Film History as Social History:

The Dieterle/Warner Brothers Bio-pic

By Thomas Elsaesser
Genres and Social History

Most attempts at writing film history as social history, especially for the classic period of the American cinema, have rightly stressed the importance of genres as a stabilizing element, fixing expectations and offering an organized pattern to the cinema experience. — Robert Warshow, describing the gangster film, writes:

"In its initial character, the gangster film is only one example of the mores' tendency to create fixed dramatic patterns that can be repeated indefinitely... [For a genre] to be successful means that its conventions have imposed themselves upon the general consciousness and become the recognized vehicles of a particular set of attitudes and a peculiar aesthetic effect. One goes to any individual example of the type with very definite expectations, and originally it is to be welcomed only in the degree that it interferes the expected experience without fundamentally altering it."

During the three decades from 1930 to 1960, genres and the star system supplied the main discourses whereby the Hollywood film industry communicated with its audience. For the social historian treating films as interpretable source material, the dominance of genres leads to expecting changes in social relations manifesting themselves in and through generic intertexts. Andrew Bergman's formulation is well-known:

"How did people flock to gangster films in the early thirties and stay going in Westerns at the same time? What made It Happened One Night, released with little publicity by a second rank studio, the most enormous success of 1934?... How does one explain the huge success of the talk musicals in 1933 and their decline in the mid-thirties?...?' In all of these questions, box office success by itself is not meaningful. But when it is considered along with sociopolitical facts of life and the content of the pictures themselves, we have a highly useful tool. People went to certain kinds of films and cycles (gangster, "fallen woman" cycles, "shyster" cycles, "backstage" cycles). The cycles emerged and faded over time by a process which the most elementary knowledge of depression conditions indicates was not random."

Yet the difficulties critics encounter when focusing on genre as a way of analyzing the ideological significance of the "institution cinema" are notorious, especially when such cycles are viewed not simply as "reflecting" historical events or popular perceptions but as shaping them: a possibility largely sidestepped by Bergman in a grammatically flawed phrase:

"The existence of these cycles, fostered and withered by public interest and disinterest helps us to understand the problem of interest and causality."

Warshow has already cautioned against the coupling of genres and social reality:

"The relationship between the conventions which go to make up such a cycle and the real experience of its audience or the real facts of whatever situation it pretends to describe is of only secondary importance... It is only in an ultimate sense that the type appeals to its audience's sense of reality; much more immediately, it appeals to the previous experience of the type itself: it creates its own field of reference."

Reading one text (the films completing a genre or cycle) as constructed by another text (American society) is also problematic (though as it assumes the existence of a master narrative, a source of textual authority, giving film to conspiracy theories or ideological models of explanation. This is ultimately no more satisfactory than Bergman's phantom historical subject (public interest) which "fosters and withers" genres and cycles. Equally damaging for a historian is the fact that the economic organization of film production in general, and of a given studio in particular, is for a "reflectionist" irrelevant to the study of genres, even though it is well understood that genres are both effects and causes of specific industrial production practices. In the words of Marc Venet:

"This identity [which the spectator recognizes among all the films of the same genre] is not only objective at the level of the film or subjective to the spectator—it corresponds equally to the way in which the system of film production and distribution is organized, and to the directorial process of the film in question."
Ideological Incoherence or Intertextual Coherence?

Despite the many new approaches in film history and textual analysis, the rift between political, legal and economic determinants of the industry and the reception-oriented determinations of the film-texts does not seem to have narrowed appreciably. As Nick Brown has pointed out, even the influential article on Young Mr. Lincoln (1939) by the Cahiers du cinéma collective, which analyzes the false body itself as an indirect, mediated process of transcoding ideological positions into textual ones, nonetheless treat production as a direct, immediate transfer of politics and economics into management and text.6

Is it possible to situate genres between these determinants: neither altogether self-enclosed, stable units of production nor the transparent vehicles of volatile ideologies and reflecting mirrors of consumption? To what extent do conflicting goals enter into genres and are cycles a sort of compromise formation based on containing disruptions to the system? Viewed from the side of production, generic stability and coherence exist itself the sign of a successful integration of contradictions, though not those abstracted from a retrospective ideological reading of social history: they are more likely those arising from the production process itself.

From the point of view of consumption, genres have always been perceived as instances of intertextual play: between different texts of the same genre and from genre to genre (Wattisbow’s own symptomatic placement of gangster and western genres comes to mind). But the interplay of genre and star is equally important because the borders between the textual referents and the extra-textual field (social values, lifestyle, role-models, etc.) become especially permeable, since stars and genres have an existence that goes beyond the texts that define them.

The case of Warner Brothers has always been a privileged one because in so many of their genres and cycles, the “social” element loomed large, with often explicit references to contemporary politics and ideological options that can be identified with America during the Depression. Yet in some of the studio’s most topical examples, like Heroes for Sale (1933), blending with social and political referents, Bergman has also highlighted the difficulties of a coherent ideological reading:

Heroes for Sale had little to do with capitalism but none in the capitalist. Beyond satirical framing for the benevolent protector, the film was nowhere, despite all its violence and perversion, having found something grotesque and repressed in each class and ideology depicted, the film staggered to its conclusion with a heavy burden. It dropped this burden at the door of the White House, rang the bell and ran away.7

However, while Bergman is obliged to attribute the incoherences of Heroes for Sale to the fact that the studio had no “solution” to offer to the nation’s politicalills, one could point out that the ideological face-off which he discovers did the film little harm with the public. The studio’s priorities might have been to put out a strong vehicle for Richard Barthelmess, for example, whose performance drew in energy from the narrative discontinuities. Theruptures make Heroes for Sale incogent only from the vantage point of an idealistic correspondence. If production and consumption converge in the star vehicle or the genre picture, then the social meaning of the text must be located in the relation between ideological and spectatorial coherence and not in isolation from each other. Generic codes and star images support each other, precisely, because they can displace or even negate contradictory connections. Discussing Marilyn Monroe and Lana Turner, Richard Dyer notes that the

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The grandiose built by “Hollywood studio realism” is built around the “catharsis of the hero” and is he claims, “inevitably social commentary.”8 “Because he or she converts the anger expressed in the film to an expression of his being... he converts the question ‘why do people feel this way?’ to ‘how does it feel to be an outcast?’ The stars promote a privatization or personalization of structural determinants.9
The construction of the kind of unity represented by the star is in some sense only a special, if extremely important aspect of the film industry's general ability to create discrete units out of diverse and heterogeneous materials. Instead of extending this point to the extent to which they, too, rely on images: a single physical representation covering broad and contradictory associations in the case of the star, extreme narrative condensation in the case of genres. For both, the act of containing or encoding is the work of the institution as a whole (not just of the texts, which are of course themselves not reducible to their narratives), and includes the publicity apparatus as well as the presentation of the cinema into adjacent social institutions and other public spaces. Whether it is personal appearances of film stars at supermarket openings, our images of the police, the courts, or of a certain imagery and landscape, what is "social" about the cinema is not in the degree of political or ideological topicality of the narratives, but the narrative images and exhibition values which stars and genres transport, the degree to which these can unroll, expand and proliferate through the body-politic: a film thus contains a textual as well as a social mode of address.

To stress "image" and exhibition values of cycles or genres would bring to their study a consideration of the social meanings created and constructed by their place in society as opposed to the ideological reading of narratives as imprints of society. Although still investigating discourses formulating contradictions as coherence, such an approach would alter the size of coherence: for underlying such a shift would probably be a different conception of the film-text in relation to the institution cinema. Films might be seen not as products only, but also as services, organizing certain ameliorates, spaces and pleasures. This would mean that one could study both the film texts and the institutions that produce and circulate them in the form of social values, as differently constituted and historically variable material supports in social discourse or practices that are not necessarily centered on the individual film. Not only would this displacement emphasis from the idea of the film as the creation of an autonomous work (itself one of the most problematic aspects of genre study, where a critical approach ought to be able to account for seriality and generic intertextuality), it would also see the single text as a kind of ally: a symbolic form, not for any particular social context but as the enactment of social relations. Their the text localizes with its modes of address and conditions in the viewing experience. The individual film text thus becomes the trace and transitional manifestation of historical processes which can be understood also from a quite different vantage point.

Such at any rate, do I take to be the implication of recent studies in film history which begin with a consideration of the cinema as a particularly constituted exhibition space. The chain producer-consumer-produce may eventually turn out to be too rigid for an understanding of the dynamics of the cinema as a socially significant practice if one wants to make useful for historical analysis the inter-relations of cinema architecture, derotography (voting of theaters, effects on domestic spaces) or the economics of popcorn franchises, double features and block booking. Their effects on the production space, considered not only as the site where films are made but also as a sort of stock exchange of differently quoted values, has yet to be fully theorized.

At Warner Brothers, for instance, the operational constraints were such that distinctions between A and B features (due to their different modes of circulation: rapid circulation of a great quantity of low-budget, low-yield films, as opposed to the concentration on fewer, more valuable and more highly praised prestige films) structured hierarchies of executive decision-making and production planning more decisively than genre distinctions. Historically most studies maintained a diversification of strategy which, policy precisely because it permitted them to allow the different kinds of exhibition spaces to determine the shape of the material supports (the films). Yet film studies has so far been slow to make much use of this type of information.

Self-Regulation as Self-Reflexivity

The film industry comprises two moments of economic consolidation potentially in conflict: diversification (of products and services) on a horizontal level and vertical integration around a single commodity. These two moments can in fact be seen to be interrelated inside the tendency towards commercialization, due to the financial powers that came to dominate the film industry in the late Twenties, went hand in hand with the different studios success-
fully integrating the various institutions of the cinema into a self-regulatory system in line with political thinking of the time. Hollywood, as historian P演nmaker Chaski once wrote, has a very high degree of ritual education, which is accompanied by image-consciousness and self-awareness. Warding off external interferences by closing ranks and adopting strategic responses seems to be the key to an understanding of how the studio system effectively mediated between social discourses and textual discourses. Self-regulation, considered as an economic as well as an ideological premise, could be compared to a metaphor: communicating external pressures to the studio system, but filtered because, figured in its own terms, the demands become translated into textual representations (narratives and images) and self-representations. The classic example, of course, is the setting up of the Hays Office and the implementation of its Production Code. Unlike the sociological “stimulus-response” model or the direct bracketing of production and consumption with the box office (only success film are socially significant), the assumption of self-regulation acknowledges the internal organization of the film industry as a material factor of change. It also helps to explain how the discourses Hollywood produced about itself affect the texts.

Self-regulation lies at the heart of what I take to be one of the main characteristics of commercial film-making generally: the high level of self-referentiality, and intertextuality, as evidenced in the genres, stars, remakes, publicity and the general tendency to translate other art forms, entertainment media, cultural values into the terms of its own system. To it corresponds, on the side of the consumer, a similarity self-reproducing psychic system: a love of cinema for the sake of cinema. Remembering Watergate’s cinema, one might say that in all its discourses, the industry is able to talk about itself as if it were talking about social reality. This, as we know, is now more true of television, and for much the same reason: a hegemonic institution existing, as it were, as a within the state.

One reason why Warner Brothers represents an instructive case in the Thirties is that it found itself at the cutting edge, not only of the latent conflict between the two moments of economic consolida-
tion, but also of the various forms of outside intervention. If the need to maintain financial inter-
vention partially shaped Warner products and the way they were marketed with a predominance of pro-
grammers, these very same pictures were one of the main targets of external influence: from the Catholic Church, educators and the press to the lure of a demand for censorship. The industry accepted the Hays Code because it wanted to retain control not only over the unity of their products, but also the social spaces and audiences which these products penetrated.

Self-regulation as an integration in order to exclude independent producers, the studios not only formed a cartel and integrated vertically their production, distribution and exhibition but also integrated their mode of production on the basis of standardization and divisibility (division of labour, hierarchies and line of command, development of the continuity system, time keeping and budget control). It would be possible to argue that Warner Brothers’ production was subject to a double articulation: the vertical arm was represented by the genres (and codes) (standardization and divisibility of product), but studio output was also horizontally diversified by way of its material sources: newspaper stories, stage musicals, firms featuring radio; its domestic political issues: unemployment, juvenile delinquency, prostitution and organized crime; its international politics (European Fascism, Spanish Civil War, Latin America); its cultural and educational subjects: literary adaptations, biography. With this, the Warner product was present in very diverse social and ideological terms.

Thus the study of a studio’s output would ideally combine a “vertical” line of inquiry (centred on the notion of “products,” their circulation, their “images”), a “horizontal” one which could relate the functioning of the industry to other leisure industries competing with the cinema. The different forms of broadcast radio, the press and film television would automatically be regarded as the interventions of cinema, within the overall context of social, educational spaces (family, school, the home, the street or neighborhood) given over to socializing and integrating individuals: this might lead to a different definition of the social for cinema in general and for specific groups of texts in particular. Emphasis would be on the forms of equivalence and kinds of substitutability within the social or discursive spaces the cinema affects and which it occupies as so many modes of address.

The social power base of the film industry has been its access to audiences (or ownership or control of mass media) through publicity (advertising, the press...
generally, fan magazines, fashion, glamour photography; via controlling the supply of quantity and quality of product. These are essentially extra-textual discourses, but which share with the texts themselves the material/immaterial, economic/textual status of the image: the film industry has been immensely successful in integrating very diverse social instances and institutions in the service of its "images," dissimulating the boundary between the economic and the textual. It was this transformation of external demands into discourses and "images" which served as the buffer against the State (as a political institution) intervening on the economic side, to affect, for instance, distribution and exhibition (the anti-trust action); against the banks, in the form of finance capital, intervening on the production side by determining cash flow (the importance of stars to bail out bankrupt studios); against social institutions (church organizations, civic pressure groups) trying to intervene on the textual level (censorship). By contrast, after entertainment and information media (newspapers, radio, legitimate stage theaters up to the advent of television) affected the film industry by acting on some economics and texts. The self-regulation reflex here was to include the competing media as interests in the films themselves or to include them physically by buying out performers and buying up properties.
The Warner Biopic and the Eid for "Culture"

An analysis of the mechanisms of self-regulation in place at any given time would have to inform any thorough study of a genre's social history. In what follows I want to do no more than sketch the kinds of resistances, discontinuities and breakthroughs which oppose themselves to a homologizing reading of the cycle of biographies, and of The Story of Louis Pasteur (1936). These bi-pics which Warner made from 1936 onwards have received far less attention than the topical films because the references seem at first sight so remote from contemporary American reality: The Story of Louis Pasteur, The White Angel (1933), about Florence Nightingale), The Life of Emile Zola (1937), Juarez (1939), Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet (1940), about the inventor of a cure for syphilis, A Dispatch From Reuven (1940) are distanced either in time or geography from America in the Thirties. Yet "socially" significant evidence need not be exclusively sought in the pro-filmic: multivalent constellations around the central figure in the bio-pics give clues to the inscription of the social—depending on how the social is to be defined. Read in this sense, for example, a film like Louis Pasteur can be usefully compared to Huxley for Sale, if only because the "typical" Depression film and the historical film both focus on inversions or discoveries that interfere with vested interests. While Tom Hatten capitalism on his table and markets them successfully, the discoverer of Louis Pasteur has to prove himself in opposition to the prevailing ideology and even be proctected from the market in order to be of social benefit. The pedagogy are similarly structured around public responsibility and private enterprise, even if the terms appear inverted: scientists or inventors are as symbolically overemphasized figures as gangsters, not in any sociological sense, but owing to the conflicting social value systems at stake in their actions: free enterprise in conflict with the law and public interest: capitalism vs. philanthropy, while social welfare falls to the State: they are the figures of a problematic mediated.

Such a reading raises, but does not answer the question of what integrative function the different mechanisms of self-regulation might have had on the text, in order to produce a number of typical narrative images and condensations strong enough to found a genre: for the bio-pic did establish such an image not only for itself ("worthily, but dull"), but also for its stars (Paul Muni: A Pasteur; Zola, Juarez), its director (Dierdrl, the humanist, representative of the better Germany) and the studio (successfully maintaining its status by winning Oscars with serious pictures). Rather than taking the convergence of these determinants as something given from the outside as it were, by accumulation and reinforcement (making its existence somehow inevitable), the conjunction of director, producer, star and studio represents a compromise between quite heterogeneous and structurally distinct factors. They require not only a possibly more militant model of analysis but may be understandable only in the diachronic between the external threat of censorship and a potential disturbance from inside: too great a desire for autonomy by the individual parts (the star and the director) creating an excess of "personality" in the system and thus requiring a counteracting force of integration: the bio-pics were to some sense this counterforce. The social discusses it intersected with in turn gave a specific ideological meaning to the internal struggles, thereby redefining—at another level—the basis on which Hollywood could market the self-representation.

In the emergence of the bio-pic one can isolate the following model: the director's changing self-image from professional contract worker to "European-style" producer-director; Warner Brothers' long-term strategy to modify their public image: by 1933 heavily associated with gangsters, violence and crime films in as well as the overtly sexual romance in its musicals and comedies; the studio's difficulties with Paul Muni, who after the success of Scarface and I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang (both 1932) wanted to have a greater say in the choice of his roles than Jack Warner deemed permissible; finally, the resignations of Zamour over the NRA-imposed salary waiver, which put the Wallis in charge of programming and gave Hiram Blanc a position where he could act as prodrome to Dieterle on the strength of a personal friendship which dated back to the days of UFA in Berlin. The pre-history thus encompasses at least three years.

Early in 1933, in a move to counter the adverse publicity (its highly accidental) but violent films had
The Director as Image Value

Dietrich for his part had come to Hollywood in 1928, after Warner had offered him a contract via its German First National operation. The studio’s reason for wanting Dietrich and Dietrich’s reason for accepting the offer were in some sense totally fortuitous. Dietrich had debts she was glad to leave behind, and Warner needed an actress of international appeal. Dietrich’s German language version in Hollywood under Blanke’s supervision, Soon Dietrich established himself as a successful contract director mainly with B-pictures. Encouraged by the critical success of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, he began to redesign his directorial image. In order to advance the status of an A-picture director, he restructured himself as a Germanic Director, taking up the kind of auteurial eccentricity which so often “Viennese” as Erich von Stroheim and Josef von Sternberg had made popular: Dietrich’s trademark was a pair of immaculate white gloves which she wore whenever on the set. It now began to feature in the publicity materials. But far from having a genteel or aristocratic background, Dietrich, rather like Streisand, was actually self-taught and had grown up in a working-class or artisanal family. Nor, of course, was she a refugee. In Hollywood, the gloves which Dietrich wore for a skin allure paradoxically conveyed a “cultural” value which the publicity department was able to use for the promotion of the image they needed for *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*: Viennese charm and sophistication combining with immorality, thanks to Warner Brothers respect for culture and their patronage of famous emigrants.

Dietrich’s attempt to become permanently associated with European “Kultur” failed at first. The projects he proposed to Wells (Twelfth Night, Bunton’s Death) were turned down. The studio clearly did not want him to continue in this vein.Box office considerations played their part, but also their assessment of Dietrich as a contract director:

To be a big success you must first have the ingredients for success, and in the picture business this means a good story… [After A Midsummer Night’s Dream], well I thought I was in for a red good assignment. Then they gave me a story, and it was really terrible. I said, ”No,” and they gave me two weeks’ vacation. I was having a great time when I got a wire which said, ”Come back immediately. We have a wonderful story.” Well, it was the same script, Dr. Socrates, only rewritten up—it had been rewritten for Paul Muni.”

Dietrich thus had to look elsewhere in order to upgrade his status from B to A director: he became associated with a different style of acting. His first attempt, with Paul Muni, himself a central European emigré, in effect paired two Warner Brothers malcontents on a low-budget studio property, Muni, who did not think of himself as a movie star, had insisted on being taken off the role; Muni’s working class hero parts. Essentially an actor with stage training he was afraid of being typecast and sought subjects which his talent for Warner’s interpretation would be showcased. Wanting screen roles more in the vein of his Broadway success Counselor at Law, Dr. Socrates (1935) must have seemed to Muni a compromise: playing a young idealist doctor ostracized by the small-town community in which he worked, he gets caught up in the world of crime out of sheer humanism.

In retrospect, the role (an idealist among
From "Realism" to "Authenticity"

The Story of Louis Pasteur was an enormous hit. Years later, Jack Warner (who had done much to block the film) provided a medal of the French Legion d'Honneur for it on a visit to Paris: the studio had underestimated its value larger than the film. The condensation of elements was such that it could form the basis of a series. In marketing, too, it represented a shift in strategy by the studio. While playing the card of culture for one part of its audiences (the French setting), the studio discovered a way of combining its reputation for social concern with an altogether less controversial "realism" than that which had troubled the Legion of Decency. Perhaps the publicity for Warner's bio-pic was the emphasis on historical accuracy, on the quantity of research materials, the extensive inspection of original locations and the quality of the professional consultancy. For Dr. Douthitt's Magic Bullet, the research department established the exact date when pumped labels first came into use; and no lesser person than the vice-consul of Mexico acted as the technical advisor on Juares. What gritty realism was to the topical picture became authenticity to the bio-pic: the trademark for genre.

As a genre in its own right, the bio-pic has a mixed parentage. Historical biographies in the cinema were made famous by Lubitsch with his fictional and comic treatment of Madame DuBarry (1919) and Ann Boleyn (1920). Not only did they establish the reputation of the German cinema in the Twenties, they were also imitated by emigre directors such as Alexander Korda (The Private Life of Henry VIII, 1933) and Dziga Vertov (1936) who directed a remake of Madame DuBarry in 1934. Another genre intertextual altogether are the scandal sheet and pulp revelations of the private lives of the rich and famous which found their way into the paraphotobiographies that structure the narrative of the gangster films. By turning this latter genre (The Little Caesars, 1930; Public Enemy, 1931; Scarface) inside out, The Story of Louis Pasteur sets up both a different generic space and recalls other Warner genres, thus rewriting the studio's own past while not breaking with it. The Story of Louis Pasteur opens in the decor and dramatic atmosphere of a horror film; we see a Second Empire interior, heavy drapes billowing in the wind from an open window. A man enters, unaware that he is being watched by someone lurking in the shadows. Suddenly a shot; and the man, recognizable as a doctor, slumps over the table and collapses—in much the same dramatic way as in a gangster film like Scarface set in its violent age, where in the opening scene a man is killed by Tony Camonte (Paul Muni) as he sweeps out his restaurant after a party. The image of leading actor and his traditional genres are written into the first of Muni's bio-pics as a symptom for audience orientation well before he makes his entrance in the film. The bio-pic thus represents a threefold compromise formulation: in terms of generic codes, it reworks and rewrites mostly from the studio's other cycles; as a strategic response to censorship, it exchanges rural violence for gangster violence; in absorbing the "authorial" ambitions of particular studio pedantical, it stabilizes its internal organization. Although a limited and perhaps special case, the bio-pic suggests that the call for censorship was answered not so much by internalization and self-censorship, but by a sort of visual displacement of exhibition values (realism
to authenticity; sex to European culture and sophistication; domestic social issues to world politics) and by transferring the image value of a star or director into other forms of intertextuality.

Bert Brecht and the Biopic

For quite a different view of the ideological discourse of the biopic one could turn to Bertolt Brecht:

William Dieterle with his filmed biographies of Zola, Pasteur, Shaw, Doblin has inaugurated a gallery of great bourgeois figures. [Ita . . . ] extraordinary characters allow the actors (Muni and Robinson) the depiction of personalities, which constitute a considerable advance. [Briefly] the representation of ordinary people as personalities seems impossible to realize within the Hollywood cinema; even Dieterle's interesting experiments in this area encountered resistance. The element of conflict in these bourgeois biographies derives from the opposition between the hero and dominant opinion, which is to say the opinion of those who dominate. The type is that of Ibsen's Enemy of the People. Bourgeois society is already eating the increase of productivity forces as if it was a cancer. . . . Zola, lamped a bourgeois, turns against the bourgeoisie in order to address mankind. Pasteur is shown as the Gallon of medicine; he too risks being put in prison . . . . An example of the difficulties that Dieterle encountered: the студiо wants to do a biopic of the life of Mike, Curie because of the scene of the scene where the Curie, who conducted their experiments in great poverty, refuse to sell their radicals patents to industry. In order that the world at a whole may benefit from them, these scientists later, each creating a lot of money, the studio is still not satisfied until it is divulged that it is precisely this scene that spoils it all: the Curie's refusal of a million dollars is altogether too unnatural; it ruins the credibility of the entire film. 21

Brecht isolates two symptomatic elements: in the biopic the central conflict has to do with a division within ideology itself, produced by the rapid increase of productive forces under capitalism which bourgeois society, particularly in its judicial, medical and scientific discourses is no longer able to control.

Secondly, he highlights the tension inherent in a story that dramatizes contradictions while at the same time confusing and resolving them within the terms of ideological and motivational versimilitude. In Brecht's view, "personality" functions as the discourse that unifies an ideologically coherent narrative around a coherent motivational core (the concept of psychological credibility), but he overlooks that the cinema can impose coherence by personality, because the star image is a mode of address, a way of inscribing a unified audience in a text which deals with potentially divergent subject-positions. Yet Brecht's first point may nonetheless help to understand a film like Louis Pasteur as part of a discourse in which the industry talks about itself as if it were talking about society.

What is the function of narrative in a Hollywood studio film? At Warner, as indeed at other studios, the importance of the story for producer or director lay in the personnel and organizational assets which could be accumulated around it; this was its technical and financial aspect. A certain type of story was allowed a certain budget, which in turn determined the importance of the production and the status of the director. In terms of the industrial mode of production generally, however, the script had to be able to articulate the narrative in such a way as to fit into the already established division of labor and the separation of functions, from casting and work schedules to art design, music scoring and editing. The priority at Warners was the organization of production time, with managers charged to ensure full utilization of production facilities. According to Dieterle, for instance, Zanuck was the type of producer who, even without a story, could produce a script, and Curie was the kind of director who, even without a script, could shoot the predictable number of scenes per day.

Under Zanuck we sometimes had to start a picture with only ten pages of script. A film should have a unified all-over conception. If I don't know the ending how can I motivate the beginning? That does not mean: Where does it start? Oh, the fight we had sometimes, . . . It was the system. We had to shoot 4-5 of script a day and those poor fellows, the writers had to produce so many pages a day from 9.5 whether they had an idea or not. They had to deliver or lose their job. If a director wasn't fast enough, or gave them too much trouble, they replaced him, usually with Mike [Currie], Mike did everything. He could finish a picture at 11 and at
Ips start a new picture. He was extraordinarily talented. He did not always know what he was doing, but he had such an instinct for film, he could do it. I couldn't. If I didn't have my script, I was helpless. 22

The productive forces at Warners were clearly in conflict with bourgeois notions of the organic work, or what Dieterle calls "a unified all-over conception." The form of the product pre-existed its context, and a narrative style could develop which was based on divisibility: action-oriented and below-average shot length giving priority to editing rather than complex set-ups and allowing for the sort of textual "bricolage" necessitated by filming out of sequence or without a completed script. For Dieterle, to get an A-picture assignment meant therefore also that the script would determine the allocation of production facilities rather than the availability of facilities determining the script.

It is possible to see in The Story of Louis Pasteur and other bio-pics the textual traces of the conflicts between the divisions of the studio production system on the one side and the "unified all-over conception" on the other. There are generic traits typical of Dieterle's biopics which seem to reproduce within the fiction the difficulties of the fiction: the hero's struggle, for instance, to retain intact his or her virtue, invention, humanization ideal, against the social forces that attempt to appropriate it—a self-representation of the bourgeois artist, the man of genius, a figuration of Dieterle himself in his struggle with the studio system? Dieterle did rewrite his career in the light of his self-criticism with the success
of the bio-pic. This, however, would be to reduce the textual operation to an anecdotal function. Instead, what is important to retain is the emphasis in the films on the "unified conception" (biography: the meaning of a life becomes identical with, because rewritten as, the meaning of a work) and the emphasis on "personality" as that which transcends the contradictions which Brecht finds between the organization of the productive forces and their personalization or psychologizing in the fiction. Hollywood's mythology of the mogul, the tycoon, its legendary figures in and out of films, can be seen as the attempt to give human—if necessary, monotonous—shape to historical or economic forces. Blanke, for instance, saw the role of producer as someone who can "weird and overt the loose smile" which is to say revere the divisibility of the production process and give the product an appearance of unity for consumption. It is in this context that one can understand Brecht's other point: the ten- dency of the central character in the bio-pic to address himself no longer to his own class but to humanity at large.

One of the main contradictions of the bio-pics as ideological self-representations of American capitalist society in general (or the studio system in particular) is that the subjects whose biography the films narrate are "idealists," which is to say, the very nature of their mission implies work either to isolate (church, political in exile) or under conditions of atonal production (inventors, doctors, scientists) rather than as parts of a corporate hierarchized enterprise such as the studio system. By contrast, the economic discourses of earlier Warner cycles (gangster film or the Depression musical) register in a more overtly meta- phoric fashion the material shift in American industry and the film industry from entrepreneurial to corporate capitalism.

"Spontaneous Crowds"

The bio-pics represent a more indirect encoding of this process. The "sheer force of personality" creates a unified mode of address capable of articulating but also reconciling the ideological divisions within the bourgeoisie itself in Brecht's terms. However, instead of being merely worked over by the narrative, in the manner of myths ("the imaginary evolution of real contradictions"), the cinema displaces ideological incompleteness into spectacle and the show, capitalizing on the unifying and settling force of the "investing" performance: the star image mediates between society and the script as much by the imaginary coherence of its stabilizes as by any formal narrative homology.

Dietz's bio-pics reconcile the private with the public by engineering situations that allow the hero to present himself, with an impassioned speech or plea to a court jury (Emla Zola), to a crowd of his followers (Jawes) or to journalists, all of them different instances of intra-diegetic audiences which function as delegate of us, the spectators. By electrifying an audience or by addressing a sceptical and hostile gathering, the hero bypasses the "system" and at least temporarily suspends the validity of the institutions and their discourses. It might be worth investigating to what extent this is a significant feature of the cinema before the Thirties in general. With the coming of sound, a new dimension of public life is opened up to cinematic representation. The courtroom, the election platform, the marketplace or even a cattle auction can come to stand for the democratic process itself. The disagreements which Brecht had with Fritz Lang over the function of spontaneous crowds and the hostages in Hangmen Also Die! (1943—Brecht wanted to call it "The People") are an instructive example of an ideological conflict over different versions of popular democracy.24

Dietz's films appear to typify a system of address instilled by the cinema's changing role as a forum of public debate within the context of fulfilling a specific ideological task: making good Hollywood's claim to speak with a voice representing the whole nation thanks to its ability to create an imaginary consensual audience. In particular, the desire to represent in the bio-pic an individual who is both within and outside given ideological discourses, who belongs to his age and in some sense transcends it, affects the process of elucidation itself. The Cahiers du cinema article on Young Mr. Lincoln has located this effect as unique to the representations of Lincoln as founder of the nation. But Dietz's biographies, notably Jawes (in which the hero carries a portrait of Lincoln permanently in his luggage), show some of the same strategies. In The Story of Louis Pasteur, for instance, the primary opposition—the individual
against society—is first recast in terms of a limited or local conflict (scientific interests against the vested interests of the medical profession). Closure and resolution, however, are achieved by a kind of mix-
er-enzyme of different social fields (the sphere of the family, the medical profession, the government and international relations) which are layered concentrically and resolved consecutively.

Within the family, narrative closure is assured by the formation of a couple. Pasteur's daughter marries the former assistant of Dr. Charbonnet, enemy of Pasteur in the French bureaucracy. However, the resolution is only apparent because the child born from this union has to be delivered by a doctor who does not believe in Pasteur's theories about the causes of childhood fever and is only persuaded to observe the new hygiene rules on condition that Pasteur recants publicly. The conflict with the medical profession thus takes on the form of a wager: Pasteur's biological survival (family offspring) is played off against the survival of scientific truth.

As it turns out, too, is a pseudo-dilemma: it merely provides the motivation for the domestic reversal in the closing scene. Pasteur's devoted wife and the frail and discouraged scientist to attend a public lecture disproving his findings—in actual fact a ruse to make him accept the honor of membership into the Académie Française. The narrative resolution is thus guaranteed by acceding him with the medical profession; he is accepted into the ranks of the institution which had done everything to block his work. This would seem to undo and take back Pasteur's opposition, obscuring the original issue: pure science vs. vested interests. It is then-
four telling that Brecht should refer to Pautre as “the Galileo of Medicine”: his own bio-pic for the stage, _The Life of Galileo_ can be seen as a kind of dialogue with Brecht’s bio-pic, which it both imitates and subjects to a materialist critique. In its dialectical structure, Brecht’s plays juxtapose rather than metaphorically doubles private life and work, and opposes to the “idealist” transcendence of the conflict between pure science and the uses that society makes of its discoveries a radical non-equiva-

ence. Self-containment, “truth,” political means and commerce are in Brecht totally antagonistic fields allowing for neither narrative closure nor unified spectator-position.

In Diterle, the specifically filmic semes of the narrative resolution are those of a public spectacle in front of a diegetic audience which includes the members of Pasteur’s own family. While in the narrative, the divergent discourse of personal self-esteem and public acknowledgment, scientific truth and social medicine resolve themselves by being placed eadghy (science inside itself in the family via son-in-law and grandson), specular coherence is only possible in the terms of another discourse altogether: that of the enactment of a performance and a public ritual, whose function, however, it is to assure the double insinuation of the spectator. Pasteur, the audience’s main figure of identification, is both protagonist and spectator of his own public recognition. The spectator identifies simultaneously with two subject positions: that of the surprised Pasteur and that of the diegetic audience in the fiction, metonymically represented by Pasteur’s wife.

**A Personal Style or a Historical Subject Position?**

No doubt, this analysis would have to be taken further to provide a secure base for a general model. But even on a single viewing, the mise-en-scene of a bio-pic like _The Story of Louis Pasteur_ or _Auer_ could probably be distinguished from other contemporary or earlier Wanner genres by different kinds of spatial construction and a different sense of continuity. For example, scenes are very often staged frontally, which reduces the illusion of spatial depth; secondly, spatial use is made of the principle of view structure, and thus the nutured process does not always place the spectator on the side of the chief protagonist (reserving this for a dramatic climax, as in _Louis Pasteur_). Instead, lives appear as if already set in the picture frame of history.

These effects have earned Diterle a reputation for slow and ponderous direction, lacking the elegance and drive of classical continuity editing. Whatever the criteria may be for calling Diterle’s style “elephantinely ponderous,” “Indean,” “clumsy,” they have no room for the possibility that this mise-

en-scene is itself historically and ideologically deter-

mined. By attributing it to Diterle as a personal style (or lack of it), one conveniently overlooks that in other films he was as versatile as any other Wanner contract director. _Jewel Robbery_ (1932), _Lawyer Man_ (1932), _Mog-Over Prince_ (1934) show him_ public as visual elegance, of fast-paced direction in the Wanner manner, for what these epitomes are worth. The differences between _Lawyer Man_ (a picture where the legal setting is only interesting for an optical analysis of the narrative, not for its civic connotations) and _Auer_ (an A picture with political references about American Islamism and the Spanish Civil War) point not only to a shift in paradigm or genre, or a different target audience, but also, within the social field that the studio occupied from around 1938, to Hollywood consciously creating an image of public and ideological responsi-

bility this time less in order to ward off textual interference like censorship, but to ward off economic interference (the anti-trust suit) displacing itself to a world-political or historical canvas in the narratives and to a self-consciously civic mode of address.

The style of the bio-pics, therefore, may have corres-

ponded to what one might call a particular social imaginary: that of synthesizing different spectators by redefining the space which the cinema as an institution occupies in public life and consciousness—part of the industry’s way of talking to the Justice Department by endorsing the Administration’s foreign policy and addressing the box office as civic subjects. Diterle’s mise-en-scene could be seen as a mode of cinematic address which has itself a sanitizing function. The spectator identifi-

ing not only with the main character (humanizing genius) but with the audience that the hero is addres-
James (1939); conflict arises in the opposition of hero and dominant opinion.
The confrontation between Hollywood and civic bodies in the early Thirties and the Academy in the late Thirties outlined the historical moment where Hollywood itself reconceived itself as an universalizing, representative discourse by the very economic power represented by the film industry. In this sense the discourse of the big picture is only the form of dramatizing this process of the cinema competing as a mode of civic "direct address" before it is seized in the universality of its audiences. The films of Capra from the same period, for instance, could provide an instructive parallel. This oblique inscription of the community as audience becomes obsolete twoways to the degree that Hollywood’s own status as dominant discourse becomes contested.

In other genres, the dominant economic position of the film industry in relation to other and earlier mass forms of entertainment expressed itself by their appearance in the films, like prisoners triumphantly put on show by a conquering army. The dialectic of neutralizing interference by internal self-regulation meant that the competing media and the institutions with which the cinema might enter into conflict (state and federal agencies, the legal system, different lobbies) were often taken into the narrative either as symbolic figures (metaphoric presence) or appeared as cultural values which the cinema could appropriate for itself (narrative presence) - the adaptation of famous plays or classics of literature, best-sellers and Broadway hits.

Genre, authorship, star- enhancing and studio style these are traditionally areas of investigation whose relation to each other is not only homological nor, strictly speaking, oppositional. They articulate themselves in a way like the O’strada/Warner Brothers big picture at different levels, as a collage of motives, or fortuitous coincidence, as heterogeneity. But does this mean that they have no social meanings and can only be discussed as separate fields of inquiry? To analyze them as if they were would be to submit to a non-discretized empiricism, treating the phenomena at the level of their own self-fashion, the imaginary unity which the various processes of self-representation of the institution cinema strive to achieve.
NOTE


Ibid.

Wuthnow, p. 130.


7Benjamin, p. 99.


9But see the work by Robert C. Allen and Douglas Greven on the Film History: Theory and Practice (New York: Knopf, 1983).


14Ibid., especially Part Five, "The Hollywood Mode of Production, 1929-40."


17Ibid.

18This information I owe to Paul Rosen.

19Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, p. 236.

20Vorderer’s first filmography was *Ludwig Den Zwanzig* (1930) in which he also played the lead.


22Foner, 16.


26See Nick Brown’s reading of Meet John Doe.

Thomas Keneally's marriage with film and compare litigation at the University of East Anglia.