Champlin should have researched his subject more thoroughly it is very likely that he was misled by Levine who, true to his consistent exaggeration of his role in certain projects, had claimed credit for importing these films in a different interview a month or so earlier: "Before *Hercules* I practically invented importing Italian films," he told Pat O'Haire, "I brought over *The Bicycle Thief*, *Paisan*, *Open City* and others."<sup>27</sup>

There is a notable difference in emphasis between this direct quotation from Levine and Champlin's paraphrasing. It is Champlin who notes the "revolutionary impact" of these films whereas Levine is keener to claim credit, albeit erroneously, for the "invention" of importing Italian films, highlighting his own instincts and abilities as a salesman and a hustler. It is also worth mentioning that the same interview contains yet another spirited defence of *Hercules*, the film that Levine never distanced himself from.



As for the American films mentioned by Champlin, Levine was not the producer of *A Lion in Winter* but rather the executive producer. Furthermore, he did not produce *The Graduate* and the title of executive producer was denied to him in his negotiations with producer Larry Turman, though the film still bore the legend “Joseph E. Levine Presents.” Given Levine’s prominence in promotional campaigns, however, the confusion is understandable.

The confusion regarding Levine’s precise role in his various projects is revealing. In the late 1960s he had complained about his lack of influence over the films he had made with Paramount (see Chapter Seven) and in 1974, upon leaving AVCO, Levine told *Variety* that he “didn’t like being an executive, I like to make pictures, I like to wheel and deal.”<sup>28</sup> Such statements of dissatisfaction indicate a frustration on the part of Levine regarding the definition of his own role in his films.

Post Avco, the first film Levine was linked to as a producer was *Beyond Good and Evil* (1977, Liliana Cavani), to be based on the life of Friedrich Nietzsche, which Levine would co-produce with Robert Gordon Edwards, who had produced *The Night Porter*.<sup>29</sup> Levine was not involved in the eventual production yet it should be noted that if Levine was eager to “redeem his reputation” at this time it seems odd that he should seek to pursue a relationship with a producer and director whose most recent film had been widely ridiculed. Levine, as per his reputation and public image, was acting in defiance of his critics as opposed to courting their favour.

Levine dropped *Beyond Good and Evil* in favour of *A Bridge Too Far*, the film that would dominate his next three years. Although Monaco cites this film as an example of reputation-redemption on Levine’s part, the kind of critical defiance he had shown by his supporting of *The Night Porter* and Cavani is much in evidence. “In

Hollywood they've been saying that I ought to be carted off in a straight jacket,"

Levine told Victor Davis on *A Bridge Too Far*'s completion:

But I want them to know that I already have every dollar back. I've done distribution deals with every country in the world. I'd even do deals with Mars and the Moon but their telephones don't seem to be working so good.<sup>30</sup>

Although such pugnacity was a familiar Levine posture, Levine's self-aggrandising assessment is not so far from the truth. William Goldman tells of one Hollywood executive who remarked that Levine's decision to hire Richard Attenborough as director was an act of "total committable lunacy." He goes on to say:

Since he has always done things his own way, his own money, his own publicity sense – he is very resented in the movie business, something I didn't realise until I started work on *Bridge*, and people came out of the woodwork to wonder why I was working on "that piece of shit" – Hollywoodese for "property." Everyone told me that the entire exercise was going to be futile, because Levine was retired, old, past it, washed up, done.<sup>31</sup>

It was not only Hollywood that experienced a wave of eyebrow raising at Levine's latest scheme. *The Economist* also ran a piece about the film, warning that Hollywood may be taking "the inflationary road to ruin once again," as it had done in the late 1960s, concluding: "Few very expensive films make money."<sup>32</sup> Amid all the

speculation and anticipation of failure it seems that Levine did have something to prove with this particular film, though it does not necessarily follow that he was courting critical acceptance or industry approval. Publicly at least, Levine seemed unconcerned about critical reception, choosing to once again privilege his anticipated audience over intellectual consideration:

Teenagers will love *A Bridge Too Far* ... Teenagers hate Vietnam and the people who started the war there ... They'll love it in Japan too, the Japanese love to see white men kill each other.<sup>33</sup>

Notably, in his own idiosyncratic way, Levine has identified two demographics here that exist beyond the US's critical radar. Teenagers and the Japanese are unlikely to read *The New York Times* in order to decide what film to watch. For Levine, a film did not necessarily need critical approval to be a hit. Certainly it may help, as no doubt did in the cases of *8 ½* or *Two Women*, but if a film could succeed in spite of nay-sayers, as *The Night Porter* had done, then so much the better.

If Levine had something to prove with this film it would be the audience, rather than the critics, who would prove it for him. In contrast to Kapsis's analysis of Hitchcock, Levine seemed to relish critical disapproval, and this relish formed a fundamental component in his public image. Whereas Hitchcock wished to prove his mettle by being taken seriously as an artist by the critical establishment, Levine's motives seem more confrontational, more atavistic. This feeling seemed to spread to others in the production of *A Bridge Too Far*, as evidenced by a telegram sent by one of the stars, Sean Connery, to Levine once shooting had completed: "It would be

rather nice to shove some of the screwers' noses in the shit by grossing a couple of hundred million."<sup>34</sup>

If, as Kapsis argues, a capacity for publicity-generation acts as an impediment to serious critical appraisal then Levine could do little to accommodate such a critical climate short of undermining his own obvious strengths as a showman. Moreover, despite claims of Levine's attempts at reputation redemption in the 1970s, it is far more accurate to say that Levine's strategy regarding critics was always to confound rather than court, and *A Bridge Too Far* was no exception.

### **A Question of Trust**

From the outset, *A Bridge Too Far* looked set to be a gigantic undertaking, as the *LA Herald Examiner* reported when the project was announced in early 1975:

In true Levine style the producer announced that the film will have "a cast of thousands ... and more than 50 top stars to play both big name roles (such as General Eisenhower and Field Marshall Montgomery) and everyday soldiers."<sup>35</sup>

By the time of this announcement both Richard Attenborough and William Goldman had been signed; a few months later the Hollywood rumour mill predicted an announcement from Levine that Frank McCarthy would be announced as producer.<sup>36</sup> McCarthy had produced the Oscar-winning World War Two epic *Patton: Lust For Glory* (1970, Franklin J. Schaffner) and so would seem to have been an ideal

choice to produce *A Bridge Too Far*, but the announcement never came and Levine, along with his son, assumed the producer's mantle.

McCarthy went on to produce another war movie, *MacArthur* (1977, Joseph Sargent), so it is possible that scheduling conflicts prevented him from producing *A Bridge Too Far*. What is clear, however, is that in order for the film to be made at all, Levine would have had to assume a leadership role early on, given that he planned to fund the film himself in its initial stages and then finance the project through selling distribution deals to the uncompleted film.

Although Levine had left Avco, the company was still fulfilling a distribution role for Levine's films and, with such ties, would seem a natural port of call for funding for *A Bridge Too Far*. Avco chose to pass on the film: "We have concluded that we do not wish to invest in such a motion picture,"<sup>37</sup> wrote Avco's William E. Chaikin to Levine in November 1975. Levine, however, was not over-reliant on traditional funding sources. Four months earlier he had hinted at how he intended to fund the film:

By the time Dickie Attenborough ... starts filming next April, distributors from all over the world will have invested in what's gonna be a hell of a picture.<sup>38</sup>

The lack of any major source of outside funding was a source of pride for Levine throughout the campaign and allowed him to play up his role as hustler supreme. The set-up would have benefited him in other ways too, allowing him a greater degree of freedom as a producer than he would have had if he had had a board of directors to contend with and justify himself to, as Daryl Zanuck had at Fox when

making a previous Ryan adaptation, *The Longest Day*.<sup>39</sup> Also, there were few people in the film world other than Levine who could rustle such a massive budget as this project required from non-traditional sources. In the time it took for *A Bridge Too Far* to be shot, cut, released and forgotten Francis Ford Coppola was watching his production of *Apocalypse Now* (1979, Francis Ford Coppola) spiral out of control in the Philippines, resulting in a situation in which Coppola risked financial ruin by funding the project himself once other sources of funding had dried up or been withdrawn.<sup>40</sup> Although *Apocalypse Now* was a critical and commercial success, such success is undoubtedly a result of Coppola's mastery of the principals of internal authorship and occurred in spite of his limited capacities in the field of external authorship – a field in which Levine excelled.

The early stages of the production of *A Bridge Too Far* were funded by Levine from his own pocket, something he claimed he had never done before. "I really believe in this picture," he told Roderick Mann, "In the past I've often claimed I would never risk my own money in the hazardous film world. But I feel differently about this one. It's the best damn story I've ever read."<sup>41</sup> That Levine believed passionately in the project is not in doubt but what should also be emphasised is Levine's remarkable capacity for delegation and faith in his assembled team, on this project like no other, despite the fact that the initial stages were self-funded.

It is Levine's capacity for trust and delegation that are the hallmarks of *A Bridge Too Far*'s production process; Richard Attenborough has observed of Levine, "On occasion some people consider Joe's courage extends to the point of foolhardiness."<sup>42</sup> Nonetheless, without studio or corporate backing, using his own money, without any of the stars who would sell the film, with an unproven director and no script, Levine began production on this most ambitious of films.

When *The Economist*, with reference to the big budget failures of the 1960s, spoke of *A Bridge Too Far* as evidence of Hollywood taking “the inflationary road to ruin once again,” the debacle of *Cleopatra* (1963, Joseph L. Mankiewicz) is brought immediately to mind. Once *Cleopatra* had been brought in, years behind schedule and wildly over budget, Zanuck said that the film had “consistently violated every fundamental or ‘kindergarten’ production rule.”<sup>43</sup> For Mathew Bernstein, one of the most notable violations was the lack of a shootable script.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, for Goldman, *A Bridge Too Far* represented the most unusual experience he had had in movie making because, “It was the only time that a picture was actually into production *before* a first draft screenplay or so much as a word of it had been seen by anyone.”<sup>45</sup> This was an extraordinary display of faith by Levine in Goldman, especially given Hollywood precedent.

Baker and Faulkner have suggested that the emergent blockbuster period “put the producer in the center of Hollywood ... Indeed, the specialized producer became the initiator of films in ways that seem to evince disdain for artistic contributions.”<sup>46</sup> Levine’s actions regarding Goldman explicitly contradict such an assertion. Levine displayed an enormous amount of faith in Goldman’s contribution to the project; he was heavily reliant on the viability of Goldman’s script yet, nonetheless, allowed Goldman the latitude and autonomy to work.

What makes Levine’s trust in Goldman even more remarkable is that Levine had always set great store by scripts. Whilst *Le Mepris* was in pre-production, the script went through four drafts and, once it was finished, Levine complained of Godard’s refusal to follow the script as it was written. Pre-production of *The Carpetbaggers* saw the production of various synopses of the novel in galley form before four initial drafts of the script were completed, which were followed by two

drafts of a shooting script; the scripting process on *Harlow* followed a similar path. And, as noted in the previous chapter, Mike Nichols, Levine's favourite star of the 1960s, would not have got the go-ahead for *The Graduate* had Levine not been satisfied with the script. The scale of *A Bridge Too Far*, however, meant that Levine had to gamble, as Goldman explains:

My script wouldn't be done till, say, November of '75. Well, you can't risk a giant undertaking without top personnel who have the experience with this kind of massive operation. These technicians – production designers, cinematographers, at least thirty in all – are in demand. If Levine waited till he had a script, the chances are strong that the crew Attenborough needed would be busy on other pictures. But he went ahead, took the risk, and hired them. If my script was unusable, they had to be paid. Not only that, preliminary production had to start.<sup>47</sup>

In terms of securing financing for the project, the most important aspect of pre-production was the engagement of stars to appear in the movie, fourteen in all, in order to entice funding from distributors. By the late 1960s the faith banks had once had in the power of the star was waning, but Levine was not dealing with banks. Within the industry stars were still essential indicators of a project's viability.<sup>48</sup> "Sure we could have made the picture with one or two stars," Levine told Victor Davis:

... but when I go to those film distributors and ask for some up front money they only ask one question: 'Who's in it?'



They ought to be asking: ‘Do you have a good script?’ But it ain’t a perfect world, right?

So when Dickie and I went shopping for stars we decided to go for broke. We spent nine million dollars.<sup>49</sup>

According to Richard Attenborough the fulfilment of the star quota from the British side of the pond was left largely to him, and he managed to secure the involvement of “[Sean] Connery, [Michael] Caine and [Dirk] Bogarde etc.”<sup>50</sup> These stars secured, American involvement was now needed and, in order to facilitate this, Levine and Attenborough journeyed to Hollywood to conduct what William Goldman dubbed “The Raid.”<sup>51</sup>

According to Goldman, Levine’s plan was to use star endorsement of the project to “flush out the foreign distributors.”<sup>52</sup> In other words, once the stars were on board Levine would use the money paid to him by distributors to pay the stars’ salaries. However, many agents in Hollywood were doubtful about the feasibility of the project, Levine was “not young, he had been away, etc.” so they asked for an upfront guarantee of their client’s salary, which Levine was personally liable for.

The 1970s had seen an increase in the popularity of the gross point deal amongst Hollywood’s heaviest hitters. Such a deal ensured that a star would receive a percentage of a film’s gross income in addition to his salary. Given that Levine’s strategy was to saturate the movie with stars, he would be unable to offer such a deal as it would wipe out all the profits, so the only other option was to offer huge sums as salary, which Levine was now expected to pay out of his own pocket. “I’d never screamed louder in my life!” he told Goldman, “I’d never given in to a guarantee

demand before, I swore I never would – but I didn't have much room to manoeuvre; if I did I didn't see it.”<sup>53</sup>

Of the major US stars of the time, Levine focussed his attention on Robert Redford and Steve McQueen for the part of Major General Julian Cook and after negotiations with both, during which McQueen's demands rose to exceed \$3 million, a deal with Redford was struck in which he would be paid \$2 million for four weeks work. Not only was this an astonishing (though not unheard of) amount for the time, it was also an astonishing amount to pay to an actor who was not in a starring role. In terms of screen time the star of the film is Connery's Major General Robert Urquhart.

Aside from hefty pay cheques, another appealing factor for the stars was the fact that they were under no obligation to “carry” the picture, as Ryan O'Neal commented: “I like sharing the glory ... it means you're not responsible for carrying the movie. I feel very little pressure on this set.”<sup>54</sup> Yet the large number of stars on the film meant that, rather than responsibility for success or failure being dispersed – as per Tashiro's argument cited earlier – it was consolidated for the producer. So intimately was Levine associated with this project that the responsibility for any perceived failure of the project would be, and was, attributed to him.

Nonetheless, in terms of production and funding the situation was mutually beneficial. The stars got enormous sums yet were not required to carry the picture and Levine was able to use the star names to attract funding, with Robert Redford providing the greatest enticement to potential distributors, as this contract confirms:

If Robert Redford does not render services as scheduled in the picture, Nordisk Films Kompagni, upon written notice may, upon written notice, request that Joseph E. Levine Presents, Inc. replace said actor

with an actor of comparable stature. If Joseph E. Levine Presents fails to replace said actor within sixty days from and after receipt of said written notice, Nordisk Films Kompagni may cancel the agreement and Joseph E. Levine Presents Inc. sole liability shall be to promptly refund any monies heretofore paid to it by Nordisk Films Kompagni. If any other than Robert Redford fails to render service, such failure shall not be deemed as a breach of contract by Joseph E. Levine Presents, Inc.<sup>55</sup>

On 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1976 Redford received an offer of \$2 million to “make himself available for a four week period,”<sup>56</sup> and by 26<sup>th</sup> January the agreement was confirmed.<sup>57</sup> By the mid 1970s the practice of paying enormous sums to a star, for what was essentially a cameo role, was not unheard of, the most notable cases being the huge sums Marlon Brando received for his appearances in *Superman* and *Apocalypse Now*. Although in many ways *A Bridge Too Far* would hark back to the star-studded action epic of *The Longest Day* it can also be seen as a tapestry of cameos, harking back further to *Around the World in Eighty Days* for which Mike Todd enlisted an array of stars to appear for the sheer novelty value of their recognisability.

The qualities of trust, faith and ability to delegate are exemplified in Levine’s approach to the selling of *A Bridge Too Far*. Although he used the stars to arouse the interest of prospective distributors he chose not to sell the film immediately. As he had done with the sale of Embassy Pictures in 1968, Levine gambled and held back in order that *A Bridge Too Far*’s saleability may rise. William Goldman explains:

Most films are done in as much secrecy as possible. But because of the way Levine sold the film, it seemed to me almost like an open shop. Cutting rooms were set up in Holland, and as soon as ten minutes of the film were done, they were available to be viewed by anyone interested in buying the film. (Levine realized early on the quality of what he was getting, so he held off on taking offers, confident that those offers would increase as time went on...)

When forty minutes of the film were done, they were there for all to see. When we were halfway through, people would troop to Holland and take in the hour and a half.<sup>58</sup>

Principal photography began in April 1976 and, his cast confirmed, Levine spent \$50,000 on full-page ads in the trades to publicise his stars.<sup>59</sup> A press release from 4<sup>th</sup> March 1976 reveals that the distribution rights for Japan were sold before shooting commenced,<sup>60</sup> but most of the key territories were sold during the filming. Levine was, as Goldman claims, very impressed by the quality of the film, sending a telegram to Attenborough on seeing the early rushes, exclaiming, “All the credit belongs to you. This of course does not preclude me from screaming at you, but I will scream a little softer.”<sup>61</sup> Goldman also sent his praise to the director, “It is better than I ever dreamed it would be;”<sup>62</sup> as did Arthur Krim of UA who not only told Attenborough that the film “looks like one of the biggest winners of all time,”<sup>63</sup> he and UA also stumped up \$12 million for the distribution rights.<sup>64</sup>

Whilst Levine was heavily involved with dealing with distributors who would provide the initial return on his investment, this does not mean that Levine was a “hands off” producer. Attenborough has stated that Levine was involved with every

aspect of the making of the film and was on set in Holland throughout, save for a six-week period as he was recovering from a leg injury. This unforeseen circumstance meant that Levine's capacity for delegation paid dividends when he was forced into convalescence.

Communications with Attenborough at the time reveal not only Levine's confidence in the comparative novice director but also his frustration at being laid up: "Thank God for you, I feel safe with our film safe in your hands. Notwithstanding I would give one of my legs to be with you."<sup>65</sup> Leg injury or not, Levine returned to the set in Holland. Rosalie Levine's diary reveals plans for the provision of doctors, nurses, oxygen, an emergency ambulance at the airport and a stretcher for Levine on the plane along with evidence of Levine's tenacity and irrepressible nature: "Both doctors advise against transporting him. KLM doctor refuses to be part of worsening condition."<sup>66</sup>

Levine pulled off a feat of Zanuck-like efficiency and successfully landed *A Bridge Too Far*. United Artists published a congratulatory message in the trades:

UNITED ARTISTS CONGRATULATES JOSEPH E. LEVINE,  
RICHARD P. LEVINE, RICHARD ATTENBOROUGH and all the  
creative members of the cast and production team of *A Bridge Too  
Far*.

PRODUCTION COMPLETED OCTOBER 6 1976

133 SHOOTING DAYS

1 DAY OVER SCHEDULE

UNDER BUDGET<sup>67</sup>

The wrapping of the shooting and the subsequent completion of the film demonstrated a level of efficiency of which Levine could be justly proud. Admittedly, had *A Bridge Too Far* taken a *Cleopatra*-like turn there is no way Levine would have been able to keep it out of the trades, even then, it is highly unlikely Levine would ever have admitted to losing control of the film. But events did not spiral out of control, something that cannot be entirely attributed to good fortune. Levine may have been reckless but it was in his nature to gamble, and the gambles he made clearly demonstrate the faith he had in the abilities of the members of his assembled team, including his own.

On-set relations seem to have been cordial throughout the shoot. One of the notable objections about the film came from Colonel John Waddy. Whilst on set as an advisor Waddy had complained about a distortion of history; in the film Robert Redford's Major Julian Cook and his troops capture the bridge at Nijmegen, in reality, it was the British Grenadier Guards. In an article for *After the Battle*, he provides an account of the filming:

Repeated advice by the military advisors caused Attenborough to rethink the scene and a last minute compromise was reached. A scene was added depicting the Guards fighting in the streets of Nijmegen and heading for the bridge and this was also an example of the unit's fast action capability for instant filming.<sup>68</sup>

Not only does this compromise indicate a respect for factual accuracy and the guidance of advisors, Waddy's account also provides evidence of a smooth running,

harmonious and flexible operation – a circumstance occasioned in no small part by Levine’s leadership.

Levine said of *A Bridge Too Far*, “I’ve never left a bigger piece of myself in a film than I did with this one.”<sup>69</sup> Indeed, the film was a labour of love and one that saw Levine take huge risks. The willingness to take such risks demonstrates Levine’s belief in the project, trust in his team and faith in his own abilities. As Baker and Faulkner have noted, on the blockbuster film the problem of coordination is key. The instigation of consonance, then, is an ideal – the creation of conditions conducive to filmmaking. As I argue in chapter one, Levine was an expeditor of cinema and as such constitutes a creative force, and the orchestration of conditions conducive to collaborative work constitutes a significant authorial input.

### **A Question of Showmanship**

“The first time I met [Levine], he was totally convinced of one thing: *A Bridge Too Far* was going to open on June 15<sup>th</sup> 1977.”<sup>70</sup> Although Goldman is unable to explain the reasons behind Levine’s insistence on that particular date, the timing is significant and can be seen as an example of Levine’s foresight as a showman. June 15<sup>th</sup> 1977 would coincide with Queen Elizabeth II’s Official Birthday Celebrations in her Silver Jubilee year; given that *A Bridge Too Far* was a largely British affair, the evidence suggests that Levine would have wished to capitalise on the event. Ultimately, Levine made the deadline and the world premier was held in Washington on June 15<sup>th</sup> 1977, attended by Princess Anne; subsequently, the film would be given a Royal Performance in London, attended by the Queen.<sup>71</sup>

Levine, as we have seen, believed in the power and importance of *A Bridge Too Far*, yet certainly was not above the hard sell and so set about mounting an enormous campaign based on stars, size, scale, importance and cost. There was little about the film that could not be publicised and he set about publicising it all; Levine was not about to let prestige and worthiness sell themselves. The pressbook is filled with brags regarding how much meat (240lbs) and potatoes (260lbs) were prepared on an average day during the shoot, whilst also imparting extremely valuable information regarding tea consumption on this most British of productions (3,880lbs during pre-production and shooting.)

Just prior to the film's release he was keen to foreground the anti-war message of the film, mingling his claims, in typical Levine style, with a brag about the scale of his product:

You're never going to see 900 men jump out of the sky ever again,  
you're never going to see 800 tanks ever again, unless you go to war,  
and you ain't if you see this picture.<sup>72</sup>

As noted in the introduction to this chapter, Levine's exploitation strategy was to emphasise uniqueness, and such a claim undermines an authorship claim in the traditional scholarly understanding of the term. For Tashiro, a critic of auteur theory, "A mantra like 'a film by John Landis' repeated frequently enough eventually becomes self-confirming. It is, finally, not achievement that creates authorship but advertising."<sup>73</sup> Yet even this broad-brush assertion fails to account for Levine. Indeed, Levine heavily advertised himself along with his films and the legend Joseph E. Levine Presents was ubiquitous in the US from the 1950s to the 1980s, yet it is



precisely Levine's advertising that excludes him from being considered an auteur; the sheer variety of the films with which he was involved, and his insistence on advertising them as individual and unique products works against him.

From its inception *A Bridge Too Far* was trumpeted as a BIG movie. The film's prestige lay in its noble subject matter but also in the scale of the production. During shooting, *Time* magazine quipped, "The climactic battle scene comes when everybody starts shooting 105mm Oscars at one another."<sup>74</sup> Vastness, scale and excess formed the basis of much trade and popular press scuttlebutt surrounding the film. A few months prior to the film's opening Levine claimed that he had expected the film to cost \$17 million but publicised the figure of \$25 million because it sounded better. The film's cost was closer to the latter figure, "This is a helluva situation," he told Victor Davies, "my lies have come true!"<sup>75</sup> The accompanying article in the *Daily Express* featured pictures of five of the star cast with their salaries printed underneath, alongside a picture of Colonel Frost accompanied by the revelation that he would have earned £6 a month in 1944.

Many of the participants of Operation Market Garden were still living whilst the film was being made and some acted as consultants and participated in the publicity drive. Most of the participants of Operation Market Garden seemed quite pleased with "their star." Sir Brian Horrocks was "delighted" when Edward Fox got the part; General Roy Urquhart was equally pleased, though conceded that Sean Connery is "far better looking than I am;" Major General John Frost worked closely with Anthony Hopkins on his role ("towards the end of the film he started to look like me"); Brigadier Joe Vandeleur thought Michael Caine "first class" and Kate ter Horst was "honoured" to be played by Liv Ullman.<sup>76</sup>

What the film captures, and has its basis in reality, is a sense of momentum, that the operation is an unstoppable force and while the risks are high, the possible prize is an end to the war by Christmas. Ultimately, however, Operation Market Garden failed:

The Battle of Arnhem is almost totally unknown in America, but in England, probably because the British cherish their disasters so, it is the second most famous encounter of the war, topped only by Dunkirk.<sup>77</sup>

Choosing to overlook D-Day, El Alamein and the Battle of Britain, no doubt to highlight British eccentricities, Goldman hints that from the beginning, despite its producers, screenwriter and five of its stars hailing from the US, *A Bridge Too Far* was always a peculiarly British affair, a fact signified, some may say, in that it depicted a failure.

“Operation Market Garden,” wrote Richard Schickel in his review of *A Bridge Too Far*, “was yet another in the great tradition of British military foul-ups.”<sup>78</sup> Indeed, class-based military incompetence is deeply ingrained in British culture, and events such as the Charge of the Light Brigade through to the battles of the Somme and Passchendaele have all been understood with a certain cultural relevance. Attendant fictional literature, poetry and histories have seen such an interpretation of history ingrained still deeper. Alan Clarke’s 1961 book, *The Donkeys: A History of the British Expeditionary Force in 1915*, an influential and damning indictment of the Officer class during the Great War, did much to popularise the phrase “lions led by donkeys,” to describe the British Military; the poetry of Tennyson and Wilfred Owen

bestowed a grave literary hue to the tragedy of military blunder whilst David Low's Colonel Blimp and George Macdonald Fraser's Flashman opted for lampoon, as did Attenborough's own *Oh! What a Lovely War*, from Charles Chilton's play. Significantly, Attenborough's film was described by Levine as one of the three greatest movies ever made and played a large part in him securing the director's chair on *A Bridge Too Far*.<sup>79</sup>

Nonetheless, some critics on this side of the pond accused the film of aiming toward the US market. Patrick Gibbs wrote of the British Generals portrayed in the film, "They are caricatured ... as terribly lah-di-dah, my dear old boy types," and posed the question, "the producers are American. Could a desire to angle the film towards American audiences have been an issue?"<sup>80</sup> Another who concurred with this point of view was Viscount Montgomery, son of Field Marshall Montgomery, who concluded that *A Bridge Too Far* was "clearly yet another film of how the Americans won the war."<sup>81</sup> Chris Kenworthy broached some of the reservations of British critics and audiences in an interview with Attenborough, saying "people who have seen the film have accused it of being eager to show the Americans as efficient and the British as eccentric and incompetent," to which the director replied, "Do you know, in America the complaint was exactly the opposite."<sup>82</sup>

This is not entirely true, but the US critics did have similar complaints about the depiction or stereotyping of *their* countrymen. "Whatever is lively and memorable in the film ... is provided by the English members of the ... cast. Their Yank allies ... have dim, brief lives on the screen," observed Richard Schickel,<sup>83</sup> Andrew Sarris noted, turning what was seen as cliché in the UK into an advantage in the US, "the British players, with their ancestral stiff upper lip, come off much better than the American stars, who have a slack jawed, gee-whiz approach to the action,"<sup>84</sup> whilst

Penelope Gilliatt complained about Elliot Gould, who is “an American and therefore always shown with a cigar in his mouth, such is the sensibility of the film.”<sup>85</sup>

For many critics, then, the film’s focus and sensibilities seemed to flounder somewhere in the middle of the Atlantic. The notion of floundering between not only countries but also genres and ideas are a running theme through many of the reviews. Richard Gertner said that the film proved that: “documentary film making and glamorous stars don’t mix;”<sup>86</sup> Schickel reported that “the film lacks the grandeur one sometimes finds in the literature of military history ... [and] also lacks the common humanity of well-made war movies, in which one is invited to share the fates of a small unit.”<sup>87</sup> There is no such intimacy in *A Bridge Too Far*; the operation is depicted as a job or function, not as an odyssey. The climactic battle famously never takes place as a withdrawal is ordered because, despite being only a mile from their objective, the troops simply cannot continue.

For Jeanine Basinger, a key principle of the World War II combat film is resolution: “It will be so only after sacrifice and loss, hardship and discouragement, and it can be resolved either through victory or defeat, death or survival.”<sup>88</sup> For all the momentum in the film, which helps to carry the plan and narrative along, it expires before there can be any climax. Operation Market Garden, in reality and in the film, ended in neither victory nor defeat, just an admission of failure and a withdrawal. For Gary Arnold this represents something of an unsatisfactory omission:

There's something missing in the last analysis. *Bridge* is a stirring succession of episodes, but the episodes don't quite add up to a movie with a unified, powerful vision. It's not as if the filmmakers have done something wrong. They seem to have left something out, perhaps an

explicit closing statement that might sum up the complex of feelings aroused by witnessing an epic about an ambiguous military operation, a calculated risk that didn't quite pay off ... At the end one waits for a resolving chord – or epilogue – that never comes.<sup>89</sup>

Arnold is not the only one with such concerns, but I believe it is to the film's great credit that it does not offer a vision of resolution, which would undoubtedly undermine the film's portrayal of heroism, sacrifice and waste without victory, defeat, transformation or epiphany.

What is revealed most about *A Bridge Too Far* in this chapter is its collaborative nature. Far from being authorless the film is, more accurately, multi-authored. In addition to the film's three prime movers, there were fourteen stars, numerous technical and historical advisors, various storylines, an international sensibility and a basis in fact; in addition, the film portrays a wasteful wartime failure. All of these factors surface, to varying degrees, in the negative critical reaction referred to above. Notably, *A Bridge Too Far* was often unfavourably compared with *Star Wars* (1977, George Lucas),<sup>90</sup> which had opened a couple of weeks earlier and a film which, though extremely derivative, provided a singularity of vision and an easily understood morality. By contrast, to leave *A Bridge Too Far* without a resolution and without an explicit message is a brave move on the part of the film's creative team of Attenborough, Goldman and, most notably, Levine, who has so often been caricatured as an interfering philistine, concerned only about the bottom line.

As if to say "I told you so," *The Economist* ran a piece in early 1979 highlighting *A Bridge Too Far* as being among "cinema's most costly mistakes."<sup>91</sup>

Levine, true to form, would not admit to such a thing. When Joe Baltake suggested that the film was a failure, Levine reproved him:

‘What do you mean *A Bridge Too Far* was a flop? That (expletive deleted) film made \$21 million!’

He stops and stares, then he pokes the reporter with his walking stick.

‘Write that down!’<sup>92</sup>

Though Levine was keen to point out that the film made a healthy profit, he did assume, indirectly at least, responsibility for what was perhaps an over-enthusiastic blunderbuss campaign, given the grave subject matter. As Earl Wilson noted, “[Levine] doesn’t talk about picture budgets anymore. He quit after there was a rash of publicity about *A Bridge Too Far* costing \$26 million. ‘People think I’m talking about a bank instead of a movie,’ commented Levine.”<sup>93</sup>

That said, though some of the reviews for *A Bridge Too Far* positively glowed, many did not. Had the film been better received by the critics it is certainly arguable that Levine’s campaign may have been better complemented. In the absence of critical adulation, Levine’s heavy guns marketing appeared incongruous.

As already noted, many critics felt uneasy that the film lacked a singularity of vision. Joe Baltake was even keen to expose what he saw as the cynicism that lurked behind the film’s collaborative nature,

*A Bridge Too Far* has been staffed by a hired hand director (Richard Attenborough), a detached big salary cast and a screenwriter (William Goldman) who specializes in disposable pop-culture stuff (*Butch*

*Cassidy and The Sundance Kid, Marathon Man*). This isn't a movie; it's a business investment that's been recorded on celluloid.<sup>94</sup>

I would argue, however, that the film benefits greatly from its collaborative nature. It necessarily lacks a singularity of vision and a resolution, and is more powerful for it.

Notably, the 1978 Oscars were dominated by war films. *The Deer Hunter* (Michael Cimino, 1978) and *Coming Home* (Hal Ashby, 1978) scooped most of the big Oscars that year; *A Bridge Too Far*, meanwhile, was nominated for none at all, despite being nominated in many categories in the British Academy of Film and Television Arts Awards (BAFTAs), and picking up a handful, in the UK. Significantly, both *The Deer Hunter* and *Coming Home* concern the Vietnam War; they are American films about an American war as opposed to a British film about a largely British operation. Moreover, Vietnam was recent and the US was still coming to terms with its failure and cost. Furthermore, both films focused very closely on the effect war has on individuals and on the home front, arguably making them more accessible, and both films have a sense of resolution lacking in *A Bridge Too Far*'s chaos and carnage. Arguably, therefore, these films commanded a level of emotional involvement which, simply, made them more American. Also, the directors of both films can adequately be described as auteurs.

One of auteur theory's most prominent critics, Pauline Kael, complained that the theory did not give enough credit for versatility and variety<sup>95</sup> and it was precisely these qualities that Levine sought to emphasise throughout his career. In the pressbook for *A Bridge Too Far* Levine's pedigree is noted thus:

God didn't create Hercules or Mike Nichols or Sophia Loren or Mel Brooks or Dustin Hoffman or Julie Christie or Marcello Mastroianni or countless others of the biggest and brightest names in the entire entertainment industry. No, it wasn't God, it was some guy from Boston – a guy named Levine, Joe Levine.<sup>96</sup>

Levine's keenness to contravene cultural boundaries and emphasise versatility leaves him badly placed for authorship considerations. Moreover, much of the scholarship referred to in this chapter, in seeking to privilege singularity of vision, makes conformity a stamp of authorship, be that Hitchcock conforming to his public's expectations or Spielberg conforming to dominant industry mores. It is essential, however, to widen the scope of the authorship debate to include the maverick, whilst recognising not only the collaborative nature of filmmaking, but also the authorial contribution of the expeditor of that collaboration and the responsibility he assumes.

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<sup>1</sup> Wayne E. Baker and Robert R. Faulkner, 'Role as Resource in the Hollywood Film Industry,' *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 97, No. 2, September 1991, p. 286.

<sup>2</sup> Warren Buckland, 'The Role of the Auteur in the Age of the Blockbuster: Steven Spielberg and Dreamworks,' in Julian Stringer (ed.) *Movie Blockbusters* (London: Routledge, 2003), 84-87.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 87.

<sup>4</sup> William Goldman, *The Story of 'A Bridge Too Far'* (New York: Dell Publishing 1977). (No page numbers).

<sup>5</sup> Christine Saxton, 'The Collective Voice as Cultural Voice,' *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 26, No. 1. (Autumn 1986), p. 21-2.

<sup>6</sup> William Goldman *Story of A Bridge Too Far*.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph E. Levine, *A Bridge Too Far: Notes from a Filmmaker*, (New York: Joseph E. Levine Presents 1977). (No page numbers).

<sup>8</sup> Charles S. Tashiro, 'The "Twilight" Zone of Contemporary Hollywood Production,' *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 3, (Spring 2002), p. 29.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Dunn, 'The Last Movie Mogul,' *The Sunday Times* 5<sup>th</sup> February 1978.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph E. Levine, 'Ars Longa, Vita Brevis,' *New York Times*, 8<sup>th</sup> October 1974, p. 41.

<sup>11</sup> Robert E. Kapsis, *Hitchcock: The Making of a Reputation*, p. 218.

<sup>12</sup> Pat O'Haire, 'This Levine Guy ... He's a Real Joe,' *Sunday News – New York's Picture Newspaper*, 29<sup>th</sup> September 1974, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Frederick M. Esry, 'Film Pirates,' *New York Times*, Letters, 2<sup>nd</sup> August 1977, p. C4.

<sup>14</sup> Andrew Sarris, 'Notes on The Auteur Theory in 1962,' re-printed in Peter Hutchings, Joanne Hollows and Mark Jancovich (eds), *The Film Studies Reader* (London: Arnold, 2000) p. 69.

<sup>15</sup> Robert E. Kapsis, *Hitchcock: The Making of a Reputation* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press 1992), p. 216.



- <sup>16</sup> David A. Cook, 'Auteur Cinema and the 'Film Generation' in 1970s Hollywood,' in Jon Lewis (ed.) *The New American Cinema* (Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 35.
- <sup>17</sup> Warren Buckland, 'The Role of the Auteur in the Age of the Blockbuster: Steven Spielberg and Dreamworks,' p. 92-3.
- <sup>18</sup> John Desplas, 'Moving Pictures: Magic,' *Figaro*, 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1978, Section 2, p. 21.
- <sup>19</sup> James Monaco, *American Film Now*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 124.
- <sup>20</sup> Joseph McBride, 'Levine Slaps Non-Paying Exhibs, Press Agents For Industry Ills,' *Variety*, 21<sup>st</sup> August 1974.
- <sup>21</sup> A.H. Weiler, 'Screen: Encore Lelouch,' *New York Times*, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1975, p. 36, and Kevin Thomas, 'Lelouch Touches All Phases in 'Love,'" *LA Times*, 26<sup>th</sup> March 1975 p. G1
- <sup>22</sup> 'Joe Levine Warming Up Old-Style Promo Push For Porter,' *Variety*, 19<sup>th</sup> June 1974.
- <sup>23</sup> James Bacon, 'Good and Bad Reviews,' *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, 1<sup>st</sup> November 1974.
- <sup>24</sup> Charles Champlin, 'He's Banking on the Last Laugh,' *LA Times*, 1<sup>st</sup> November 1974, p. H1.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>26</sup> "I was shocked beyond words by Charles Champlin's column of Nov 1 which states that Joe Levine was identified with *The Bicycle Thief*, *Open City* and *Paisan* – which he imported and which have had a revolutionary impact on American ideas about film making. You are surely aware that these pictures were imported by Joe Burstyn and myself. Joe Levine's only association with them was as a salesman representing Mayer-Burstyn in New England. I do not personally care very much – I have reached an age where such matters do not concern me greatly, but Burstyn was a marvellous little man who, more than anyone else, was responsible for bringing foreign films into American Theatres, and I am indignant that his services should not only be belittled but actually ignored." Arthur L. Mayer, *LA Times*, Calendar, Letters, 24<sup>th</sup> November 1974.
- <sup>27</sup> Pat O'Haire, 'This Levine Guy ... He's a Real Joe,' *Sunday News. New York's Picture Newspaper*, 29<sup>th</sup> September 1974.
- <sup>28</sup> 'Joseph E. Levine Presents Himself. Takes Powder as AvEmb Official,' *Variety* 29<sup>th</sup> May 1974.
- <sup>29</sup> Joseph McBride, 'Levine Slaps Non-Paying Exhibs, Press Agents For Industry Ills,' *Variety*, 21<sup>st</sup> August 1974.
- <sup>30</sup> Victor Davies, 'How The Bridge At Arnhem Came To Be Paved With Gold,' *Daily Express*, 7<sup>th</sup> February 1977.
- <sup>31</sup> William Goldman, *Story of 'A Bridge Too Far'*, (No page numbers).
- <sup>32</sup> 'A Budget Too Big,' *The Economist*, 29<sup>th</sup> May 1976, p. 96.
- <sup>33</sup> Guy Flatley, 'I Have Butterflies' Says Joseph E. Levine. ABTF Opening Has Him Nervous,' *LA Herald Examiner*, 18<sup>th</sup> June 1977.
- <sup>34</sup> Telegram from Sean Connery to Joseph E. Levine, 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1976.
- <sup>35</sup> 'Film Notes,' *LA Herald Examiner*, 11 February 1975.
- <sup>36</sup> Dorothy Manners, 'Ike-Monty Saga to McCarthy,' *LA Herald Examiner*, 29<sup>th</sup> September 1975.
- <sup>37</sup> Letter from William E. Chaikin to Joseph E. Levine dated 11<sup>th</sup> November 1975.
- <sup>38</sup> 'Joe Levine's Retirement Is Postponed,' *LA Herald Examiner* 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1975.
- <sup>39</sup> George F. Custen, *Twentieth Century's Fox: Darryl F. Zanuck and the Culture of Hollywood* (New York: Basic Books 1997), p. 360-4.
- <sup>40</sup> Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How The Sex Drugs and Rock n Roll Generation Saved Hollywood* (London: Bloomsbury Paperbacks 1999), p. 346-376.
- <sup>41</sup> Roderick Mann, 'Stars Falling From War Skies Over 'Bridge',' *LA Times*, Calendar, 19<sup>th</sup> September 1976, p. 1.
- <sup>42</sup> Joseph E. Levine, *A Bridge Too Far: Notes From a Filmmaker*.
- <sup>43</sup> Darryl F. Zanuck quoted in Mathew Bernstein, *Walter Wanger: Hollywood Independent* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2000), p. 343.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>45</sup> William Goldman, *Adventures in the Screen Trade* (London: Futura 1985), p. 274.
- <sup>46</sup> Wayne E. Baker and Robert R. Faulkner, 'Role as Resource in the Hollywood Film Industry,' *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 97, No. 2, September 1991, p. 291.
- <sup>47</sup> William Goldman, *Adventures in the Screen Trade*, p. 280.
- <sup>48</sup> David A. Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press 2000), p. 339.
- <sup>49</sup> Victor Davies, 'How The Bridge At Arnhem Came To Be Paved With Gold,' *Daily Express*, 7<sup>th</sup> February 1977.
- <sup>50</sup> *Richard Attenborough: A Filmmaker Remembers*. A letter from Levine's London associate, Edward Bryon, dated December 8<sup>th</sup> 1975 informed Levine: "As far as the British are concerned, it appears that

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we may count on commitments from Sean Connery, Michael Caine, Anthony Hopkins and Lawrence Olivier. I'm not sure when Edward Fox came on board but according to Richard Attenborough Levine attempted to persuade Attenborough to take the part of Lieutenant General Brian Horrocks, the part eventually awarded to Fox. Attenborough demurred, saying, "in my view you've got to be a bloody genius to act and direct in a picture. Olivier, Chaplin, Welles – they can do it. But I can't." Roderick Mann, 'Stars Falling From War Skies Over 'A Bridge', *LA Times*, Calendar, 19<sup>th</sup> September 1976, p. Q39.

<sup>51</sup> William Goldman, *The Story of 'A Bridge Too Far'*.

<sup>52</sup> Goldman, William *Adventures in the Screen Trade* p. 284.

<sup>53</sup> Goldman, William. *The Story of 'A Bridge Too Far.'*

<sup>54</sup> 'Eye View: Gambling Again on Arnhem,' *Women's Wear Daily*, 1<sup>st</sup> September 1976.

<sup>55</sup> Contract sent from Joseph E. Levine Presents to Nordisk Film Kompagni (distributor for Denmark and Iceland) 17<sup>th</sup> May 1976.

<sup>56</sup> Telex from JEL Presents Inc. to Wildwood Enterprises, January 22<sup>nd</sup> 1976.

<sup>57</sup> Telex from Wildwood Enterprises to JEL Presents Inc. 26<sup>th</sup> January 1976.

<sup>58</sup> William Goldman, *Adventures in the Screen Trade*, p. 294.

<sup>59</sup> 'Let There Be Light,' *Variety* 18 February 1976.

<sup>60</sup> "In what is said to be the highest price advanced for a motion picture in Japan, Joseph E. Levine and Richard P. Levine have signed a deal with ... Tohukshinska Film Co. Ltd. for exclusive distribution rights in Japan and Okinawa of ... *A Bridge Too Far*." Joseph E. Levine Presents Press Release 4<sup>th</sup> March 1976.

<sup>61</sup> Telex from Joseph E. Levine to Richard Attenborough circa April/May 1976.

<sup>62</sup> Telex from William Goldman to Richard Attenborough circa April/May 1976

<sup>63</sup> Telex from Arthur Krim to Richard Attenborough circa August 1976.

<sup>64</sup> 'UA To Release 'Bridge', *Hollywood Reporter*, 18<sup>th</sup> May 1976.

<sup>65</sup> Telex from Joseph E. Levine to Richard Attenborough, circa. April 1976.

<sup>66</sup> Rosalie Levine's personal diary circa April 1976. KLM is a Dutch airline.

<sup>67</sup> *Hollywood Reporter*, 6<sup>th</sup> October 1976.

<sup>68</sup> Colonel John Waddy, 'The Making of *A Bridge Too Far*,' *After The Battle* No. 17, 1977, p. 32.

<sup>69</sup> Joseph E. Levine, *A Bridge Too Far. Notes from a Filmmaker*.

<sup>70</sup> William Goldman, *Adventures in the Screen Trade*, p. 279-280.

<sup>71</sup> Richard Attenborough has written how Levine met Queen Elizabeth II at a function in early 1976, whereupon she asked him about the handle of his walking stick, which was a gold moulded replica of the Arnhem Bridge. At this point, the photographer who had been trailing the Queen was nowhere to be seen. "'Where's that goddam lousy photographer?' said Joe, between clenched teeth. 'Of all the goddam stinking lousy pictures he's ever taken, there was a great one. Me, the bridge, and the Queen of England in the same picture. What a memento for the kids. I'll kill the bastard.'" Richard Attenborough, *In Search of Gandhi* (London: Bodley Head, 1983), p. 159. There is little doubt in my mind that, had the picture been taken, it would have found its way into the publicity material for *A Bridge Too Far*.

<sup>72</sup> Earl Wilson, 'One Filmmaker Recreates War,' *LA Herald Examiner*, 5<sup>th</sup> June 1977.

<sup>73</sup> Charles S. Tashiro, 'The "Twilight" Zone of Contemporary Hollywood', p. 29.

<sup>74</sup> *Time*, 21 June 1976.

<sup>75</sup> Victor Davies, 'How The Bridge at Arnhem Came To Be Paved With Gold,' *Daily Express*, 7<sup>th</sup> February 1977.

<sup>76</sup> David Wigg, Paul Dacre and Judith Simons, 'The Stars' Reflected Glory,' *Daily Express*, 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1977. Horrocks and Urquhart, however, both expressed deep reservations about the portrayal of Lieutenant-General Frederick "Boy" Browning, played by Dirk Bogarde, *Ibid*. And Browning's widow, author Dame Daphne Du Maurier, who had praised Ryan's book, was dismayed by her husband's portrayal on film, accusing the producers of turning Browning into a "fall guy," Barry Powell, 'Scapegoat General,' *News of the World*, 25<sup>th</sup> May 1977.

<sup>77</sup> William Goldman, *Adventures in the Screen Trade* p. 279.

<sup>78</sup> Richard Schickel, 'Clumping Around Market Garden,' *Time*, 13<sup>th</sup> June 1977.

<sup>79</sup> John Sandilands, 'Tanks, David Darling,' *Observer Magazine*, 27<sup>th</sup> March 1977, p. 26.

<sup>80</sup> Patrick Gibbs, 'Arnhem Through The Smoke,' *Daily Telegraph*, 24<sup>th</sup> June 1977.

<sup>81</sup> Barry Powell, 'Scapegoat General,' *News of the World*, 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1977.

<sup>82</sup> Chris Kenworthy, 'How I Made The Biggest Movie Ever,' *The Sun*, 9<sup>th</sup> July 1977.

<sup>83</sup> Richard Schickel, 'Clumping Around Market Garden,' *Time*, 13<sup>th</sup> June 1977.

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- <sup>84</sup> Andrew Sarris, 'Films in Focus. A War Picture To End All War Pictures,' *Village Voice*, 27<sup>th</sup> June 1977.
- <sup>85</sup> Penelope Giliatt, '*A Bridge Too Far* Review,' *New Yorker*, 20<sup>th</sup> June 1977.
- <sup>86</sup> Richard Gertner, 'Star-Heavy Cast Both Aids and Hinders Levine's Spectacular *A Bridge Too Far*,' *Motion Picture Product Digest*, 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1977, p. 8.
- <sup>87</sup> Richard Schickel, 'Clumping Around Market Garden,' *Time*, 13<sup>th</sup> June 1977.
- <sup>88</sup> Jeanine Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre* (New York: Columbia University Press 1986), p. 75.
- <sup>89</sup> Gary Arnold, 'A Bridge Too Far: War Epic at the Head of Its Class,' *Washington Post*, 16th June 1977, p. C. 1.
- <sup>90</sup> Guy Flatley, 'I Have Butterflies,' Says Joseph E. Levine: '*A Bridge Too Far* Opening Has Him Nervous,' *LA Herald Examiner*, 18<sup>th</sup> June 1977 and Joe Baltake, 'Levine's Bridge Won't Go Too Far,' *Philadelphia Daily News*, 16<sup>th</sup> June 1977, p. 36 and 38.
- <sup>91</sup> 'Return of the Blockbuster,' *The Economist*, 27<sup>th</sup> January 1979, p. 35.
- <sup>92</sup> Joe Baltake, 'Fun? Flops? Levine Has 'Em,' *Detroit Free Press*, 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1978, p. 20B.
- <sup>93</sup> Earl Wilson, 'The Last Hustler,' *The Dallas Morning News*, 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1978.
- <sup>94</sup> Joe Baltake, 'Levine's Bridge Won't Go Too Far,' *Philadelphia Daily News*, 16<sup>th</sup> June 1977, p. 36 and 38.
- <sup>95</sup> Pauline Kael, 'Circles and Squares,' *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 3. (Spring 1963), p. 15-17.
- <sup>96</sup> *A Bridge Too Far* Press Book, 1977.



## Conclusion

This thesis has sought to rediscover Levine and engage with his legacy in order to position him as a vital figure in film historiography. Levine's multifariousness and unabashed independent spirit make him an ideal figure by which to survey the development of post-World War II cinema in the US. Yet the fact that he has been all but forgotten brings into sharp focus the very valuable areas of research that are too often overlooked by film researchers. As this thesis demonstrates, an analysis of an individual's career and influence can call into question many scholarly assumptions regarding cultural and industrial boundaries.

Throughout his career, Levine embarked on many short-lived and long-standing relationships with individuals, companies and studios, moving with relative ease through the industrial networks of the international film industry and across the cultural spectrum. He thus calls into question entrenched notions of film industry construction and cultural demarcations. As this thesis demonstrates, such barriers are rather more porous than they may appear: maverick individuals and small platoons are able to engage in acts of trespass and contravention fairly easily, thus disrupting and forcing a reconfiguration of wider areas of academic debate regarding supposed cultural and industrial barriers, such as those between various types of cinematic distinction (art, exploitation, mainstream, blockbuster and so on) and industrial borders (such as the distinction between independent and studio production).

Levine is also a key linking figure in a historical and generational sense. He absorbed, utilised and modified techniques of the past in order to capitalise on contemporary industrial and cultural mores, and, occasionally, point a finger toward the future of the film industry. The wide variety of roles he assumed on various projects – producer, exec-producer, importer, funder, promoter – shows that a figure

with wide ranging abilities and ambitions can provide a much sought after navigational tool for furthering understanding of many of the complexities of film industry scholarship. Indeed, I believe that a greater focus on the careers of industrial figures and organisations hitherto marginalized by film scholarship can provide many extremely valuable lines of enquiry for future study.

When I began researching this project there was very little material available about Levine. As I said in the Introduction, Levine is more often likely to appear as a footnote than as the focus of a study. Since then, however, more work on Levine has appeared, work which often expands on Levine's footnote status. Sheldon Hall's exhaustive study of *Zulu* (1964, Cy Endfield), not only details Levine's role in the making and marketing of the film,<sup>1</sup> it also goes some way to contextualising Levine in terms of his career and historical moment.<sup>2</sup> Dade Hayes and Jonathan Bing have also sought to reposition Levine as an important figure in film historiography, positioning him as a key figure in the development of the modern day blockbuster, both in their book, *Open Wide*,<sup>3</sup> and in an article in *Variety*, which was notable for its subtitle, 'Debunking the *Jaws* Myth.'<sup>4</sup>

Following on from *Showman* and *Le Mepris*, the collection of on-screen Levine doppelgangers is soon to be expanded with Anthony Hopkins's forthcoming *Slipstream* (2007, Anthony Hopkins), which features John Turturro playing a film producer based on Levine.<sup>5</sup> Levine's name has also cropped up from time to time in the popular press, often accompanied by nostalgic wonderings regarding great figures of cinema's past and who will take their place. The novelist Stephen Sheppard has written about his own meetings with Levine, concluding with the remark, "They don't make 'em like that anymore. Crass. But too damn true."<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Sean MacCaulay

wondered, “what’s happened to Hollywood’s pirate kings?” in the pages of *The Times*, before recounting anecdotes involving Levine, Mike Todd and Sam Spiegel.<sup>7</sup>

There does seem to be, then, a popular and scholarly curiosity developing regarding cinema’s forgotten figures and one that is to be welcomed. Indeed, an amusing one-liner reprinted in a Sunday supplement can sometimes provide all the motivation needed to facilitate research for an article, thesis or book. The current critical atmosphere seems ripe for re-examination of film industry men and women who, in earlier times, seemed disreputable or unworthy of scholarly attention.

In 1965, Stephen Taylor wrote of “Joseph E. Levine, who, as everyone knows, is Lorenzo the Magnificent of a cinema whose products are tailored to the distributor’s measurements.”<sup>8</sup> As this thesis has demonstrated, there was enough evidence even in 1965 to rebuff such a blanket dismissal, yet the cultural prejudices that inform Taylor’s assertion are worthy of investigation.

Lorenzo the Magnificent (Lorenzo de Medici) was a notable patron of the arts in Florence in the late 15<sup>th</sup> Century. His influence over the Florentine art world coincided with the Italian Renaissance, so, unsurprisingly, his contemporary and posthumous reputation was secure and he was long regarded as one of the architects of the Renaissance - until the 1960s, that is; the time of Taylor’s article. For F. W. Kent, “from the 1960s onward scholars sought to demolish the myth, past and present, of Lorenzo the Magnificent.”<sup>9</sup> Subsequently, argues Kent, Lorenzo’s reputation became that of an overrated dilettante, a view bolstered by snobbish associations with his family of “parvenu bankers.”<sup>10</sup> Taylor’s “as everyone knows” gambit suggests how well known this scholarly volte-face was in certain circles. Kent attributes the demolishing of Lorenzo’s reputation in the 1960s to his prior lionisation. He also

attributes what he perceives to be an over-enthusiastic reappraisal of Lorenzo's reputation in recent times to its 1960s demolition.<sup>11</sup>

The swinging pendulum of reputation building and dismantling may, for some, be an occupational hazard of academia, but this is rather fatalistic. As with Lorenzo, Levine has suffered his fair share of critical and scholarly maulings, as this thesis has examined, but the temptation should not be to drag the pendulum back the other way. To be sure, in addition to scholarly examination, this thesis is also a commendation of Levine and his achievements; I have, however, sought to recognise where Levine has been given credit undeserved, and also endeavoured to reveal his influences and compadres. Levine was a man of extraordinary talents, but he was no angel.

Levine's devotion to showmanship was seemingly insatiable; two recent articles are revealing in this sense. Harold Robbins's biographer, Andrew Wilson, has written about Levine's great influence on the writer. In one article he quotes Levine:

[Robbins] eats up circus life. Some writers won't lift a finger to help the book, the picture or themselves, but not Harold. I've never asked him to cross a tightrope over Times square, but he'd do just about anything else I ask.<sup>12</sup>

For Wilson, Robbins absorbed Levine's devotion to showmanship and utilised the lessons he had learned. Yet Levine's passion for his "peculiar talent" had its obnoxious side too. As I described in Chapter Seven, Levine, in collusion with Jack Garfien, subjected Carroll Baker to a punishing schedule of publicity engagements for *The Carpetbaggers* (1964, Edward Dmytryk), which resulted in her being hospitalised for nervous exhaustion. And a recently published article reveals Levine's displeasure



when Stephanie Beacham refused to pose nude for *Playboy* in order to promote the Avco Embassy production, *The Nightcomers* (1972, Michael Winner). According to Beacham, Levine reasoned that, as she had appeared nude in the film, why not in *Playboy*? Beacham refused, provoking a good deal of anger from Levine.<sup>13</sup> Of course, such tales are unsettling, yet film historiography is littered with tales of a “great director” subjecting “underlings” (usually women) to insufferable demands for the cause of “art”. I’m not suggesting that either practice is conscionable, yet the “art” of filmmaking is unquestionably privileged over the “art” of showmanship. Indeed, to challenge another barrier, aren’t they, perhaps, the same thing?

When I began research on this thesis I knew little about Levine beyond some perfunctory knowledge of his life and the curious juxtapositions of his output. Since then I have discovered much more. I have investigated his life and career through his output and through his public record, which is scattered across the archives. I have spoken to many people who admired him and many who still hate him, twenty-odd years after his death. For those that admired him, he provided an essential injection of showmanship into the film world. For those that hate him, well, the general tale is that he ripped them off in some way. As I said in Chapter One, Levine was more of a rascal than an ogre – this is not a statement that is meant to mitigate, just to contextualise.

Levine was a figure of great influence in the US cinema during his lifetime and helped to pioneer many techniques that are still familiar today. But he did not do it alone. There are many names in this thesis who would benefit film studies with greater engagement; publicity men such as Terry Turner, who worked with RKO, Warner Bros and Levine; and Bill Doll, who was a press agent for Mike Todd before working for Levine. Notable figures such as film producers Max Rosenberg and

Edward S. Feldman, sexploitation queen Doris Wishman and the current CEO of New Line Cinema, Michael Lynne, all worked for Levine at some point; as a partner in Motion Picture Ventures, press agent, distribution assistant and lawyer, respectively. Levine benefited from their input and, no doubt, had an influence on their subsequent careers.

This thesis is, I hope, not the last word on Levine. Indeed, each chapter can open up many valuable lines of scholarly enquiry. Yet, whatever future work is done, and whatever Levine's failures, I hope that some good mention is made of his peculiar talent.

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<sup>1</sup> Sheldon Hall, *Zulu: With Some Guts Behind It. The Making of an Epic Film* (Sheffield Tomahawk Press 2005), passim.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 128-133.

<sup>3</sup> Dade Hayes and Jonathan Bing, *Open Wide: How Hollywood Box Office Became a National Obsession* (New York: Miramax Books 2004), p. 227-232.

<sup>4</sup> Dade Hayes and Jonathan Bing, 'Perspectives: Debunking the *Jaws* Myth,' *Variety* 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2004, p. 21.

<sup>5</sup> Brian Jacks, 'Anthony Hopkins On Flying In The *Slipstream*, Going *Psycho* And Why New Age Hippies Don't Make Sense,' <http://moviesblog.mtv.com/2007/11/05/anthony-hopkins-on-flying-in-the-slipstream-going-psycho-and-why-new-age-hippies-dont-make-sense/> (accessed 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2008). NB. Hopkins said the he originally wrote the part for Harvey Weinstein.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Sheppard, 'Dinner With Joe and a Case of Cash,' *Herald Express* 1<sup>st</sup> March 2004, p. 17.

<sup>7</sup> Sean MacCauley, 'Buccaneers of Beverly Hills,' *The Times*, 8<sup>th</sup> July 2004, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Taylor, 'After The Nouvelle Vague,' *Film Quarterly* Vol 18, No. 3 (Spring 1965), p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> F. W. Kent, *Lorenzo De Medici and the Art of the Magnificent* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press 2007), p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 4-7.

<sup>12</sup> Andrew Wilson, 'The Man Who Invented The Blockbuster,' *Sunday Times*, Culture, 14<sup>th</sup> October 2007, p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Brian Beacom, 'The Bitch Is Back – But She's Not Scary At All,' *Evening Times* 6<sup>th</sup> March 2007, p. 24.

## Appendix I



**Figure 1**

Joseph E. Levine, 1960.



Figure 2

*Tattoo* (1981, Bob Brooks) Poster.

**MAKES 'KING KONG'  
LOOK LIKE A MIDGET!**  
-DAILY NEWS

**"A REAL  
KILLER-DILLER"**

N. Y. MIRROR

**"WILD-EYED  
THRILLER!"**

N. Y. JOURNAL-AMERICAN

**"GODZILLA, KING  
OF THE MONSTERS'  
(an import from Japan)  
is science-fiction.  
Several episodes are  
banzai-worthy!"**

WALTER WINCHELL

**cue**

**GODZILLA, KING OF THE MONSTERS**  
(Embassy) At the State. The Japanese contribution to the current movie monster marathon is a veritable hair-raiser: a 40-story-high, armored back, spiked head, sub-oceanic megalosaurus that comes up out of Tokyo Bay—breathing fire and destruction. It's impervious to high voltage shock, artillery, rocket fire and depth bombs. It explodes ships by exhaling a fiery breath upon them, turns the ocean into steam, topples skyscrapers, stamps out whole blocks at a time, tows railroad trains about like matchsticks, sets Tokyo on fire, and terrifies the world. Then two Japanese geologists, two scientists and one pretty Japanese lady scientist figure out a scheme to get rid of their unwelcome guest. The film has been elaborately produced—and, for all that it's an imitation of Hollywood's own juvenile thrillers of this type, it should seem enough moviegoers to make a barrel of money for its producers. Raymond Burr is the U.S. newspaperman who happens to see it all, and reports to a horrified world what he can barely believe himself. Ain't we got fun.  
—JEAN ZEMKE

**RAGING THROUGH THE WORLD  
ON A RAMPAGE OF DESTRUCTION!**

**GODZILLA** **It's Alive!**

**CIVILIZATION  
CRUMBLES**  
as its  
death rays  
blast a  
city from  
the face  
of the  
earth!

**KING OF THE  
MONSTERS**



**SEE!**

A monstrous sea beast  
surging up from the ocean's  
depths in a wave of terror!

A city of six million wiped  
out by its death ray blast!

Giant ships swamped! Jet  
planes swept from the skies!  
...Trains ripped from the rails!

Towering sky-scrapers topple  
as civilization totters on the  
brink of oblivion!

**MORE! MORE! MORE!**  
**SEE EVERY EARTH-  
SHAKING, SCREEN-  
SHATTERING THRILL!**

**EXTRA!**  
**WALT  
DISNEY'S  
'SARDINIA'**  
Technicolor

**PREVIEW TODAY**  
Plus last showings  
"MIRACLE IN THE RAIN"

**RAYMOND BURR** Directed by TERRY MORSE and I. HONDA  
A TRANS WORLD Release

**STARTS TOMORROW 9 A.M.**

**LOEW'S STATE**

**B'way & 45th St. • Times Sq.**

**CHILDREN  
50¢  
ALL TIMES**

Figure 3

Godzilla: King of the Monsters (1956, Ishiro Honda and Terry Morse) Pressbook



## We Missed You At The Waldorf Last Friday, Friend Exhibitor!

Last Friday, March 20th, I had 1,000 guests for luncheon at the Waldorf-Astoria, New York. Among them were hundreds of exhibitors, theatre owners and operators, personalities of the show world, leaders of government, the press, radio, and television.

The luncheon launched my presentation of a tremendous motion picture spectacle, HERCULES. The loves and adventures of the World's Mightiest Man will fill hundreds of theatre screens starting about July 15th.

I called this event THE HERCULES EXPLODATION LUNCHEON. Why? Because we are going to explode HERCULES throughout the nation this Summer. How? That's the story we told at the luncheon.

I realize that many of you could not leave your busy desks clear across the country to break bread with us. While you missed a grand and exciting gala, I don't want you to miss our merchandising story. It's simply HERCULEAN. If it isn't the champ—well, there are mighty few contenders in sight.

In terms of money spent and media used in the space of 10 days, the campaign for HERCULES will stand as one of the mightiest ever put on for a motion picture. The picture degrees it—and go nuts—the American public. A glance at just a few of our plans right indicates how we're going to remind the nation in July—in no uncertain terms—to rush out and see HERCULES in wide-screen Dyaliscope. And with 600 Eastman Color (by Pathé) prints working, we're going to make it very convenient for them.

I'm very pleased to tell you that WARNER BROS. agrees with me on the boxoffice power of HERCULES and will distribute it nationally.

Secretary  
JOSEPH E. LEVINE, President  
EMBASSY PICTURES Corp.  
1730 Avenue of the Americas  
New York 20, New York



**WITHIN 10 DAYS  
IN JULY... THIS  
EXPLODATION!**

FULL PAGE  
4-COLOR ADS

**LIFE · LOOK  
AMERICAN  
WEEKLY  
PARADE**

FULL PAGE ADS

**SEVENTEEN  
AND 8 NATIONAL  
MOVIE-FAN  
MAGAZINES!**

FULL PAGE ADS

**25 NATIONAL MEN'S  
MAGAZINES!**

**FULL PAGE, 4-COLOR  
ADS IN INDIVIDUAL  
SUNDAY ROTO  
MAGAZINE SECTIONS!**

FULL PAGE, 4-COLOR  
TRUCK-PAUSE ADS IN  
MANY MAGAZINES!

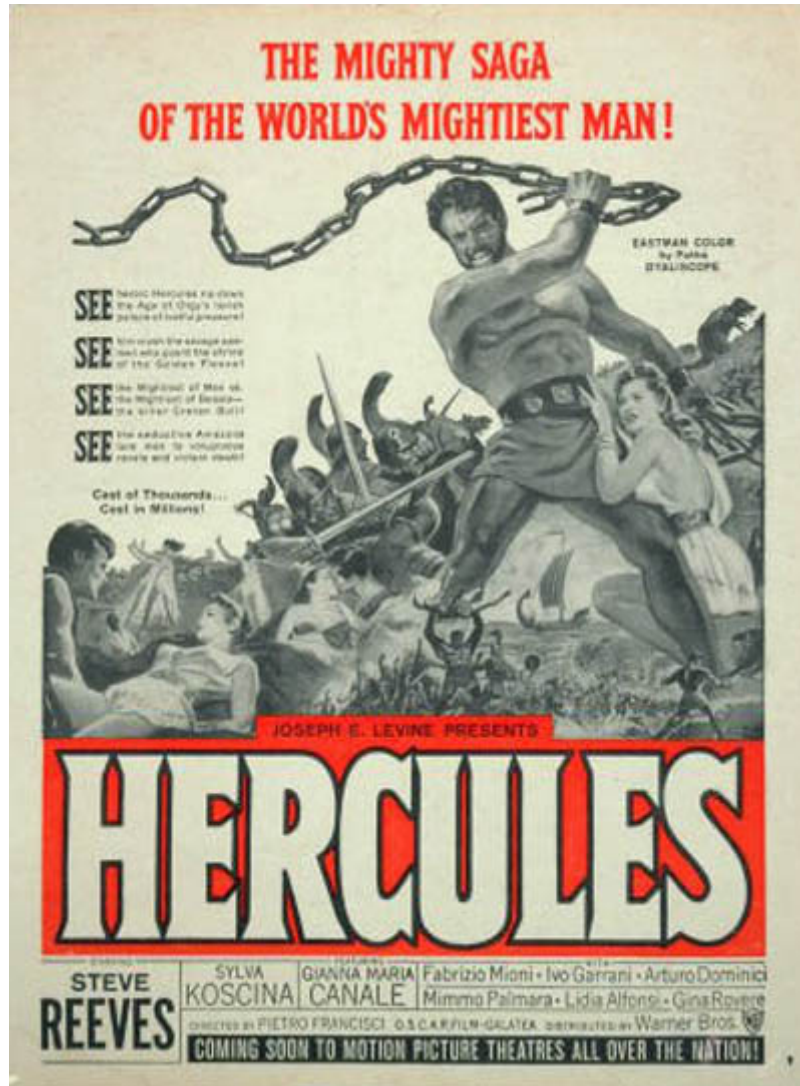
**PLUS**

**The Greatest TV  
Saturation in Every  
Local Market...  
Daily Newspapers and  
Radio, Too!**

TRADE AD 'OUTSIDE.' Above is reproduction of unique, full-page trade ad placed by showman Levine in New York Times following "Hercules" feast. Double-barrelled effect is achieved by informing exhibitors who missed out on the luncheon of the importance of the film, at the same time letting the public in on an upcoming movie treat.

Figure 4

Levine's missive to exhibitors. Reproduced in *Film Bulletin* 30<sup>th</sup> March 1958, p.12.



**Figure 5**

*Hercules* (1958, Pietro Francisci) Advertisement



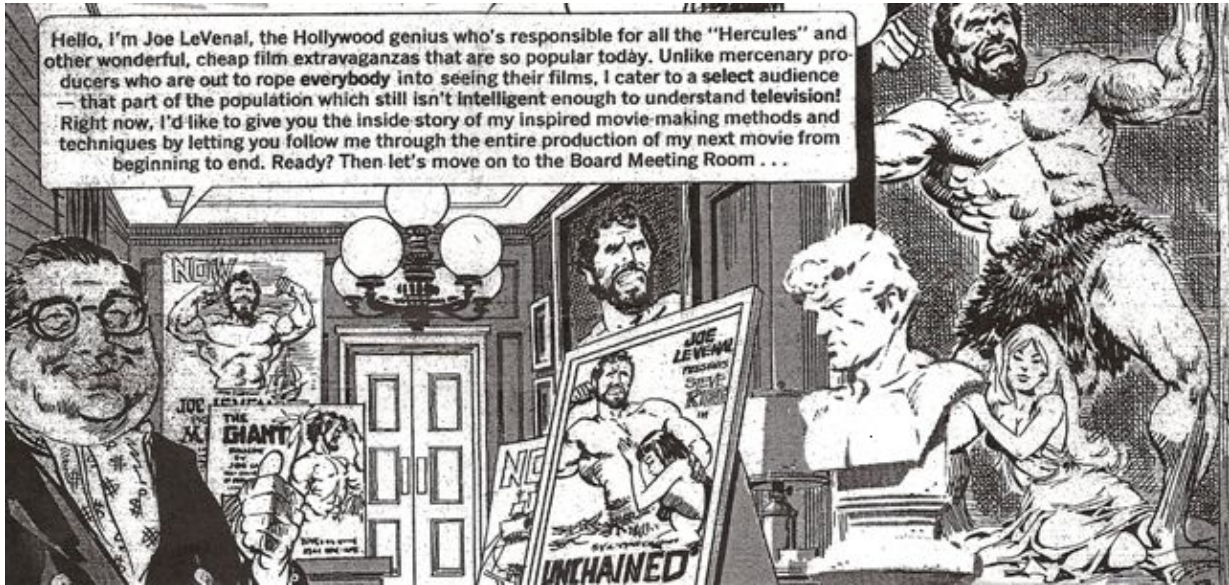
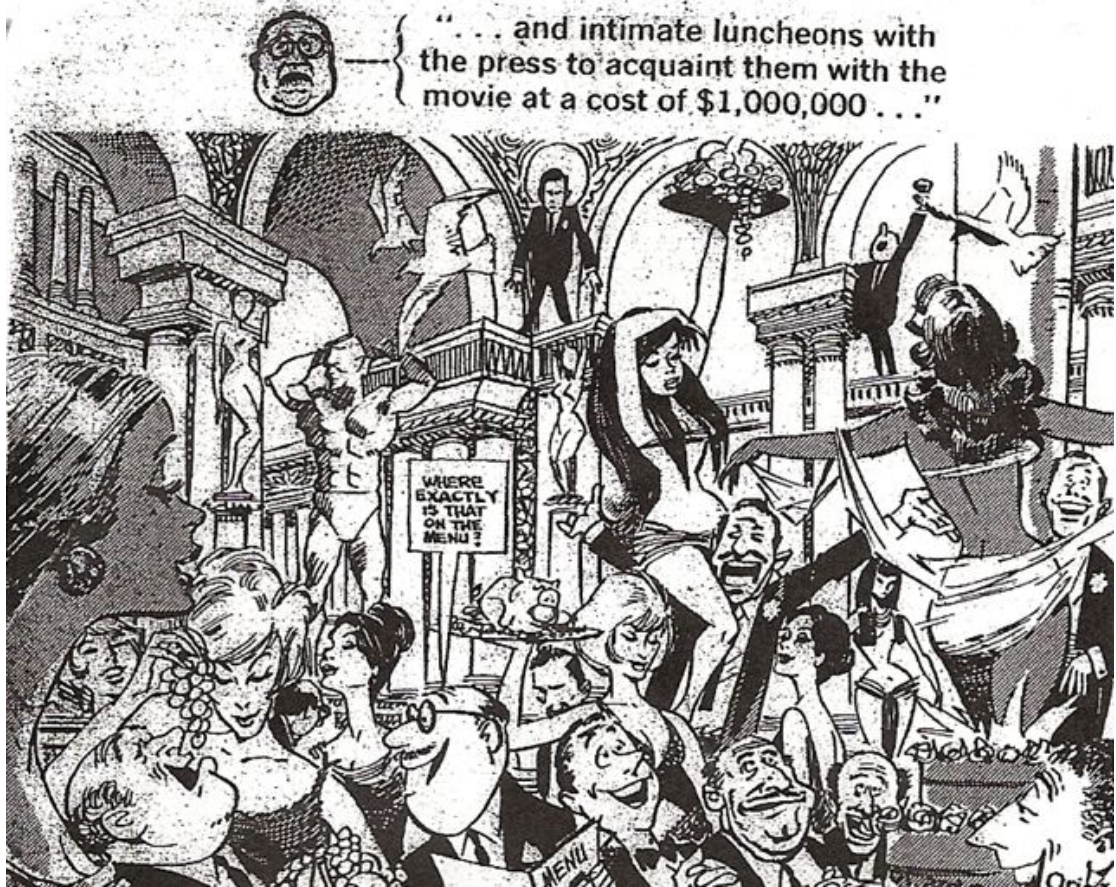


Figure 6

*Mad Magazine's Joe LeVenal.*





**Figure 7**

Parties of Bacchanalian Excess.

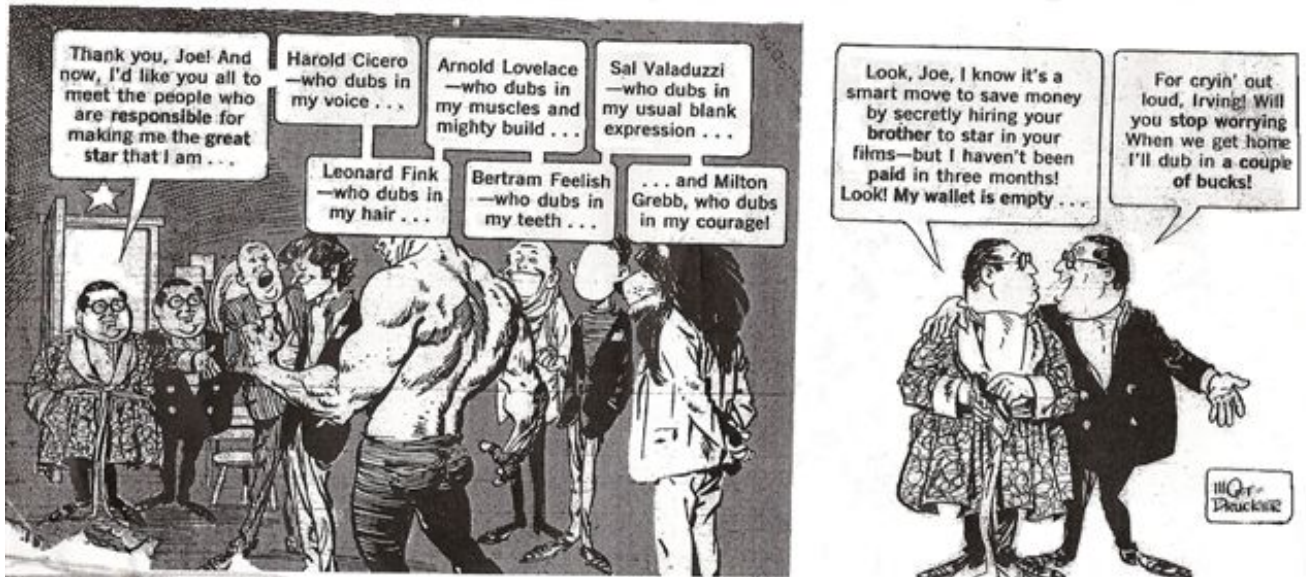


Figure 8

Joe LeVenal reveals that his star, Steve Ribs, is a composite of his twin bother, Irving, and various post-production dubbing processes.

## Appendix II

### Select Filmography

Given Levine's career, there are hundreds of titles to go through, and a labyrinth of relationships and associations, so I will restrict this filmography to the significant and the intriguing.

#### **Early Work as States' Rights Distributor in New England. 1945-1950**

##### **Motion Picture Ventures. (With Max Rosenberg)**

*Open City* (1945, Roberto Rossellini)

*Paisan* (1946, Roberto Rossellini)

*The Bicycle Thief* (1948, Vittorio de Sica)

#### **Levine/Embassy State's Right Distribution. 1930s-1950s**

Levine also distributed a variety of art and exploitation films in the Boston and New England area from the 1930s to the 1950s. During the 1950s he also worked as a states' rights distributor for AIP.

*Duel in the Sun* (1946, King Vidor). *Distibuted in New England by Levine in 1952.*

### **Levine/Embassy Imports. 1950s-1967**

*Godzilla: King of the Monsters* (1956, Ishiro Honda and Terry Morse). This is not really a Levine import. The rights to *Gojira* (1954, Ishiro Honda), from which *Godzilla* was fashioned, were acquired by Dick Kay and Jewell Enterprises. Levine, however, distributed the film, as a saturation opener, under the auspices of Transworld, in 1956.

*Attila* (1954, Pietro Francisci). Imported and distributed by Embassy in 1958.

*Hercules* (1958, Pietro Francisci). Levine acquired the rights in 1958; distributed by Warner Bros. in 1959.

*Hercules Unchained* (1959, Pietro Francisci). Distributed by Warner Bros. in 1960.

*Jack The Ripper* (1959, Robert S. Baker and Monty Berman). Distributed by Paramount in 1960.

*Where The Hot Wind Blows!* (1959, Jules Dassin). Distributed by MGM in 1960.

*Two Women* (1960, Vittorio de Sica). Sophia Loren became the first actress to win the Best Actress Oscar for a non-English-speaking role with this film. Distributed by Embassy in 1961.

*Love at Twenty* (Shintaro Ishihara, Marcel Ophuls, Renzo Rossellini, Andrzej Wajda). A portmanteau film notable not only for its input from world cinema's acknowledged greats, but also for the segments by the sons of two of cinema's acknowledged greats – Marcel (son of Max) Ophuls and Renzo (son of Roberto) Rossellini. Distributed by Embassy in 1963.

*The Sky Above, The Mud Below* (1961, Pierre-Dominique Gaisseau). A widely praised and well-received Oscar winning travelogue documentary. This film performed well at arthouse theatres, bolstered by tasteful advertising in *The New York Times*, etc. It

was also a hit in grindhouses bolstered by exploitation material exclaiming: “They lived with guru CANNIBALS! They filmed actual fertility rites. They witnessed the secret orgies of the cult of the severed head. They were forced into intimacies with their savage hosts.”

*Seven Capital Sins* (1962, Phillipe de Broca, Claude Chabrol, Jaques Demy, Sylvian Dhomme, Jean-Luc Godard, Edouard Molinaro, Roger Vadim, et al). A portmanteau film. Distributed by Embassy in 1963.

*Boccaccio 70* (1962, Vittorio de Sica, Federico Fellini, Luchino Visconti, Mario Monicelli). A portmanteau film. Distributed by Embassy in 1963, Monicelli’s segment was not included in the original US release.

*8½* (1963, Federico Fellini). Distributed by Embassy in 1963.

*Women of the World* (1963, Paolo Cavara, Gualtiero Jacopetti, Franco Proserpi).

Levine said of this: “I didn’t like [Jacopetti’s] ... *Mondo Cane* (1961), which I did not distribute. But *Women of the World*, I feel, is a great picture.”<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, a scene in *Showman* (1962, Maysles Brothers) shows Levine attempting to acquire the rights to *Mondo Cane*.

*A Pistol For Ringo* aka *Ballad of Death Valley* (1965, Duccio Tessari). Perhaps the first spaghetti western to go on general release in the US. Distributed by Embassy in 1966).

*Dingaka* (1965, Jamie Uys). A South African film, starring Stanley Baker, from the director of *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (1989). Distributed by Embassy in 1965.

*Darling* (1965, John Schlesinger). Julie Christie won a Best Actress Academy Award for her performance. Distributed by Embassy in 1965.

*John F. Kennedy: Years of Lightning, Day of Drums* (1966, Bruce Herschensohn). Distributed by Embassy for free in 1966.

*Romeo and Juliet* (1966, Paul Czinner). BBC produced ballet. Distributed theatrically in the US by Embassy.

### **Levine as Producer/Exec-Producer. 1945-1967**

*Gaslight Follies* (1945)

*Morgan the Pirate* (1961, Andre de Toth and Primo Zeglio)

*The Wonders of Aladdin* (Mario Bava and Henry Levin)

*Long Day's Journey Into Night* (1962, Sidney Lumet). Levine gets an exec-Producer credit on this film but production responsibilities are better ascribed to Ely A. Landau and Jack J. Dreyfus Jr.

*Boys Night Out* (1962, Michael Gordon)

*Sodom and Gomorrah* (1962, Robert Aldrich). Levine pulled out of this project during filming yet retained an exec-producer credit.

*Le Mepris* (1964, Jean-Luc Godard)

*Zulu* (1964, Cy Endfield)

*The Carpetbaggers* (1964, Edward Dmytryk)

*Where Love Has Gone* (1964, Edward Dmytryk).

*Santa Claus Conquers the Martians* (1964, Nicholas Webster). Filmed in ten days on a miniscule budget, this film is a perennial youtube favourite and a classic “bad film;” though it was fairly well received by some critics at the time.

*Nevada Smith* (1966, Henry Hathaway)

*The Spy With A Cold Nose* (1966, Daniel Petrie). Written by Ray Galton and Alan Simpson who had written *Steptoe and Son*, a television series that Levine tried, and failed, to have made into a show for NBC. Galton and Simpson remember Levine’s enthusiasm for British cinema and praised his support for it. They have also said that

they rarely met Levine during the filming of *The Spy With A Cold Nose*, and were more likely to deal with the film's other producer, Leonard Lightstone, who was VP of Embassy and a trusted Levine intermediary. "Joe delegated," they said.<sup>2</sup>

*Robbery* (1967, Peter Yates). An all too often overlooked British heist movie.

### **Embassy Productions and Co-Productions. 1960-1967**

*Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (1963, Vittorio de Sica)

*Marriage, Italian Style*, (1964, Vittorio de Sica)

*Casanova 70* (1965, Mario Monicelli)

*Attack and Retreat* (1965, Giuseppe de Santis). A notable Italian/US/Soviet Union collaboration.

*Village of the Giants* (1965, Bert I. Gordon)

*The Daydreamer* (1966, Jules Bass)

*Jesse James Meets Frankenstein's Daughter* (1966, William Beaudine)

*Billy The Kid Versus Dracula* (1966, William Beaudine)

*Shoot Loud, Louder ... I Don't Understand* (1966, Eduardo de Filippo). Embassy's last Italian production

*The Graduate* (1967, Mike Nichols)

### **Avco Embassy Productions. 1967-1974**

*The Producers* (1968, Mel Brooks). Production began at Embassy and completed at Avco Embassy.

*A Lion In Winter* (1968, Anthony Harvey). Levine's favourite of his own films, with the almost certain exception of *A Bridge Too Far*. Production began at Embassy and completed at Avco Embassy.

*Macho Callahan* (1970, Bernard L. Kowalski)

*Soldier Blue* (1970, Ralph Nelson)

*The Nightcomers* (1972, Michael Winner)

*Day of the Dolphin* (1973, Mike Nichols)

**Joseph E. Levine Presents. 1974-1981**

*This Time I'll Make You Rich* (1974, Gianfranco Parolini). Imported by Levine and distributed by Avco.

*Toute Une Vie* (1974, Claude Lelouch). Imported by Levine and distributed by Avco.

*The Night Porter* (1974, Liliana Cavani). Imported by Levine and distributed by Avco.

*A Bridge Too Far* (1977, Richard Attenborough). Produced by Levine and his son, Richard P. Levine.

*Magic* (1978, Richard Attenborough). Produced by Levine and his son, Richard P. Levine.

*Tattoo* (1981, Bob Brooks). Produced by Levine and his son, Richard P. Levine.

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<sup>1</sup> Sam Lesner, 'Levine on 8½, Other Projects.' *Chicago Daily News*, circa 1963.

<sup>2</sup> Personal correspondence with author, 2007.



## Appendix III

### Timeline

9<sup>th</sup> September 1905 – Joseph Edward Levine born in Boston's West End.

1938 – Buys the New Lincoln Theatre in Boston. Sets Up Embassy Pictures. Begins distributing films locally. Marries Rosalie Harrison.

1945 – Produces *Gaslight Follies*.

1952 – Distributes and promotes re-release of *Duel in the Sun* in New England.

1956 – Embassy distributes *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* (1956, Ishiro Honda and Terry Morse) nationwide.

1958 – Embassy distributes *Attila* (1954, Pietro Francisci) nationwide with around 500 prints. Levine buys rights to *Hercules* (1958, Pietro Francisci), which will be distributed with over 600 prints by Warner Bros. Levine conducts promotional campaign. Warners also distribute the sequel, *Hercules Unchained* (1959, Pietro Francisci), the following year with Levine conducting exploitation campaign.

1960 – Embassy move into arthouse distribution with *Where The Hot Wind Blows* (1959, Jules Dassin).

1962 – Sophia Loren becomes first recipient of Best Actress Oscar to win in a non-English speaking role for her performance in the Embassy import, *Two Women* (1960, Vittorio de Sica).

1963 – Levine enters into a non-exclusive deal with Paramount where he produces a variety of projects as an independent producer. Deal ends 1966.

1967 – Embassy releases its biggest hit with *The Graduate* (1967, Mike Nichols).

1968 – Embassy merges with the Avco Corporation. Levine becomes President of Avco Embassy Pictures.

1974 – Levine leaves Avco. Sets up Joseph E. Levine Presents. Begins work on *A Bridge Too Far* (1977, Richard Attenborough).

1981 – Levine produces his final film with *Tattoo* (1981, Bob Brooks)

31<sup>st</sup> July 1987 – Levine dies in Greenwich, Connecticut.

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