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BALANCING ACTS
American Thought and Culture in the 1930s

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For my parents
Richard H. Cooney and Marcia L. Cooney
who were there
dependence, personalized responses and institutional efficiencies. In their collective tolerance for inconsistency, in their efforts to balance competing values, claims, and ideas, New Deal programs created channels of political expression for the thought and culture of the decade that earned them their "psychological" success.

Reeling from the depression’s onslaught in 1931, the producer Cecil B. DeMille took up the bold shield of individualistic moralism to declare the troubles of the film industry a “test of courage.” Proclaiming that those who could stand only “pleasant times and pleasant words” were not of “lasting value,” he proceeded, in the style of Treasury Secretary Andrew Mellon, to find positive good in the economic collapse and reason for a perverse optimism. “This year will be a splendid year for the industry,” DeMille averred, “for during it we will see much of the purging effect of that greatest of all natural laws: the survival of the fittest.” The laxities and inefficiencies encouraged by prosperity were impurities that had to be cleansed; the virtues of unrelenting work, and thrift, and discipline, had occasionally to be tempered anew in the fires of competition.

In May 1933 Walt Disney’s The Three Little Pigs first appeared in theaters, and the popularity of the short cartoon quickly outstripped Disney’s ability to supply copies. Eventually, it became the most widely shown film of the year and earned Disney his first Academy Award. In the familiar tale it tells, two sprightly porkers throw together houses of straw and sticks so that they can “play around all day,” only to find themselves in dire straits when they confront the physical and economic peril of the wolf at the door. The third pig—proclaiming righteously that he has “no chance to sing and dance, for work and play don’t mix”—builds his house laboriously of brick and stone, protecting himself from danger and ultimately providing a haven for the others as well. It is easy to conclude that there was a transparent moral message in the film endorsing the traditional virtues of work, discipline, and self-denial, a message it is tempting to link to Disney’s conservative political views.
Even if one accepts DeMille’s remarks and Disney’s industrious pig at face value, however, a moment’s thought will suggest that there is some irony in their precepts. The moral framework centering on productive work and upright character so important to nineteenth-century American culture had come under increasing challenge, especially in the 1910s and 1920s, from rival values that embraced leisure, personal experience, and self-expression. The economic success of the system built up around the older morality had set it to gnawing at its own roots. High levels of production, once achieved, presented an expanding problem of how to market the flood of goods available. Business relied ever more heavily on advertising, reinforced by easy credit and installment buying, to boost consumption—encouraging a quite different behavior than did traditional notions of fiscal integrity, self-denial, and thrift. The trend toward shorter working hours and higher real income gave leisure time new social and economic importance and fostered the marketing of recreation and entertainment. Often the emphasis of the newer forms of selling and of play was on novelty, excitement, personal fulfillment, and self-expression; by the 1910s and 1920s, economic, social, and intellectual changes were loosening traditional restraints for at least some social groups in virtually all areas of life.1

The movies were a product of that newer world. When DeMille made his appeal to the stern morality of steady work and purgative competition, he was speaking about an industry dependent on leisure time and the popular consumption of entertainment. Films sold excitement and adventure, the glamour of luxury goods, the titillation of a loosened sexuality, and an extravagance of emotion far more than they dealt in any ethic of self-control or restraint; DeMille himself had gained renown for his exploitation of such patterns. Even if a film seemed to carry a traditional moral message, people could see DeMille’s epics or Disney’s hardworking pig only if they had spent their money (not saved it) to indulge their hours of leisure. There were inherent tensions between sermons on economic discipline and the nature of the film industry.

In the case of The Three Little Pigs, other ambiguities are apparent in the content of the film itself. Where some see an affirmation of traditionalist values, one scholar has found it just as possible to decide that “the most effective pig is the one who does not minimize the fact of crisis and builds with modern materials and tools.” Moreover, the pigs who fail in their own protection are not abandoned to the jaws of the wolf, as they are in early versions of the tale and as a strict application of DeMille’s “survival of the fittest” might require. Rather, they are welcomed and granted succor by the one who is secure—a version of the story that may have had unpredictable resonances during 1933. In the midst of the New Deal’s first Hundred Days, the optimistically defiant theme song “Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf” (with its echoes of Roosevelt’s inaugural attack on fear) became a national hit that seemed to reflect the upbeat mood of the new administration—whatever Disney may have intended.

Finally, the third pig is ultimately no enemy of play. The products of his dutiful construction include a piano, which he plays not in the manner of the middle-class Victorian parlor but, first, in a melodramatic accompaniment to the wolf’s assault that mimics the silent-movie accompaniments of the 1920s, and second, in a honky-tonk rendition of “Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf” that the three pigs sing together at the end. This little piggie has gone not just to work but to market, and having upheld his moral duty, he turns to embrace the popular culture of his day.

DeMille’s words and Disney’s cartoon provide a caution against deciding too readily what cultural materials mean or hurrying them too quickly into categories. Mixed meanings may offer important messages, and the presence of contradictions is seldom a simple matter of hypocrisy (though Hollywood was hardly immune to that temptation). DeMille may have appealed sincerely to an older complex of work-centered values even as he built his career on visions of indulgence and leisure. The problem is not to choose one or another ethos to represent the 1930s but to discover the ways in which contrasting values interacted through conflict and combination. What may be most interesting about The Three Little Pigs in this light is that it allows different value claims. As a result, the cartoon offers at least a tentative reconciliation between its strong dose of traditional moralism and its acceptance of popular leisure. Some expressions of American culture during the 1930s offer no reconciliation at all; others attempt to blend older and newer values in sharply different proportions. We need to ask how popular culture in its various forms coped with the presence of conflicting values during the decade, and how the makers of that culture attempted to resolve or exploit prevailing tensions.

Formulas for Success

The idea of opportunity and the dream of “success” were deeply rooted in American culture. What happened to the idea and its promises during a decade when as many as one-quarter of those seeking work could not find it, and when businesses were collapsing by the dozen? What became of the validation that the success myth offered for thrift, industry, ambition, and character when such virtues, for many, offered no protection from economic failure? Could other values replace a cluster of beliefs that provided both a strategy for gain and a moral compass? Such questions clearly troubled the 1930s. By the end of the following decade, numerous studies of depression images of success and their underlying cultural significance would attest to the importance for contemporaries of the issues at stake.

When economic collapse threatened the American promise, perhaps the strongest response was to reassert the patterns of established myth. One scholar has noted, in popular magazines of the period, an “almost obsessive
concern with questions involving success” that tended to pour most easily into familiar molds.\(^4\) Magazine biographies told time and again of a man—for it remained a male myth—who had gone to work as a boy (most likely with only a limited education, preferably with a rural background) and risen through effort, merit, and a touch of good fortune to financial success or public distinction. Articles by the score insisted that America was still the land of opportunity. Magazine writers lauded the prospects in developing fields, such as movies, air-conditioning, and aviation, or encouraged pioneers to explore the dimly perceived frontiers of atomic energy and radiation. Others tried to keep alive the idea of free land and homesteading or boasted of opportunities to make money out of the wreckage of depression. Often in such articles, the key to getting ahead lay in hard work: continuous effort that made anything possible and guaranteed good results; work that occupied the whole of life and left no room for leisure; labor as a form of training that made education a luxury or even an obstacle to success. The near certainty that traditional formulas would leave the aspiring youth ill-equipped to make his mark in atomic energy, or the fact that by the 1930s the majority of top business executives had at least some college education, presented no obstacle to those reciting a litany of success that had withstood the force of technological and organizational change for decades.

The traditional formulas for success were for many a bastion of ideological individualism, and by mid-decade they were being pressed into service to reinforce political opposition to the Roosevelt administration. In the election year 1936, one writer recited tales of businessmen who had climbed to success from humble origins and complained that New Deal regulations preventing children under 16 from working were obstructing ambitious young men who might best begin their careers at 13 or 14. The nation’s greatest economic problem, from this point of view, was not the depression but federal programs that undermined self-reliance and initiative. The Republican candidate, Alfred Landon, became the embodiment of well-worn myth as a rural boy from the Kansas plains who just might have grown up to become president. The success of “Frugal Alf,” one writer declared, came from his practicing “the homely virtues of his country”; he was a man who “counts his change . . . remembers to turn out the lights . . . keeps himself and his state out of debt.”\(^5\)

Republicans were not mistaken in believing that appeals to the traditional gospel of work, opportunity, and success continued to have substantial resonance in the 1930s, but the election demonstrated quite handily that their party had no exclusive claim on such themes. And even as its older forms were being harnessed to the political uses of the moment, the idea of success was undergoing internal reformation at the hands of newer disciples. Books of advice had long preached proper rules for climbing the social and economic ladder. Often the trappings of such advice could be kept up-to-date without changing basic patterns, as did many of the success books published in the 1930s. Through

Failure to Success (1934), for example, struck a note especially suited to the depression context, while The Super-Science of Success (1933) tried to claim the modern mantle of “scientific” authority. In a few instances, however, adjusting the precepts of the advice tradition meant restructuring the rules of the game, setting behavior and values within a different cultural frame.

Dale Carnegie’s How to Win Friends and Influence People (1936), one of the most popular success books of the decade, announces in its title a new set of tactics for getting ahead and a new conception of the process. Carnegie de-emphasizes traditional maxims of initiative, industry, thrift, self-control, and dependability to concentrate on ways of making oneself appealing to others and persuasive in dealing with them. Rather than climbing up in the world through superior character, ability, and effort, the ambitious are now urged to cultivate their minds and manners to rise through a kind of interpersonal engineering: they are to train themselves in amiability, celebrate the strengths of others, and avoid friction. References to psychology, quotations from the famous, and a ready assortment of anecdotes are pressed into service to demonstrate that making others feel important is the key to success, a key that can be used only by those who have first retooled their own perspective.

Unlike the older formulas for success that often rested on stern injunctions of considerable moral force, Carnegie’s advice places less visible emphasis on right and wrong than on getting along. Its tendency is to push any standards for critical judgment of social institutions or individual behavior into the background through admonitions to accentuate the positive. The gospel of winning friends bore a certain appropriateness for a twentieth-century industrial society increasingly characterized by large organizations and a growing service economy. Concentration on good relations with others could smooth the internal workings of corporate and government bureaucracies, lubricate the direct but largely impersonal contacts of sales and professional services, and varnish nagging anxieties with a coating of affirmation.

Noting this apparent fit, some commentators have ventured to suggest that the emphasis on consciously shaping one’s thought and behavior in order to please—on packaging and “selling” oneself—marked the individual’s consignment to an expanding domain of marketing and consumption. A related idea holds that the nineteenth-century emphasis on “character” had given way between the early twentieth century and the 1930s to a preoccupation with “personality” as the proper measure of human worth.\(^6\) Intrigued by the evidence of new standards and new behavior, post–World War II social science paid close attention to David Riesman’s distinction between the “inner-directed” and the “other-directed” person and to various forms of the idea of the “organization man.” Such efforts to categorize and type are perhaps necessary, but they can easily obscure the mix of ideas and values at a given cultural moment from which individual outlooks often take their shape.

Carnegie’s advice, like that found in several other success-full books of the 1930s, is actually pulled in several directions at once as it attempts to reconcile
different aims, values, and conceptions of individual efficacy. The goal of winning friends broadcast in half of Carnegie's title coexists in tension with the desire announced in the other half to influence people to one's own advantage. Whereas the traditional idea of success had implied the potential loneliness of "setting oneself apart," Carnegie conjures a promise of distinction and power with a promise of camaraderie and belonging. A combination of ideas that would surface again and again in the culture of the thirties—with relevance for public figures from Roosevelt to Hollywood stars—appears in Carnegie as a "success" model for the self: the individual can be both hero and buddy, exceptional and everyday.

Questions of values are similarly tangled. At times Carnegie seems to urge a computation of the cash value of every smile and to assume that getting ahead is justification enough for the tactics he prescribes. Yet after providing his calculating lessons on making others feel important, Carnegie takes pains to distinguish between "appreciation" and "flattery," adding the rather too vigorous protestation, "No! No! No! I am not suggesting flattery!" Flattery is "shallow," "counterfeit," and "insincere"; appreciation offers praise that is "sincere," "from the heart," "unselfish." Those who cannot offer smiles and appreciation without expecting something in return are "contemptibly selfish" and deserve to fail. This declaration seems to attack the very idea of self-interested action and with it the program for success that Carnegie is teaching, but the teacher admits no contradiction.

Carnegie papers over the difficulties with a revised standard version of the relationship between success and morality. His program assures readers that getting ahead in a world of large organizations and salesmanship is not just compatible with but dependent upon a moral stance that abjures social frictions and downplays the competitive pursuit of wealth. Those who do not adopt the strategies of good feeling for the right reasons—reasons that give a substantial place to nonmaterialistic ends and to family and community harmony—will "meet with the failure [they] so richly deserve" through the operation of a Carnegie equivalent of natural law. Conversely, those who begin to "appreciate" others in the right spirit will earn not only satisfaction and love but also a just and deserved profit. Like the products of streamlined design, Carnegie's model of success promises both stability and a frictionless advance.

A stockbroker who had put a part of Carnegie's advice into operation reported with elation that "smiles are bringing me dollars, many dollars every day," and went on a few sentences later to declare, as if with complete consistency, that he was "a richer man, richer in friendships and happiness—the only things that matter much after all." Money and a sentimental morality that denied its importance were closely linked. The new world of "techniques in handling people" and "dramatization" and "showmanship" ("The movies do it. Radio does it. Why don't you do it?") was presumed to be in harmony with the values of an idealized village life. Perhaps Carnegie and his more astute readers sensed at some level that the emphasis on fitting oneself to others, on being pos-

itive and upbeat, on public relations, could lead all too readily to false representation, to personality as performance, to cynicism behind the public fronts. If so, Carnegie's ethical protestations provided the necessary assuagement: getting ahead could be "unselfish"; moralisms could purify manipulation.

Carnegie, finally, offers a mixed response to the question of just how effective individuals can be in shaping their lives and their world. The whole framework and purpose of his book was tied up with a program for self-reconstruction that, like the entire success tradition, asserted the power of will and desire to mold each person anew. Within this tradition, individuals were asked to hold themselves responsible for their own fates, as many did who took joblessness in the depths of depression as a personal failing. Yet at certain points, Carnegie ventures quite different claims. If a person possessed the inherited traits and had lived with the "environment and experiences" of Al Capone, Carnegie declares, then that person would be "precisely what he is—and where he is. . . . You deserve very little credit for being what you are." Although Carnegie does not pursue the implications of such remarks, they seem to leave little room for personal responsibility or individual will.

Between the promise that anyone can be self-made and the warnings of an inevitable fate lay a message that imputed to individuals the power to attain success but limited their prospects for doing so. Even as Carnegie pledges that his program can "achieve magic" for the reader, he acknowledges that it is "difficult to apply these suggestions all the time" and warns that the "natural thing" to do is "usually wrong." Indeed, the listings of six ways and twelve ways and nine ways and seven rules to accomplish one thing or another guaranteed both that strivers would always have something to work on, and that they could never do enough. The more elaborate the program for success, the more it carried the subtle message that readers must be prepared for failure.

Carnegie's preachments on how to succeed thus carried no brief for intellectual consistency; nor did they convey any simple cultural intent. Although the major lines of argument seem evident enough, How to Win Friends and Influence People combines advice on standing out with advice on fitting in; lessons in hardheaded management with sentimental moralisms on the superiority of love over money; claims of efficacy and responsibility with a biological and cultural determinism that denies both; the promise of success with the likelihood of failure. The presence of such mixed messages, far from diminishing the book's attractiveness, may well have been an important source of its appeal.

Through its ambiguities and seeming contradictions, Carnegie's advice offered tentative reconciliations between competing outlooks and values (more consciously so than in either DeMille or Disney). What appeared to be specific instruction allowed wide flexibility of response. Readers who embraced Carnegie's formulas, or something like them, could rest first on one foot and then on the other as circumstances warranted, relying most heavily on values and explanations that served the needs of the moment.
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no need to make binding choices or exclusive commitments. Carnegie presented ready-made the kind of mosaic that people often construct for themselves from varied sources, even as his advice left room for individuals to balance competing values in their own ways and to function as makers of their own culture. In cushioning the tensions inherent in changing economic and social conditions, and in easing the more specific pressures of depression, a degree of eclecticism could be a decided strength.

Advertising: The Assurance Industry

Cultural advice of a different sort flowed unbidden to most Americans in the form of advertising. The main purpose of advertising, of course, is to sell particular products, yet with growing frequency during the decade or two before 1930, that function had become purposefully knotted with others as advertisers aspired to shape ideas, manners, behavior, and values. As early as 1908, American Telephone and Telegraph had attempted to guide public opinion on the issue of regulated monopolies through advertising. During World War I, George Creel’s Committee on Public Information mounted a full-fledged campaign of patriotic propaganda that, before the CPI’s reputation soured, gave advertisers a chance to claim that their industry had performed a great national service in a moral cause. On a more practical level, advertisements offered instruction: in telephone manners, in the use of modern products, in the proper way to shop. And if advice of this sort provided partial orientation to a world of expanding consumer goods, such literal guidance had a more flamboyant twin. During the 1920s it became apparent that although advertisements had once emphasized quality or reasoned choice by describing their products in straightforward detail, many were no longer doing so. They now appealed to consumers by associating merchandise with the experience of luxury or adventure, by identifying products with the up-to-date and the stylish, or by presenting goods as solutions to emotional problems and personal dilemmas. What the newer kind of ads increasingly sold was fantasy, status, and therapy.

In the early 1930s appeals of this kind remained an advertising staple, striking in their adaptability. Some uses were predictable: Studebaker added to an accumulating list of ads linking automobiles to excitement and adventure by combining in one layout an “Indianapolis Speed Classic” picture that promises buyers “speedway stamina” and a drawing of a car in front of a ship that is winning admiration from stylish couples, including dashing ship’s officers. Other appeals required a greater stretch: a young woman standing ecstatically with hands upraised in “sun-drenched fields” turns out to be selling the “tonic” available from a Dualator heating and cooling system; under the carefully scripted words “ Beautifying Modern,” a sleek woman in a shimmering pink evening gown yearns toward a “satin-smooth” product of “dynamic, modern, arresting” design—a “steel!” General Electric refrigerator; from a roadster stopped on a wooden bridge, a relaxed man leans out to talk with a boy fishing, reinforcing the promise that “You too, can be as carefree as Huckleberry Finn!” thanks to an Aetna automobile insurance policy. If such ads frequently seemed about to stumble over their internal incongruities, greater inconsistencies pushed to the fore as the depression clamped its economic vise on the advertising industry. The appeal to consumers through luxury and leisure stood in sharp tension with the business outlook of advertisers themselves, and the nature of the conflict mirrored the separation between words and work evident in DeMille.

When hard times came, the well-worn language of discipline and character stood ready-to-hand. Predictably, some advertising executives asserted that the economic collapse brought a deserved punishment to an industry grown lax, that people and products would be better for having been tested, even (in the 1932 ads of one watch company) that parents should be thankful to have their children graduating in tough times that would discipline them for the future. In trade publications, advertising agencies tried to assure each other and potential clients that they still had an economic future through repeated images of light at the end of a tunnel, or light breaking through the clouds, or light bathing the countryside after a storm. To get to that brighter tomorrow, businessmen must not be quitters or weaklings or cowards but must demonstrate their courage and meet the toughest challenge (a rhetorical appeal to masculine virility that appeared during the depression in wildly different arenas of American culture). This display of character had to be accompanied by unremitting hard work on the battlefield of sales and a determination often symbolized in ads by a clenched fist.

Roland Marchand has tied the recurring symbol of the fist to “harangues” that “fiercely reasserted the validity of the success creed”: in 1932, E. R. Squibb and Sons called for “intestinal stamina, hard work, long hours,” because “the day of the survival of the fittest is here”; Metropolitan Life Insurance trumpeted the individualist theme that each agent was responsible for his own economic fate and asserted that “the year ahead can be as good a year as the individual agent wills it to be.” The clenched fist thus provided a shorthand for the doctrines of work and discipline. Yet the symbol was not without its ambiguities. Marchand himself has suggested that many clenched-fist ads connote anxiety as well as determination, an effort to induce tough-minded fortitude as much as to honor it.4

Further probing suggests additional complexities. The economic struggle associated with the symbol of the clenched fist implied a need to eliminate waste, to set aside leisure and luxury, to be hard-headed and hard-boiled. In this spirit, an ad for Powers Accounting machines shows a fist squeezing the juice from an orange under the heading, “The Last Drop May Be Profit.” Meanwhile, a full-page layout from the Young and Rubicom advertising agency pictures a large hand clenched around several dollar bills and declares
in bold type, “America Has Closed Its Fist.” The same Americans who once spent money “like a drunken sailor” had become by 1931 “a people who think twice” about spending at all. Advertising’s challenge was to “overcome the reluctance to part with that money.”16 Logical in their own terms, the two ads taken together disclose messages in conflict. Discipline, work, and hard-headed thrift were appropriate values for business it seemed, but not for the buying public. Consumers had to be urged to live by a contrary standard: they had to be lured toward looser spending—toward indulgence, therapy, and fulfillment—and away from thinking twice. Business leaders thus clenched their fists in order to unclench the fists of consumers. Two quite different sets of values found a curious resonance in the same visual image.

Such tensions within advertising were kept at least partly under control through the cultural practices of the advertising industry and its dominant assumptions about audience. Industry analysts did not assume their audience was everyone. Making ability to buy the basis for market citizenship, advertisers generally excluded from one-third to one-half of the population from the “mass” that advertising attempted to sway. Like many success fables and the advice of Dale Carnegie, advertisements made little direct appeal to African-Americans, the rural poor, nonacculturated ethnicities, or others on the lower economic rungs of American life.17 With the problem of audience simplified through these exclusions, advertising could more easily contain and express limited conflicts over values, and it found a ready vehicle in assumptions based on gender. The clenched-fist calls for toughness and discipline that reflected older, work-centered values appeared primarily in ads aimed at advertising firms and their corporate clients: the expected audience was dominated by men. In the wider market, however, women were believed to account for more than three-quarters of consumer purchases, and advertisers shaped their messages around cultural stereotypes of women. Women were presumed to be emotional, full of longings for romance and fulfillment, subject to personal appeals more than reason, weak before the blandishments of fashion. Yet they were also taken to be the guardians and transmitters of culture and beauty, appreciators of genuine “style,” and potentially (with the right goods) embodiments of it. The Americans pictured in advertisements reflected these assumptions about different roles and, implicitly, different values: the men are dressed primarily in work-related middle- to upper-class business suits; women often appear as aesthetic or decorative presences celebrating the modern possibilities of style and consumption. Through a partial separation of competing values by gender, advertisers tentatively balanced the elements of a divided outlook within which an ethos of hard-headed competition spurred the production of fantasy and promise.

A mixing of values lay implicit in the newly distinctive style of 1930s advertising as well. In the 1920s some advertisers had maintained that their industry could serve as a major educational force to raise the cultural level of the population. Touched by such claims, New York Governor Franklin Roosevelt commented that if he were starting life over, he might well go into the advertising business, because “it is essentially a form of education; and the progress of civilization depends on education.”18 With the arrival of the depression, however, pressures for aggressive marketing undercut any serious pretension to public service and weakened nearly all aspirations to high standards: “Depression advertising was ‘loud,’ chattered, undignified, and direct.” To advertising journals, this was the style of “shirt-sleeve advertising” or “Advertising in Overalls”—fitting images for the reassertion of work-centered values.19 But a different message resided in the forms and materials that ads now borrowed.

Advertising craved the attention of potential consumers. Ready to attach itself with chameleon intent to whatever seemed effective in getting people’s attention, advertising became a mimic and mixer of other forms of mass communication and entertainment. When a study by the opinion researcher George Gallup (soon to be employed by the Rubicam Agency) showed in 1931 that comic strips had a wide social appeal, and when a Hearst experiment demonstrated that newspaper readers cared far more about their Sunday comics than about any other section of the paper, comic sections became suddenly a bustling frontier for advertising. Food, soap, pens, and razors were newly marketed with sequential storytelling squiggles and speech balloons.20 Movies, confession magazines, and tabloids provided other formats to be copied. On radio, already pervious lines between advertising and entertainment were further breached when radio stars began to glide from the show itself into promotions for their sponsor’s product. Print ads, meanwhile, identified products with the appropriate radio “personality” or perhaps with a sports “celebrity.” Gillette razor blades managed to combine in one print ad a tabloid style, a sponsored radio show, a popular contest, and a heavyweight boxer as it challenged readers to “Name Max Baer’s Dog.”21 New merchandise was created to tie in with the sales potential inherent in radio and movies: in the midst of the recession of 1937–38, a factory working overtime after the release of Disney’s Snow White would still fail to keep up with the market for rubber dwarfs. As advertising put on its overalls of hard work and competitive discipline, its tools as well as its purposes reflected the appeal of indulgence and leisure.

The principles and practices of advertisers thus contained inherent tensions, yet the central ambition of the industry was clear. Advertising sought to build upon and to manipulate public tastes for the sake of greater sales. In considering this industry effort to shape individual and cultural perceptions, it is important to maintain a sense of perspective. Advertising strategies were often successful, but their influence was neither complete nor automatic. Some efforts to market fashion and behavior simply failed, and many consumers seemed to preserve a happy consciousness of the bombast and blarney in advertising’s flamboyant courtships. In 1931 the magazine Ballyhoo fed upon this skepticism to win instant popularity by devoting itself to mocking well-known ads.
A more sober resistance to advertising found expression through a burgeoning consumer movement. Having appeared in response to the critique of American selling in Stuart Chase and Frederick J. Schlink's *Four Money's Worth* (1927), the organization Consumers Research grew from 1,200 members in 1929 to 25,000 in 1931 and 45,000 by 1933. Schlink and a new partner added the book *100,000,000 Guinea Pigs* in 1933 and sold 250,000 copies in six years. It would be folly to believe that advertising’s efforts at manipulation were unperceived or its versions of the world uncontested.

Yet advertising was an undeniable force in American culture during the 1930s. Whatever the industry’s targeted audiences, its wider presence leaps out from photographs of the period: migrants and breadlines appear under billboards that identify buying with security and happiness; sharecropper dwellings and Hooverville shacks are decorated (or constructed) with advertising signs that evoke images of leisure and fulfillment. Advertising’s promises were perhaps only partly silenced by incongruities. To reach those it did intend to target, the advertising industry spent millions testing responses to its messages, and it had every incentive to follow public attitudes closely enough to evoke positive reactions. Increasingly pervasive, advertising repeated itself again and again, introducing into the culture phrases and images and ideas that helped establish a common language of national scope. Without being entirely persuasive in its huckstering claims, advertising both reflected and molded certain broad public attitudes, apprehensions, and hopes during the 1930s, providing reason enough to attend to its subduced messages.

Over the anxieties of social change, advertising tended to lay a blanket of assurance. Indeed, it was in the counterpoise between anxiety and assurance that advertisements often found their characteristic tone, with implications that reached well beyond the merits of particular commodities. The advertising industry itself, like most of the products it sold, belonged to a world of increasingly centralized and standardized production characterized by large organizations and bureaucratic administration. The ads, and the products, were aimed at a mass audience and tied to a marketplace of such scope that it could only be called impersonal. Yet what many advertisements tried to achieve was a personal touch, a sense that they were speaking specifically and even intimately to each person. Like the commercially discovered dangers of “Halitosis” (Listerine) and “Body Odor” (Lifebuoy), many of the problems dramatized in advertising threatened individuals one by one. Ads in a single magazine issue of the mid-thirties offered the drama of a mother’s embarrassment by “tattletale gray” and the satisfaction achieved with Fels-Naptha soap; urgings to “play safe” by trusting a family doctor’s recommendation on laxatives (Ex-Lax); promises that the proper shaving cream could protect men from aging (Barbasol); and reminders that “good-looking hair is a social asset” (Vitalis). Whether manipulating social fears or lending guidance to vanity and aspiration, advertising served a function that seemed to defy its own nature: in a society of large institutions and contacts with strangers, messages addressed to millions were providing personal counsel.

With their talent for blending crassness and caring, advertisers were quick to recognize that the depression provided opportunities to exploit familiar themes with new emotional impact. Advertising was alert to the pressures that economic collapse exerted on the mythology of success, for example, and ads were as quick as advice books to offer guidance for the ambitious. Consumers were warned about the importance of the first impression, on which their fate might rest. Whiter teeth, modern furniture, a “fresh, firm, fit” face, men’s garters, or house paint, might lead to the positive judgment that would ensure individual success; dated clothes, a bad shave, even an “old-fashioned wood toilet seat” could destroy one’s chances. Like Dale Carnegie, these ads assumed an urban world of mobility and of interaction between relative strangers in which “others” were very important. Yet where Carnegie counseled the individual to take control of the situation through behavior, the ads left each person subject to the constant scrutiny of “critical eyes” and able to gain an advantage only through the use of appropriate products. In one sense, buying was an ironic and even a harsh answer to the problem of success for those strapped by depression. From another perspective, the ads offered a curious promise that there was still room for aspiration. Both the anxieties being manipulated and the assurances at hand suggested significant cultural concerns.

Some of those concerns focused on children. Surveys taken in the later thirties indicated an enduring faith in American progress and the promise of success: a majority of parents continued to believe that their children might be better off than they were. Advertisers played upon these hopes, and the potential for parental anxiety and guilt that went with them, by expanding dramatically in the early years of the depression a child-centered “success” ad of a kind little used before. A boy or girl lacks energy or fidgets in school or has poor grades because parents have failed to purchase the correct cereal or toilet paper or pencils. The ads took for granted a context of competitiveness and looming frustration but offered assurances that the doors of opportunity could be held open for families who were wise consumers. They both recognized social anxieties and provided the salve of a ready solution.
reach of kings were now everyday delights. Using the measure of goods, advertising could endorse established American attachments to notions of social unity, the democracy of possibility, and progress. Like “success” heroes with roots in the common clay, the wealthy had to be both different, to provide a standard of aspiration, and the same as everyone else. Tensions and anxieties met with reconciling myth.

In depicting the products they were selling as guarantors of opportunity and democracy, advertisers argued implicitly that the changing world of modernity was easily compatible with the rooted concerns of American life. Through its visual imagery, advertising offered even clearer assurances that the traditional and the new, the past and the future, could exist in harmony. The security of the home was repeatedly upheld in representations of families together. Advertisements showing a husband, wife, and at least one child comfortably gathered in a living room after dinner often favored a fuzzy soft-focus technique that stood in sharp and sentimental contrast to the clean hard lines used to depict the world of work. Such scenes carefully blurred not just their edges but the tensions between traditional assumptions of the father’s dominance and more “modern” ideas of family democracy and women’s and children’s rights. Sometimes a particular product—a radio or phonograph perhaps—has been introduced into the scene, suggesting the compatibility between advancing technology, with all it implied, and the sanctity of the traditional family. Another wide-ranging set of ads included in a single image iconographic versions of pioneers or New England villages and skyscraper cities of the present or future. The values of the past, including the individualism of the pioneer and the neighborliness of the village, were presumed to be congruous with the vastness and complexity of modern or futuristic urban landscapes. Advertising’s standard visual imagery was not meant to be thought about, simply accepted. As with the admixtures of traditional and modern, the images were often comforting ones that seemed able to ease tensions without even granting them recognition.39

The advertising of the 1930s, then, not only gave expression to competing sets of values but also recognized personal, family, and community concerns over balancing the familiar and the new. For each contradiction, anxiety, or ill, the industry offered a palliative, not a cure. Different values could be made only partly or superficially compatible by associating them with separate spheres or opposite sexes. Cultural concerns could be dimmed but seldom erased by selling impersonal products personally, by merging images of traditional families and modern goods, or by linking pioneers and skyscrapers. Yet the larger point may be that the tensions did not need to be fully resolved. Many Americans targeted by the ads were no doubt torn themselves between the values of individualism, character, and work and those of personality, self-expression, and consumption. Many who had experienced firsthand the limitations of cultural myth nevertheless welcomed firm affirmations that opportunity remained open, that democracy prevailed, and that change was consistent with tradition. The ads might slant their pitch toward one set of standards or another, combine images in the search for universal appeal, or provide ample grounds for more than one interpretation without necessarily losing touch with major strains of public feeling.

The range of impulses or ideas that found expression in advertisements did, of course, have important limits. Because advertising as popular culture existed to serve an evolving industrial economy, it had little interest in espousing values that challenged that economic system from either the right or the left. Its business was not critique but promotion. When advertising held out images of lives more glamorous or powerful or secure or fulfilled, they were accompanied by the promise that at least partial satisfactions were readily available. When advertising played the delicate game of stirring up ambitions and fears, it did so to direct the energies released into a system-affirming purchase of commercial products. If depression affected the style and the themes of some advertising, it did not change its purpose. A staggering economy meant that advertising must concentrate intensely on its work, indirectly reinforcing its role as an industry of assurance. Whether anxieties were rooted in the immediate crisis or in long-term social and cultural transformations, the central message of advertising was that, with the help of modern goods, things were ultimately going to be okay.

Sounding out the Movies

The descent into depression overtook a movie industry in the midst of major transition and explosive growth. At the turn of the decade the revolution driving silent pictures into oblivion through the triumph of the “talkies” was just striking with full force. Careers were ending or taking off based on an ability to accommodate new forms as the whole industry explored how sound might serve both art and commerce. Many of the films of the early thirties that were still making the adjustment seem technically crude by later standards, and the actors frequently clung to the exaggerated gestures and expressions typical of the silent era. Yet even as the depression lurked at the industry’s door, sound was being fully assimilated to give many of the movies produced after mid-decade an integrated quality that continues to satisfy.

This conjunction of internal transformation and external pressure only begins to suggest the range of forces that shaped the movie business during the 1930s. Claims of commerce and culture, politics and art—individually and in combination—tugged on, molded, and burnished the images and values that gave life to the films of the period. Like advertising, the movie industry tried both to read public tastes and to alter them, to respect the strength of existing attitudes and to stretch their limits. But films were tied to a less constractive purpose than advertisements, and they were freer to respond more emphatically and more disparately to varying impulses and shifting concerns.
Moviemaking in the thirties was formed and reformed by audience reactions, by discoveries about the power of the movies, by moral-cultural pressure groups, by political developments inside and later outside the United States, by the ambitions and calculations of those who controlled the industry, by the individual vision of particular directors, by idealism, and by hunch. Early films of the thirties demonstrated the sense of liberation as well as the degradation and the bleakness that could accompany an experience of social collapse; in the later thirties movies rallied far more around traditional themes and positive ideals, especially as Americans weighed the nature of democracy and contrasted it with fascism and communism. This larger pattern and the dynamics that swirlled within it told a multifaceted story about the culture of the period.

Between 1928 and 1930, thanks in part to the arrival of sound, average weekly movie attendance leapt upward from 65 million to 90 million, and the industry fairly glistened with confidence. One-third of this audience disappeared as the economy sank into the trough of 1933. When the general upturn began in 1934, the movies, like other industries that attracted discretionary consumer spending, tended to recover more quickly than older basic industries like steel and lumber. In the second half of the thirties, weekly attendance stabilized between 80 and 90 million in a population of between 30 and 35 million households. Moreover, throughout the decade the movies consistently attracted about 20 percent of all that Americans spent on recreation (as opposed to less than 3 percent a half-century later). In retrospect, the film industry suffered less than many others during the depression, but no such comfort was available to the major studio and theater conglomerates during the skid from 1930 to 1933. At the worst point, almost one-third of all theaters had closed; admission prices had been forced down from 30c to 20c on average; and four of the eight large movie companies were in a state of collapse. Moviemakers, like advertisers, reacted to hard times with an intensified competitiveness seldom restrained by the boundaries of taste, and they delivered products with a tone and content provocative to established sensibilities.

A surge of interest in social issues during the early 1930s carried with it a certain eagerness to confront conspicuous problems in their sordid detail. In the case of the movies, this tide merged inextricably with a topical exploitation of crime, sex, and political corruption motivated, as one historian has put it, by the "crassest expediency." Movie companies shaken by declining receipts were alert to "whatever forms of shock or titillation would lure audiences into theaters," and they looked for "settings that provided the fullest opportunity to raise the pitch of excitement on the screen, to amaze, frighten and even sexually arouse." Leading actresses, including Greta Garbo, Tallulah Bankhead, Marlene Dietrich, Jean Harlow, and Irenne Dunne, were, or became, prostitutes or mistresses in a striking number of early 1930s movies that tended both to exploit sexuality and to confine women to a dependent identity. The frightening or bizarre found ample expression during 1931 and 1932 in Dracula, Frankenstein, The Mummy, Murders in the Rue Morgue, and Freaks. Some of the famous images from the films of these years brought together sex and violence (and sometimes horror), as in the case of Fay Wray in the arms of King Kong (1933), or James Cagney assaulting Mae Clarke's face with a grapefruit in The Public Enemy.

Sound in films became a method of seeking stronger effects through its ability to shape a whole environment, to build suspense or shock, and to make telling use of colloquialism or innuendo in spoken language. (Anyone who has listened to a horror or suspense movie with the volume turned down will understand the difference sound can make.) Moviemakers quickly learned to use music to intensify mood and reaction, and song or dance situations provided new possibilities for conveying romantic or sexual suggestion. The sheer number of films being produced—some 500 each year—meant that the range of topics was wide and that the quest for "shock or titillation" was a trend rather than a dominant mode. Yet that trend, combined with the lust for new material that a high level of production required, created an openness to new themes and a mixing of values and styles that was emblematic of the early thirties.

Changes in mood and outlook, combined with the quest for sensation, had more than enough power to reconfigure cultural stories like those the movies told. A tale that began with the experience of Robert E. Burns can stand as an example. Burns had been implicated in a robbery attempt, convicted, and subjected to the brutal rigors of a southern chain gang; having escaped to build a new life, he was betrayed by a lover back into chains once more, only to flee again. With dramatic and sometimes formulaic elaborations, Burns's story, I Am a Fugitive from a Georgia Chain Gang!, was serialized over seven months in True Detective Mysteries in 1931 and was then published as a book. The real Burns ended up as a tax consultant in New Jersey, but this was hardly the stuff of popular drama.

True Detective Mysteries belonged to a type of "confession" magazine (True Story, True Romance, True Confessions) that gained a major following in the 1920s and built to a peak of popularity in the 1930s by publishing what appeared to be first-person accounts of the extremes of experience and emotion. Bernarr McFadden, who owned several such magazines, employed a staff of writers to shape the "confessions" and a clergyman to ensure that all stories had a moral ending to redeem their content. In the hands of the McFadden team, Burns became not simply a standard victim but something of a success hero for his rise by initiative and hard work after his first escape. Moreover, when it became clear that the strongest reactions to the story centered on its exposure of chain gang conditions, McFadden's writers simply turned their hero at the last minute into a committed social reformer who declared, "It's now my life's ambition to destroy the chain gang system." With this twist, the narrative adapted smoothly to the growing concern with social issues and evils.

The story took another turn in 1932 when it was made into a film, I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang, directed by Mervyn Leroy. Building in part on a
I Am a Fugitive spoiled the picture or “left a bad taste.” Bleakness honestly rooted in its cultural setting was not necessarily more meaningful or more legitimate for its audience than the formulas of True Detective Mysteries. The same basic story could be packaged and repackaged to create variations on themes of morality, success, reform, and despair, with each version playing out the possibilities for emotion and sensation, whatever its thematic intent.

A flamboyant pairing of social issues and hard effects, pliant to a range of potential meanings, also characterized the cycle of gangster movies in the early thirties. Leading examples of the genre, including Little Caesar (1930), The Public Enemy (1931), Smart Money (1931), and Scarface (1932), concentrated their attention on individual gangsters who were generally of lower-class immigrant background and who were always-driven by a passion for power and wealth. To fit what became the standard pattern, the individual at the center of the story had to achieve substantial success in his “business” only to face ruin or death at the end. The mixture of criminality, aspiration, and ultimate failure at the core of these films made for disparate and sometimes confused reactions from the start.

An early outcry in some quarters condemned the seeming glorification of gangsters; in cities like New York and Chicago censors made significant portions of their cuts from gangster movies; liberal magazines as well as conservative attacked the lawlessness of the type; and there were the requisite congressional hearings. Yet people flocked to the theaters to see gangster films, which economically hard-pressed film studios could not take lightly. Will Hays, president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), suggested that too heavy an emphasis on gangsters was undesirable, but he claimed in his 1932 annual report that the films successfully taught that “crime does not pay.” Warner Brothers sent a major gangster picture to theaters with instructions that publicity campaigns should not emphasize the gangsters so much as the law. Some of the films attached prologues reminding viewers that the all too successful and exciting characters they were about to see were evil. Such efforts were roughly equivalent to McFadden’s clergyman attaching moral maxims to confession stories. The assertion of respectable values struggled against a clear public attraction to vitality and violence that threatened to counter their effective force.

Later readings of the gangster films have reached conclusions no less divided than the claims of contemporaries. One interpretation holds that though the attraction to social outlaws during the worst of the depression is an important reflection of the period, the standard gangster movie was primarily an assertion of faith in older formulas for achieving success. The young hooligan fights his way upward through ambition, drive, talent, hard work, and, within his peculiar context, self-discipline and good character (Rico in Little Caesar avoids both alcohol and women). Yet because the only believable path to success in those years stood outside the law, and because such success could not be affirmed directly, the hero has to meet finally with destruction or death.
Balancing Acts

The central fact remained, as this reading would have it, that familiar values were being reasserted in an unfamiliar context.11 Another interpretation explicitly rejects claims of the success myth at work. Rather, the gangster movies were films of “social pathos” reflecting in the lives of their main characters the “social conflicts and disorders” of the period. The films indicated that the gangsters’ “chaotic lives were more than matched by the chaos in society around them,” for “their friends, their rivals, the police, all seemed capable of greater dishonesty and disloyalty than they.”12 There was no reaffirmation in the face of depression in this view, but only the anxieties of a world out of joint.

Writing in 1948, the critic Robert Warshow suggested that gangster movies conveyed a more complex network of implications within American culture. The gangster to Warshow represented the city of the American imagination—the antithesis of the romanticized countryside—and he was thus identified with the direction in which the modern industrial world was traveling. Possessed of the “city’s language and knowledge, . . . its queer and dishonest skills and its terrible daring,” the gangster-hero raises himself over others with a brutal assertion that betokens an “unlimited possibility of aggression,” representing for modern Americans “what we want to be and what we are afraid we may become.” A deep dilemma of American culture and the success myth thus emerges: all efforts to succeed involve aggression; every drive to stand out from the crowd leads to loneliness; and as the conventions of gangster movies insist emphatically, there is danger in being alone. The gangster asserts himself as an individual and must die because of the separateness this entails. Success “is evil and dangerous, is—ultimately—impossible,” in the imaginative world of the gangster film. The gangster’s death provides a temporary resolution for what is really a wider cultural dilemma. Tensions between country and city, past and future, communal identity and individual achievement, become, in Warshow, tragic contradictions.13

Elements of culture are nearly always open to some range of manipulation. Nevertheless, the variant readings of the gangster films, like the differing themes and endings attached to the chain gang story, point toward an unusual fluidity of value commitments in the early thirties, a willingness in American culture to entertain different ideas or forms, an openness linked nervously to the insecurities of the moment. Robert Sklar has found the Disney cartoons of these years “magical,” “free from the burdens of time and responsibility,” part of a world “plastic in imagination and will”—in all, a reflection of the “exhilarating, initially liberating, then finally frightening disorder of the early depression years.”14 Mickey Mouse was a creature of fantasy and occasional lust in the escapades of his youth. During these same years, Mae West’s sharp tongue and suggestive presence confronted limitations on sexuality and women’s roles: Robert Forsythe (the Communist party pseudonym of Kyle Crickton) declared in New Masses that West “epitomizes so completely the middle-class matron in her hour of license,” “so obviously represents bour-

ggeois culture at its apex,” that she would “enter history as a complete treatise on decay,” while “such children as Katherine Hepburn” would be rapidly forgotten.15 The Marx Brothers comedies of the early thirties, meanwhile, subjected respectability and predictability to a verbal and physical dismantling. As one student has put it, “Absurdity has never had it so good in American film” as between 1930 and 1934.16

This mood was not to last. By the release of the Marx Brothers’ Duck Soup in late 1933—a film that held up to ridicule patriotism, leaders, and government itself—audience attitudes had shifted and the film did not do well. Mickey Mouse, at about the same time, was turning “respectable, bland, gentle, responsible, moral.”17 Mae West met with restriction and began to fade. And actors who had played leading gangsters were reappearing on the screen as defenders of the law.

Several developments came together in 1933–34 to change the tone of the film industry. Perhaps most important, the arrival of Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal altered the country’s mood, with the evidence of the shift sometimes strikingly explicit in the movies themselves. Three of the most successful film musicals of the decade appeared in 1933—42nd Street, Gold Diggers of 1933, and Footlight Parade—all of them offering plenty of singing, dancing, and glittering escapism but also telling stories of people who got a break or had an idea that opened the door to success. This renewed optimism seems to be tied to a tangible source when in the last number of Footlight Parade, the dancers hold up flash cards of the NRA Blue Eagle and a smiling Franklin Roosevelt. The musicals came from Warner Brothers, where a degree of enthusiasm for the New Deal ran contrary to the heavily Republican preferences of film industry leaders during the thirties. So did Wild Boys of the Road (also 1933), a social issues film in which a battle between homeless youths and police gives way to resolution by a compassionate judge (looking a bit like Roosevelt) who presides under the sign of the Blue Eagle. The Motion Picture Herald suggested that the conditions portrayed were already passing and that theater owners might promote Wild Boys by acknowledging the remedy of the New Deal’s Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC).18

Other forces pressing for change in the tone and direction of the movie industry during 1933–34 drew on persistent anxieties over the capacity of films to shape cultural values. Both private organizations and public boards had long worked to control what they regarded as the immoral or socially dangerous possibilities of the movies and, preferably, to turn them into bastions of acceptable middle-class standards.19 The MPPDA had appeared in 1922 to promise industry self-regulation in the wake of scandals, and in 1927 and 1930 the organization had issued specific lists of rules and exclusions covering movie content. These regulations proved a permeable barrier for the entrepreneurial, aggressive, and often flamboyant leaders of the film industry. Meanwhile, conscientious concern over the influence of the movies, especially on children, led to an extensive investigation by psychologists, sociologists,
and educators under the auspices of the Payne Fund, resulting in 12 volumes of evidence and conclusions that began to appear in 1933. Although most of the studies were cautious in their claims and tended to emphasize the variability of individual responses, they did hold that movies could have a strong influence on the young, rivaling schools and homes in shaping ideas and attitudes (whether for good or bad), and that movies had encouraged antisocial behavior in at least a fraction of young delinquents. Popularized and misrepresented, particularly through the book Our Movie Made Children (1933), the Payne Fund studies provoked a considerable response and a hurried MPPDA promise to promote high moral and artistic standards by beginning work at once on films of improved quality.

Shortly thereafter, a burst of interest and organizing by the Catholic church brought a centralized national thrust to the reform campaign that older Protestant efforts had lacked. After six months of agitation and preparation, Catholics were asked in April 1934 to sign pledges of support to the Legion of Decency, which condemned “vile and unwelcome moving pictures.” The legion found a receptive audience not just among Catholics but among many Protestants and Jews, claiming 11 million members within ten weeks. More as a result of the implicit threat than any evidence of reduced movie attendance, the MPPDA established the “Production Code,” which held, among other things, that “law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed”, that “correct standards of life . . . shall be presented”; and that the “sympathy of the audience shall never be thrown to the side of crime, wrong-doing, evil or sin.” The producers and distributors named one of the Catholic activists, Joseph Breen, to administer the code. For the rest of the 1930s, Breen would have a sometimes extraordinary power to review movies and scripts and to block the making or release of films containing material to which he objected.

The shift in public mood and the pressure on films to become more responsible and respectable marked a distinct turning away from negativity and disorder. Positive images of authority and social unity now came to the fore. This by no means erased the reliance on sensationalism, for the Production Code left ample room to exploit the exciting malevolence of crime and corruption so long as it was ultimately countered on the screen. Moviemakers quickly found ways to modify tested formulas to suit new demands.

By 1935 the film industry was bending over backward to reverse its gangster-movie treatment of officers of the law (and by implication, of government itself) as invisible or ineffective. This inversion of cultural messages was no simple matter controlled by the industry alone. In the early thirties a set of real gangsters, including Al Capone, Dutch Schultz, Legs Diamond, Mad Dog Coll, and John Dilinger, had become symbols of both criminality and the weaknesses of law enforcement. With his emphasis on local authority, Herbert Hoover had downplayed any national responsibility for dealing with crime. Roosevelt’s attorney general, Homer Cummings, by contrast, along with the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), J. Edgar Hoover, set out not just to run the gangsters to ground through a series of convictions and shoot-outs but to publicize the federal anticrime campaign and make the FBI a heroic model of modern law enforcement that less effective local police might eventually copy. Representatives of the federal government were made heroes by conscious design.

The publicity for the new films starring federal agents gave them explicit political significance. Public Hero Number One (1935), according to its advertisements, was a “public service” that allowed people to “see Uncle Sam draw his guns to halt the march of crime.” In publicizing G-Men (1935), Warner Brothers claimed that “the last hold of the criminal mobs on the imagination of the public will be broken by this picture which shows criminals as they really are—and how helpless they are when the government really starts after them.” Perhaps because it was the first of the federal agent films in 1935, G-Men carefully justifies the decision of its leading character, played by the former gangster star James Cagney, to join the FBI. Cagney and Edward G. Robinson (who played the good guy in Bullets or Ballots (1936), a “mirror reverse of Little Caesar”44) could still be tough, but they now delivered their sensationalist quota of toughness and violence in the name of law and order. Cowboy heroes could perform a similar function as part of a pseudohistorical process of bringing civilization to the West. Having lost much of their popularity during the early thirties, westerns came storming back into town by mid-decade with their affirmative tales of evil and corruption giving way before the forces of progress and prosperity. Celebrating law-bringers and—in two different senses—the building of nationhood, the classic G-man and cowboy films were “almost national pageants”; in an America still struggling against depression, they were “metaphors for the country’s unity.”

Another kind of film characteristic of the later thirties delivered an affirmation of social unity in quite a different way. The “screwball comedies,” like many major box-office successes after 1934, relied little on explicit violence or blatant sexuality. Rather, they prospered by cultivating a spirit of wackiness that made the rich seem appealingly idiosyncratic, that poked fun at social pretension, and that pushed acceptable standards (and plots) toward their breaking point, only to pull up at the end in rousing reaffirmation of basic social arrangements. Given charm by talented stars, including Cary Grant (in several roles), Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., Katherine Hepburn, Carole Lombard, Irene Dunne, and Jean Arthur, the screwball comedies developed enormous appeal through films like My Man Godfrey, Nothing Sacred, Easy Living, The Awful Truth, Holiday, Joy of Living, and Bringing up Baby (all 1936–39). Social tensions were not ignored in these comedies; indeed, they were often their direct or indirect subject. But apparent divisions of class, conflicts between rural and urban, and frictions between men and women were explored only to be ultimately overcome.

Depending on how strictly and by what elements one attempts to define the boundaries of the genre, Frank Capra can either be considered the most
In *Bringing up Baby*, Katharine Hepburn (Susan) and Cary Grant (David) race through a series of inescapable episodes that affirm decorum and seductiveness while ultimately offering the existing order a pattern characteristic of the immensely appealing "screwball comedy." The quick-talking, rambling, leopard-catching Susan is a strong heroine who controls the action of the film. David acknowledges the obvious when he declares, "You can think much faster than I can." Yet where Susan maneuvers the plot is toward a predictable romantic ending, offering little threat to traditional gender roles. *Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive*

important of the screwball comedy directors or not in the genre at all. His tremendously successful film of 1934, *It Happened One Night*, plays on a developing romance between a sharp-talking, shallow-pocketed urban reporter (Clark Gable) and a spoiled rich girl rebelling against parental control (Claudette Colbert). The two are ultimately married after the intervention of the fundamentally wise and caring father, who welcomes the personal strength and integrity of the reporter compared with the weakness and fortune-hunting of the playboy to whom his daughter had been engaged. The values of self-reliance, ingenuity, and integrity could cut across class lines and link the businessman-father with the aspiring young man, and they could attract the daughter away from more flighty beans, affirming both social unity and social strength. In *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), starring Gary Cooper, Capra's trademark emphasis of the late thirties on the virtues of traditional small-town America, on neighborliness and common sense, on genuine responsibility and social feeling, reached full-blown expression. Having inherited a fortune out of the blue, the village-minded Longfellow Deeds travels to the city, shows up the scheming lawyers and the pretensions of high society, and wins the heart of the initially cynical woman reporter, who has replaced the millionaire daughter as heroine. When Deeds, who plans to distribute his unearned wealth democratically by buying small farms for the dispossessed, is called insane by the lawyers, he triumphs in a final courtroom scene that brings city and country together in the embrace between him and the reporter and in the celebration of the common people around them.

Capra's emphasis on unity took another turn toward the end of the 1930s as a consciousness of world politics, and especially the Nazi threat, produced a fervent interest in reasserting the basic principles of democracy. In *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) and *Meet John Doe* (1941), Capra told tales of an American political system threatened by the powerful and corrupt, with clear references in each film to the present dangers of fascism. Two simple, idealistic heroes, played by James Stewart and Gary Cooper, combat political machines and convincing villains whom they can counter only with massive popular support from the plain and decent folks of the land. Common values and an everyday hero demonstrated the power of democracy and the combined ability of the American people to stand up against political evil. Perhaps only Walt Disney made films that pleased as wide an audience as Frank Capra's in the 1930s. In Capra's reconciliations of social differences, in his visions of small-town values triumphant, in his celebrations of the people, there were unquestionably strong elements of fantasy; but it was, or became, a collective fantasy that large numbers of Americans dearly wanted to endorse.

The themes consciously developed in the movies, of course, represented only one layer of the meanings they conveyed. Whether films offered visions of order restored, affirmations of work-centered values, or celebrations of a culture rooted in the mythic American village, they also held out images of competing worlds that might be entered through mimicry or consumption. The impact became apparent in the stream of women at beauty parlors wanting hair like Jean Harlow's and in the enduring life of the "platinum blonde." When Clark Gable undressed in *It Happened One Night* and revealed that he wore no undershirt, sales of men's underwear went into a steep decline. Strategy replaced happenstance through conscious advertising tie-ins, and no one outdid Disney's merchandising division, which reported 147 contracts to produce 2,183 different items based on the cartoon figures in *Snow White* alone. The development of an economy relying more heavily on consumer goods went hand in hand with a culture more cosmopolitan in its contacts and tastes. Films could provide models of how to live in a world of goods, of how to look or travel or order in a fancy restaurant, even as they seemed to promote a social allegiance to small-town verities.
A climactic scene in *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* brings together distinctive elements of Frank Capra's unifying vision. Longfellow Deeds, played by Gary Cooper, is a small-town, folksy, community-oriented soul whose mental competence is challenged by established power and wealth when he tries to use his recently inherited millions to purchase land for small farmers. Jean Arthur plays a workingwoman, a city newspaper reporter, whose layer of cynicism is melted away by Deeds's sincerity and whose urban sophistication is brought to the aid of village values. When good deeds (providing land deeds) are upheld by a wise judge and the authority of law, justice and romance triumph as the two lead characters are raised together on the shoulders of the crowd and acclaimed by the common people, with George Washington looking on. *Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive*

In addition, relationships with more than a surface complexity existed sometimes between nicely wrapped up endings and the spirit of the characters portrayed. If independence and career nearly always gave way at last to love and marriage for the heroines of screwball comedies and other films, many women characters nevertheless conveyed images of competence and spunk. The “battle of the sexes” at the heart of many screwball comedies, one critic has claimed, was “a battle of equals” that limited male authority for the sake of a “larger equilibrium.” The fondness for “smart, cracking dialogue” in the thirties allowed women to show intelligence and self-possession: “The more a heroine could talk, . . . the more she seemed to define herself by her own lights.” Strong heroines carried the possibility of challenging gendered social conven-

tions even as they seemed, in the end, to be reconciled to them. In a similar vein, Capra’s Longfellow Deeds, Jefferson Smith, and John Doe have been interpreted by one scholar as characters whose “comic disengagement” from society represented “a form of radical criticism,” whose “somewhat childlike” idealism had teeth. Capra’s celebrations of the significance of the individual and his insistence on the importance of moral choice can strike viewers as a powerful social critique, as sentimental melodrama, or as one wrapped within the other. On matters of both behavior and character, implicit cultural messages often stood in tension with explicit themes, and the contradictions and imbalances within the movies helped define the experience they offered.

Off-the-screen models sometimes provided important support for the representations that appeared in film. In stretching dominant notions about the capabilities of women, for example, Amelia Earhart helped lead the way. In 1928, she became the first woman to fly the Atlantic, and in 1932 she became the first to do so alone. The first pilot, male or female, to solo from Hawaii to the mainland (in 1933), she was also a lecturer, editor, and airline vice-president before her disappearance over the Pacific in 1937. Popular culture sounded echoes of Earhart. When the magazine *Pictorial Review* promoted itself in 1931 by celebrating “the change that has come to woman,” it emphasized the point with a picture of a stylish modern woman looking upward toward a helicopter knowing that “even the skies are hers.” And before * Bringing up Baby* and *Holiday*, Katherine Hepburn played a record-setting pilot in *Christopher Strong* (1933). Yet if real models of accomplishment and heroism contributed to images in the movies, the hoopla surrounding the movies more often tended to obscure real achievement and to devalue its worth.

Entertainment and fantasy made a bid to overwhelm reality for those drawn most strongly to the manufactured flambéoyance that was Hollywood’s trademark. The business of promoting films and stars was an exercise in exaggeration, in gaseous inflation, in emotional overkill. Movie publicists made the explanation point their most common form of punctuation and seemed to pride themselves on overreaching: one film was “Packed with power! Racing with romance! Teeming with thrills!” while another blurbs proclaimed “Sock! At the heart, at the funny bone, at the tear ducts, at the pulse strings.” To heighten the impact of horror movies, theaters were advised to hire a nurse and a person to faint at each performance so that the stricken viewer could be carried to an ambulance past those waiting in line. The difference between what was real and what was staged became increasingly blurred even for the illusion-makers themselves, as the contemporary observer Margaret Furrand Thorp recognized in referring to “the searchlights and spots, without which Hollywood would not believe in the opening of even a tinny station.” Events sometimes took their very eventfulness from self-conscious fabrication.

The careers of the stars depended heavily on image and reputation shaped by constant attention. The cultivation and consumption of celebrity kept the press agent actively employed, supported the Hollywood gossip industry
(dominated in the thirties by Louella Parsons), and provided an audience for the breathless reporting in fan magazines. The most important requirement for a star in the magazines was “personality,” which, as Thorp recognized in 1939, suggested some of the tensions or competing desires in American culture. “Personality” in this context suggested less a way of getting along than a denial of modern standardization, a consumer’s version of individualism. To gain personality and individual distinctiveness, avid fans copied fashions and behavior with a seemingly contradictory awareness that many others were doing the same thing. The stars were pictured as glamorous, wealthy, and exciting, yet also as commonplace or, as one editor put it, “very much like you and me.” They were held up as examples of the traditional virtues of hard work, energy, and perseverance yet often seemed to have been finally successful only when struck by the lightning bolt of being “discovered.” They belonged to both the world of work and the world of play. No single set of values, no unitary notion of success, came out of the Hollywood magazines, but a blending and blurring of competing values that fed similar composites in the minds of many readers and reflected something of the menu available in the culture as a whole.47

Social and cultural tensions of a different kind sprang from the nature of the filmmaking industry and the characteristics of its leading figures. Hollywood was a boom town in the still-developing West, with plenty of raw edges and showers of money for the successful, the clever, and the lucky. Many of its studio moguls, most of them Jewish, were immigrants (or the children of immigrants) who had tended during the growth of the industry to be at once extravagant in their ambitions, pretensions, and appetites and sensitive about their reputations and social status. One current that arose from this milieu affected the content of several major films in the later thirties. The “better” movies after 1934 reflected not only public preferences and pressures but also the ambitions of a younger generation of producers who identified Western culture as their own and pictured themselves as gentlemen and natural leaders. Big-budget films with historical settings, based on classics or best-sellers, provided both profit and claims to respectability. Led by three of the younger producers, Irving Thalberg, David O. Selznick, and Darryl F. Zanuck, Hollywood turned out between 1934 and 1939 David Copperfield, Anna Karenina, Les Miserables, Mutiny on the Bounty, The Good Earth, Romeo and Juliet, Marie Antoinette, A Tale of Two Cities, Gone with the Wind, Rebecca, and biographies of Louis Pasteur and Emile Zola.48

However well these films served to demonstrate cultural seriousness and belonging, they could not erase suspicion of Hollywood in traditional bastions of cultural power. The “movie colony” on the far fringe of the country was envied, resented, wondered at, and looked down upon in the intellectual centers of the East. Literary people in particular chafed and gaped at a spectacle that both drew them in and threatened to supplant their authority. Hollywood could and did pay talented writers inflated salaries, attracting people like F. Scott Fitzgerald and William Faulkner as well as hosts of others, yet the producers often treated writers as hired hands or technicians, and the credit for good films went elsewhere. By the late thirties, moreover, intellectuals were acutely conscious of the idea of cultural myths and of the role of social communication and propaganda. In the past, the cultural functions of describing and interpreting the world had generally fallen to people who “had come from similar ethnic and class backgrounds and had utilized the same means—the written and spoken word.”49 Now a new group, of different background, exercising authority over a different medium, seemed to possess a culture-shaping force of indeterminate potential. The commercialism of the movies, their extravagant promises of vicarious experience, and (with the example of fascism at hand) their possible influence over the mass of people, all provided cause for apprehension. Critics struggled to balance cultural anxiety and fears of displacement against fascination with the creativity and power of films.

One unsettling vision of what Hollywood might mean in American culture incorporated a number of these reactions into a tale of fantasies accepted, frustrated, and unleashed: Nathanael West’s 1939 novel The Day of the Locust. West’s Hollywood is a land in which the artificiality, illusion, and false promise of the movie screen intersect with reality and enter into the lives that people are actually trying to lead. A field of discarded movie sets constitutes “a dream dump” presenting its own history of civilization, for there is no dream that will not eventually turn up there, “having first been made photographic by plaster, canvas, lath and paint.” To West, this exploitation of dreams and the wider cultural pattern of sensationalism and exaggerated promise to which it contributed were far from benign. California was filled with people from across the country who had been drawn there by fantasies of luxury, excitement, and fulfillment only to meet with frustration and boredom—and in the mass, their repressed bitterness was dangerous.

At the end of his book, West describes a crowd waiting at a movie premiere for a glimpse of arriving stars. Individuals and families, unassuming on their own, turn “arrogant and pugnacious” as they merge with the crowd. A radio announcer stands amid the massed bodies proclaiming, “A veritable bedlam! What excitement!” and so on, all in a “rapid, hysterical voice . . . like that of a revivalist preacher whipping his congregation toward the ecstasy of fits.” And the crowd rises to the stimulus. West saw a people made “savage and bitter” by an existence that fell short of expectations. A life of dull striving and the promises of leisure had led them to the land of sunshine and oranges, but once there, “nothing happens. They don’t know what to do with their time. Their boredom becomes more and more terrible. They realize they’ve been tricked and burn with resentment.” West’s premiere turns to riot, flame, and apocalypse. What Hollywood portended for modern society was a pervasive disappointment that threatened to destroy all concepts of meaning.50

West’s vision, concerned as it was with the relation between the imagined and the real, derived in part from actual incidents. The Persian Pleasure
ed a particularly volatile situation when the worlds of on-screen fantasy and off-screen actuality were suddenly blended in the street, when screen idols were paraded in front of an agitated and expectant crowd that was itself denied admittance to the show inside. They clearly suggested that the movies and popular culture could arouse audiences in ways that escaped social and cultural controls. West saw this explosive possibility in the premieres of the early thirties, but he did not see what had happened to such events by the time he wrote.

The movie premieres by the end of the decade, according to its closest student, had exchanged the pursuit of "carnival splendor" for a "spirit of civic festival," with the energies generated flowing into an affirmation of public, and often patriotic, values. The power of the newer media of communication and entertainment to stir mass audiences aroused both hope and anxiety in the 1940s. Early movie premieres, stirring up the emotions and expectations of a crowd, had sometimes threatened to get out of control and escalate into riots. The process of spreading out the premieres, staging them to take advantage of the local and historical appeal of new films, and framing them with dignitaries and pageantry had by the end of the thirties made this form of mass gathering seem celebratory, democratic, and safe.  

Palace in The Day of the Locust seemed to mimic the exotic appeal of Sidney Grauman's Egyptian and Chinese Theaters—scenes of some of the more elaborate movie premieres of the late 1920s and early 1930s. The opening of the Chinese Theater in 1927 with the premiere of King of Kings attracted 23,000 people, and the newspapers reported the story under the headline, "Hundreds of Police Battle to Keep Crowds in Check." The throng at the premiere of Grand Hotel at the Chinese Theater in 1932 broke through police lines and nearly flooded into the theater itself; at the gala for Strange Interlude a woman's leg was broken in the crush of the crowd, and the 1931 première of I'm No Angel came "very close to a dangerous street riot." The premieres represent-
a demonstration that a culture undergoing modernizing transformations of economy and values, when threatened by depression and international crisis, retained enough vigor and cohesiveness to channel the force of popular culture toward holding the society together rather than ripping it apart.

The World on the Radio Dial

Radio had entered American life after World War I and developed rapidly in the 1920s. During the thirties it claimed a central place in what was, thanks in part to its influence, an increasingly national culture. As technological advances made radios smaller and less expensive, ownership spread rapidly despite hard times. By 1935 twice as many American homes had radios as telephones; the number of households with at least one receiver—12 million in 1930—had risen to 28 million by 1939 (covering about 86 percent of the population). Social workers reported during the depression that families would give up furniture or bedding or most anything rather than their radio—whether because it offered entertainment, something to fill the time, or a sustaining emotional link with a larger community. Even more strongly than the movies, radio brought a certain commonality of experience to much of the country through its most popular programs, and for better or worse; it worked a kind of erosion on local and regional distinctions of language and custom. Still a relatively new phenomenon, radio stood ready to serve those who could exert their control or discover its cultural uses.

In 1927 Congress had tried to bring order to the growing industry by creating the Federal Radio Commission (FRC) to license stations and regulate the frequency and power of transmitters. Over the next few years a system of national networks emerged led by the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), with its blue and red networks, and by the smaller but dynamic Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS). Arguments over the control of radio continued to be waged vigorously during the early thirties by commercial interests, proponents of educational use, and advocates of lighter government control or ownership. Whatever the merits of the various cases, those seeking changes in the way the industry was developing found it difficult to overcome the advantage of broadcasters and sponsors associated with national shows that had a strong popular following. The establishment of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in 1934 brought no dramatic changes. The FCC proved more interested in preventing broadcasting offenses than in establishing positive requirements for the type and quality of radio fare, an attitude that allowed neither constructive guidance nor threatening control. Radio would remain primarily a commercial medium.

The open debate over control sometimes masked a quieter evolution in values: a shifting understanding of the boundaries between public and private. At the beginning of the decade, commerce was still restrained by assumptions about integrity, privacy, and good taste. Whereas the movies had climbed upward from lower-class origins, radio had at first been associated with the upper classes because of receiver costs. This association reinforced the tendency to emphasize the special nature of the radio-listener relationship. Unlike the movies, radio did not pull together a mixed audience of people in a public place; it entered the private arena of the home and spoke to the intimate family circle. Only gradually did it come to seem acceptable to admit advertising to the parlor. The brief mentions of sponsorship permitted before the late 1920s first gave way to commercials interspersed throughout the program and then, in 1931, as the depression took hold, to direct statements of price, which networks had earlier prohibited. Standards were indeed changing when a manufacturer could combine the declaration that its cigars cost 5¢ with the elegant hygienic assurance, "There is no spit in Cremo!"

As sponsored radio programming searched for its largest possible audiences, the depression provided a context for other shifts in the content of home entertainment as well. (To measure the popularity of specific programs, Archibald Crossley organized the first national ratings system for the Association of National Advertisers in 1930.) Declines in other communication and entertainment industries sent a flood of performers into radio early in the decade, perhaps most notably from the collapsing world of vaudeville. At the beginning of 1933, the most popular show in the country, according to the Crossley ratings, featured Eddie Cantor (sponsored by Chase and Sanborn coffee). Other comedy and variety shows with vaudeville ties were legion, including those starring Ed Wynne (Texaco), Al Jolson (Chevrolet), Rudy Vallee (Fleischman's yeast), the Marx Brothers (Esso), Jack Benny (Canada Dry), Fred Allen (Limit), and George Burns and Gracie Allen (Robert Burns cigars). As some noted appreciatively at the time, such upbeat comedic shows were most popular when the depression was at its worst.

Advice shows also seemed to evoke a special response when conditions worsened, generating programs based on various systems, from astrology and numerology to palmistry and success charts. A man known on the air only as "The Voice of Experience" claimed by 1933 that some two million people had sought his counsel, and Haley's M-O was reported to have increased its sales severalfold as a result of sponsoring the show. Advertisers promoted special mail-in offers to encourage ties between the audience and their products, and radio stars were regularly identified with particular brands in print advertising as well. With the distinctions between them rapidly eroding, commerce and entertainment marched together into private homes, and the listeners who reached outward to offer their personal problems to the purveyors of public advice collaborated eagerly in blurring the lines between public and private.

A similar blurring, in a different form, was implicit in the spread of a relaxed, mellow, smooth-voiced style that in singers was identified as "crooning." Part of what crooning seemed to involve was an effort to convey to
listeners the sense of a friendly, personal relationship with the public performer or announcer, a relationship that denied the scale and distancing implicit in mass communication. Some crooners also displayed the "personality" touted by Dale Carnegie and the movie magazines, contributing to an intensifying interest in personalities during the thirties—or, as Reuel Denney has put it, in "the consumption of other people's personalities." Easing the anxieties of impersonal scale, the presumed intimacy of crooning and the personal element in personality signaled a cross-migration of values that helped fit the public institutions of mass media to private expectations, and vice versa.

Radio's relationship to social and political events presented a different set of issues and evolved through a different pattern of developments. Companies sponsoring radio programs craved large audiences to maximize their advertising exposure and generally tried to offend no one; this priority often led to programming caution and a wariness about social issues. By the mid-thirties the assumption was established that sponsors paying for a show could determine its content—a kind of corporate censorship over prime broadcasting periods. Sponsors tended to keep their distance from news programs and to shiver at the prospect of controversy. In 1935, when Alexander Wolcott criticized Adolf Hitler on "The Town Crier," for example, Cream of Wheat canceled the program after Wolcott refused to promise he would make no such remarks in the future. One significant exception to the sponsors' know-nothing attitude toward current events was "The March of Time" on CBS, supported by Time magazine. This was hardly a news show in the later meaning of that term, but a weekly dramatization of current news events by actors with the support of sound effects, music, and scripting. Sometimes a product more of imagination than reporting, the program nevertheless suggested promising possibilities for radio that would require developments in technology, an evolution of principles, and the demonstration of popular appeal.

Ample room remained for the evolution of radio's public information role because sponsors by no means laid claim to all broadcast time. In 1931 about 65 percent of the scheduled programming on NBC and 75 percent of that on CBS was not sponsored. The demand for material to fill this time was most often met by playing music, yet the available hours also provided room for experiment and, increasingly, for new kinds of shows. Various staged demonstrations had shown that sound could now be sent around the world. In 1930 the networks had broadcast speeches and news reports from a naval conference in London. This experience led to a series of talks over CBS by prominent British politicians and authors, and these in turn helped frame questions about the intellectual principles and responsibilities appropriate to public broadcasting. When George Bernard Shaw ruffled a good many feathers by speaking favorably of the Soviet Union, a Catholic priest from Georgetown University was given time for a critical reply—an important moment for radio's slowly developing notions on the free exchange of ideas. In June 1933 the political columnist Walter Lippmann and the economist John Maynard Keynes in London took part in what was billed as the first broadcast of a conversation between people on different sides of the ocean. Although limited in their immediate impact, such programs held out the prospect that radio could engage rather than evade public issues.

The importance of broadcasting to politics changed with the arrival of Franklin Roosevelt. The Republican and Democratic parties had earlier purchased airtime during presidential campaigns to broadcast set speeches, and huge audiences had been able to tune in to a major event like Hoover's inauguration (some 65 million). But Roosevelt as a politician was made for radio: he created a relaxed, "personal" contact as successfully as any announcer or performer, and he drew enough mail to make any advertiser jealous. Other politicians, and those seeking to influence politics, took to the airwaves as well. Father Coughlin, the "Radio Priest," built his reputation and following almost exclusively through broadcasting. Huey Long fattened his reputation on a rich diet of media attention and made skilled use of the radio and of sound trucks in his campaigning. Critics of agricultural policy could reach a scattered farm population through radio, as Milo Reno did between 1934 and 1936 in talks over station WHO in Des Moines. And Liberty League radio addresses were an important part of that organization's effort to unseat Roosevelt. The pattern, as it came to fullest definition in the year or two before the 1936 elections, seemed to suggest the power of the mass media to give a wider hearing and national exposure to legitimate but volatile voices, with an impact on national politics that was then hard to predict.

In other instances, the only clear impact was to demonstrate that radio's power was completely indiscriminating: whether hollowness, geniality, or substance predominated, almost any radio presentation could strike a responsive chord in at least some substantial part of the radio audience. W. Lee O'Daniel used a radio show jingle to sing his way to the governor's seat in Texas. Mayor Fiorello La Guardia endeared himself to New Yorkers when he read the comics over the radio during a 1937 newspaper strike. The Supreme Court nominee Hugo Black, accused of earlier membership in the Ku Klux Klan, helped defuse the issue by explaining himself in a radio talk, keeping the door open to a distinguished judicial career. In each instance, radio provided an opportunity to reach large numbers of people directly. The blending of the serious and the farcical reflected an absence of broadcasting controls, as well as wariness before the thought that any single standard might actually become controlling.

Discoveries about the power and possibilities of radio were meantime accumulating in other spheres through a combination of aspiration, experimentation, and accident. After 1935 William Paley led CBS in introducing new programming ideas, most of which made use of unsponsored network time. NBC's John F. Royal reacted to CBS gains in the "vaudeville tradition . . . of competing marques": "He watched the marquee across the street. Any strong move called for a similar but more spectacular countermove." When
CBS announced a Shakespeare series with distinguished actors for Monday evenings in the summer of 1937, NBC responded with a John Barrymore Shakespeare series scheduled at the same time. Because CBS was winning a positive response by airing the New York Philharmonic, NBC formed its own orchestra, directed by Arturo Toscanini. The CBS show "American School of the Air" prompted NBC's "University of the Air," and two poetry series squared off in like fashion.

Perhaps the most irksome CBS program to John Royal was "The Columbia Workshop," which had been established in 1936 specifically to provide a context for experimentation. Early shows were often built around the discovery of specific sound effects that led to ideas about how to use them—as spaceships, ghosts, echoes, or whatever. The major landmark for the program, however, was an abstract commentary on international politics contained in Archibald MacLeish's verse play, The Fall of the City (1937). The play encouraged experiments with both verse and narration, especially after it made a major performer out of a young actor named Orson Welles. The closest parallel at NBC to "The Columbia Workshop" came through the work of Arch Oboler, whose creativity and technical abilities allowed midnight listeners to prepare for sleep by listening to the beating of a chicken heart as it grew to engulf the earth or to sound effects suggesting a man being turned inside out. The plays presented on both networks used unsponsored time to stir the imagination through radio in ways that movies (and later, television) could not easily match.

On occasion, the qualities of the medium and the circumstances of the moment meshed with extraordinary power, leaving a permanent mark on radio history. One such moment struck without warning on 6 May 1937, as the announcer Herbert Morrison was reporting on the arrival from Germany of the zeppelin Hindenburg. Morrison had a breathless, excited speaking style—the kind that some announcers used to manufacture enthusiasm for predictable or staged events. When the Hindenburg as it was being moored burst into flames before Morrison's eyes, and as people leaped from it to their deaths, real drama overtook the artificial style, and Morrison became virtually hysterical. Listeners were pulled into the middle of the tragedy, and what they heard was almost overwhelming. Both CBS and NBC to this point had observed strictly a rule that all material except sound effects had to be produced live; shows heard nationally were regularly performed twice by the actors to suit different time zones. So powerful was Morrison's broadcast that NBC suspended this sacred rule to allow replay, and large numbers of people were immersed in an experience of unprecedented intensity.

Real dramas began to unfold with rising frequency as events in Europe and innovative commentators pushed radio news toward the center of listener consciousness. The realm of unsponsored time now played a part in the struggle to define the nation's values in foreign affairs. In 1936 H. V. Kaltenborn, a 58-year-old journalist, traveler, and radio broadcaster, set out to cover the Spanish Civil War, paying his own way at a cost greater than the $100 per week he was receiving to do two broadcasts for CBS. In one of his most notable ventures, Kaltenborn established himself, with an engineer, on a finger of French territory reaching into Spain that was in the middle of a battle; with a microphone planted in a haystack to pick up the sound of live fire, he then transmitted to the United States a report that was audibly from the front lines of war. In Spain, Francisco Franco led fascist forces that were attempting to overthrow an elected socialist government. Franco was soon receiving direct support from Germany and Italy; the government and its supporters (the Loyalists) gathered some aid from the Soviet Union and from politically motivated volunteers from many countries. The United States, along with Britain and France, maintained a posture of nonintervention. In his several broadcasts on Spain and in the talks he gave upon returning home, Kaltenborn's mix of reporting, interpretation, and opinion criticized nonintervention and suggested the likelihood of a wider war in Europe. The Hearst newspapers and others, by contrast, tended to refer to the Spanish government as the "reds" and to the fascists as "insurgents" or as the "Franco regime." The power of local and regional newspapers was under challenge. Americans were being offered two different versions of the conflict from two different sources of "news." Radio was helping to mount a communications revolution that was altering the cultural world just as the transportation revolution had altered the physical world in the century before—shrinking distance and expanding the range of contacts.

If newspapers remained confident that theirs was the greater influence, that attitude would change in 1938. CBS had shipped a new program manager to Europe the year before—28-year-old Edward R. Murrow. Expected to act as a supervisor not a broadcaster, Murrow broke his mold in March 1938 during the Anschluss, Hitler's anticipated occupation of Austria. Informed by William L. Shirer, a veteran reporter on Germany then in Vienna, that German troops had crossed the border, Murrow flew into Austria to cover the story while Shirer hastened to London, where he could transmit an eyewitness report. On 13 March, CBS accomplished a major feat of radio technology and reportage by coordinating from New York a sequence of on-the-spot accounts from London, Paris, Berlin, Rome, and Vienna (the last being Murrow's first major broadcast). News reporting from Europe had reached a new level, and Murrow, Shirer, and an expanding staff kept up their reports as Hitler began to turn his attention toward Czechoslovakia.

When the Czech crisis came to a head in September—with threats, war preparations, appeals, and concessions leading up to the legendary appeasement at Munich—CBS offered extensive coverage that was reinforced by an only slightly less thorough NBC. For 18 days, from 12 to 29 September, radio listeners could follow the tense European situation through regular reports from major capitals and hear the voices of the leaders of Germany, Italy, Britain, France, and Czechoslovakia. Kaltenborn held the news together for
CBS with at least 85 separate reports during this period, reading European bulletins and commenting, translating from German and French, explaining when necessary, sometimes staying on the air for two hours at a time. The news now took priority over sponsored shows, which were canceled right and left.

This change in broadcasting style and technology was a sign of where news reporting was heading. Leading commentators were actually beginning to attract sponsors themselves, and some became celebrities whose incomes shot skyward. CBS received some 50,000 fan letters on its Munich coverage. That coverage had brought prestige to news operations, which were now expanded in preparation for the war that seemed certain to come. During the crisis, Murrow had opened a report with, “This . . . is London,” a phrase that would become famous through his landmark broadcasts during the German bombing in 1940; it added to the growing emphasis on trademark expressions and identifiable personality in news reporting. In the winter of 1937–38, a study had found that more than half the people surveyed preferred to get their news reports from newspapers rather than radio; by the month after the Munich crisis, better than two-thirds declared they favored radio. Radio news no longer stood on the fringes of broadcasting or of American culture.99

The Munich coverage and the events it described also helped set the stage for one of the most extraordinary episodes in radio history. On 30 October 1938, CBS presented as part of its “Mercury Theater on the Air,” led by Orson Welles and John Houseman, a rewritten theatrical version of H. G. Wells’s story, “The War of the Worlds.” In preparing the script for the show, Houseman and others had worried that it was too unreal to hold much of an audience, and the network had required script changes to make it seem even less authentic. The story described a Martian landing and assault on the New Jersey countryside—not a tale that would seem to demand immediate credence. The method of telling, however, once the initial announcement of the show was past, mimicked the news techniques so recently established in people’s consciousness: a presumptive regular program was interrupted for a “special bulletin”; the musical show returned only to be interrupted again with updates and eyewitness reports of creatures emerging from spaceships; reports seemed to come in from various locations as the story developed. Significant numbers of listeners throughout the country took what they heard on the radio at face value. Calls flooded in to newspapers and police stations; people in the New York to Philadelphia area tried to flee in their cars; panic struck individuals and groups in several locations; and an electrical failure convinced a town in Washington State that a final calamity was indeed at hand.

The relationships that could develop between creative work and the tensions of a period was never more clearly in evidence, and the credibility that radio could achieve was never demonstrated in more startling fashion. One commentator after another pondered the nature of the panic, the presence of preexisting fears, and the implications for mass movements thus implied. Interruptions for news broadcasts in fictional works were banned from radio. Was the “Mercury Theater on the Air” destroyed? On the contrary, the evidence of its impact drew the attention of sponsors, including a soup company, and it soon became “The Campbell Playhouse.” Radio, like the movie premieres, obviously could stir popular passions; the inescapably pertinent question for the thirties was how and by whom such mass energies might be controlled. In the case of radio, the fate of the “Mercury Theater” suggested an answer from practice. Just as premieres were democratized into docility, radio’s potentially explosive power to communicate and convince came under regulation in part through the very eagerness of advertisers to harness that power to the cause of profit.

Although radio plays and news coverage had flourished in the freer realm of unsponsored time, radio in the United States remained a business eager for the income advertising provided. When successful innovative ventures found sponsors, they gained regular support but often faced limitations as well. Campbell Soup did not want another panic. Likewise, with an eye to avoiding controversy, networks during the late 1930s and early 1940s tried to restrict commentators with a clear point of view from shaping broadcast news, preferring the presumably more objective notion of “news analysts.” Because radio was a business, and because the networks reached a huge and diverse audience in a nation of competing values, standards emerged that tended to soft-pedal the conflicts between those values and to dampen the medium’s potential to stir up fundamental controversy or destabilizing passions.

The main diet of sponsored programming, meanwhile, concentrated on a few successful formats. The evenings still belonged to comedy and variety and to a new efflorescence of quiz shows. Sports broadcasts, especially of singular events, could attract even larger numbers; the listening audience for the Joe Louis–Max Schmeling boxing match in June 1938 set the record for the 1930s. An increasing number of daytime radio hours were being sold to soap operas, which took their name from the advertising that accompanied them. Originating in 1931, these never-ending formulaic dramas had multiplied to 12 by 1933, 19 by 1935, 31 by 1937, and 60 by 1940.100 Daytime programming also included shows based on conversation and interviews, for which Mary Margaret McBride was perhaps the leader, and advice programs hosted by sponsor-invented “personalities,” like “Beatrice Fairfax” on romance, “Betty Crocker” on cooking, and “Betty Moore” on decorating.

The listeners were not all the same. Studies indicated a split between the audiences for soap operas and for “reality-oriented” shows of interviews and advice; neither group generally listened to programs of the other kind. Yet interestingly, both groups seemed to seek information and guidance from the radio in their contrasting ways. In the case of soap operas, this quest was less obvious, but interviews with listeners demonstrated that many valued the stories because they seemed “real” and that people looked to the radio serials for
examples of how to be attractive or relate to a spouse or handle children. The characters in soap operas were generally either helpers or in need of help, and some listeners joined the process by writing to characters to offer suggestions or guidelines of their own. In brokering specific ideas about how to deal with others, how to appear, or how to behave, the soaps and the direct advice-giving shows provided their audiences in different ways with opportunities to test their own values, to give and to receive advice on how to live in a changing world.

Radio during the 1930s evolved not just around issues concerning its own emerging practices or the problems posed by the depression but around questions arising out of an ongoing cultural transition. Like The Three Little Pigs and the literature of success, radio programming juggled tensions between work and leisure, discipline and indulgence, character and personality. Like the advertising that helped support it, radio offered guidance on the proper treatment of modern ills and paid a homage to the family sphere, even as it helped to undermine the private nature of that sphere and absorb some of its functions. Like the movies, radio provided models of speech, style, and behavior and offered experiences of wider worlds both real and imagined, often suggesting potential tensions with localization or the habits of the past. Although sometimes an agent of change, the radio industry seldom set out to sharpen or define the conflicts of values that were a part of its necessary business. Rather, it sought to balance or combine, to blur exact distinctions, to present, within limits, a variety show of behaviors and values. The effect was almost certainly to help ease and contain the tensions of culture and politics; individuals and audiences of varying commitments were left with the space for (and the burdens of) interpretation and choice.

There was one important exception to the pattern of mixed representations: the coalescence around a central idea of American political-cultural identity. Radio brought European politics into American homes and tracked the advance of fascism with growing concern. In the process, its reports and commentaries helped sharpen a definition-by-contrast of the United States as a country pledged to democratic liberties and resistant to any monolithic appeal. From this perspective, the presence of different groups and values in American culture became evidence of a unifying national commitment, and by extension, a meliorative treatment of conflicts among the parts verified the presence of an enlightened understanding of the whole. Although this idea would be developed more directly elsewhere, its sometimes piecemeal emergence in the realms of popular culture gave evidence of its potent appeal and usefulness. The economic pressures and cultural tensions of the 1930s were powerful and real, yet they were frequently overmatched by a revivified American belief that multiplicity was not just consistent but, with the very heartbeat of, a cohesive democratic nation. Wherever it appeared, this message asserted its stabilizing claim.

Study the Media

In the sweeping survey Recent Social Trends in the United States published in 1933, the authors of the section on “The Agencies of Communication” noted that the new machinery had the capacity to create “mass impression,” that these impressions necessarily affected individual “attitudes and behavior,” and that the direction of modification depended “entirely on those who control the agencies.” The simple existence of mass media posed questions of power and values. “Greater possibilities for social manipulation, for ends that are selfish or socially desirable, have never existed,” the authors went on. “The major problem is to protect the interests and welfare of the individual citizen.”

These remarks conveyed an acute awareness that mass communication technology might work for good or ill depending on the wielding. They also implied a belief that “the interests and welfare” of citizens might easily be recognized, and that the “socially desirable” could be readily distinguished from the “selfish.” Yet who would control such a winnowing was just as important a question as who would control the media. In a 1935 promotional brochure for advertisers entitled “You Do What You’re Told,” CBS publicists claimed that seven or eight or nine times out of ten, people obeyed instructions from voices representing authority or caring, and that radio, not other advertising media, could provide such voices. Whether these claims represented threat or promise, cynical manipulation or good marketing, the selfish or the socially desirable, depended on one’s point of view.

The contemporary social scientists who examined the newer forms of popular culture, and particularly radio, often found themselves caught up in their own dilemmas of competing outlooks and unyielding assumptions. In Radio and the Printed Page (1940), Paul F. Lazarsfeld (who directed the Office of Radio Research at Columbia University) explored the impact of broadcasting on reading, reporting in an “optimistic” vein that “radio has not impaired the reading habits of the population” and that “if properly used radio offers a rich opportunity for the promotion of reading.” The question, the conclusion, and the notion of “proper” use all implied a traditional mainstream belief in information and education as engines of progress. Yet Lazarsfeld suggested potentially serious limitations on this capacity for progress in arguing that the consequence of radio depended on “the social forces prevailing at a certain time”; the medium reflected its context, and in that sense, it could be understood as “a stupendous technical advance with a strongly conservative tendency in all social matters.” In the United States this tendency shaped the industry so as to serve the ends of capitalism and commerce; in another social context (German or Russian, perhaps) it might work to conserve quite different arrangements. Whether the bias in favor of prevailing social forces was consistent with an “optimistic” view of radio’s educational potential, Lazarsfeld did not say.
Hadley Cantril and Gordon W. Allport presented *The Psychology of Radio* (1941) as the first attempt to describe "the new mental world" created by the medium, and they emphasized, in keeping with a common posture in the social sciences, the need for a "strictly objective and dispassionate attitude." Their language hardly seemed dispassionate, however, when they spoke of radio as an "altogether novel" medium, "epochal in its influence" and "preeminent as a means of social control"; a medium that "thrilled" romantic souls while evoking in "reflective souls" a feeling of "helplessness and dismay.” More than a hint of trepidation lay behind their declaration that soon “men in every country of the globe will be able to listen at one time to the persuasions or commands of some wizard seated in a central place of broadcasting, possessed of a power more fantastic than that of Aladdin.” And their reminder that radio development took its shape from the society’s “framework of political and economic philosophy” seemed grounds for concern when it introduced an analysis of advertising as propaganda.

Yet at other points Cantril and Allport sang a hymn to radio as “by nature a powerful agent of democracy”: “Distinctions between rural and urban communities, men and women, age and youth, social classes, creeds, states, and nations are abolished. As if by magic the barriers of social stratification disappear and in their place comes a consciousness of equality and of a community of interest.” Radio brought an almost unlimited expansion of experience, overcoming poverty, parochialism, and loneliness, and it served the “middle classes and the underprivileged” as “a gigantic and invisible net which each listener may cast thousands of miles into the sea of human affairs and draw in teeming with palpitating delights from which he may select according to his fancy.” Such lyrical celebration had a tenuous connection with the image of a broadcasting industry shaped by propaganda or with the pose of dispassionate objectivity, yet here all were intertwined. The reactions of social scientists to the new medium, like those of many in the general population, constituted an intellectual and attitudinal balancing act that blended hopes and fears about the modern into an evolving effort to grapple with contemporary life.44

Not all responses tried to bring off a feat of balance. Many assessments of popular culture entered into an old debate about the uses of leisure and the desirability of popular entertainments. Montaigne in the sixteenth century welcomed diversion, variety, and escape as healthy antidotes for isolation and the pressures of life, as Leo Lowenthal once noted, while Pascal in the seventeenth condemned constant activity and distraction as a source of great unhappiness.61 More recent commentators of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, assuming aristocratic or elite traditions as a background, tended to split between those who praised the spread and democratization of leisure entertainments in popular culture and those who complained of qualitative deterioration and the loss of the true character of art. If some, including those involved in industries like radio and film, were quick to indulge in inflated cel-
In looking to only one side of the picture, Lowenthal provided an argument that was narrowing and occasionally dogmatic. By insisting that the media could offer “nothing but entertainment and distraction,” his analysis denied the value that entertainment may have, left itself helpless to explain the best products of popular culture, and failed to grapple with the power and appeal of the materials in question. Writing at the same time, the critic Robert Warshow took a less traveled path in trying to comprehend the real attractions of popular culture without dismissing the idea of aesthetic standards. He had seen a “great many very bad movies,” Warshow reported, but he had “rarely been bored” by them; when he had been bored, it was usually “at a ‘good’ movie” with artistic pretensions. What was needed was “a criticism of ‘popular culture’ which can acknowledge its pervasive and disturbing power without ceasing to be aware of the superior claims of the higher arts.” The critic had to begin with perception, not with an outlook that predeterined response and restricted scope.

The emphasis on the false and manipulative nature of popular culture in the Lowenthal argument took for granted the power of elites to control tightly the content and the impact of the media. Lowenthal’s argument not only assumed a greater unity of authority over the production of popular culture than ever existed, it also assumed a ready receptivity and a complete absence of discrimination in mass audiences. Such a position largely denied the presence of significant variety of content or quality in the materials of popular culture: it downplayed the possibilities of multiple responses and different understandings of media creations that might stand apart from any structured intent; and it ignored the capacity of individuals and groups to give meanings of their own to elements of popular culture. According to Lowenthal, the “prevailing view” of the people’s taste was that “only the bad and the vulgar are the yardsticks of their aesthetic pleasure.” There was little room left, once such blinders were put on, for seeing popular culture with any complexity or for finding in it anything but degradation.

The question of what to make of the media and of mass audiences attracted increasing attention from intellectuals at the end of the 1930s and beyond. Although the issues involved were not entirely unprecedented, they were substantially reshaped by the emergence of new means of mass communication between the world wars, and they were shadowed by the looming presence of fascist and communist movements and regimes. Those trying to read the import of the newer media looked to an experience that was short and often contradictory; every effort at description quickly became tangled with conclusions. The radio audience could be understood as a scattered body of individuals and families making independent choices, or as an aggregated mass controlled by a distant voice. Popular culture could be hailed as democratizing and as a solvent of class inequities, or castigated as a tool of elite domination and a threat to the very basis of democracy. The media could be described as breaking down parochialism and allowing all to have “cos-

mopolitan interests” (Cantril and Allport), or as demeaning to everything that deserved the name of culture. And more specifically, radio could be praised for bringing Americans closer to events, or maligned along with other forms of popular culture for providing artificial experience that separated them from reality. The issues were difficult ones, and assessments of the popular media often implied judgments on all of modern culture. Perhaps it is no wonder, then, that the work of intellectuals reflected tensions between ideas, and an ongoing dance of values, fully as much as the media they evaluated.