

# The Projector: A Journal on Film, Media and Culture Fall 2012

## Analyzing Cautionary and Edifying Tales: Research at the Intersection of Film, Media, and Culture Studies



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**Analyzing Cautionary and Edifying Tales:  
Research at the Intersection of Film, Media, and Culture Studies**



**Cynthia Baron**

I would like to begin by thanking editorial board member Heidi Kenaga for serving as the guest editor of this issue of *The Projector*. Her inspired proposal to call for research papers on B pictures, industrial films, marketing strategies, audience reception, and non-theatrical exhibition, and her judicious approach to editorial work, led to a collection of peer-reviewed articles that advance scholarship by exploring productions and practices that have been largely overlooked.

Amanda McQueen's essay, "Selling Bonita: The Early Career of Bonita Granville (1936-1939) and the Marketing of B Stars," not only reminds us that "B films made up the bulk of the film industry's product" in the late 1930s; its analysis, which "reveals the importance of B stars for selling films," details how studios would use a performer "as a commodity," even in cases of "limited to short-term exploitation." Derek Long's essay, "The Highway Shock Film: History, Phenomenology, Ideology," examines the historical and industrial context for mid-century highway safety films that existed at the intersection of the "documentary, the exploitation film, the educational safety film, and the high school filmstrip." Discussing films with sensational titles like *Signal 30* (1959) – the Highway Patrol code for a fatal accident – *Mechanized Death* (1961), *Wheels of Tragedy* (1963), and *Highways of Agony* (1969), Long examines the

implications of the films' consistent message that "safety on the road was purely a matter of individual responsibility, and accidents, injury, or death could only be the result of a childish mentality on the part of the driver." In the third essay, "Lost in Santa Barbara: *An American Family* and the Birth of Reality TV," Cynthia Felando analyzes the production and reception context of the twelve-part 1973 PBS documentary that captured the era's "culture wars" between the East and West Coasts," and established the model for contemporary reality TV shows that use "familiar locations" to signal "cultural and social difference."

The three essays effectively contextualize their respective case studies by drawing on surrounding documents that shed light on the horizon of expectations that shaped marketing strategies and the responses of contemporary audiences. The essays also examine filmic, industrial, and critical practices in ways that illuminate fascinating but troubling patterns in American culture. While each essay provides distinct insights into industrial practices and questions of reception, when considered together, the articles illustrate subtle and explicit ways that media products and the discourses that surround them have functioned as instructional tools designed to instill and police proper behavior in the American populace.

For example, a teenage girl in the 1930s should be like Nancy Drew, "average in her school work, pretty in a youthful way and no better and no worse in her average behavior than any other girl her age" (McQueen). Teenage boys in the 1960s and 1970s should not drink, speed, or ignore traffic signs, because "young and reckless drivers" are destined to die in gruesome car accidents, which are then photographed and put on display "for the world to see" (Long). Husbands and wives in pursuit of the American Dream in the 1970s should be wary of the West Coast's shallow, morally degenerate affluent suburbs, because embrace of that lifestyle causes families to crack "like shattering glass" (Felando).

Writing about various highway safety films produced from the late 1950s to the early 1980s, Derek Long points out that the films were informed and accompanied by a “moralizing and fetishistic” discourse. As he explains, the creation and circulation of the highway safety films rested on the notion that it was not only possible, but also legitimate to “shock” juveniles “into better behavior through lurid realism.” Interestingly, a “moralizing yet fetishistic tone” (Long) prevails in the productions and surrounding materials discussed in the other two essays. Amanda McQueen’s analysis of studio publicity for Bonita Granville, best known for starring in four Nancy Drew films released in 1938 and 1939, shows that Warner Bros. promoted “Granville as a role model for teenage girls,” but did so in a way that emphasized “the fashion trends and beauty tips that were increasingly seen as vital to a young girl’s popularity with her peers.” McQueen identifies a range of authorities that sought to control the discourse surrounding a B picture star. The studios aimed to control exhibitors’ marketing techniques through press books that supplied the proper narrative. For the Nancy Drew films, the Stratemeyer Syndicate, which held the rights to the books, required the films to avoid anything that might be “inimical to the morals and welfare” of juveniles (McQueen). Some “600 sociologists, educators and miscellaneous pundits” gave their expert opinions about “the ‘ideal adolescent’ on which to base the character of Nancy Drew” (McQueen). A “moralizing yet fetishistic tone” (Long) carries all the way through, as exhibitors were instructed to “Conduct a search for town’s typical American girl, using Bonita Granville as the standard,” while press books pushed the idea that Granville was “the perfect fashion model for sweet sixteeners” (McQueen).

Cynthia Felando’s analysis of *An American Family* and its production/reception context identifies patterns that confirm Derek Long’s observation that “the warning gaze” of highway safety films contributed to their “moralizing yet fetishistic tone.” For example, Felando explains

that while the PBS series made the Loud family members erstwhile celebrities, “their decision to invite cameras into their private lives” essentially made them objects of director Craig Gilbert’s “warning gaze.” As with the mangled bodies featured in highway safety films or even the B picture stars whose images were controlled by studio executives, because of their visibility, Bill Loud, his wife Pat, and their five children became little more than figures in a narrative designed by Craig Gilbert. He had selected the Louds as his subjects because he imagined that their picture-perfect surface masked “tortured relationships”; he then organized the hundreds of hours of footage so that “the series presents the Loud family as a failed one” (Felando). As McQueen, Long, and Felando demonstrate, whereas the Nancy Drew films and their surrounding publicity provided edifying tales for teenage girls in the 1930s, Gilbert’s PBS documentary series followed the pattern established by the highway safety films, for the series offered a cautionary tale that substituted an emotional train wreck for the sensational car accidents featured in highway shock films. By identifying the cultural implications of the media productions and practices, the three authors enrich our understanding. Their thoughtful analyses also reach far beyond the points of contact outlined here.

This issue of *The Projector* concludes with reviews of two books that examine some of the subjects explored by the articles. Lisa Woronzoff’s review of *American Independent Cinema: An Introduction* (2006) by Yannis Tzioumakis points out that the text includes Poverty Row, B pictures, and exploitation films in its expansive and innovative account of independent cinema. Frank P. Tomasulo’s review of *The Emancipated Spectator* by Jacques Rancière (2009) contextualizes Rancière’s reflections on “the text-spectator question” (Tomasulo), which perhaps complement Long’s discussion of embodied spectatorship as characterized by Vivian Sobchack,

who sees “the film viewer’s lived body [as] ‘a carnal “third term” that grounds and mediates experience and language, subjective vision and objective image’” (Long).

## **The Highway Shock Film: History, Phenomenology, Ideology**

**Derek Long**

This is not a Hollywood production as can readily be seen. The quality is below their standards. However, most of these scenes were taken under adverse conditions, nothing has been staged. These are actual scenes taken immediately after the accidents occurred. Also unlike Hollywood our actors are paid nothing. Most of the actors in these movies are bad actors and received top billing only on a tombstone. They paid a terrific price to be in these movies, they paid with their lives.

--Opening title crawl for *Signal 30* (Highway Safety Foundation, 1959)

In 1954, Richard Wayman, a businessman and amateur photographer, encountered a fatal accident involving a motorcyclist and a train while traveling through Mansfield, Ohio. He snapped a few color photos of the scene for the local police department, and over the next five years photographed numerous highway accident sites for a traveling slide show to be presented at schools and county fairs. In 1959, Wayman and his associates, now organized into a venture known as the Highway Safety Foundation (HSF), began shooting 16mm color film of the accidents. The result was *Signal 30* (1959) – the first of a twenty-year cycle of educational films released by the Highway Safety Foundation and other companies that foregrounded, in graphic detail, the mangled, bloodied, twisted, and charred bodies of traffic accident victims. The films, intended for distribution to schools and police departments for driver training and instruction, were all accompanied, either implicitly or explicitly, by a common discourse, both moralizing and fetishistic in tone. This discourse stressed a certain need for the vision of bodies – specifically, the dead, dying, and always horrifically injured bodies that populated the films. A simple viewing of the literally embodied aftermath of traffic accidents, the logic went, could “shock” the viewer into adopting safer and more responsible driving practices.

The discourse that lay at the core of these films' mode of presentation rested on a vague theory of spectatorship: if viewers were to see a particular stimulus – in this case the gruesome aftermath of traffic accidents – certain desired responses would be elicited in them. Most importantly, these responses included increased consciousness of driving safety and strict obedience of traffic laws. The specific manifestation of these responses, a “shock,” was thought to be the only way to impress these films' spectators, most of whom were likely to be either teenagers or DUI offenders, with the requisite message. The ubiquity of these films in driver education courses and DUI programs across the nation, a trend that continued at least into the late 1970s, suggests a widespread acceptance of this discourse during the period when these films were being produced. Furthermore, as the quote above explicitly states, highway shock films tended to be produced outside of Hollywood's industrial mode of production. The shock films of the 1960s were composed primarily of compilations of accident and other documentary footage, and if any staged footage was used, it featured nonprofessional actors (usually actual police officers, ambulance drivers, or schoolchildren). Later shock films like *The Last Prom* (Gene McPherson Productions, 1980), despite their more narratively integrated approach to the presentation of accidents and their aftermaths, also featured lay actors and barebones production values. Given the explicit nature of their common rhetoric and their location on the margins of film discourse, these films call for analysis through a variety of critical frameworks.

In this essay, I seek to answer three primary questions: First, what historical and industrial contexts frame the production of highway shock films from the late 1950s to the early 1980s? To answer this question, I offer an historical account of the cycle and its roots in public discourses surrounding automotive safety. Second, what are the theoretical foundations of this “shock” discourse, and how can we use these foundations to understand the phenomenon of the

highway shock film, both as an historical object and as a lasting cultural text? Here, Vivian Sobchack's work in existential phenomenology and her notion of the film text as "viewing subject" help us to define the phenomenological underpinnings of the shock discourse of these films. Third, what are the ideological goals of this discourse, and how did they work to justify the continued production and distribution of the highway shock cycle during this period? I argue that Michel Foucault's theories on power and discourse, particularly as manifested in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), help to explain the role of the highway shock film as a manifestation of state power.

While each of these questions calls for a different historical or theoretical approach, they are prompted by a common set of themes and observations, all of which make the highway shock cycle a fascinating object of inquiry. These include the films' obsession with bodies (and their analogues), the role of the police and the auto industry as regulators of vision, the troubled ethical position of the highway shock cycle, and our ambivalent spectatorial relationship with the films the cycle encompasses. Ultimately, my approach is simultaneously historical and theoretical. I offer a phenomenological theoretical framework as an explanation for the spectator-scale workings of these films, and approach broader questions of discourse and ideology historically.

### **Contextualizing Shock: A Brief History**

Little scholarship has been written on the highway shock film – a surprising fact given the wide awareness and cultural capital of the phenomenon. This dearth of scholarship may be partially explained by the unique exhibition circumstances of these films, as they were rarely, if ever, screened in any kind of dedicated theatrical space. The highway shock film was located at

an interstitial generic location between documentary, the exploitation film, the educational safety film, and the high school filmstrip; ultimately, these films comprise a nontheatrical cycle that evades easy categorization. Eric Schaefer, in his work on exploitation cinema, has dated the end of the “classical” exploitation film to 1959, the same year as the release of *Signal 30*. Nevertheless, many of the issues he discusses with relation to the classical exploitation film also apply to the highway shock cycle. The “educational” discourse of sex hygiene films, the moralizing yet fetishistic tone of drug panic films, and the bloody spectacle of the atrocity film can all be seen to some extent in *Signal 30* or *Highways of Agony* (HSF, 1969) (Schaefer). The crucial difference, however, is that such discourses are explicitly foregrounded in the highway safety film not as ends in and of themselves, but as means to an end. Unlike most exploitation films, highway shock films never sought theatrical success or wide distribution through their excesses. Their rhetorical goal, at least on the surface, was to reduce traffic fatalities by means of the cold, hard discourse of shock.

In her book *Crash: Cinema and the Politics of Speed and Stasis*, Karen Beckman very briefly discusses the highway shock cycle as a kind of gory aesthetic outlier from more mainstream highway safety films produced during the period (113). However, she also illuminates a useful historical starting point for automotive shock discourse, J.C. Furnas’ 1935 *Reader’s Digest* article, “And Sudden Death.” The article, which would go on to become the most reprinted piece in the magazine’s history, explicitly attempted to evoke a physical sickening of its readers through luridly detailed descriptions of the injuries of car crash victims. The magazine even printed an editorial statement before the article’s main text:

Like the gruesome spectacle of a bad automobile accident itself, the realistic details of this article will nauseate some readers. Those who find themselves thus affected

at the outset are cautioned against reading the article in its entirety, since there is no letdown in the author's outspoken treatment of sickening facts. (Furnas 21)

This statement indexes the text to follow as something truly horrific and shocking, and such a rhetorical frame would accompany many a screening of a highway shock film. More importantly, however, Furnas' article initiates and exemplifies the strategy used by the later highway shock films to justify their own depictions of automotive horror. First, shock discourse justifies the gruesomeness of its representation through an appeal to a kind of documentary realism; Beckman points to historian William Stott's placement of Furnas' essay squarely within the Depression-era documentary tradition of the 1930s (113). Second, Furnas argues in his article that such representations of accident aftermaths are the only effective way to convince readers to change their driving behavior: "I can't help it if the facts are revolting. If you have the nerve to drive fast and take chances, you ought to have the nerve to take the appropriate cure" (22). These two rhetorical approaches – the appeal to realism and the framing of automotive injury as a pure result of personal irresponsibility – would characterize automotive shock discourse as a whole when the Highway Safety Foundation began making films some twenty years later.

*Hell's Highway: The True Story of Highway Safety Films*, a 2002 documentary by Atlanta-based filmmaker Bret Wood, has served as a valuable secondary resource in constructing a historical context – however preliminary – of the highway shock film. Wood's film argues that as a film practice and mode of spectatorship, the highway shock film did not arise in a vacuum, but rather instantiated a longstanding tradition of safety-themed educational films stretching back to the 1920s. The film archivist Rick Prelinger, who is widely quoted in Wood's documentary, traces the origins of this tradition to that decade and industrial safety films produced by

insurance companies. These films, which often depicted workers handling equipment improperly, failing to wear safety gear, or practicing general recklessness, ostensibly aimed to reduce workplace accidents. However, as Prelinger points out, the films served another purpose: to shift responsibility for accidents away from unsafe working conditions, long hours, and the general purview of management, and toward the actions of individual workers. Workplace accidents in these films are solely the result of worker incompetence or recklessness, and the filmic manifestations of these accidents are quite literally embodied. *The Joker* (Mode-Art Pictures, 1960), a later industrial safety film produced for U.S. Steel, features various workers being crushed by improperly balanced plates and I-beams, complete with lifeless arms and feet protruding from underneath tons of steel. While their images were nowhere near as graphic or lurid as those of the highway shock cycle, industrial safety films offered a rhetorical template for the productions of the Highway Safety Foundation.

By the 1950s, driver safety had become a more visibly important issue for many Americans, and the safety film expanded from the sphere of industrial production to encompass everyday life. The postwar industrial boom that spanned most of that decade resulted in a new phenomenon: for the first time in American history, a substantial proportion of the population handled complicated, industrially-manufactured machines – automobiles – on an everyday basis, and at speeds that could kill in an instant. The construction of the Eisenhower interstate highway system (which began in 1956), postwar suburbanization, the decline of public transportation, and an explosion in the number of privately-owned automobiles and the number of miles driven daily all contributed to an inevitable rise in the number and frequency of traffic fatalities. While automobile death rates had been extraordinarily high in the 1920s and 1930s (a fact that should be noted as context for Furnas' article), mass ownership of automobiles was largely a postwar

phenomenon. Public consciousness of the everyday dangers of getting behind the wheel expanded during the 1950s and 1960s, when the previous long-term trend of high but constantly reducing traffic death rates year after year began to flatten out (National Safety Council). As a result, corporations, government entities, and independent production companies began producing and sponsoring automotive safety films, and the issue of deflecting accident responsibility onto individuals, both in a moral and a legal sense, was once again a central one.

The safety films of this period, which were typically funded by auto industry giants like Ford or General Motors and produced by independent companies (most notably the Jam Handy Organization), rarely showed the explicit, embodied results of traffic accidents. Rather, bodily injury was usually deflected through implication and analogy. Typical of these films is the James Stewart-narrated *Tomorrow's Drivers* (Jam Handy for General Motors, 1954), in which children driving miniature cars stand in for reckless adults in their failure to obey the rules of the road, resulting in rather mild accidents.



*Tomorrow's Drivers* exemplifies the auto industry's wider rhetorical stance regarding driving safety during a period in which it went largely unregulated: safety on the road was purely

a matter of individual responsibility, and accidents, injury, or death could only be the result of a childish mentality on the part of the driver. One 1960 GM ad, printed in several popular youth magazines and aimed at graduating high school seniors, read: “The cars are *safer* . . . the roads are *safer* . . . the rest is up to *you!*” (Reprinted in Tenney 160, emphasis in original). The safety features touted by the ad include “a clear view of the road,” “better braking,” and “easier steering”; it does not mention seat belts, which were still considered optional equipment at the time. Henry Ford II, testifying before the Senate Commerce Committee in 1966, stated, “the driver is the most important factor [in safety] because if you drive safely, accidents won’t happen” (Moynihan 10). So widespread was this rhetoric that it served as a point of departure for industry critics and consumer advocates. Ralph Nader, in a discussion of the safety hazards of the Chevrolet Corvair in his landmark book *Unsafe At Any Speed* (1965), wrote

What would legislators think – men long nourished on the diet that “it’s all because of the nut behind the wheel” – when court-sanctioned investigations of evidence brought out into the open the facts about an American car that abruptly decides to do the driving *for* the driver in a wholly untoward manner? (Nader 9)

For the most part, the highway shock film aligned with this discourse attributing accidents to “the nut behind the wheel,” and not without reason; driver error remains the leading cause of auto fatalities. However, as a result, the shock films often framed the accidents they depicted as the result of a single, easily-understood factor – typically alcohol, excessive speed, or ignoring traffic signs – at the expense of extenuating circumstances such as seat belt availability, inclement road conditions, or driver age. In 1969’s *Highways of Agony*, for example, the film’s narrator emphasizes that a particular drunk driving crash would have been survivable had the driver been wearing a seat belt, before offhandedly adding that none had been installed in the car.

In 1966, Congress passed the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act, which initiated more substantial regulation of the auto industry, imposing uniform standards on the design and construction of automobiles and mandating the installation of seat belts in cars beginning in 1968. The Act's passage was a result not only of Nader's activism, but also of new "scientific" approaches to automotive safety testing which systematically revealed the physical effects of car collisions. *Safety-Belt for Susie* (Charles Cahill & Associates, 1962) exemplified this new approach. The film occupies a surreal rhetorical middle ground between the lighthearted strategy of *Tomorrow's Drivers* and the grim, sadistic approach of the highway shock film. As in *Tomorrow's Drivers*, *Safety-Belt for Susie* eschews the depiction of actual bodily injury or death; however, the film does depict the effects of automobile accidents in explicit and physically naturalistic detail. The film's surreal, uncanny character derives from the specific embodiment of this detail in physical simulacra for actual human bodies. Produced "with the cooperation and assistance of the U.S. Public Health Service," *Safety-Belt for Susie* opens innocuously enough in an amusement park, complete with a camera ride on a roller coaster. We are introduced to a white, middle-class American family, consisting of one Mr. Norwood, his wife Alice, their daughter Nancy, and her beloved life-size doll: the titular Susie. The film quickly and none too implicitly establishes Susie as a kind of simulacrum for Nancy; the child and her doll wear the same clothes (on Nancy's insistence) and ride in the same car on the roller coaster, and Nancy's father even buys them both their own ice cream cones. When Norwood and his wife become involved in a car accident on the way to pick up Nancy from her grandmother's house, they are spared serious injury by their seat belts. Susie, however, who has been riding unrestrained in the back seat, does not. Norwood makes explicit the rhetorical connection between Susie and Nancy in voiceover narration: "We discovered something that gave us both a genuine shock . . ." – the

doll, thrown forward by the collision, now lies grotesquely twisted and broken – “What if *this* had been Nancy?”

The “body trauma” suffered by Susie works as part of *Safety-Belt for Susie*’s rhetorical strategy in its displaced depiction of bodily injury and death, but the film goes even further in this regard. As Norwood and Alice recover from their injuries in the office of their family physician, Dr. McAllister, the doctor takes over the film’s voiceover narration from Norwood. Noticing Susie’s mangled body, Dr. McAllister reveals that he is a “medical consultant” for the Institute of Transportation and Traffic Engineering, an organization funded by the state of California and based at the University of California, Los Angeles, and that he has been involved with a scientific study of the effects of car crashes on crash-test dummies. The crash-test dummy was itself something of a curious new technological simulacrum in 1962; automotive testing through the 1950s had relied primarily on cadavers. The slow-motion crash test footage that fills the second half of *Safety-Belt for Susie*, taken at UCLA’s automotive testing facilities, differs from the film’s depiction of Susie’s injury in its fetishistic dissection of the mechanics of the car crash. Whereas Norwood and Alice’s accident is edited in a frenetic style similar to classical Hollywood’s typical depiction of car crashes, the crash test footage is presented in full slow-motion detail. This footage differs from the highway shock film’s lingering on dead and dying bodies only in its emphasis on the particular synchronic moment of disaster – the crash itself – rather than its aftermath. *Safety-Belt for Susie*’s use of crash-test dummies stands in for any depiction of injury to actual human beings, but in so doing the film relies on a particularly visceral sort of horror (possibly inherited from the earliest highway shock films) in order to carry out its rhetoric.



Indeed, that Wayman's HSF films centered around the depiction of *actual* accident victims, both dead and dying, made them unique in the years before other companies began to imitate them. The HSF was an independent producer and distributor, not technically affiliated with any corporate or government entity. However, the Foundation did work in close cooperation with the Ohio State Highway Patrol, which allowed them to film accident sites and police training sessions (the credits sequences of these films are devoted almost exclusively to Ohio state patrol officers and officials). From 1959 to 1971, the HSF produced 16mm educational safety films about a variety of subjects, including shoplifting, check forging, and child molestation, but most concerned driver instruction and brandished titles like *Mechanized Death* (1961), *Wheels of Tragedy* (1963), *Carrier or Killer* (1966), and *Highways of Agony*. Other independent producers copied the HSF model, resulting in films like *Death on the Highway* (1971), which infamously retouched accident still photos with a profusion of fake blood, as well as the more professionally-produced and narrative-driven *The Last Prom*.

The highway shock cycle thus emerged as the confluence of a number of discursive contexts. An emphasis on the personal responsibility of the driver, legitimized and institutionalized by industrially-funded education films, formed a key part of this discourse, and the notion of "shocking" consumers into better behavior through lurid realism – made popular by

Furnas' article in the 1930s – continued to hold sway into the 1960s, although not primarily in visual form. The visual analogue to Furnas' literary shock discourse did not come to fruition until the release of *Signal 30* in 1959; the industry-sponsored auto safety films of the 1930s-50s did not directly depict the violent aftermath of traffic accidents. The new brutality that characterized the highway shock film was at least partially a result of changing censorship standards in Hollywood. Although the Production Code was still in effect in 1959, it had weakened significantly since its heyday under Joseph Breen, and indirect representations of violent death had been an integral part of visual mass culture even during those stricter years. As David Cook has pointed out, the 1960s was a pivotal decade in the aestheticization of violence and death in visual media; it seems no coincidence that the Highway Safety Foundation produced the majority of its films during those years. Nevertheless, the sight of significant quantities of blood in visual media – not to mention actual mangled corpses – was uncommon in American film until the late 1960s, and this relative lack of explicit violence may have given the highway shock film a substantial amount of its “shock value.”

### **The Phenomenology of “Shock”**

Besides showing you the dead, we tried to shock you into being a better driver by showing you the dying. And we showed you the ones that didn't die, the lucky ones. This is what pain looks like. Remember, these are the *lucky* ones. We showed you pain. But we didn't think seeing was enough. So we let you hear the sound of pain. Seeing *and* hearing . . . that's believing. Do their screams impress you? Will they make you more alert in driving and more cautious?

These lines, spoken by the narrator of *Options to Live* (HSF, 1979), make explicit the phenomenological strategy of the highway shock film: an attempt, through visual and aural stimulus, to “shock” or “scare” young and reckless drivers into safer practices. While any survey of the reception of these films would be limited to anecdotal accounts (Wood relates several in his documentary), it is clear that the highway shock film has come to be associated with certain very visceral physical reactions. Popular narratives about these films often include stern warnings from teachers about their content or viewers fainting or vomiting, and the sheer, ostensibly stomach-churning horror of the films has become part of their mythology, regardless of our actual reactions to them. It is this visceral, embodied reaction that calls for a phenomenological reading of the highway shock film, and an application of Vivian Sobchack’s work on existential phenomenology and film seems appropriate in this context.

In *The Address of the Eye*, Sobchack argues for the notion of film as a “viewing subject – one that manifests a competence of perceptive and expressive performance *equivalent* in structure and function to that same competence performed by filmmaker and spectator” (Sobchack, *Address* 22, emphasis in original). When we view a film, we are not simply a subject (a spectator) viewing an object (the film) and making meaning out of it. Rather, we are embodied spectators perceiving an embodied perception of the world that also expresses it, allowing us to articulate both that world and the film-body’s perception of it through our own bodily sensations. The meaning articulated by this fluid perception/expression dynamic is, for Sobchack, inherently pre-conscious or pre-reflective; she is interested in our reactions as they are manifested before the intervention of process or analysis by our conscious minds.

How can Sobchack’s phenomenology help explain the visceral displeasure we experience when watching a highway shock film? The role of the body is certainly central to this question,

but in these films there are really three phenomenological “bodies” at play. The first is our own “lived body” as spectators, sitting in a classroom watching the film. The second is the “embodied eye” of the film, which Sobchack sees as the central mediator of film experience, the site of reversibility between perception and expression of both film and spectator (Sobchack, *Address* 10-11). Finally, there are the dead and dying bodies that the film’s embodied eye sees, and that we see as well – it is our reaction to *these* bodies that the highway shock film privileges. These bodies (both dead and dying) are clearly marked as “other,” but the otherness here is not linked to race, sex, class, or any other traditionally differentiating category. In the case of the injured and dying bodies, Sobchack has argued that injury and disease can also serve as categories in marking “otherness”:

we can add to the “female” body and the “colored” body further significant discriminations: the “diseased” body, the “impaired” body, the “fat” body, the “old” body, and even the “deprived” body. These are the lived-bodies significantly marked and “disfigured” in our current culture. The term *disfigured* here is not used poetically but literally . . . Although to re-mark a bodily aspect or quality is to take it as a figure, it is also to spoil, mar, harm the lived-body *as a whole*. Marked elements thus *de-face* the lived-body in a synecdoche that refuses the body-subject: its existence as intentional and its activity of becoming (Sobchack, *Address* 145, emphasis in original).

Sobchack suggests that the disfigured body calls attention to itself in its failure to be a whole lived body, thus refusing to be identified as a subject. In the highway shock film, the kind of distancing that Sobchack describes plays out to one extent or another whenever footage of dying or injured crash victims appears, and I would argue is largely dependent on sound. The

element that most clearly marks these bodies as *human* rather than *other* is screaming – in my own personal reaction to the films, the most horrifying moments involve not the silence of charred corpses or the subtle moaning of the nearly unconscious, but the screaming of fully conscious human beings who are aware (as am I) of their bodily injuries.

How, then, do we account for the depiction of *dead* bodies in these films? In one sense, we might treat the corpses in the highway shock film as the extreme but logical extension of Sobchack's notion of the disfigured body. As bodies that *once were* but now *are no longer*, their otherness is literally beyond human comprehension. Indeed, the "once-were-ness" of these bodies in many ways forms the source of "shock" discourse, if not in the sense of an extreme visceral reaction, then in a certain Freudian sense of the uncanny. For Sobchack, the film viewer's lived body is "a carnal 'third term' that grounds and mediates experience and language, subjective vision and objective image – both differentiating and unifying them in reversible (or chiasmatic) processes of perception and expression" (Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts* 60). If this is the case, then the highway shock film offers a subjective vision of an objective image that refuses experience, since we cannot "experience" death or the condition of being dead. We may be able to incarnate the experience of bystanders carrying or witnessing the dead, but never the dead themselves. The chiasma here between "these" live bodies (to use Sobchack's formulation) and "those" dead ones is not a stable one – we are forced back to the pole of our own bodies, which results in one of two reactions: ironic and reflective detachment or visceral sickening.



Of course, fundamental to our phenomenological response to these films is a certain notion of the real – as the opening crawl of *Signal 30* foregrounds, the accident footage taken for these films involved no staging, makeup, or special effects, and the grainy film stock, shaky camera work, and hard frontal lighting of the films attests to a kind of documentary-style realism. Indeed, the contemporaneous rise of cinema vérité (and its American counterpart in Direct Cinema), which introduced a new relationship between the motion picture camera and the “real world,” suggests the extent to which the highway shock film may have been perceived as a “cutting edge” form of educational filmmaking. However, we must be careful not to generalize about these films’ stylistic investment in “the real.” Although Mikita Brottman has described *Signal 30* as having a “cinema vérité camera style,” there is no evidence to suggest that either Wayman or his contemporaries ever saw the work of the style’s pioneers, such as Jean Rouch or Richard Leacock (238). Furthermore, such an estimation reduces the films to their crash aftermath sequences, ignoring their construction as a whole. Individual highway shock films work within a variety of documentary modes; while the visual style of the films’ shock sequences evoke what Bill Nichols has termed the observational documentary, their omniscient and often moralizing narration, along with their frequent police training sequences (included to secure the blessing and cooperation of the highway patrol) align them strongly with his expository category. Thus, these films are best described not as stylistically unified texts, but as pragmatic hodgepodes. They are organized primarily according to the overall goal of effective “shock” discourse, with an eye toward their continued production.

Along with these films’ complicated relationship to “realism” come certain ethical and moral concerns that are central to our phenomenological experience of them. In her essay “Inscribing Ethical Space: Ten Propositions on Death, Representation, and Documentary,”

Sobchack lays out “a semiotic phenomenology of death as it is represented and made significant for us through the medium and tropes of nonfictional documentary film” (Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts* 226). Although her concern in the essay is with the depiction of actual *moments* of death in film, many of Sobchack’s conclusions help to illuminate the role of the real in these films. With the coming of the 20th century, Sobchack argues, death ceased to be the object of eroticized fascination it had been during the Victorian era. Improvements in medicine, obstetrics, and general public health made death by “natural means” less common, and discouraged the public and private rituals that often accompanied death during the 19th century. As a result, the representation of “natural death” became something of a taboo, “leav[ing] only *accidental* and *violent* death in public sites and conversation” (emphasis in original). Sobchack quotes Geoffrey Gorer:

the diffusion of the automobile [in the 20th century], with its constant and unnoticed toll of fatal accidents, may well have been the most influential in bringing the possibility of violent death into the expectations of law-abiding people in time of peace. While natural death became more and more smothered in prudery, violent death has played an ever-growing part in the fantasies offered to mass audiences – detective stories, thrillers, Westerns, war stories, spy stories, science fiction, and eventually horror comics (Gorer, in Sobchack 230).

I would argue that these films’ depiction of not just violent but “real” death entails a kind of quantum leap of representation. As Sobchack puts it, “when death is represented as real, when its signs are structured and inflected so as to function indexically [rather than iconically or symbolically, as in fictive representations], a visual taboo has been violated, and the representation must find various ways to justify the violation” (Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts* 242).

Indeed, the educational discourse of the highway shock film served largely as yet another kind of justification, an argument for the necessary evil of its own representation.

### **The Warning Gaze: Foucault and the Ideology of Shock Discourse**

Our knowledge as spectators of the “real” nature of the dead and dying bodies we see in highway shock films is inherently extratextual. Sobchack, using the example of a rabbit killed in Jean Renoir’s *Rules of the Game* (1939), echoes this notion: “the textual moment of the rabbit’s death gains its particular force from an extracinematic and intertextual cultural knowledge that contextualizes and exceeds the representation’s sign-function in the narrative” (Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts* 246). In other words, we know that the rabbit in question was actually killed, largely because we also know that both rabbit-training and animatronics lie comfortably outside the cinematic paradigm of late 30s French poetic realism. In the case of the highway shock film, however, where we do not see the instant of death directly (with rare exceptions), our only intertextual recourse might be a Holocaust documentary or some other nonfiction account of mass trauma or death. Ultimately, the source of authenticity for both the trauma documentary and the highway shock film is some form of authoritative testimony – in this case, that of parents, driving instructors, and the Ohio State Highway Patrol. It is the presence of this authority that leads us to a broader level of inquiry: those discourses of power surrounding, encouraging, and justifying the highway shock film. In the eyes of their producers, these films are able to recuperate the moral and ethical capital that is lost in the breaking of the “taboo” which Sobchack associates with the depiction of actual death in film.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault traces the genealogy of the modern penal system and locates a distinct transformation in state and popular discourses of punishment that

took place between the 18th and 19th centuries. Foucault argues that the public and spectacular emphasis on the torture and execution of criminals that marked the early modern period was supplanted in the early 19th century with a rationalized notion of “rehabilitation” characterized by the disciplined structure of the penitentiary. During both periods, the prisoner’s body remained the primary incarnation of society’s disciplinary power, but the modern period is distinguished by its interest in punishing the “soul” through a technological regime of knowledge and power. Exemplified most famously by Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon, this regime seeks to instill discipline and obedience through an “unequal gaze.” Two notions that Foucault develops at length in *Discipline and Punish* – the body and panopticism – are especially applicable to my discussion of the highway shock film.

There are obvious affinities between Foucault’s account of the early modern discourse of punishment and the highway shock film’s interest in mangled, bloodied, and otherwise disfigured corpses. Compare this 18th century account of the execution of the attempted regicide Robert-François Damiens, related by Foucault:

The four limbs [of Damiens] were untied from the ropes and thrown on the stake set up in the enclosure in line with the scaffold [...] the whole thing was reduced to ashes. The last piece to be found in the embers was still burning at half-past ten in the evening. The pieces of flesh and the trunk had taken about four hours to burn. (Foucault 5)

to this narration from *Signal 30*, matched with images of the aftermath of a fiery crash between two trucks:

While one of the drivers burned to death in his cab, the other was blown through the floor of the cab of his truck by the force of the explosion that followed the

initial impact. His body could not be removed until the fires had been extinguished and the wrecked trucks separated. You've seen the blackened body of a dead man in a horrible death, far from family and friends and even farther beyond help. And you see the beginning of a final ride as one of the drivers is carried away, a mass of charred flesh.

Both of these discourses display a certain fetishism for the human body and for its othering, its transformation from a living subject into abject elements: "pieces," "ashes," or a "mass." Both are obsessed with the destructive power of fire, and both display a form of awestruck horror at the notion of human beings being consumed and destroyed by burning. However, Foucault would likely argue that the body serves a similar but not identical function in these two accounts. In the former, the tortured and burned body of a criminal serves as a direct signifier of the power of the state – it is a public execution, "its ruthlessness, its spectacle, its physical violence . . . inscribed in the political functioning of the penal system" (Foucault 49). The latter, on the other hand, is not a staged public event; it is an accident, caught on film for semi-public presentation after the fact. The state itself does not stage car crashes or mangle the bodies of crash victims, although a certain argument for *Safety-Belt for Susie* might be made in this regard. In that sense we cannot fully or simply equate the highway shock film with Foucault's account of the early modern "torture" period. Rather, the body in these films falls directly within his notion of discipline, the discourse of rationalism that characterizes modern punishment. The power that manifests itself in bodies in these films is not the direct power of the state, as Foucault argues was the case with early modern torture-spectacle. Rather, the highway shock film serves to empower the *ideology* of the state – in this case, free-market capitalism. Under capitalism's logic, as well as that of the discourse that framed dominant "nut-behind-the-

wheel” notions of automotive safety in the 1950s and 60s, the individual is entirely responsible for his or her own safety and prosperity; these films demonstrate that assuming otherwise results in injury or death. The victims in these films have tortured and killed *themselves*. Like any ideology, capitalism effaces its own authority and alerts no one to its presence in these films; however, both the aural and visual narration of the highway shock film articulate that ideology through a particular kind of disciplinary gaze – a *warning gaze* – not dissimilar from the public display of the corpses of criminals or pirates during the 18th century.

If the highway shock film is a genre that dwells on bodies, and the warning gaze that accompanies that dwelling serves to reinforce capitalist ideology, then we can better understand the mechanics of that gaze through Foucault’s account of Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon. Designed by Bentham as a prison in 1785, the Panopticon consisted of a central pillar that served as a guard tower, surrounded by the cells of prisoners. The pillar would emit light into the cells such that the guards in the central tower could see the prisoners, but not vice versa: “Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault 201). Prisoners would discipline themselves under an “unequal gaze” that posited the constant possibility of observation. The warning gaze of the highway shock film fulfills a similar panoptic function:

All of these [accidents] resulted from violations of simple traffic regulations. It’s up to you and your own driving habits. We don’t like to take these pictures, but *whether we show you or your loved ones in the ugly sprawl of death is largely up to you*. You can be, if you wish, just another...signal 30. (emphasis mine)

In this concluding narration from *Signal 30*, the film seems to imply that the viewer is already under a kind of surveillance. Also present is a barely disguised threat: any carelessness

on the driver's part will lead to a fatal accident, after which his or her mangled body will be publicized for the world to see. This *possibility* of being filmed after death forms another layer of shock discourse. Furthermore, the traditional mode of exhibition for the highway shock film invariably included a figure of authority, a teacher, driving instructor, or police officer, sitting at the back of the room or at the projector. This secondary panopticism ensured a kind of reverence for the presented discourse, the discipline that Foucault locates in the modern prison but also in modern society generally.

Another panoptic presence in these films is the highway patrolman. Police serve as a constant reminder of the presence of an authority that dictates behavior but also absolves itself of responsibility. Their authority is unquestioned; many of the films feature brief montages that emphasize the expert training and skills of the highway patrolmen as they participate in coordinated exercise or pull over speeders – another consequence of Wayman's police boosterism, which secured the cooperation of the Ohio State Highway Patrol. The primary role of the police in these films, however, is as keepers of vision and handlers of bodies. Quite literally agents of the state, they are responsible for telling the story and cleaning up the mess, but also embody the not-always-genuine "humanity" that Foucault argues is typical of modern, "reformist" panopticism. Highway shock films often cut to the patrolmen to dwell on their reactions to the carnage; in *Highways of Agony*, one weeps upon seeing a dead infant.

## **Conclusion**

The highway shock film serves as a site of historical and discursive confluence. Films like *Signal 30* or *Highways of Agony* prefigured the radical changes that the 1960s would bring to visual culture, particularly with regard to representations of violence. At the same time, their

innovative interest in a certain kind of documentary realism served a longstanding and dominant discourse surrounding automotive safety: that individual irresponsibility is the sole source of death on the highway. It has become something of a historiographical commonplace that the 1960s was a period of increased perceptions of violence for many Americans, both in popular culture and as a fact of everyday experience, and the visual representations of this violence are often associated with broadly leftist ideological projects. Consider television news depictions of police brutality in the South, the American Direct Cinema movement, or Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967). Yet the highway shock film's interest in the brutal naturalism of automotive violence is neither aesthetic nor overtly political; rather, it is staunchly pragmatic and vaguely menacing in its desire for order. These were films made for the "silent majority," not the Great Society.

The later history of the HSF has been chronicled by a few sources, including Wood's documentary and a *Bright Lights Film Journal* article by Alexandra Heller-Nicholas. The Foundation's demise is usually traced to a botched 1973 telethon starring Sammy Davis, Jr., for which the HSF took a substantial financial loss as a result of unfulfilled viewer pledges. Highway shock films continued to be produced into the early 1980s, although they were probably screened less and less frequently as the 1970s wore on and more reformist educational philosophies took hold. It should be emphasized that industry-funded driver safety films remained the norm throughout the 1960s and 70s; a survey of four Wisconsin driver's education curriculum guides spanning the period from 1963-1979 reveals that industry films were commonly listed as recommended for student viewing, while none of the guides even mentions the films produced by the Highway Safety Foundation (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction). Indeed, the question of the reception of these films remains an open one. Anecdotal

evidence notwithstanding, systematic data on the reception of these films is difficult to obtain, and we simply know too little about how widespread the highway shock phenomenon was, especially outside the state of Ohio. However, the status of these films as objects of cult fascination is clear. Well before the production of *Hell's Highway*, highway shock films were widely available from independent exploitation video distributors like Something Weird.

At various levels of textual engagement, it is clear that the highway shock film manifests myriad issues of embodiment, vision, and power. In many ways, these issues are also at stake in the modern fictional horror film, but the highway shock films' gesture toward documentary realism serves to trouble our relationship with them in a different way. Ultimately, the most fascinating aspect of these films is what they tell us about American ideology and visual culture in the 1960s. Any given textual analysis of a fictional horror film from this period might, at best, reveal vague trends of consciousness, ideology, and sensibility; the highway shock film, by contrast, was produced with an explicit discourse in mind, a discourse that these films foreground in textual, filmic, and aural narration. The ostensible abhorrence of explicit violence laid out in Hollywood's Production Code – an abhorrence that dictated the textual fabric of American cinema for more than thirty years – is not present in these films. The widespread distribution and acceptance of the highway shock film during the latter half of the twentieth century suggests that filmic representations of violence (or its aftermath) were perfectly acceptable under certain circumstances; that is, as long as that violence served a constructive or educational role in furtherance of a societal norm.

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## **Selling Bonita: The Early Career of Bonita Granville (1936-1939) and the Marketing of B Stars**

**Amanda McQueen**

Bonita Granville was never more than a B actress. She first came to prominence in 1936, at age 12, with her Oscar-nominated performance as the nasty Mary Tilford in William Wyler's *These Three* (Samuel Goldwyn/United Artists), a loose adaptation of Lillian Hellman's play, *The Children's Hour*. In the wake of this role, Granville briefly became one of Hollywood's most promising and sought-after young talents. She was put under contract at Warner Bros. (1936-1939), MGM (1939-1941) and RKO (1941-1944), but starred only in B films or lower budget programmers, and was relegated to supporting roles of various sizes in the more expensive A films (Churchill 8/25/39 12; Churchill 9/12/41 25). She eventually moved into freelance work, increasingly for Poverty Row studios, before turning to television and then retiring from acting altogether in her early 30s. Perhaps because of her status as a B actress, little has been written about Granville outside of tribute articles published in fan magazines after her death in 1988. Nevertheless, Bonita Granville's career illustrates an important, but often overlooked, industrial component of the classical Hollywood studio system: the B Movie Star.

Most studies of classical Hollywood stars, such as Cathy Klaprat's work on Bette Davis or Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery's analysis of Joan Crawford (based on the work of Richard Dyer), focus on how the studios marketed and developed their most prestigious actors and actresses. These industrial historical analyses, by examining how the studios carefully built and controlled – both on and off the screen – the personas of the stars they created, aptly explain the economic and social functions these well-known actors served within the mature oligopoly of the studio system. Given the importance of B films to the economic stability of the major studios – supplying needed product for theatres, maintaining low overhead costs, providing relatively

stable income to offset riskier A level productions – and given that B films were frequently used as testing grounds for promising new studio talent, similar studies of B actors are clearly worth conducting (Taves 314-315, 318, 329; Balio 102; Glancy 63; Miller 58). Yet, little attention has been given to those stars found almost exclusively on the lower half of the double bill. In this essay, I will use the early career of Bonita Granville, from 1936 to 1939 when she was under contract at Warner Bros., as a case study for exploring how, at the B level, the vertically integrated major studios marketed stars to sell their films (Balio 145).

In Hollywood, B films and A films were produced, distributed and exhibited differently. Since B films were rented for a flat fee, rather than for a percentage of the box office gross, and since B films were a relatively flexible product that different exhibitors could book into their programs as needed, the majors did not plan for their B films the same type of large-scale, national advertising campaigns that they designed to coordinate with the release patterns of the A's (Jacobs 4-6). Instead, advertising responsibilities for B films fell primarily to exhibitors, and the relative success of a B film depended on the ability of theatre managers to make good use of the studio-provided press book materials, with their lobby displays, publicity stories for local newspapers, and exploitation suggestions (Taves 314; Balio 174-175).<sup>1</sup> The press books were designed by the advertising departments of the studios' distribution arms in order to instruct exhibitors on what the studio believed were the most effective methods of selling their films to the movie-going public. The Warner Bros. press books for Bonita Granville's films suggest that a carefully crafted and exploitable star persona was a central component of a B film's marketing campaign, especially for a performer seen as being on the rise (Klaprat 366; Balio 173, 175).

The leading actors and actresses of B films were also not under the same types of long-term studio contracts as the A list stars. Even at the height of her career at Warner Bros. in 1939, when she was making \$400 a week, Granville would not have been considered a star of the same

caliber as, for example, fellow child actress Shirley Temple, who in 1939 was making \$350,000 a year (Warner Bros. Letter to Bonita Granville. 7 Dec. 1938; Balio 155, 147). A B star, furthermore, would not be provided with the same extensive publicity machinery that was devoted to promoting a studio's top talent (Balio 168-173). However, as Brian Taves and Don Miller note, within the industrial tier of the B film many actors could be considered stars in their own right, with devoted fan followings, and the press books for Granville's Warner Bros. films suggest that the studio both viewed and promoted her as a rising star, particularly for juvenile audiences (Taves 313, 316-317; Miller 41).

In this essay, then, I will use Warner Bros.' press books to explore how the studio relied on Granville's star image to sell her films. I will first examine how Warner Bros. directed exhibitors to use lobby displays, publicity articles and advertisements to highlight Granville and her studio-created star personas – first that of Hollywood's Brat and then that of the All-American Teenage Girl. I will also note how Warner Bros.' use of Granville's star image correlated with her changing contractual status and her elevation within the studio. Then I will look at how the press books deliberately position Granville as a figure worthy of admiration and imitation by her teenage fans. I hope that this case study of Bonita Granville will indicate that, though they were marketed differently and not to the same degree as A stars, B stars nevertheless served important economic and social functions within the mature oligopoly of the Hollywood studio system (Taves 331; Balio 102).

### **From Hollywood's Brat to Typical Teen: The Exploitability of the B Star Image**

In the late 1930s, due to the standardization of double bill even in the studio-owned first run theatres, B films made up the bulk of the film industry's product; after 1935, in fact, half of Warner Bros.' yearly output was B films (Jacobs 2; Taves 313; Balio 100). Furthermore, because

no single studio produced enough films to meet demand, and because of the patterns of theatre ownership throughout the country, the vertically integrated majors agreed to show one another's product – including B films – in their own theatres in order to ensure a full film program (Huettig 219, 305). This meant that a financially successful film would benefit all theatre-owning studios, regardless of which studio had actually produced it (Huettig 304). Naturally, A films, rented for a percentage of the box office, had the potential to be the real moneymakers, and it was to these films that the studios dedicated the bulk of their advertising resources and their major stars.

In the actual practice of distribution and exhibition, however, films were flexibly categorized. While B films were generally produced for the lower half of the double bill, a strong B could play as an A in certain venues or on subsequent runs, or could be renegotiated for distribution as an A, for a percentage of the box office (Taves 316, 318; Jacobs 2-3).

Furthermore, though the standard double bill paired a B with a more expensive A, an exhibitor might choose instead to show two mid-budget films (“intermediates” or “programmers”) or even two B's if he thought it would create a more profitable show or if he needed to fill a hole in the program (Taves 316-317; Jacobs 3; Miller 41).

A major studio's B films, therefore, though they were produced on a smaller budget and with a shorter shooting schedule, were “never hasty or slapdash” productions; the necessity of booking B films into theatres not owned by the producing studio and the flexibility of the B film within the distribution and exhibition sectors meant that a major studio's reputation depended just as much on the quality of its B product as it did on its A and prestige pictures (Taves 318; Miller 37). So while the studios did not devote as many resources to the advertising and promotion of B films, they did, nevertheless, consider the most effective way to market them, and disseminated those ideas via the press books that an exhibitor would receive upon booking a film (Balio 174). For the smaller, less prestigious theatres where B films were most likely to be

found, the press book campaigns were perhaps less about increasing profits for the studio and more about preventing a local exhibitor from sullyng a studio's reputation with salacious or false advertising (Huettig 291; Jacobs 7-8; Staiger 14-15). One can view a major studio's press book campaigns, therefore, even at the B level where film booking and thus advertising tended to be more irregular, as attempts "not only to improve rental and box office revenues but also to protect the image of the rental firm" (Jacobs 6; Staiger 14).

The press books contained a variety of publicity and exploitation ideas for exhibitors but were designed to maintain studio control over how the films were sold and to maximize box office draw. Bonita Granville's press books at Warner Bros. suggest that, at least in some cases, B stars were a key method of film promotion, and studios, therefore, would build press book campaigns around them, just as they did for A stars (Klaprat 351-352). In Granville's case, when she was put under contract at Warner Bros. in November 1936, she was already firmly associated with a particular screen persona – Hollywood's Brat – due to her high profile role in *These Three*. The studio, unsurprisingly, continued to exploit that image whenever it was prudent, whether in the B films in which she played larger roles, or in the A films, where she took on supporting parts of various sizes. Though Warner Bros. tested Granville in more sympathetic roles, and though she would ultimately take on a new star persona when the studio starred her in the *Nancy Drew* series (1938-1939), Granville's brat image remained Warner Bros.' most effective tool for selling the actress to audiences, as it allowed for an immediate connection between her current film and the prestige picture that first brought her to the public's attention.

Granville's portrayal of Mary Tilford, the little girl whose whispered accusations of infidelity ruin the lives of the protagonists of *These Three*, immediately spurred a flurry of praise for the twelve-year-old, who had no prior acting reputation of which to speak. Applauded by reviewers for *The New York Times*, *Variety* and *The Los Angeles Times*; given an honorable

mention for her performance by the Screen Guilds; and nominated for an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress, Granville quickly became known as “Hollywood’s most noted brat” (Nugent “These Three” X3; Abel; “Screen Awards” 21; “Academy Announces” 2; Schallert “Shearer and Cooper” D1; “News” 7/17/36 20). Producer Samuel Goldwyn and distributor United Artists expeditiously made use of the publicity surrounding Granville to promote their film and to differentiate the young actress from the many other popular child stars of the 1930s (Balio 136; Klaprat 354). In fact, a *Los Angeles Times* publicity article from December 1935 pointedly distinguishes Granville from other child stars by claiming that she got the part “by looking as unlike Shirley Temple as possible . . . Sam Goldwyn chose her because ‘she’s different from all the other children on the screen – she’s positively refreshing’” (Merrick 15).

The high profile nature of Granville’s breakout role and the many publicity materials that surrounded it – from newspaper columns and interviews to cross-promotional advertisements – all served to identify Granville firmly as “Hollywood’s Brat.” Indeed, other studios soon attempted to capitalize on this reputation by casting Granville as brats in their own films: Paramount featured her as Virginia Goode, the village girl who makes accusations of witchcraft, in *Maid of Salem* (Frank Lloyd, 1937) – for which she also received recognition by the Screen Actor’s Guild – and RKO cast her as a mean schoolgirl in *Quality Street* (George Stevens, 1937) (“News” 7/17/36 20; “News” 4/10/37 11).<sup>2</sup> Recognizing that Granville had proven herself adept at playing a certain character type and perhaps believing that audiences would remember her from *These Three*, Warner Bros. adopted Granville’s brat image when putting her under contract, and exploited it regardless of the nature of Granville’s current role.

As a stock player, with her salary determined on a weekly basis, one of Granville’s functions at Warner Bros. was to round out a film’s cast, and so she was not always given publicity-worthy parts (Balio 155; Taves 329). However, even in her smallest roles, Granville

was still typecast as a brat, as in the A romantic comedies *It's Love I'm After* (Archie Mayo, 1937) and *Hard to Get* (Ray Enright, 1938). *It's Love I'm After's* Gracey Kane is described by the film's script as "an annoying little twit of about twelve years of age," while *Hard to Get's* Connie Richards is "haughty, self-centered, and completely poised," with lines to be delivered "disgusted[ly]," "nastily," and "sneeringly" (Robinson c; Wald, Leo and Macaulay 3). Gracey and Connie are such minor characters that Granville receives for the former no publicity at all, and for the latter, only a small article that describes her clothes (Granville's fashion sense would be a key part of how she was marketed, as discussed below).

For her larger roles, however, Warner Bros. did use Granville's brat image as an exploitation strategy, even when she was not playing a brat. Her first contract with Warner Bros. engaged her for a single film, an A picture titled *Call it a Day* (Archie Mayo, 1937). She was employed for \$500 a week for a minimum of two weeks for the role of Ann Hilton, the youngest daughter of the family around which the romantic comedy centers. If the studio chose to option her, she would then be engaged for an additional 26 weeks at a salary of \$300 a week, with further options available to increase her contract to 52 weeks with corresponding salary adjustments (Contract between Warner Bros. and Bonita Granville. 16 Nov. 1936).<sup>3</sup> Ann is a decidedly different character from Mary Tilford; she is described in the press book as an "eager, fragile, and bright-haired" pre-teen mooning over the poets Shelley and Rosetti (*Call it a Day* Press Book 9). *The Los Angeles Times* even drew attention to the different tenor of the part by noting how surprising Granville's portrayal was, and claiming, "Miss Granville is as idealistic an adolescent as she was a frightening little girl in 'These Three'" (Lusk "Film Information" C3).

Most of the press book material centers on the adult stars, particularly Anita Louise, Frieda Inescort and Olivia DeHavilland, and Granville receives only one short feature article. It

does, however, make her brat persona the focal point. Titled “Nasty Brat Part Won Fortune for This Lucky Lass,” the article directly connects Granville with *These Three*:

Most bad little girls get the back of the hairbrush. But not Bonita Granville, filmdom’s prize ‘brat.’ The wages of meanness is a big weekly paycheck for Bonita, who at 13 is one of the best paid child actresses in Hollywood. Because of her work as the spoiled child in ‘These Three,’ she is playing one of the leads in ‘Call it a Day.’ (*Call it a Day* Press Book 13)

Though Granville’s share of the press book is small, it nevertheless succinctly exploits her established star image, and an exhibitor who believed that the brat of *These Three* would have audience pull could use this article, alongside other publicity and advertising strategies, to draw crowds to *Call it a Day*. This focus on Granville’s status as Hollywood’s Brat continued to feature prominently in Warner Bros.’ press books for Granville’s films, indicating that the studio viewed her star image as a lucrative marketing strategy. The studio continued to use the brat image to connect Granville’s films to the high-profile *These Three* and to differentiate Granville from other child stars, most of who were associated with sweetness and innocence (Nash 83; Fuller-Seeley 45).

Granville’s first starring role at the studio, as the spoiled and neglected rich girl Roberta Morgan in the B film *The Beloved Brat* (Arthur Lubin, 1938), seems explicitly designed to capitalize on the public’s recognition of Granville’s screen image. Granville was still under her first contract at the time of the film’s production, but this starring role in a B picture suggests the studio was testing her star potential and popularity with audiences, as Granville was soon put under her first long-term contract. With *Beloved Brat*, Warner Bros. seems to have been primarily interested in taking advantage of the actress’s connection to *These Three*; rather than

trying the actress in a new role, the studio hoped to rely on a formula that had already proven successful with audiences (Klaprat 370; Balio 168).

Granville's star image as Hollywood's Brat, therefore, proved central to the marketing strategies found in the film's press book. Theatre owners are advised, for example, to "Blow up some scene stills from 'These Three' and circle Bonita Granville's head. Add copy: 'The 'Brat' of 'These Three' now in her own starring picture" (*Beloved Brat* Press Book 9). Items for publication in local papers take the same approach. Advertisements identify Granville as "The Brat of These Three storming her way to new stardom," while publicity articles call Granville "the brattiest of all brats in the movies" and "the Number One Brat of all time" (*Beloved Brat* Press Book 3A, 5). One feature article even insists that "she has a knack for portraying nasty little girls. Producers cry for her whenever a brat role turns up. When worse girls are portrayed, Bonita will probably be portraying them" (*Beloved Brat* Press book 5).

Ultimately, *Beloved Brat's* Roberta Morgan is a more sympathetic character than Mary Tilford, as her behavior derives not from vindictive motives, but rather from a desire for affection from her inattentive parents. Unlike the manipulative Mary, Roberta is allowed real character development from a self-centered brat to a kind, thoughtful girl, thereby distancing Granville some from the all-around nastiness of her best-known role. The film emphasizes that Roberta is a good girl at heart, while displaying Warner Bros.' usual "talent for combining real entertainment with social problems of significance" (*Beloved Brat* Press Book 5).

Furthermore, the press book is quite explicit about the fact that Granville is not a brat in real life. This discrepancy between actress and character was similarly highlighted by Goldwyn/UA for *These Three*. For example, an interview with Philip K. Scheuer in the *Los Angeles Times* begins by describing how, on screen, Granville appeared "so abhorrent to decent sensibilities that audiences all over the country would deem it a privilege to beat the living

daylights out of her,” before insisting that the actress “looks so different from the make-believe Mary Tilford that I couldn’t credit my eyes. Looks different. Acts different. Is different” (“Meanest Girl” C1). Thus part of Granville’s brat image was this split between on-screen and off-screen, and Warner Bros. maintained it within the *Beloved Brat* press book. For example, an article titled “Bonita is Holy, But No Terror,” notes that, despite her on-screen appearance, “Off-screen she really is a charming and pleasing youngster who listens to her mother, eats her spinach obediently, takes care of her toys and does not go around walloping other girls and boys” (*Beloved Brat* Press Book 3). Nevertheless, *Beloved Brat* gives Granville plenty of screen time to display typical bratty behaviors: screaming, throwing things, lying, and, ultimately, attempted arson and vehicular manslaughter. Though the film partly softens Granville’s brat image – Roberta is a *beloved* brat, after all – it nevertheless remains the central focus of the film’s plot



Fig. 1: Display for *Beloved Brat*.  
Wisconsin Center for Film and  
Theater Research

and of the press book materials, particularly lobby displays and advertisements (Fig. 1). Even for this solid B film, then, Granville’s star image guided both the film’s production and marketing.

In January 1938, when *Variety* first reviewed *Beloved Brat*, Warner Bros. placed Granville under a long-term contract for a period of 52 weeks at \$300.00 a week, and in May of that year, announced via a gossip column in *The Los Angeles Times* its intention of “elevating [Granville] to stardom the coming season” (Review of *Girls on Probation*;<sup>4</sup> Contract between Warner Bros. and Bonita Granville. 8 Jan.1938; Kendall 10). Shortly thereafter, Granville appeared in a supporting role in the A picture, *White Banners* (Edmund Goulding, 1938), based on the Lloyd C. Douglas novel about the invention of the refrigerator, first published in *Cosmopolitan Magazine*. As Sally Ward, Claude Rains’ daughter, Granville played an important and sympathetic character with an on-screen romance, but her brat

image still remained the focus of much of the press book material. As was often the case with such off-casting, publicity material relied on the star image with which the audience was familiar, while stressing how the current role was different (Balio 168; Klapat 372). The prepared review for the film, for example, describes Granville as an “erstwhile ‘meanie,’ who is not a bit behind Rains in demonstrating that she, too, can play sympathetic characters,” while a picture caption asserts that she “deserts her usual ‘brat’ roles to play a youngster in the throes of puppy love” (*White Banners* Press Book 7). One article, aptly titled “Not Really a Brat,” explains that

Bonita Granville, who rose to screen fame by virtue of her characterizations of ‘brats,’ says there is nothing she dislikes quite so much as a ‘brat.’ In private, Miss Granville is quite the opposite of her screen portrayals, so her sympathetic role in ‘White Banners’ is the first in her career which *permitted Bonita to act somewhat like her real self.* (*White Banners* Press Book 6 – emphasis mine)

As this article makes clear, what distinguishes the *White Banners* press book materials is the fact that, for the first time, Granville the performer was being conflated with her screen character. In her analysis of the star image of Bette Davis, Cathy Klapat explains how studio publicity materials usually attempted to convince audiences that a star possessed the same traits as the characters she portrayed on screen – that the actress was the same in “real” life as in her “reel” life (Klapat 360). Granville had been deliberately distanced from her screen characters up to this point, but *White Banners’* press book now emphasizes similarities between Granville and Sally. For example, the studio utilized the common strategy of claiming that Granville’s on-screen love interest, Jackie Cooper, was also her off-screen boyfriend (Klapat 363). A series of behind-the-scenes photographs includes, among other miscellaneous events, a picture of “Bonita

Granville accepting a bouquet from boy friend Jackie – with blushes all around” (*White Banners* Press Book 6). The contractual promotion and the elevation to an important role in an A film thus coincides with the studio’s testing of a new star image for Granville, one with which she could be conflated according to standard studio practice. This perhaps suggests a correlation between the development of a star’s image and a star’s place within the studio hierarchy.

After varying Granville’s image with *White Banners*, however, Warner Bros. again cast her as a brat in a supporting role in the drama *My Bill* (John Farrow, 1938), a B film about a widowed mother (Kay Francis), who is abandoned by her children, except her youngest, Bill (Dickie Moore), during a time of financial hardship.<sup>5</sup> Granville, Anita Louise and Bobby Jordan play her other three children; all three are characterized by the *Los Angeles Times* as “thoroughgoing brats,” and Granville, as Gwen, is described in advertisements in the press book as “13 and impossible” (Scheuer “Kay Francis” 8; *My Bill* Press Book 3). In addition to referencing Granville’s earlier films at the studio, particularly *Beloved Brat* and *White Banners*, *My Bill*’s press book continues to suggest that exhibitors focus their exploitation and publicity on Granville’s brat image. A portrait of a smiling Granville, for example, references both the title of her first star vehicle at Warner Bros. and her career as a screen brat through its caption: “BELOVED BRAT – Bonita Granville lives up to her reputation for cinematic cutting-up in ‘My Bill’” (*My Bill* Press Book 7). Lobby display suggestions more directly invoke the continuity of Granville’s brat roles: the press book suggests using stills from both *These Three* and *Beloved Brat* to draw attention to Granville, who, it is claimed, has “a great following among movie fans” (*My Bill* Press Book 10).

*My Bill*’s press book also emphasizes Granville’s brat image by comparing her to Warner Bros.’ biggest star, Bette Davis (Balio 150-151). The feature article “To Be Another Bette Davis is Bonita’s Goal” claims that Granville’s excellent portrayal of brats derives from being a

“student of Miss Davis’s unforgettable ‘Mildred’ and other bad girls” (*My Bill Press Book 9*).

“Like Bette Davis,” the article continues, “Bonita sees a more interesting future in playing hated brats than beloved ones,” and “Although Bonita wants to play a sympathetic role occasionally, just so she will not be fatally ‘typed,’ she wishes to grow up into an adult rival of her friend, Miss Davis, whom she worships. And who, incidentally, has the highest respect for Bonita’s talent.” Associating a rising star with a box office attraction like Davis appears like a variation on the strategy of connecting Granville with *These Three*; the prestige of the latter could help create audience interest in, and thus box office revenue for, the former. However, the article also reinforces Granville’s brat image and continues to differentiate her from other child stars by emphasizing her desire to be a different type of actress, known for “bad girl” roles. This tactic, too, evokes publicity from *These Three*; in the interview with Scheuer cited earlier, Granville had reportedly declared about her future roles, “I don’t want to be sweet. Ugh, no. But I’d like to be someone nice, now. I’m afraid people will think I’m really like that!” (“Meanest Girl” C2).

Only with the *Nancy Drew* series (discussed below) did Warner Bros. abandon Granville’s brat image; throughout the press books for all four films, her brat image is referenced only once. Nevertheless, Warner Bros. still relied on the brat image in the press book for one of Granville’s last films at the studio, the B film *Angels Wash Their Faces* (Ray Enright, 1939), which was released in the midst of the *Nancy Drew* series. Primarily a Dead End Kids vehicle, featuring Ann Sheridan and Ronald Reagan in the adult roles, *Angels Wash Their Faces* had Granville playing Leo Gorcey’s sister, Peggy, a character similar in personality and action to Nancy Drew. Nevertheless, rather than connect Granville to the B series in which she was currently starring, the press book instead reverts to references to *These Three*. One article, for example, declares that “her big opportunity came when she was cast for the now-famed ‘brat’ role in ‘These Three.’ This juvenile acting plum of many seasons definitely established Bonita as

an actress of unusual ability and she was shortly placed under contract to Warner Brothers” (*Angels Wash Their Faces* Press book 14). The continuing focus on Granville’s brat image points toward the economic motivation of utilizing a proven marketing strategy; while Warner Bros. was testing Granville in a new star image, the studio knew that her reputation as Hollywood’s Brat was successful and exploitable.

The emphasis on Granville’s brat image suggests that Warner Bros.’ viewed her primarily as an exploitable commodity. She arrived at the studio with an easily marketable star persona, and the studio continued to take advantage of that through both her film roles and press book suggestions. Continuing to sell her as Hollywood’s Brat was yet another way of reducing risk in film production. Nevertheless, the studio did build a new star image for Granville when they starred her in the low budget four-film *Nancy Drew* series: *Nancy Drew Detective* (1938), *Nancy Drew, Reporter* (1939), *Nancy Drew, Trouble Shooter* (1939) and *Nancy Drew and the Hidden Staircase* (1939), all directed by William Clemens. Series production, particularly at the B level, was frequently used as a way to offset risk; not only did a series cut production costs, but a successful series would also create a set of loyal fans, who could be counted on to return to the theatre for each subsequent installment (Balio 101-102). A particularly popular B series, furthermore, like Fox’s *Charlie Chan* films or MGM’s *Andy Hardy* films, could potentially propel a B actor into a star, or a B series into an A series (Taves 317, 336-337; Balio 102; Miller 41). It is possible, therefore, that Warner Bros. initially conceived of the *Nancy Drew* films, based as they were on the most popular series in juvenile literature, as a film series with similar crossover potential (Lindenmeyer 182).

Warner Bros. often used its B series as venues for its contract players, such as Glenda Farrell and Ronald Reagan, to prove their star potential, and so it is not surprising that with the production of the *Nancy Drew* series, Warner Bros. optioned Granville’s contract again (and for

the last time) in December 1938, for an additional 52 weeks with a raise to \$400 a week (Miller 65, 157-158; Glancy 63; Warner Bros. to Bonita Granville. 7 Dec. 1938). As was the case with *White Banners*, it seems like Granville's elevation within the studio coincided with a new approach to promoting her. Now that she was starring in her own series, Granville was completely conflated with her screen character and was given a new star image: the All-American Teenage Girl (Klaprat 360-361).

This particular star image was just as exploitable as the brat image, given its highly publicized creation. The rights to the *Nancy Drew* books, ghostwritten under the pseudonym Carolyn Keene, were held by the Stratemeyer Syndicate, which started the series in 1930 as a female correlate to the popular *Hardy Boys* mysteries (Lindenmeyer 182). When securing the adaptation rights, Warner Bros. agreed to the Syndicate's request that "inasmuch as the Nancy Drew books are for juveniles, they [Warner Bros.] will not introduce in the exercise of its rights in the production of photoplays in connection with them, any scenes and matter involving elements of violence or sex inimical to the morals and welfare of said juvenile class" (Adams; Ebenstein). The Syndicate's conditions reflect broader contemporary concerns about the impressionability of children and the need for wholesome popular culture for adolescents, brought about by studies like Henry James Forman's *Our Movie-Made Children* (1933) (Lindenmeyer 156, 159-161; Savage 288-289, 320; Nash 72-73). Many producers of popular culture – radio, cinema, literature – thus attempted to create media content that was relatively free of violence and sex, and that promoted "all-American values" (Lindenmeyer 163). Warner Bros.' marketing of Nancy Drew/Bonita Granville as the All-American Teenage Girl thus fit squarely within this impetus toward producing appropriate media content for the juvenile market, while reinforcing the studio's long-standing reputation for moral uplift (Balio 98; Miller 154).

Publicity for the *Nancy Drew* series, then, emphasized the great lengths to which Warner Bros. had gone to create a title character that would set the best example for the juvenile audience to which the films were likely to appeal. Philip K. Scheuer reported in the *Los Angeles Times* in August 1938, for example, that Warner Bros. had questioned “600 sociologists, educators and miscellaneous pundits” in order to create an image of the “ideal adolescent” on which to base the character of Nancy Drew (“Bonita to be Composite Adolescent” A16). The press books echoed this claim; according to a publicity article for *Nancy Drew, Detective*, “The studio conducted an intensive survey to find the correct pattern” for the typical sixteen year old girl. “They sent questionnaires to such celebs as Emily Post, Kathleen Norris, Elizabeth Brown, Angelo Patri and others,” and then cross-referenced the answers with results from polls of actual teenage girls to find a “Composite ‘Miss America–Age 16’”: a teenage girl who was an amalgam and a distillation of all the respondents’ answers (*Nancy Drew, Detective Press Book 7-8*).

Once Warner Bros. had developed a pattern for the typical teenage girl on which to base the character, however, the studio then insisted through press book publicity that Granville herself fit that pattern, much to the reported surprise of “studio officials,” who initially felt that she “was not a typical sixteen year old girl. . . . She was a sixteen year old Hollywood actress” (*Nancy Drew, Detective Press Book 8*). Despite being a star, Warner Bros. claimed, Granville is, like Nancy Drew and her adolescent fans, “in every way typical,” “a completely normal, healthy girl who is average in her school work, pretty in a youthful way and no better and no worse in her average behavior than any other girl her age” (*Nancy Drew, Trouble Shooter Press Book 8*; *Nancy Drew, Reporter Press Book 9*). It seems, publicity for *Nancy Drew, Trouble Shooter* concludes, that the studio had simultaneously and (supposedly) unintentionally established “an accurate portrait of Miss America – aged sixteen, and of Bonita Granville, youthful film star”

(*Nancy Drew, Trouble Shooter* Press Book 8). Indeed, the only reference to Granville's brat image is mobilized primarily to emphasize the suitability of the actress's new screen persona:

She won fame as a brat, starting with her memorable meanie role in 'These Three.' Then she reformed, at the concerted request of literal minded fans who feared she might unconsciously become a brat in real life. So little Miss Granville became the All-American girl on the screen, *just as she is and always has been in real life.* (*Nancy Drew, Trouble Shooter* Press book 10 – emphasis mine)

Throughout the press books for the four films, then, publicity material and exploitation suggestions consistently stress a conflation between Bonita Granville and Nancy Drew, and the overarching concept of the press books is to sell both to audiences as the All-American Teenage Girl. Exhibitors, for example, are encouraged to hold a contest, and "Conduct a search for town's typical American girl, using Bonita Granville as the standard" (*Nancy Drew, Detective* Press Book 6). Publicity articles generally take the tactic of demonstrating that Granville is the same All-American Teenage Girl off-screen that she is on-screen. For example, Warner Bros. drew parallels between Granville and Nancy's love lives by publicizing an on-going relationship between Granville and Frankie Thomas, who played Nancy's on-screen boyfriend, Ted Nickerson. Publicity for *Nancy Drew, Trouble Shooter* thus reports "a note of romance" between Granville and Thomas, and recounts how both teens "wheedled still photographs of their first kissing scene from the photographer. And each pledged him not to tell the other about the request!" (*Nancy Drew, Trouble Shooter* Press Book 9). A full article is even devoted to Granville's first kiss, further conflating the actress with her character by suggesting that both Nancy and Bonita received their first kiss at the same time and from the same boy (*Nancy Drew, Trouble Shooter* Press Book 9). Furthermore, the press book for *Nancy Drew, Reporter*,

describes how Granville wants to become a reporter herself: “‘Long before I had any idea I might do a picture like this I was doing newspaper work. . . . I hope someday to make a name in that that business’” the actress explains (*Nancy Drew, Reporter* Press book 10). Finally, Warner Bros. also publicized how Granville herself was the real-life inspiration for aspects of her screen character. For example, publicity articles for *Nancy Drew, Reporter* describe how screenwriter Kenneth Gamet asked Granville “to collect the slang expressions used by her friends in high school” so that he could incorporate them into the films’ scripts and capture the way average teenagers actually spoke, and how costumer Milo Anderson took Granville “into his confidence when he planned her wardrobe for the picture” (*Nancy Drew, Reporter* Press Book 10, 2).

Even at the B level, then, Warner Bros. recognized that a marketable star image was a valuable publicity tool, particularly if it could be easily and succinctly exploited. For Granville’s starring films, Warner Bros. made her star image, whether Hollywood’s Brat or the All-American Teenage Girl, the focal point of the press book campaigns. The press books for Granville’s supporting roles, such as *White Banners*, *My Bill* and *The Angels Wash Their Faces*, understandably include fewer publicity articles and advertisements emphasizing Granville, but they do, nevertheless, exploit her easily-recognizable brat image. These press books, furthermore, also tend to focus on their respective stars. The press book for *The Angels Wash Their Faces*, for example, emphasizes through its lobby displays, advertisements and publicity pieces Ann Sheridan’s star image as the “Oomph Girl” – which Warner Bros. created via a publicity contest – by advising exhibitors how they can put “oomph” in their campaigns (Bubbeo 195). In short, Warner Bros.’ press books suggest that developing (as in the case of the *Nancy Drew* films) or simply adopting and utilizing (as with the brat image) a marketable star persona was strategy studios undertook even at the B level. While the development of B star images may have been part of the trial process to see if a B star was worth promoting into an A star, as the

development of Granville's star images suggests, this development also served a short term function of making B stars and their films easily marketable commodities that could be promoted and exploited through carefully constructed press book campaigns.

### **“High School Girls, Please Copy!” The B Star and Audience Identification**

In addition to exploiting Granville's star image, whether as Hollywood's Brat or as the All-American teenage girl, to sell its films, Warner Bros. consistently promoted her as a figure worthy of admiration and imitation by fans, even though she was firmly a B actress within the studio's hierarchy (Dyer 20, 45). Certainly studios devoted most of their resources to developing and promoting a small set of A list stars; while about 500 actors were contracted to all the studios each year during the 1930s, only about 30 of them would receive star billing in A features (Balio 155). This did not preclude B stars, however, from attaining fan followings, appearing as they did repeatedly across the studios' lower budget fare. Recall, for example, the assertion in *My Bill's* press book that Granville had “a great following among movie fans.” A strong fan base, of course, might be key for an actress's promotion to A films and greater stardom, so it is perhaps not surprising that a studio would test a rising B star's potential by seeing whether fans did, indeed, wish to imitate her.

In Granville's case, Warner Bros. seems to have promoted her particularly as a role model for adolescent girls, likely because Granville was a teenager herself, and because many of her films likely played in weekend matinee screenings that were often frequented by younger patrons (Taves 321, 331; Balio 102; Lindenmeyer 172). *Variety* saw the *Nancy Drew* films, in particular, based as they were on a juvenile literature series, as prime matinee fair, and suggested that *Nancy Drew and the Hidden Staircase* (1939) was strong enough to be top billed during a matinee program (Herb). While Granville's films would play to wider audiences than just

teenagers, studios had discovered that films featuring children were more easily marketed to younger audiences, and throughout Granville's press books exploitation suggestions geared directly toward youth feature prominently (Fuller-Seeley 51; Nash 72). For *Nancy Drew, Trouble Shooter*, for example, the press book suggests that exhibitors hold a "Youth Day," where "childrens' [sic] problems are answered from the stage by a board of people who have a close acquaintanceship with boys and girls" (*Nancy Drew, Trouble Shooter* Press Book 7). Furthermore, with the rise of youth culture in the late 1930s and a vogue for films starring teens, Warner Bros.' promotion of Granville as a teen star deserving of a fan following was simply in keeping with larger industry trends (Fuller-Seeley 63; Nash 71).

Warner Bros. began to promote Granville as a role model for teenage girls as early as *Beloved Brat*, emphasizing in particular the fashion trends and beauty tips that were increasingly seen as vital to a young girl's popularity with her peers (Lindenmeyer 145, 200-201; Savage 319). Film stars, of course, were key cultural figures for disseminating and popularizing fashion and beauty trends, and so Granville's personal style was described throughout her press books, even for small roles like that in *Hard to Get*, which notes that Granville "has more 'bounce' than any young lady in pictures . . . She looked particularly 'bouncing' in a pair of white wool slacks, a navy jersey sweater" (Allen and Gomery 183; Dyer 45; Savage 285-286; *Hard to Get* Press Book 13). The age-appropriateness of her style, however, was constantly reiterated. The *Beloved Brat* press book, for example, notes that as make-up goes, the thirteen-year-old "doesn't use powder as yet – but she uses a pink pomade for her lips, which serves as a protection as well as a just-grown-up-enough beautifier" (*Beloved Brat* Press Book 7). Similarly, she is "still too young for woman-of-the-world perfumes, but she puts a few drops of oil of cloves in her brilliantine" to make her hair smell "spicy" (*Nancy Drew, Detective* Press Book 5).



Fig. 2: “Pretty as a Picture – and much more dangerous to criminals.” Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research

Granville’s fans are directly encouraged by the publicity articles and photographs, such as this from the *Nancy Drew, Reporter* press book (Fig. 2) to emulate her look. For instance, the *Nancy Drew* films position Granville as “the perfect fashion model for sweet sixteeners,” (*Nancy Drew and the Hidden Staircase* Press Book 5). Referencing the “sub-debutante” style, which expanded the look of affluent college girls down toward younger adolescent consumers, the press book for *White Banners* declares, “Both on

and off the screen Bonita wears the kind of clothes that any sub-deb can copy with huzzahs of delight” (*White Banners* Press Book 9; Savage 319). Even more explicitly, a description of several of Granville’s outfits in the *Beloved Brat* press book is followed by the plea: “High school girls: please copy!” (*Beloved Brat* Press Book 7).



Fig. 3: Bonita’s Marshmallow Fudge Recipe. Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research



Fig. 4: “Keeps Streamlined.” A description of Granville’s exercise regime. Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research

Granville’s fans were also encouraged to imitate her other hobbies and activities. One article in the *Beloved Brat* press book, for example, describes a “novel party” Granville threw and then suggests to readers, “Consider it carefully as a grand idea for your next party” (*Beloved Brat* Press book 7). *White Banners* press book describes how in the film “Bonita Granville makes a pan of fudge for Jackie Cooper. The prop man was ready and willing to supply the confection but

Bonita insisted that her fudge was better than any he could buy and made it herself” (*White Banners* Press Book 9). Her recipe is then included in the press book so that audiences could make it at home (Fig. 3). The press book for *Nancy Drew, Trouble Shooter* includes an article

and picture describing Granville’s exercise regime (Fig. 4), which she uses to “keep in first class conditions at all times,” and which her fans could then undertake themselves (*Nancy Drew, Trouble Shooter* Press Book 10).

One might claim that Warner Bros.’ promotion of Granville as a star worthy of emulation took on more significant ideological implications through the *Nancy Drew* films, given that Granville’s star image was so clearly constructed to present a particular picture of juvenile femininity, one that most likely reflects, not an accurate portrait of the typical teenage girl, but

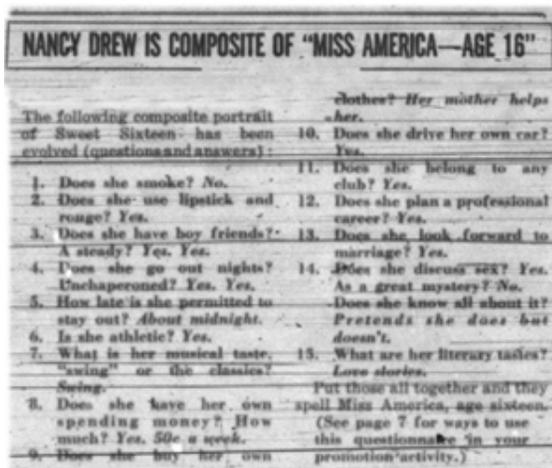


Fig 5: List of traits making up the “Composite of ‘Miss America-Age 16.’” Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research

rather the contemporary ideological construction of how she *should* be (Dyer 25; Allen and Gomery 173-174). The list of traits making up the “Composite of ‘Miss America-Age 16’” (fig. 5) that the studio produced and reprinted through the press books evokes late 1930s rhetoric about what behavior was appropriate for teenage girls and it reinscribes many traditional gender roles. Indeed, in her detailed analysis of the *Nancy Drew* series, Ilana

Nash points out how contemporary concerns about the social roles of young women and a nationwide crisis of masculinity in the wake of the Depression resulted in an “eviscerated” version of Nancy Drew, one who was flighty, “hyperfeminine,” unintelligent, and reliant on men to answer her questions and get her out of scrapes (70-116).

The list of traits that Warner Bros. claimed both Nancy Drew and Bonita Granville possess reflects the greater independence young girls (and adolescents in general) experienced in the late 1930s, while simultaneously reinforcing established gender roles and the belief that proper young women would grow up to be proper wives (Savage 320; Lindenmeyer 199). Thus

traits like going out unchaperoned, having a midnight curfew, driving her own car, having her own spending money, being athletic and planning a professional career, are listed alongside wearing lipstick and rouge, having a steady boyfriend, reading love stories, and wanting to get married. The importance of the traditionally feminine traits to the identity of the typical American teenage girl is summed up neatly in Granville’s confession of average teenage worries: “it’s difficult to be sixteen. So many decisions must be made when one is only half grown up. Among the major problems are how much lipstick a girl should use, how late she should stay out, and what kind of boys to go with” (*Nancy Drew, Detective Press book 9*).

Despite the slightly ditzy, girlish nature that Nash correctly ascribes to Granville’s Nancy Drew, her character is, nevertheless, active, assertive and fairly self-reliant. She is also not above lying or manipulating her father or Ted in order to get her way (all in the name of truth and



Fig. 6: *Nancy Drew, Detective* Ad.  
Wisconsin Center for Film and  
Theater Research

justice, of course); in this way, Nancy is actually more like some of Granville’s former brat characters than she is like *White Banners*’ more demure Sally (Collura C5). Many of the publicity images in the press books show Granville/Nancy looking remarkably confident, and references are often made to both girls gaining the upper hand over men. For example, advertisements for

*Nancy Drew, Detective* depict Nancy shoving past Sherlock

Holmes, Perry Mason and Philo Vance with the quip: “One side flatfoot . . . let a real sleuth show you how its done!” (Fig. 6), while a promotional photograph from *Nancy Drew, Trouble Shooter* depicts Granville lecturing Frankie Thomas by grabbing him roughly by the ear, with the caption ““GIVING HIM AN EARFUL – ‘You listen to me’ – or words to that effect seems to be the advice Bonita Granville is giving Frankie Thomas” (Fig. 7). In short, Granville’s typical teenage girl image walked a careful line of gender norms that she sometimes bent, but never broke. For

example, Granville wears clothes that are “distinctly feminine” but that are also “styled for action,” and she is a “‘tomboy’ by day and a ‘lady’ by night” (*Nancy Drew, Reporter Press Book 9; Nancy Drew, Detective Press Book 4*).



Fig. 7: “GIVING HIM AN EARFUL.” Granville taking the upper hand over her “boyfriend” Frankie Thomas. Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research

Warner Bros.’ *Nancy Drew* series, then, presented a teenage girl who was different from many others on screen in the late 1930s, in the way that Granville’s brat characters were different from the sweet and sunny portrayals of other child stars (Nash 87; Fuller-Seeley 45). Just as the slightly gritty *Dead End Kids* series reflected a more realistic version of young life – with delinquency and poverty – than that rendered in MGM’s cheerful *Andy Hardy* films, the *Nancy Drew* series depicted a more typical picture of adolescent femininity. Unlike the “ideals of sweetness and innocence” embodied by Deanna Durbin and Judy Garland, Granville was average, typical (Lindenmeyer 176; Savage 324; Nash 87). The All-American Teenage Girl image, therefore, served to differentiate Warner Bros.’ teen star from those of the other studios, again facilitating the exploitation of Granville’s new star image. Warner Bros. encouraged audiences to identify with its particular teenage girl not only through the many articles on Granville’s clothes, beauty habits, hobbies and exercise regimes, but also through exploitation gimmicks like the *Nancy Drew Clubs*, which provided members with a list of rules to follow that would assure they conformed to the picture of the typical teenage girl the studio had created.

Throughout all her films, however, Granville was consistently promoted as an ideal figure of imitation by her teenage fans. Furthermore, though she was a B star, many of the articles publicizing Granville’s style and hobbies echo on a smaller scale the promotional

materials developed for A list youth stars. For *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), for example, Macy's carried "Judy Garland Dresses" and hats supposedly "Designed for and selected by Judy Garland herself" for the "Teen Age girls who are exactly Judy's age . . . growing girls with grown up ideas. They firmly believe that no one is too young for a certain amount of glamour" (qtd. in Savage 332). With teenage stars a significant industrial trend, it is not surprising that Warner Bros. used Granville to attempt to capture a share of the movie-going youth market by selling her directly to that audience, even if the studio relied on more localized publicity to do so.

## **Conclusion**

Like other B series, the *Nancy Drew* films returned approximately 100% of their cost and overall the films received good reviews from *Variety*, with Granville's acting in particular being frequently praised (Glancy 63; Hobe.). Nevertheless, Granville's contract was not optioned again at the end of 1939; Warner Bros. seems to have decided that Granville was not worth a long-term investment.<sup>6</sup> She then worked for a few years under contract to MGM and RKO, but as she reached her 20s, she decided to act on a freelance basis. It was primarily in poverty row features – such as *Song of the Open Road* (Charles R. Rogers Talking Pictures, S. Sylvan Simon 1944) and *Breakfast in Hollywood* (Golden Productions, Harold D. Schuster 1946) – where she was given a chance to star as a romantic lead. Often, however, she played adult "bad girls": a wayward teen in RKO's *Youth Runs Wild* (1944), a murderer in Monogram's *Suspense* (1946), and evil twins in Monogram's *The Guilty* (1947). She even returned to Warner Brothers in 1942 for a supporting role in *Now Voyager* as Bette Davis' snotty niece, a part *Variety* felt "suggest[ed] a little of her past 'brat' roles" (Naka.). Like most B film performers, Granville never transitioned into A films, and, like many of her peers, she moved into television in the early 1950s (Taves 329, 350). Then, in 1947, at the age of 24, Granville married oil tycoon and independent producer Jack Wrather, and by 1956, at the age of 33, she had left acting altogether.

She and her husband felt, “that if [they] were going to have children, a woman’s place was in the home” (Granville 31; Collura 61). She became active in running her husband’s businesses, producing and directing the *Lassie* TV show, and sitting on the board of organizations like the American Film Institute, the Los Angeles Orphanage Guild, and the Women’s Council of the Public Broadcasting Service (Granville 31; Parish and Leonard 258; Vermilye 27; Collura 61).

Throughout her time at Warner Bros., though, Granville was positioned, not just as a B actress, but also as a B star. For both her larger and smaller roles, studio press books instructed exhibitors on how to use her star image to sell her films, and encouraged imitation by her teenage fans through publicity articles and promotional gimmicks. Whether being sold as Hollywood’s Brat or as the All-American Teenage Girl, Granville was clearly an exploitable commodity for Warner Bros. The fact that the studio ultimately decided not to invest more in her is perhaps indicative of the tendency for studios to devote most of their resources to developing a small number of A list stars. While a B star was worth promoting to attract audiences and to build a fan base, she was, perhaps viewed by some studios as a product for short-term or immediate use. Warner Bros. built Granville up from her initial brat image to the *Nancy Drew* series, increasing her contract status accordingly, but it seems a point was reached where she was no longer worth the studio’s time or money to develop further. For three years, Warner Bros. sold Bonita Granville at the B level through an exploitation of her star image, but as it seems the studio was not prepared to promote her to A status or to sustain her long-term at the B level, by 1939 she had ceased to serve a purpose.

Bonita Granville was never more than a B actress, but she was, at least for a time, a B Movie Star. While she was at RKO, Whitman Publishing Co. released *Bonita Granville and the Mystery of Star Island* (1942), “An original story featuring BONITA GRANVILLE, famous motion picture player, as the heroine,” as part of their Whitman Authorized Editions for Girls

series, and the Hollywood Pattern Company put out dress patterns with Granville's face on them ("Vintage 40s Hollywood Pattern"). This suggests that into the 1940s, Granville remained a low level star with a fan following, even though she rarely appeared in a studio's most expensive product. Throughout her career, however, no studio seemed to find her worth a long-term investment, not even RKO, which appears to have made the greatest effort to promote her to leading and featured roles. Bonita Granville's tenure at Warner Bros. reveals the importance of B stars for selling films and building a devoted audience, but her larger career suggests that her importance as a commodity was limited to short-term exploitation.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Of course, press books were provided for A films as well. A films, however, would also be promoted via large-scale campaigns in the trade press, popular press and fan publications, which B films did not, as a rule, receive (Balio 168-177).

<sup>2</sup> In addition, David O. Selznick reportedly "prevailed upon" Goldwyn to lend Granville to him for a written-in part in *Garden of Allah* (Richard Boleslawski, 1936), but she seems to have been cut from the final film (Granville 13-14; Schallert "Bonita Granville and Marcia Mae Jones" 15). RKO also signed her to play a sympathetic Irish girl who dies of consumption in John Ford's *The Plough and the Stars* (1936).

<sup>3</sup> A rider on this initial contract also allowed Granville to leave Warner Bros. to make Hal Roach's *Merrily We Live* (Norman Z. McLeod, 1938), a *My Man Godfrey*-type comedy, in which she played a softer, more comedic variant of her brat persona ("News" 9/1/37 15; Contract between Warner Bros. and Bonita Granville. 16 Nov. 1936).

- <sup>4</sup> *Girls on Probation* may have been a working title for the film. However, Warner Bros. released another film called *Girls on Probation* in 1938, starring Jane Bryan and Ronald Reagan, so there may have been some title switching at the studio or a misprint in *Variety*.
- <sup>5</sup> Granville is billed second, after Kay Francis, but she receives about the same amount of screen time as the lower-billed Anita Louise and Bobby Jordan, and less than the even lower-billed Dickie Moore. Her place on the bill, however, perhaps suggests her position within the studio at this point in time.
- <sup>6</sup> Don Miller and Ilana Nash intimate that Granville's subsequent move to MGM was a step up toward stardom, but given the contract system in Hollywood, it seems unlikely that Granville's departure from Warner Bros. was her decision (Miller 157; Nash 71-72; Balio 145). Access to more contractual documents might clarify the conditions of her move.

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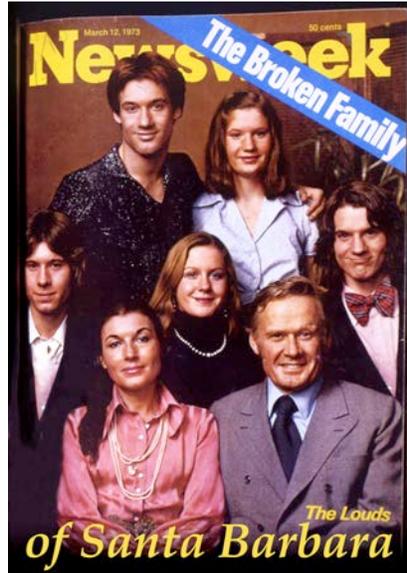
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## Lost in Santa Barbara: *An American Family* and the Birth of Reality TV



### Cynthia Felando

Santa Barbara, California was the setting for the first-ever American “reality” television program in 1973. A twelve-part, twelve-hour public television documentary, *An American Family* featured the “day-to-day” lives of a white, upper-middle-class family, Bill and Pat Loud, along with their five children – and their well-appointed Santa Barbara canyon ranch house. It also revealed the end of the Louds’ marriage. Not surprisingly perhaps, *An American Family* unleashed an avalanche of charged commentary, both about the Loud family and the truthfulness of the production. Rather more surprising were the charged critical responses to the Santa Barbara/Southern California setting, which both reflected and promoted the then current “culture wars” between the East and West Coasts. This essay considers the critical discourses about the series and its Santa Barbara location, the processes that led to the selection of both the city and the Louds, and will note briefly the significance of location as a convention in many of today’s reality television shows.

Santa Barbara is the first thing introduced in the first episode of *An American Family*. In fact, its first image is a wide shot of the Santa Barbara coastline, held for a moment until a slow pan reveals the documentary's producer, Craig Gilbert, standing rather awkwardly atop a picturesque hill. In his only on-camera appearance, Gilbert introduces the series, explains the seven-month-long recording process, and works to preempt objections about the effects of the cameras on the Louds. Next, Gilbert provides a brief description and analysis of the immigrant history of the Loud family's ancestors:

The Loud family, like all families, has a history. Their ancestors came from Ireland, England, Germany, and Scotland to settle on the Eastern seaboard and in the Midwest. Near the turn of the century, these families began moving, like the frontier, slowly westward. What were they looking for? Like most of us, I suppose, they were looking for better business opportunities, better places to raise children, better places to live.

After noting that both Bill's and Pat's parents ultimately settled in Eugene, Oregon, Gilbert makes a suggestive rhetorical move, claiming that Bill and Pat moved south to Santa Barbara because, "unlike their parents, they could no longer move west, the frontier was gone." Then, despite the beauty that surrounds him, Gilbert describes Santa Barbara using fairly dry, city-guide style statistics with attention to population (73,000) and geographic location ("on the slope of the Santa Ynez mountains, fac[ing] south on the Pacific Ocean, ninety miles north of Los Angeles"). With his introduction, and his reference to the lost Western frontier, Gilbert suggests the perspective that helps to inform subsequent episodes: that Santa Barbara is not only the setting of the series, it is likely one of the causal factors in the demise of the Louds, a family that seems to typify the very essence of the American dream. After Gilbert's prologue, the opening

credit sequence introduces each of the family members individually in brief film segments, and the series' title appears in bold, white-on-red letters. Then, in a less-than-subtle move that distills the documentary's pessimism and also reveals the demise of the Loud family, the word "Family" cracks like shattering glass, with a shrill musical effect that underscores the point.

Conceived in 1971 by Craig Gilbert for National Education Television (WNET), *An American Family* premiered between January and March 1973. It was an epic and unprecedented undertaking, with a \$1,200,000 budget and a seven-month shooting schedule that produced 300 hours of footage. *An American Family* was also enormously popular and controversial, and earned unprecedented ratings for public television—with an estimated ten million viewers for each episode (Ruoff xi). Viewers were primed to watch by extensive pre-broadcast publicity and some lurid WNET print advertisements that ran each Thursday morning of the twelve-week series in anticipation of that night's episode. The ads were dominated by photographs of the family and headlines that read: "Are you Ready for 'An American Family'?"; "Would you live next door to the Louds?"; and in reference to Lance, the openly gay eldest son who lived for part of the series in New York City's legendary Chelsea hotel: "He dyed his hair silver and his clothes purple" (Ruoff xvi, 100). *An American Family* had a huge popular cultural impact, and the Louds became instant celebrities. Indeed, soon after the series premiered, as *The Nation* magazine put it, they were "popping up all over the place." Throughout 1973 and into 1974, the Louds appeared in dozens of magazine interviews and features; they made the cover of *Newsweek*, and appeared on television talk and variety shows such as *The Dick Cavett Show* and *The Dating Game*. Even the cartoonists Garry Trudeau and Jim Berry (among others) did their part by parodying the Louds.

As for the genesis of *An American Family*, it occurred in the midst of the women's and civil rights' movements in 1971, when the recently-divorced, admittedly angry, middle-aged documentary producer Craig Gilbert, whose resumé included the Margaret Mead project *New Guinea Journal*, asked himself some provocative questions: "What is going on here? Why are men and women having such a tough time? The problem seemed a simple one. How could I discover what women were feeling as women and in their roles as wives and mothers and what men were feeling as men and in their roles as husbands and fathers? My instincts and the increasing evidence all around me of broken and disintegrating relationships and marriages told me some disturbing force was at work" (Gilbert 26). The producer was convinced that a documentary project would provide some answers, so he made a proposal to WNET executives that outlined his plan to find a family and film its "daily life" for a one-year period. Also, convinced that "family life in the United States was embattled – disappearing," Gilbert told the Louds themselves that he wanted to document the American family before "it became obsolete" (Loud 89).

Craig Gilbert admitted in pre-screening publicity that he was inspired to make *An American Family* in order to refute the television sitcom images of American families as happy, healthy, and strong – like those in *The Brady Bunch* and *Ozzie and Harriet*. As he had observed: "In all these shows, the family was middle-class, attractive, and lived in a house (as opposed to an apartment) in what appeared to be a suburb of a large city" (Gilbert 27). He was further convinced that the sitcom images of domestic bliss had fed the "comfortable fantasies" of millions of viewers. Conveniently, his production crew (Alan and Susan Raymond) agreed with Gilbert's claims regarding the impact of such hyperbolized images of happy TV families, saying: "an entire generation of viewers was unconsciously traumatized because they could never

measure up to the image of family life they saw on the screen” (Raymond, “Filming *An American Family*” 19). Gilbert therefore aimed to find a television family that “looked reassuringly comfortable and familiar [because] I wanted to hook viewers before they began to realize they were in for an experience considerably different from the one offered by *Father Knows Best* or *Ozzie and Harriet*” (Gilbert 27). Accordingly, he looked for a similarly telegenic family: affluent, attractive, with a professional dad, a stay-at-home mom, and a passel of active kids. Bill and Pat Loud and their five teenagers were made to order – as was their lovely Southern California location.

But before he found the Louds, Gilbert scouted locations. California seemed to carry nearly mythical weight for the producer. As he explained to *The Atlantic* magazine, California was the source of new American trends – where “American culture is fashioned,” including those nefarious happy family sitcoms made in Hollywood. So convinced was Gilbert regarding the cultural significance of California that he declared: “Any day now America will become California” (McCarthy 76). Also, apparently inspired by Frederick Jackson Turner’s “frontier thesis,” Pat Loud in her autobiography recalled that Gilbert characterized California as the “Last Frontier...the setting most appropriate to ‘that most pervasive of fantasies, the American Dream’” (Loud 88). As Gilbert put it: “In the early days of our country the quest for happiness and fulfillment had led men and women toward the West and...I had a hunch that the dream had only slightly dimmed in the past 200 years” (Gilbert 28). Gilbert did not further develop his notions regarding the frontier but, as will be discussed below, it was an aspect of his discourse that was echoed by and seems to have informed the views of several critics and commentators. Further, his reference to the lost frontier in relation to the Louds enabled him to predict a dire future for the American family in general.

For three months, Gilbert searched along the California coast, including in Los Angeles and Palo Alto, interviewing about fifty families without success (Gilbert 28). Finally, he found additional inspiration from *another* popular fiction source, when he happened to read the new 1971 Ross Macdonald detective novel, *The Underground Man*. As Gilbert later confessed to *Commentary* magazine, the novel “described with absolute accuracy the kind of family I was looking for” (Sanborn 80).

Ross Macdonald, the pen name of Kenneth Millar, was an award-winning novelist and a resident of Santa Barbara. His recurring hard-boiled detective, Lew Archer, often finds himself in “Santa Teresa,” which is a pseudonym for Santa Barbara, and the novels were admired for their precise evocations of the city and California. *The Underground Man* features several iconic Santa Barbara settings: picturesque hills, canyons, and beaches, in addition to a few grand estates and swimming pools. Also useful, for Gilbert’s purposes, were Macdonald’s detective-novel themes, like family betrayal and tortured relationships between men and women, and stories about affluent and decadent characters for whom, as the magazine writer Sara Sanborn put it, “glossy exteriors cover hidden taint, moral degeneration, selfishness, and mutual exploitation of epic proportions” (80). The many murders in *The Underground Man* are all the result of family estrangements and betrayals, of husbands and wives who have run off with other husbands and wives and left behind embittered relatives whose lives are “robbed of all meaning” (Macdonald 18). Of the many families that populate *The Underground Man*, not a single one is intact or otherwise “healthy.”

Macdonald’s characters and location were spot-on for Gilbert’s vision of the decaying American dream and the American family, so he traveled to Santa Barbara, got in touch with the novelist himself, and asked for his help in finding a family. Macdonald agreed and introduced

Gilbert to the women's section editor at the *Santa Barbara News Press*, Mary Every, who also happened to be a friend of the Loud family. After listening to Gilbert's pitch, Every drove him through the Santa Barbara hills to the Loud family home at 35 Woodale Lane. After meeting the "attractive and articulate" family, a delighted Gilbert later enthused: "I had only been in their home for ten minutes when I knew...we had our family" (Gaines 47). Critics often referenced Gilbert's good fortune in finding the Louds; *Family Circle* magazine characterized them as "handsome, Christmas-card people" (Dowling 38), and *Vogue* magazine quipped: "The manufacturer of Barbie dolls could not have typecast a family better" (Brown 68).



For the most part, the specific production strategies used for *An American Family* followed the "direct cinema" methodology. In the United States, direct cinema has often been called "cinema vérité," including by Craig Gilbert, but there are important distinctions between them, particularly in terms of the filmmaker's role. In cinema vérité, the filmmaker functions, to use documentary scholar Erik Barnouw's term, as an on-camera "catalyst" for the events being filmed. Moreover, the cinema vérité filmmaker's involvement in the process is revealed explicitly. Therefore, one might hear and see the filmmaker asking his or her subjects questions or otherwise engaging in conversations with them. In contrast, the direct cinema paradigm emphasizes the filmmaker's purported efforts not to interfere with, nor to control, events, but

merely to record them. In short, the direct cinema practitioner must never, ever ask anybody to do anything for the camera. The “direct cinema” term itself indicates the filmmaker’s aim to provide direct access to reality in an unmediated, “objective” way, much like an invisible observer. A WNET print advertisement evoked the direct cinema methodology: “The Louds are not actors. They had no scripts. They simply lived. And were filmed” (Ruoff xvii). Also, as *An American Family*’s production team explained, they had unlimited access to film stock and they “were asked not to stage or recreate anything for the camera but to try to capture as honestly as possible the daily life” of the Loud family (Raymond, “*An American Family*” 590). The direct cinema mode also favors specific stylistic and technical strategies, including long-duration takes using mobile, easily maneuverable, and synchronous film and sound equipment, with smaller crews. Direct cinema principles extend to the editing process too, as final films are to adhere as closely as possible to the actual order of events as they were filmed.

*An American Family* observes both the routine and exceptional events in the Louds’ lives from late May 1971 to January 1st, 1972. The principal film and sound crew consisted of the husband-and-wife team, Alan and Susan Raymond, who spent seven days a week, about ten to twelve hours each day with the Louds in their “rambling” ranch-style, twelve-room house. The Raymonds explained that although their “focal point” for filming was the Louds’ home, a routine day’s shooting involved the following: “We moved around a great deal: in and around the house, to the father’s office, to the high school, following one or more of the family members... Luncheons, rock band rehearsals, shopping expeditions, dance classes, dates, meeting someone at the airport – these were typical scenes” (Raymond, “*An American Family*” 591). There were also many scenes that took place around the Louds’ backyard swimming pool, as will be discussed further on.

To be clear, however, *An American Family* ignored the direct cinema ethos in some important ways; in addition to Gilbert's on-camera introduction and his occasionally recurring voiceover, the first full scene that introduces the Louds was shot during the last day the film crew spent with them, on New Year's 1972. Furthermore, Gilbert's voiceover reveals in that first scene that the Louds' marriage had ended four months earlier. As a result, the separation of Bill and Pat Loud is the key detail around which the episodes are organized, and the rest of the series consists of a seven-month-long flashback whose events are presented in chronological order for the most part. From its first scene, the series presents the Loud family as a failed one, and several subsequent episodes anticipate the revelation of the events that are finally shown during the ninth episode when Pat informs Bill that she wants a divorce.

One scene in particular provided suggestive clues about the troubled relationship between Bill and Pat Loud, and it also conveyed the superficial and privileged Santa Barbara lifestyle of both the couple and their social set. Included in the first episode, it takes place during a sunny cocktail party on the well-manicured grounds of a country club. The scene also is fascinating for evoking the characters and milieu of *The Underground Man*. Noteworthy are the shots of a well-liquored Bill as he shamelessly flirts with another woman – though his wife is nearby, and then makes inquiries about another woman who will be returning to Santa Barbara. Bill's demeanor evokes the novel's description of one of the principal characters: "In spite of the drink in his hand, and the dead-fish gleam of previous drinks in his eyes, his large handsome face was sober, almost lugubrious" (Macdonald 83). As the documentary scholar Jeffrey Ruoff has observed, the scene comes closest to "capturing the mood" of Ross Macdonald's novels, as it shows the "careless party chatter, the sunglasses, the liquor, the leathered faces, the Hawaiian shirts, and

the suggestion of extramarital affairs [that] combine to create an atmosphere of upper-middle-class suburban decadence, California-style” (62).

There was a storm of commentary about *An American Family* when it premiered in 1973. In addition to television reviewers and cultural critics, those who passed judgment on the Louds and the series included an array of professional experts – university professors, psychiatrists, sociologists, and anthropologists. The most famous and often-quoted response was issued by the prestigious and renowned anthropologist, Margaret Mead, whom Gilbert knew from his work on 1968’s *Margaret Mead’s New Guinea Journal*. Mead was enthusiastic about the documentary, claiming that it offered: “a new kind of art form...as new and as significant as the invention of drama or the novel—a new way in which people can learn to look at life, by seeing the real life of others interpreted by the camera” (Mead 21). A few of the less enthusiastic critics also made comparisons to other media forms, but in a disapproving way, including *Time* magazine, which dubbed the series the “ultimate soap opera,” while *The Nation* called it a “spy drama,” and *Newsweek* in 1974 declared it “a kind of diary of a mad household.” But, by far, most of the early commentary addressed – and often condemned – the Louds and their Santa Barbara lifestyle. Many critics were unabashed in their contempt for the Louds, including their decision to invite cameras into their private lives. Among many other disparaging things, they were called “media freaks” by *Newsweek* (Francke 58), and “living symbol[s] of a culture in decline” by *Time* magazine (Stengel 58). And, in one of the more curious responses, *The New Republic*’s Roger Rosenblatt claimed the Louds “were born a TV program waiting to be discovered” (23).

The cultural critic Shana Alexander offered an even nastier assessment of the Louds and their lifestyle:

[T]he most striking thing about the Louds is the unreality of their bleakly comfortable lives... At school, at home, at work and at play, these nice-looking people act like affluent zombies. Their shopping carts overflow, but their minds are empty...they embrace but do not feel, or are unable to communicate what they feel, or even to identify it. ...image is all. The family responds most to the appearance of success... The awful silence of the Louds finally becomes deafening. (28)

The family's upper-middle-class prosperity was the result of Bill Loud's lucrative and perfectly named company (given Craig Gilbert's implied thesis), American Western Foundries, which brokered parts for strip mining equipment. *An American Family* certainly foregrounds the Louds' affluence and material possessions so, not surprisingly, they were inevitably noted by scornful critics who cited them as evidence of California's superficiality. John O'Connor's review in *The New York Times* was typical:

The Louds are fairly ordinary inhabitants of that crowded American arena known as white middle class affluence. The parents and five children, the ranch house and four cars, the pool and assorted animals, project a surface image that would do credit to the average TV commercial. (AL-137)

The *Harper's* writer was more offended, calling the Louds "rich California showoffs" and complaining that the show "batters the audience with images of affluence" (Menaker 98, 99). However, the local writer Mary Every put things in perspective, clarifying the Louds' economic status (and proving that everything is relative): "The family is more affluent than average, but not pretentiously so. The several cars...show wear and tear; and the home looks lived in" (A-10).

Not surprisingly, critics addressed the validity of the project, its “reality” claims, and especially the potential influence of the cameras on the Louds. The *Santa Barbara News Press*’s Rick DuBrow, for example, noted the obvious: “One almost always feels that the Louds are aware of the cameras trained on them” (A-13). Indeed, several critics charged that if there were problems with *An American Family*’s objectivity, it was not the fault of the filmmakers, but of the Louds themselves. Thus, *Newsweek* alleged that they “play[ed] for the camera” (March 12, 1973, 49), and *The New York Times Magazine* called them “exhibitionists” (Roiphe 8). Many of the critical digs had more than the whiff of a cultural and geographic divide: between the East Coast and the West Coast. Nora Ephron, for example, complained that the series was the result of “the illiterate Californians trying to impress the erudite Easterners; [and] the boring, slothful family attempting to come up with a dramatic episode to justify all that footage” (55).

Of course, for the Louds, Santa Barbara was their hometown. For the filmmakers, it was a location. And for the producer, Craig Gilbert, it was the end of the frontier—and the antithesis, in many ways, of the East Coast. Discourses about *An American Family* often evoked stereotypes about Santa Barbara and issued judgments about its degraded “lifestyle” and about the superficiality of California in general. Although Bill Loud confessed that he had expected the series would make the family look like the “West Coast Kennedys,” *Esquire*’s wag disagreed, calling them “quaint Californians” (Miller 239). The Loud children were not immune to critical barbs. For example, *Commentary* magazine’s Sara Sanborn claimed that they displayed so little education or intelligence that the only evidence that these “happy, hedonistic children of the California sun do in fact go to school” are the scenes that show them there (79). Even their school, Santa Barbara High, was insulted by the series’ cameraman, Alan Raymond, who

exclaimed: “The classes were unbelievable. Classes in leadership qualities! These bizarre California-type classes!” (Ward 30).

Cued by Craig Gilbert’s own pre-series pronouncements, much of the East Coast versus West Coast discourse echoed the producer’s references to California and the lost frontier of the West. The New York novelist Anne Roiphe, author of *Up the Sandbox*, wrote a *New York Times Magazine* essay that offered the most provocative and strange ruminations on this point; her comments also evoked the East and West Coast antipathy. Although she concluded that, in general, the “Louds live desperate lives without rules or meaning,” Roiphe took a particular shine to one of the children, the seventeen-year-old, aspiring rock star Grant, whom she found warm and charming, though she worried about his future given what she called his “nonexistent” self discipline (41). Roiphe concluded that Grant was a victim of his time—and place: “I imagine that if Grant had lived on the frontier of America 150 years ago and had been forced to accomplish daily survival tasks, he would indeed have been a hero—or at least a man . . . However . . . he has many growing years ahead in which to make his own frontier and conquer it” (41). Then, perhaps to account for the ultimate failure of the Louds as a family, Roiphe adjudicated their cultural shortcomings, and by extension, Californians’:

My first realization was that all the avenues of culture as I have understood them were missing from the Loud family life. If there is such a thing as negative culture or culture minus, the Louds have it. The blaring sound of rock is the high point of creativity in the family. There are no crafts, no basket-weaving, no pottery or jewelry-making . . . There is no sense of the beyond . . . no real moral right or wrong . . . They value prettiness, success, and they do not seem to worry about those who do not make it. (51)

In contrast, Roiphe was much more impressed by her fellow New Yorker, Craig Gilbert, whom she called, “a soft and kind man, intellectual, artistic, an amateur anthropologist, a worrier, an introvert” (50).

Although Roiphe shared Gilbert’s East Coast perspective, at least a few critics specifically noted that the producer and *An American Family*’s film crews were all from New York, and some further charged that the series, from the outset, had been informed by a conflict between the two coasts. *The Atlantic* writer Abigail McCarthy was one of the few early critics who were sympathetic to the Louds; she charged that it was not the Louds, but Craig Gilbert himself who had failed in California – as a documentarian. Though she tended to agree with other critics that said *An American Family* showed a cliché family “whose unity seemed...meaningless...and temporary,” she concluded that it was really Craig Gilbert’s story – not the Louds’ (73). Later, in her autobiography, Pat Loud echoed McCarthy’s conclusion: “I think we were more real to Craig on celluloid than we ever were in the flesh” (Loud 104). But McCarthy went further in her critique of Gilbert, by attending to his problematic ethics. Specifically, she chastised the producer for using “a living, breathing family” as content for his preconceived form; that is, his Ross Macdonald vision of Santa Barbara/Southern California (73, 76).

Certainly, critics who read the Louds as representative of Southern California and as the antithesis of the East were primed by *An American Family*’s pattern of allusions to the stereotypical cultural divide, which is most explicitly introduced during the often discussed second episode, when Pat visits her eldest son Lance in New York City. Interestingly, the pattern is introduced via Lance, when he tells a new friend at the Chelsea Hotel about his hometown of Santa Barbara and its differences from New York: “Everybody is so much more pretty but they

don't have minds. They're all so stupid. [Being a kid in Santa Barbara was like] being a little white mouse entrapped in a box." Then, after returning to Santa Barbara, Pat confirms the pattern when she tells Bill her first impressions of New York City were that: "It was all so strange and different," though she admits the city is a more fitting environment for Lance. Then, in the fifth episode, as if on cue, Pat addresses the early-1970s fear that California was fated to "drop into the ocean": "Yes we succumb to hysteria about every six months... The theory is that all of California is like Sodom and Gomorrah . . . God's wrath and all that rot."

For their part, Bill and Pat Loud acknowledged their unambiguous recognition of the East/West conflict. In response to the torrent of nasty criticism about her family and their choice to be documentary subjects, Pat immediately went on the defensive. In an interview with Colette Dowling from the women's magazine, *Family Circle*, Pat acknowledged the cultural power of the East Coast, and she did so with some characteristically California style: "When a New York producer says, 'Gee your family's neat; I'd like to do a television show on you,' it's like being handed an Oscar" (Dowling 38). But Pat was even more definitive in her autobiography about what she called the "East-West cultural lag" between her family and the filmmakers, and she suggested its impact on the documentary itself: "what was really going on was an encounter between the inarticulate, optimistic, shallow, materialistic Californians and the gloomy, brilliant, neurotic, verbal, two-faced New Yorkers" (95). Pat likewise dismissed some of the negative critical commentary about her family in a *Santa Barbara News Press* interview with Jon Nordheimer: "It was just the intellectuals from the East who looked down on us with such sadness and pity. We were the Western barbarians raising a generation of more barbarians" (C2). Bill also weighed in with his own blunt critique of the East Coast filmmakers, telling Rick

DuBrow: “They had a preconceived liberal leftist view that our values are wrong” (A-13).

Abigail McCarthy largely agreed with the Louds regarding the producer’s East Coast bias:

What empathy could the verbal and socially aware New York producers and film crew summon for laconic and largely extroverted Californians who are strangers to self-examination? The experience is different. The artist’s struggle to master materials is, in this case, reflected in finding fault with the materials – faulting, that is, the Louds, the way they lived and met their problems. (75)

The often shown, and inevitably noted, kidney-bean-shaped, turquoise-colored family swimming pool was a tidy symbol, for both the filmmakers and critics, of the shortcomings of the Louds and Southern California. The swimming pool was also emblematic of the cultural divide between the East and West Coasts. Certainly, the pool effectively conveyed the Louds’ lifestyle, which *Vogue*’s writer called the “American Dream, California division” (Brown 68), but it was also considered evidence of what Sara Sanborn deemed the family’s “idle” and “unoccupied” lives (79). Certainly, as a quintessential signifier of decadence and hedonism, the swimming pool is ubiquitous in representations of Southern California, and *An American Family* is punctuated by noteworthy poolside scenes. For example, after Pat asks Bill to move out of the family’s home, several sequences show her, apparently depressed, lying alone by the pool. Equally dramatic is a scene that takes place during the seventh episode, when a somewhat stern Pat and a more easygoing Bill lecture their seventeen-year-old son Grant about the error of his misspent summer days. The scene is immediately preceded by shots of Bill sunbathing shirtless, with a sun reflector, and during the scene with Grant, both Pat and Bill are in their swimsuits and are shiny with sun lotion. As a result, it appears that their frivolous sunbathing has been interrupted by the more serious work of issuing a parental lecture. The pool’s appearances

seemed especially to incense critics, with many using them to support their judgments about the troubled communication between Pat and Bill as a couple, between them and their kids, and as evidence of the family's shallow and purposeless lives. Anne Roiphe was so provoked that she exaggerated the frequency of the family's use of the pool – and she summoned her most charged metaphor to insult them: “When they're in the house they lie by the pool which, clear blue as it was, I began to see as a fetid swamp breeding a kind of fly that gives us all a fatal case of cultural malaria” (52). Even a *Santa Barbara News Press* writer, Helen Benson, scoffed that Pat Loud's reportedly limited social life might have improved after her divorce, if she had spent less time at the pool (C-12). Pat Loud later got some revenge against her critics, especially Roiphe's “fetid swamp” barb, when she opened her autobiography, *Pat Loud: A Woman's Story*, with the news that, “I still live in the house, but the pool is empty now (drained out for an acid bath)” (9).



*An American Family* remained a subject of popular discourse for several years after it was first broadcast in 1973. It also inspired a similar project, the 1974 BBC production *A Family*. In the States, it was parodied in the mid-1970s on *Saturday Night Live*, in sketches about “The Louds” – a family that never talks but only shouts at each other. Then, in 1979, Albert Brooks famously satirized Craig Gilbert's project and its disastrous effects on the Louds in the feature mockumentary, *Real Life*, about a suburban family that at first welcomes the attention of the comedian-cum-documentary producer (played by Brooks), until his constant observation and

meddling destroys them. Of course, more importantly, although it took almost twenty years, *An American Family* also spawned reality television.

In 1990, as the reality television scholar Mark Andrejevic has noted, the producers Jon Murray and Mary Ellis Bunim cited *An American Family* as the direct inspiration for their still-running MTV series, *The Real World*, and that their specific goal was to “remake [the series] for the MTV generation” (71). Today’s reality television represents a familiar and lucrative genre with many formats. The category that focuses on what Andrejevic has defined as “the comprehensive surveillance of the daily lives and unscripted interactions” of people who agree to make their lives public is present in the shows *Big Brother*, *Jersey Shore*, and *The Real World*, among many others (64). However, in such shows there is no pretense about providing an unmediated view of reality, as in direct cinema. Instead, they combine the direct cinema style and cinema vérité strategies because, as Andrejevic notes, the camera functions as a “deliberate provocation” to the shows’ “castmates” (71). However, the foregrounding of location in *An American Family* is echoed and has become a convention in many contemporary reality shows that use familiar and often easily stereotyped locations to inform their organization and to serve thematic ends, including *The Real Housewives* and *The Real World* franchises. Specifically, in such shows well-known cities and other familiar locations function as simplistic markers of cultural and social difference and are suggestive of the characters that inhabit them and of the conflicts that animate them. Thus, recalling Craig Gilbert’s selection of Santa Barbara because it evoked a host of useful connotations about California and the West Coast, a number of reality shows similarly deploy reductive location-based stereotypes – of Orange County’s breast-implanted blondes and Beverly Hills’ mansion-dwelling socialites in *The Real Housewives*, for example. Likewise, MTV’s *Jersey Shore* features a set of castmates that not only reflect but

proudly declare their allegiance to the stereotypes associated with their particular location – of tanned, aggressive, hard-drinking young “guidos” and “guidettes.”

In April 2011, thirty-eight years after making their famous and infamous television debut, the Loud family and their Santa Barbara lifestyle were resurrected in the HBO feature film *Cinema Vérité* (Sheri Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini). Focusing on the production of *An American Family*, the film emphasizes the problematic and ethically challenged relationship Craig Gilbert developed with the Louds. Not surprisingly, the scenes set in the Louds’ carefully art-directed mid-century house with its often-visible shiny blue swimming pool are prominent. Thus, the prediction *Time* magazine’s Richard Stengel made in 1983 has come true: “it seems clear that when the map of Television Land is drawn, the [multi] room Loud ranch house will be as much a landmark as the Cleaver family’s two-story white colonial” (74).

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## Book Review

### *The Emancipated Spectator*

Jacques Rancière. Trans. Gregory Elliott. New York: Verso, 2009.

Frank P. Tomasulo

The work of Jacques Rancière, the prolific French philosopher, aesthetician, pedagogue, and political thinker, has had a bit of a renaissance in cinema studies circles, as evident by (1) recent volumes devoted to his work, such as *The Political Thought of Jacques Rancière: Creating Equality* by Todd May and Philippe Deranty's *Jacques Rancière: Key Concepts*; (2) his inclusion in the pantheon of film theorists in *Film, Theory and Philosophy: The Key Thinkers* by Felicity Colman; (3) assorted other translations and analyses; (4) the inevitable Rancière blog; and (5) numerous international conferences and seminars, as well as a special symposium at the Columbia University Seminars on Cinema.

His earlier *Film Fables* and *The Future of the Image* have been extolled by everyone from *Cahiers du cinéma* to Slavoj Žižek. These earlier volumes elucidated a cinematic consciousness, intent on establishing that we are all responsible for our own performativity in the world and for the politics we make of “emancipated” experience; according to Rancière, “Every spectator is already an actor in her story; every actor, every man of action, is the spectator of the same story” (17). His two earlier books note that the role of the viewer in art and film theory often revolves around a theatrical concept of the spectacle. Likewise, the masses subjected to the society of spectacle have traditionally been seen as aesthetically and politically passive; in response, according to Rancière, both artists and thinkers have sought to transform the spectator into an active agent and the spectacle into a performance.

As a follow-up to *The Future of the Image*, *The Emancipated Spectator* takes a different approach to this attempted liberation. Beginning by asking exactly what we mean by political art

or the politics of art, Rancière looks at what the tradition of critical art, and the desire to insert art into life, has achieved. Has the decades-long militant critique of the consumption of images and commodities become, instead, a melancholic affirmation of their omnipotence?

Unfortunately for cineastes, this follow-up volume shows little concern for the cinema spectator per se, or at least not enough for the author to read and/or cite the relevant and extensive literature on the subject. Indeed, most of the five chapters in this short book are devoted to theater, painting, performance art, and photography; any gleanings about and applications to motion pictures must be extrapolated by the reader. Even so, this sort of intellectual exercise *may* be worthwhile for film/media scholars, in that the text-spectator question may never have been adequately resolved, replaced as it was by “the historical turn” in cinema-media studies during the 1980s and 1990s.

So, Rancière’s proposal here, to “reconstruct the network of presuppositions that place the question of the spectator at the heart of the discussion” (2), is always a useful endeavor. However, the passivity versus activity of movie viewers has been contested for decades, with the debate running the gamut from the “monkey see, monkey do” school to the “free-will” and/or “resisting” paradigms. Even Rancière’s thesis – that “emancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting,” because “seeing and doing themselves belong to the structure of domination and subjection” (13) – is hardly news. Nor is his notion that “critical interpretation of the system has become an element of the system itself” (37).

Likewise, Rancière’s ideas about an active “emancipated spectator,” intellectually and ideologically freed from the shackles of mainstream commodification and right-wing reification, have been around at least since the days of Piscator, Brecht, and Artaud. For Rancière, such

emancipation involves “blurring the boundaries ... between individuals and members of a collective body” (19). In short, “Individuality for all!” (35).

Although his emphasis on live theater as “a community site” may seem promising from a progressive point of view, Rancière concedes that the conditions of reception of film and television are different from those in the theater (16), noting that “neighborhood cinemas have been replaced by multiplexes that supply each sociologically determinate audience a type of art designed and formatted to suit it” (81). Spectators must become “active interpreters, who develop their own translations in order to appropriate the ‘story’ and make it their own” (22). Again, this is ground well plowed by Barthes, Eco, and many film theoreticians in the 1970s and 1980s.

The most formidable and original piece here is the title essay, which examines the relationship of the spectator to his/her community, suggesting that there are not distinctive modes of spectatorship, only “equivalent rights” to spectatorship, with “no gap between to be filled between intellectuals and workers, ... actors and spectators” (20). The other essays cover roughly the same terrain: the idea that most theories of art, theater, and film depict recipients as aesthetically and politically passive and that artists and thinkers must transform the spectator into a committed agent and the spectacle into a communal performance. This may be a “twice-told tale,” but it is worth repeating.

In the concluding chapter, Rancière advocates for a “pensive” spectator, derived from a pensive image (122). This entails “something in the image which resists thought” on the part of both the artist and the spectator (131). His exemplar of such pensiveness is Jean-Luc Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, because its video montage detaches images from the habitual business of

storytelling to valorize “the fraternity of metaphors,” images detached from narrative to “fashion a different ‘history’” (130).

For those who can extrapolate messages about cinema from Rancière’s verbiage about art in general (and theater in particular), perhaps this variation-on-a-theme volume will provide valuable new lessons or at least a refresher course on film viewing to cinema scholars. If nothing else, the author’s call for a militant individual and collective spectator who can resist the snares of passivity and despair in the face of powerful consumerist spectacles may help maintain morale in the face of a co-opted and fractured contemporary “aesthetic community” (57). Emancipated spectators of the world unite! You have nothing to lose but your 3-D glasses!

In the final analysis, Rancière’s pleas may be just more/mere words about rebellion, perhaps inspired by Louis Aragon’s claim that “each time there is a revolution, the grammar has to be changed first.” Similarly, Annette Michelson’s notion of the “radical aspiration” suggested that changes in the aesthetic dimension could result in change in the material world. These vulgar Brechtian pronouncements may not tell the entire story of the revolutionary efficacy of art and/or intellectuals insofar as (in my opinion) social transformation happens in the streets, not in museums or on movie (or iPod) screens. Perhaps Eve Democracy (Anne Wiazensky) had a better sense of historical determinism when she acknowledged (in Godard’s *One Plus One*) that “there is only one way to be an intellectual revolutionary and that is to give up being an intellectual.”

## Book Review

**Yannis Tzioumakis. *American Independent Cinema: An Introduction*.  
Rutgers University Press, 2006.**

**Elisabeth Woronzoff**

Yannis Tzioumakis's *American Independent Cinema: An Introduction* (2006) offers a comprehensive account of the political economies shaping independent film. Tzioumakis not only presents a thorough historical overview of independent film from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present era, but also an in-depth examination of the relationship between independent cinema and mainstream Hollywood. This differentiates *American Independent Cinema* from texts such as Geoff Andrew's *Stranger than Paradise* (1998), which focuses on independent directors such as Todd Hayes, Quentin Tarantino, and the Coen brothers, and from Greg Merritt's *Celluloid Mavericks* (1999), which sees independent films as essentially separate from mainstream Hollywood.

By comparison, Tzioumakis finds that independent cinema is more than a simple, uncomplicated response to high-profit Hollywood blockbuster movies and mass popularity. By demonstrating the intersections that exist between the lines of filmmaking and how the changing conditions of independent cinema inform mainstream Hollywood, Tzioumakis reveals their multiple correlations. Thus, Tzioumakis illustrates an important conclusion: while the definition and influence of independent cinema is variable and constantly shifting, it has long influenced mainstream Hollywood, filmmakers, actors, and audiences.

*American Independent Cinema* opens with film critic Emanuel Levy's definition of independent film, which declares: "ideally, an indie is a fresh, low-budget movie with a gritty style and offbeat subject matter that express the filmmaker's personal vision" (1). As in the volume by Tzioumakis, Levy's text does not offer a simple definition of independent cinema. On

the contrary, Levy's *Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of American Independent Film* (1999) examines the range of factors that shape independent films. Levy argues that there is no set guideline for indie film production. This is where Tzioumakis is in partial agreement, as he argues that a singular definition of independent cinema is impossible and arguably a misnomer. Rather, it is imperative to deconstruct the American film industry by asking specific questions such as: how does one define independent film? What is an independent film? What cultural, political, and economic factors shape an independent film and independent film practice? Most importantly, what is independent cinema's relationship with mainstream Hollywood? Thus, Tzioumakis sets the tone for *American Independent Cinema* by refusing to chronicle a straightforward linear, independent history. As he explains, the identity of independent cinema is an influential yet mercurial facet of American culture and film practice that warrants examination from a critical perspective.

*American Independent Cinema* is chronologically divided. "Part I: Mid 1920s- late 1940s: The Studio Years" contextualizes the emergence of the mainstream film industry oligopoly. Once the studios had secured movie standardization as a means to maximize capital, independent directors, production-units, and distributors faced controlled creative conditions. To illustrate that point, Tzioumakis illustrates that the Big Five movie studios (Paramount, Loew's [MGM], 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox, Warner Bros, and RKO) and the Little Three (Columbia, Universal, and United Artists) were the companies holding the majority of the industrial power. Throughout the period of classical Hollywood cinema, these studios operated as agents that fueled monopolization and self-advantageous practices while also extending oppressive trade and distribution policies onto independent filmmakers.

It is important to note that the mainstream studios stood as the creative and productive markers that the independents opposed. To clarify this point Tzioumakis, ventures into the early 1910s to contextualize independent cinema's pre-history. He notes that "the discourse of independent cinema appears perhaps for the first time in 1908–9 with the formation of the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC, also known as the Patents Company or simply the Trust) and its antagonists, which became known as independents" (22). The MPPC then formed the General Film Company (GFC) as a method to control the market and monopolize distribution. However, by February 1909, the Anti-Trust Film Company of Chicago, and about one hundred film companies that were initially denied membership to the MPPC, challenged this control, and "these 'unlicensed outlaws' attached the label independent to their practices [thus becoming] part of an independent movement" (22). Tzioumakis explains that a defining feature of early independent filmmaking was "a production company's refusal to succumb to the pressures applied by one or more organizations that actively seek total control of the film market" (21). This type of power play, divisible by money and creativity, becomes a central issue that spans the decades of the mainstream's and independent's histories.

Part I provides a crucial contribution to the field of film studies because Tzioumakis demonstrates that independent cinema is not just a contemporary entity. Instead, independent cinema has a legacy that is as far-reaching, multifaceted, and as important as that of mainstream Hollywood. Thus, *American Independent Cinema* explores an approach that considers and illustrates commonalities, meanings, and representations of film history while illuminating and expanding our historical understanding of film studies. In "Part II: Late 1940s – Late 1960s: The Transitional Years," Tzioumakis explains that the era is marked by three key elements: the Paramount Decree that required new distribution rules, exploitation as a distribution strategy, and

catering to the burgeoning youth market. The Supreme Court found the Big Five and Little Three guilty of monopolization, thus ending block-booking and forcing the “the studios to divest themselves of their theater chains and therefore lose control of exhibition” (103). Inevitably, this made room for independent production to gain power through the adoption of specific distribution tactics such as arranging individual or multi-picture deals, selling to the highest bidder, competing for better access to theatres, etc. (125). The developing financial stability also made room to market exploitation films, such as *Cocaine Fiends* (O’Connor, 1935), *Reefer Madness* (Gasnier, 1936) and *Assassin of Youth* (Clifton, 1937) that depicted the “gratification of forbidden curiosity” and peaked at issues pertaining to venereal disease, drug use, homosexuality, etc. (139). Tzioumakis discusses aspects of the youth market as indications of trends that could contribute to a film’s financial success. Tzioumakis’s focus on teenagers highlights one of *American Independent Cinema*’s strongest aspects. Despite Tzioumakis’s emphasis on political economies, he situates the trade and industry histories within a larger social and cultural context, and thus presents American independent cinema as an intersectional, rather than a self-determining, cultural entity in American culture.

In “Part III: Late 1960s – Present: Contemporary American Independent Cinema,” Tzioumakis contextualizes key changes in the social and cultural fabric of both independent and mainstream film. Box-office failure of expensive films, audience decline, the closure of theatres, the rise in television’s popularity, and the outdated Production Codes pushed the intertwined industries toward a paradigm shift. Tzioumakis takes time to develop the dawn of the Hollywood Renaissance as an era that “combined a mixture of exploitation strategies, art-house filmmaking, emphasis on American themes and a new marriage between independent film production and the majors” (170). For instance, Tzioumakis notes that films such as *The*

*Graduate* (Nichols, 1967) and *Easy Rider* (Hopper, 1969) are radically different, aesthetically and thematically from the films being produced by the majors in the late 1960s. As Tzioumakis points out, the New Hollywood films' confrontation of traditional morals and conventions of mainstream America and American filmmaking mark the paradigm shift. However, the new auteur cinema fueled the development of mini-majors and major-independents. As a consequence, in many instances, the process of institutionalizing independent filmmaking depended on independents' relationship with a "conglomerate parent" (224). This turn at once contested and buttressed the independent framework. Corporate funding granted some form of autonomy, but it also challenged creative expression, and so curiously, conglomerate parents garnered the financial support necessary to ensure a concrete independent movement (249). The Sundance Film Festival, the Independent Feature Project, and the International Film Channel support independent cinema, but also reinforce what Tzioumakis refers to as Indiewood, or the "mix of practices associated with the majors with elements associated with independent filmmaking" (265). Clearly, the popularity and fiscal success of contemporary independent cinema, festivals, and channels renders the independent industry akin to Hollywood.

By way of examples, *American Independent Cinema* is imbued with case studies that range from an analysis of Cagney Production to examinations of *The Defiant Ones* (Kramer, 1958), *On the Beach* (Kramer, 1959), *Foxy Brown* (Hill, 1974) and *Clerks* (Smith 1994), to showcases of work by John Cassavetes and John Sayles. The case studies are separated from the body of the chapter and extrapolated upon at the conclusion of each section. Tzioumakis references the case studies in order to provide context. While one needs to page back to appreciate how the case studies figure into the discussions as a whole, they provide a useful basis for course discussions and assignments.

*American Independent Cinema* is quite condensed. In some instances, a more thorough engagement with the subject matter could benefit a reader who is not familiar with existing accounts of American cinema. For example, Tzioumakis briefly discusses the works of Poverty Row Films; films with a “low quality and cheap look...shoddy sets, dim lighting, non existent camera work and extremely poor sound recording” (63). Yet, as Tzioumakis points out, Poverty Row Films also acted as an avenue for ethnic and race films that fostered their audience’s sense of cultural identity. A closer analysis of some of Poverty Row films in relation to Hollywood would provide readers with a fuller view of the early foundations of independent cinema. However, simply by pointing to these historical tidbits, Tzioumakis illuminates the viable pasts of the cinematic histories erased or mediated by large-scale capitalism.

Hence, Tzioumakis makes palpable the need for further research, and positions *American Independent Cinema* as a decisive text not only in the field of film studies, but in a number of other fields such as cultural studies, communication studies, economics, political sciences, etc.

For Tzioumakis, the independent industry is a relentlessly shifting entity that simultaneously challenges and advances culture. As he concludes, “to say the independent filmmaking does not exist anymore, this is far removed from the truth. The label might have changed, but the type of film it signifies continues to thrive and represent the most likely source of original and challenging material in American cinema” (284). Thus, Tzioumakis implores readers to examine the strengths and potential power of independent art and media. Indeed, *American Independent Cinema: An Introduction* bolsters the identity of independent cinema as a powerful contender in the film industry.