THE STICKS, THE NABES, AND THE BROADWAYS: U.S. FILM DISTRIBUTION, 1935–1940

By

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Chapter One

Introduction

The Study of Distribution and U.S. Film History

The circulation of popular cinema has long been governed by "hierarchies of access." Shaped by economic as well as cultural logics, these distribution hierarchies determine when, where, and how films reach different audiences.[1] In the classical studio era of the 1920s through the 1950s, the business practices of the vertically integrated Hollywood majors created particularly complex hierarchies of access within the domestic theatrical market. Films' releases were gradual, starting in downtown first-run theaters in major urban markets and then moving into urban neighborhood houses and other, smaller markets around the country. Each theater occupied a clear position within this lengthy series of subsequent runs, and a film could spend months or even years winding its way from a Manhattan picture palace to a 150-seat theater in a western mining town. Through this process, the majors could reach all corners of the U.S. with a relatively small number of film prints—an average of 250 per title.

These theatrical hierarchies no longer obtain, having been replaced by other forms of tiering and phasing across films' releases. In contrast to the pattern described above, the default distribution model for contemporary releases is "saturation booking" into thousands of U.S. theaters (and often foreign ones as well).[2] Recent releases illustrate this

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[1] The term "hierarchies of access" comes from Richard Maltby, "New Cinema Histories," in *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies*, eds. Richard Maltby, Daniel Biltereyst, and Philippe Meers (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 18.

[2] In the mid-1930s, there were around 18,000 movie theaters (virtually all single-screen) in the U.S.

practice. As of late August, the fifteen highest-grossing films of 2015 all played on approximately 3,500 or more U.S. screens during their opening weekends.[3] "Ultra-wide" debuts on 4,000-plus screens are now common; these invariably involve a film occupying multiple screens at individual multiplexes. More modest releases, less likely to involve such multiple-screen bookings, might include 2,500 to 3,000 screens. Over the course of a film's run at a multiplex, it can be moved between larger and smaller auditoria according to demand.

Some features of this system are roughly analogous to the older distribution system—for example, the assignment of the largest theaters to the early runs. However, there are crucial differences: in the contemporary system, ticket prices are not tiered according to weeks in release or auditorium size; and though there may still be a hierarchy of screens within a multiplex, there is no longer an elaborate, run-based hierarchy of theaters within each local exhibition market.[4] Films tend to stay simultaneously in multiple local theaters for several weeks before moving into scattered

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According to the data from the National Association of Theatre Owners, there are today about 5,700 theaters and 40,000 total screens. The trade press generally designates as "wide" any release involving more than 600 screens, though most major-studio releases open on 2,500 or more. Increasingly, film releases are coordinated globally in order to combat piracy and capitalize upon concentrated advertising campaigns. See, e.g., Charles Acland, *Screen Traffic: Movies, Multiplexes, and Global Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

[3] Examples include: *Minions* (4,301 screens), *Jurassic World* (4,274 screens), *Furious 7* (4,004 screens), *Ant-Man* (3,856 screens), *Mad Max: Fury Road* (3,702 screens), and *Pitch Perfect 2* (3,473 screens). Slightly more modest releases include the romantic comedy *Trainwreck* (3,171 screens), the boxing melodrama *Southpaw* (2,772 screens), and the British animated feature *Shaun the Sheep* (2,360 screens). Release data from Box Office Mojo, www.boxofficemojo.com.

[4] Some screenings command higher ticket prices for premiums such as 3D and/or IMAX screens.

and increasingly marginal discount houses and other release windows.[5] These non-theatrical windows—including airplanes, hotels, DVD/Blu-ray, streaming and on-demand services, and premium and cable television—have replaced the once-intricate theatrical subsequent-run market. They have also transformed the commodity status and cultural life of films.[6] This project seeks to identify and analyze the systematic range of strategies once used to bring Hollywood films to the domestic theatrical market. In so doing, it explores what these strategies reveal about Hollywood's conception of its audiences, which, I will demonstrate, were described and understood in terms of theaters and programming practices.

To study broad patterns in release strategies is, essentially, to study film distribution. The film industry's distribution sector is the site of three major activities, chief among them the negotiation of agreements that place films in theaters and other exhibition outlets. Though this process is commonly referred to as "film selling," films are actually *rented* to theaters rather than sold outright. Some film selling is done through a distributor's headquarters or "home office," but most is done through its network of regional exchange offices. Distribution companies also coordinate the transport and delivery of film prints (and, in the modern era of film distribution, Digital Cinema Packages, video masters, or broadcast feeds) to exhibition venues. Finally, distributors

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5 A more graduated theatrical release pattern persists for art and some "indie" cinema.

6 Robert C. Allen, "Reimagining the History of the Experience of Cinema in a Post-Moviegoing Age," in Maltby, Biltereyst and Meers, 41–57. The enduring primacy of the theatrical experience in the era of home video and digital TV is addressed in Kevin J. Corbett, "The Big Picture: Theatrical Moviegoing, Digital Television, and beyond the Substitution Effect," *Cinema Journal* 40, no. 2 (2001): 17–34.

coordinate advertising for the films they sell. This process includes the management of national ad campaigns as well as the development and dissemination of materials—such as press kits—for exhibitors to use in local ad campaigns.[7] There has long been a call from film historians for greater scholarly attention to distribution as a site of power—and as the determining link between the domain of production, or films themselves, and the experiences of particular audiences in particular locations. According to Richard Maltby,

> the history of Hollywood's 'monopoly of discourse' is intertwined with the history of the major companies' monopoly of American screens. Without a more detailed understanding of how cinema circulated, of what was shown where, and of how the industry's overarching economic conditions determined the form and manner of those shows, historical commentary on the relationship between the content of motion pictures and the experiences of their audiences must remain in the realm of speculation.[8]

This project explores domestic distribution of Hollywood cinema during the era that industry historian Tino Balio has termed the "mature oligopoly." I focus specifically on the mid-1930s through the early 1940s—after the restructurings associated with the transition to sound and the onset of Great Depression and prior to the industrial shifts

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[7] A definition of distribution written in 1927 is offered in Halsey, Stuart, & Co., "The Motion Picture Industry as a Basis for Bond Financing," *The American Film Industry,* ed. Tino Balio (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 205. A more recent primer on the distribution sector can be found in John W. Cones, *The Feature Film Distribution Deal: A Critical Analysis of the Single Most Important Film Industry Agreement* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997), 142–5. In his article on pressbooks at Warner Brothers, Mark Miller classifies promotion as a separate industrial sector, in part because advertising departments sometimes had their own offices and corporate structures. See Mark Miller, "Helping Exhibitors: Pressbooks at Warner Bros. in the Late 1930s," *Film History* 6, no. 2 (1994): 188–96.

[8] Richard Maltby, "The Standard Exhibition Contract and the Unwritten History of the Classical Hollywood Cinema," *Film History* 25, nos. 1–2 (2013): 149.

stemming from World War II and antitrust litigation. The form of distribution in this era was defined by the vertical integration of the film industry's production, distribution, and exhibition sectors. The logic of vertical integration encouraged robust, steady production output to keep screens occupied and concentrate profits in the exhibition sector. As is well known, this configuration allowed the “Big Five” firms (Paramount, Loew's/MGM, Warner Bros., 20th Century Fox, and RKO), which owned or were affiliated with the majority of the nation's most profitable theaters, to secure favorable treatment for their own films and shut out competition.

The preferential treatment given to the affiliated theaters and the onerous conditions placed upon independent theaters led to a steady stream of legal challenges throughout the 1930s and 1940s. These actions culminated in a 1948 Supreme Court antitrust decree, known as the Paramount Decision, which required that the majors divest themselves of their theater holdings and abandon long-standing distribution practices such as block booking and blind buying.[9] The Paramount Decision and the subsequent dismantling of vertical integration are widely understood to have been key factors in the rise of so-called "post-studio-era" Hollywood filmmaking—a regime marked by, among other things, package production and the casualization of studio labor.

The Paramount Decision and its contexts (including the practices that led to it, the various court cases it involved, and its effects) loom large in scholarly accounts of the U.S. film industry. One of the first major economic analyses of the film industry was Mae

[9] Blind buying refers to the selling/renting of films based on titles or production information alone. (Block booking is discussed below and in Chapter 2.)

Huettig's 1944 book *Economic Control of the Motion Picture Industry*.[10] Huettig's research, first published in her 1942 dissertation at the University of Pennsylvania, was conducted in the midst of the judicial wrangling that produced a 1940 consent decree (a precursor to the 1948 decision). According to Wyatt Phillips, though Huettig made "no direct arguments" about what should be done to address the problem of economic control in the film industry, her analysis nonetheless reflected "the federal government's antimonopoly perspective" and offered "a rationale for forced divestiture."[11] Another landmark study is Michael Conant's 1960 book *Antitrust in the Motion Picture Industry*, which considers the impacts of the Paramount Decision on distributor-exhibitor relations and identifies various means by which the majors maintained oligopolistic control despite divestment. The majors' control of production and distribution meant that independent theaters often found their situations little improved relative to pre-1948 arrangements.[12] These classic studies remain widely cited by historians of the film industry and particularly of distribution, and it has become a truism that vertical integration and the practices of film distribution were crucial to building and sustaining oligopoly power in the film industry.

Economists, many of whom reject or downplay the purportedly baleful impact of

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[10] Mae Huettig, *Economic Control of the Motion Picture Industry: A Study in Industrial Organization* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1944).

[11] Wyatt Phillips, "'A Maze of Intricate Relationships': Mae D. Huettig and Early Forays into Film Industry Studies," *Film History* 27, no. 1 (2015): 136.

[12] Michael Conant, *Antitrust in the Motion Picture Industry: Economic and Legal Analysis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960).

vertical integration on fair competition, have attempted to explain precisely why and how these industrial structures and practices emerged—and to what ends they functioned. Film industry economics and regulation are of interest to scholars not just because of the peculiarities of the film commodity itself but also because film-related litigation and rulings, including the Paramount Decision, have become landmarks in U.S. anti-trust case law.

The practice of block booking has attracted particular attention. Block booking was a process by which an exhibitor signed on for a group, or block, of films from a program offered by the distributor. Blocks could include a studio's entire seasonal program of over 50 features and accompanying short films. Though a compulsory, whole-program approach to film selling has come to characterize classical-era distribution, it was used with only a minority of theaters—mostly small independents.[13] But those venues that were forced to take entire programs found the practice exceedingly unfair and detrimental, and they brought scores of lawsuits against the majors and the more powerful theater chains.[14]

In a 1983 study that compared the film industry's selling practices with those of the diamond industry, Roy W. Kenney and Benjamin Klein argue that block booking functioned to thwart "oversearching" on the part of film buyers (i.e. exhibitors) within the

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[13] For instance, in the 1938–1939 season, around 20% of the theaters that booked with Fox exchanges bought its entire seasonal program. Roy W. Kenney and Benjamin Klein, "The Economics of Block Booking," *Journal of Law and Economics* 26, no. 3 (1983): 518.

[14] Some of these cases are catalogued in Conant, 227–231.

context of an average-priced film program.[15] That is, it prevented exhibitors from negotiating for lower prices on (or rejecting outright) individual films that were suspected or confirmed to be duds—worth less than their rental cost. In so doing, block booking minimized transaction costs associated with film selling.[16] The "oversearching" thesis has been challenged on the grounds that it does not account well for the common practice of post-contractual adjustments (for instance, early terminations or holdovers) negotiated between distributors and exhibitors. F. Andrew Hanssen argues that, instead, "block booking was simply intended to cheaply provide in quantity a product needed in quantity" ("a claim made by movie producers of the time").[17] A rejoinder from Kenney and Klein contends that there having been some flexibility in the enforcement of film contracts does not mean that distributors did not wish to prevent exhibitors from rejecting films in general "or that there was no contractual constraint on exhibitors." They argue that distributors had an incentive to prevent cancellations, because it was something of a zero-sum game: the standard exhibition contract had no requirement that a cancelled film be replaced by another from the same distributor.[18]

In exploring the problem of cancellations, holdovers, and other ex post contract

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15 To be clear, Kenney and Klein mean "average-priced" in the formal economic sense and not in a colloquial sense.

16 Kenney and Klein, "The Economics of Block Booking," 539.

17 F. Andrew Hanssen, "The Block Booking of Films Re-Examined," *Journal of Law and Economics* 43, no. 2 (2000): 395–7.

18 Roy W. Kenney and Benjamin Klein, "How Block Booking Facilitated Self-Enforcing Film Contracts," *Journal of Law and Economics* 43, no. 2 (2000): 428–31.

adjustments, Hanssen has put forth a bold argument about not just block booking but the function of vertical integration itself. He contends that, by providing producer-distributors a stake in exhibition revenue, the ownership of theaters allowed them to extract benefits from the otherwise disadvantageous situation of having their poorly performing films pulled from screens early. That is, the revenue lost by the distribution sector due to a film's early termination could effectively be compensated for by an increase in revenue in the exhibition sector generated by a better-performing film. Using distribution data from major-affiliated and independent theaters, Hanssen demonstrates that extra-contractual adjustments were far more common in the affiliated venues. Further, the data indicate that affiliated theaters terminated releases from fellow Big Five members at greater rates than those of the Little Three, while the independent theaters did not.[19]

Hanssen's hypothesis contradicts the idea that vertical integration served primarily as a hedge against failure by guaranteeing producer-distributors a certain number of venues and bookings for their own films. Though the majors' first-run flagships in the key cities were primarily devoted to their own films, this favoritism did not extend to the "ordinary" Big Five theaters that made up the bulk of their affiliated venues (but not necessarily the bulk of their profits). Though he rejects one "hedge against failure" thesis, he embraces an alternative one: the idea that vertical integration essentially distributed risk across sectors by allowing for a loss in one (distribution) to be counterbalanced by a

[19] F. Andrew Hanssen, “Vertical Integration during the Hollywood Studio Era," *Journal of Law and Economics* 53, no. 3 (2010): 519–43.

gain in another (exhibition). And while this did not translate into favoritism toward a particular major's films in its own theaters, it did involve preferential treatment toward the films of *all* the majors at the expense of those from non-integrated companies. The evidence thus lends credence to accusations of collusion and conspiracy against the Big Five made by antitrust critics in the 1930s and 1940s.[20]

Like many economists, Hanssen is more sanguine about this collusion; he claims that it simply "allowed film companies to better match films to audiences so that consumers could see more of the movies they valued most."[21] This perspective downplays how maximizing efficiency for the majors required "a network of independent exhibitors running operations of marginal profitability, with relatively high failure rates and turnover."[22] According to Richard Maltby, this system is what allowed the maturing film industry to serve the entire U.S. market (rather than only major metropolitan areas). But it simultaneously created the "central structuring tension" that would lead to the industry's transformation.[23]

So, we know that film distribution was central to oligopolistic power in the film

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[20] Ibid., 522–3, 540–1.

[21] Ibid. In this sense, Hanssen's approach has something in common with various economists' defenses of vertical integration and oligopoly power of the film industry on the grounds that it yielded market efficiencies. See, e.g., Arthur De Vany and Ross D. Eckert, "Motion Picture Antitrust: The Paramount Cases Revisited," *Research in Law and Economics* 14 (1991): 51–112; Arthur De Vany and W. David Walls, "Bose-Einstein Dynamics and Adaptive Contracting in the Motion Picture Industry," *The Economic Journal* 106 (November 1996): 1493–514; Arthur De Vany and Henry McMillan, "Was the Antitrust Action that Broke Up the Movie Studios Good for the Movies? Evidence from the Stock Market," *American Law and Economics Review* 6, no. 1 (2004): 135–53.

[22] Maltby, "The Standard Exhibition Contract," 148.

[23] Ibid.

industry in the studio era. However, the methods by which the Big Five sought to maximize profits for individual films within this system, and the strategies developed for moving films through the nation's theaters, merit further examination. This study aims to investigate how domestic distribution in the classical period operated at the most basic level of selling the seasonal film program across the nation. Viewed from this perspective, the study of distribution involves the interplay of a pair of hierarchies: one, the annual studio film program; and the other, the nation's theaters, taken on a market-by-market basis. Film programs were stratified according to budget and theaters according to run status (and, secondarily, variables such as size/seating capacity and location). Distributors sought to place the "best" films (those with the highest production budgets and those which proved most successful in the earliest weeks of release) into the "best" theaters (in most major markets, the strategically located affiliated theaters with the largest numbers of seats). Mapping out the interactions of these bilateral hierarchies, at all levels, helps us see how distribution worked as a national system. We can see this as a logistical problem—a puzzle—involving space and time.[24]

Design of the Study

This project maps out a national system of film distribution in the 1930s by tracing the movement of a sample set of films through a sample set of cities and towns.

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[24] IFC Films President Jonathan Sehring recently characterized the process of planning releases as "a chessboard game." Qtd. in Cara Buckley, "Why This Movie Now? Planning Release Dates, From 'Straight Outta Compton' to 'Meru,'" *New York Times*, 12 August 2015, C1.

The films represent the range of major-studio releases, and the locations represent the range of U.S. territories and markets that structured the distribution and exhibition sectors. These data reveal patterns in how different types of films moved from major metropolitan markets to smaller cities and towns. They also allow us to compare and contrast exhibition market structures across cities and regions. My analysis demonstrates how distribution patterns were shaped by factors such as budget and story/subject matter as well as by more intangible assumptions about audiences and taste—e.g., what films were best suited to specific regions, theaters, or even days and times.

My approach to film distribution research draws on a range of sources, chief among them the film industry trade press and local newspapers. In trade publications such as *Variety*, *Box Office,* and *Motion Picture Herald*, reporters and critics used a sophisticated vocabulary to make fine distinctions among "classes" of films, theaters, and audiences. Once analyzed, these assumptions about the venues for which films were best suited can be compared with actual distribution and exhibition data gleaned from local newspapers. The study of distribution is, at this level, inseparable from that of exhibition —not just because film booking takes place between distributors and exhibitors, but also because newspaper advertisements of local theaters' offerings are the primary surviving documentation of distribution patterns in the studio era.

My approach to studying distribution was developed and tested in a pilot study, conducted with Lea Jacobs, on distribution in the 1920s.[25] This study argues against the

[25] Lea Jacobs and Andrea Comiskey, “Hollywood’s Conception of Its Audience in the 1920s,” in *The Classical Hollywood Reader*, ed. Steve Neale (New York: Routledge, 2012), 94–109.

notion of an actual or discursive "mass audience" in the late silent era. It demonstrates that films of different types were closely associated with particular audiences—and, more important, that these audiences were most often defined not demographically but rather in terms of theaters and/or programming strategies.[26] For instance, *Variety* said of Universal's courtroom melodrama *The 13th Juror* (1927), "A Sunday afternoon crowd at the Roxy might giggle at it, but the sentimental customers of a Washington Heights neighborhood will love its emotional splurge."[27] In this example, actual and potential audiences were identified in terms of theater and neighborhood. Moreover, these geographical distinctions corresponded to strategies of distribution and exhibition that can be traced over time and across space using newspaper archives. For example, *The 13th Juror* made its New York debut in the lowest-priced houses on Broadway, and in Chicago it bypassed the downtown ("Loop") theaters entirely, going straight to neighborhood houses. This pattern stands in sharp contrast to that of a prestige film like *7th Heaven* (1927, Fox), which debuted in New York via a "pre-release" at a legitimate Broadway theater before moving into first-run houses. In Chicago, it spent over a month in the Loop, receiving a first as well as second run. When the film reached the neighborhood theaters, it first showed in the largest and most expensive venues before moving, following a clearance, to the more modest houses in which *The 13th Juror*

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[26] Richard Maltby, "Sticks, Hicks, and Flaps: Classical Hollywood's Generic Conception of Its Audiences," in *Identifying Hollywood's Audiences: Cultural Identity and the Movies*, ed. Richard Maltby and Melvyn Stokes (London: BFI Publishing, 1999), 23–41.

[27] Qtd. in Jacobs and Comiskey, 99.

debuted.

The 1920s pilot project demonstrates the utility of closely analyzing individual markets' theater hierarchies and the distribution strategies employed for various "classes" of film. As important, it points to how local datasets and the distribution trajectories of individual films can be combined, compared, and contrasted to build an understanding of a *national* distribution system. This mode of analysis, which provides both granular and large-scale views of distribution "on the ground," is feasible in part due to new digital tools for accessing newspapers and aggregating data. The availability of these tools shaped the design of this much larger study on distribution in the 1930s.

The Film Sample

The bulk of my project analyzes the distribution patterns of a sample of 112 releases, which were restricted by studio and by production season. I focused on four studios: three vertically integrated majors (MGM, Paramount, and Warner Brothers) and one of the “Little Three” (Universal). These studios represent a range in terms of both theater ownership and typical production budgets. Paramount owned or was affiliated with the most theaters of any of the majors, and its budgets tended to be high. In contrast, MGM owned the fewest theaters of the majors. Though its output included a near-replete range of genres, produced in a range of budget categories, the studio was best known for expensive and spectacular releases such as costume dramas and musicals. And indeed, MGM's budgets were on average the highest of the major studios. It has been suggested that MGM was committed to high budgets in part *because* it owned relatively few

theaters and thus was not guaranteed venues for its own films to the same degree as other studios. According to Huettig, MGM's films were the most sought-after by exhibitors. And throughout the 1930s, MGM shared a close business relationship with another major, Fox.[28]

Warner Brothers and Universal represent substantially lower budget ranges than Paramount and MGM. Warner Bros.'s budgeting practices stem partly from corporate decisions at the start of the Great Depression, when the company elected to avoid bankruptcy proceedings by producing films at low cost and repaying its debts.[29] Warner Bros., which owned or was affiliated with the second-largest number of theaters of the Big Five, frequently found its releases paired with those from RKO, Columbia, or Universal—studios also known for lower-budget productions. Though Universal did not own theaters, it was a producer-distributor. In the late 1930s (between the two seasons included in my film sample), Universal executives implemented a campaign of improvement, leading to a shift in perceived quality of its films and a concomitant attempt by the studio to secure higher rentals and better booking terms from both affiliated and independent theaters.[30]

Working by "season," rather than by the calendar year, is the best way to compare and contrast how distribution functioned across different types of films. Studios'

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[28] Huettig, 132–3, 83.

[29] Douglas Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 110.

[30] Huettig, 137.

production, release, and selling schedules were planned in seasons that ran from September through the end of May, with more marginal releases opening in the summer months. (This seasonal selling system will be further discussed in Chapter Two.) All studios rationally managed their annual programs of films to use their contracted stars and other resources most effectively. The programs thus included a range of budget categories as well as a range of "types," themes, and formulas that rarely correspond neatly with subsequent critical constructions of film genres.[31] Although critics and scholars have retroactively attributed to studios various genre specialties (e.g. "Universal horror"), these purported "brands" represented only a fraction of the respective studios' output. And a successful formula or cycle initiated at one company could be taken up by other companies in subsequent seasons.

My sample includes films from two production seasons: 1935–1936 and 1939–1940. Surveying these two seasons permits identification of stable distribution norms as well as indicating changes over time—"tweaks" to program strategies due to actual or perceived shifts in studio priorities and audience tastes. I selected a representative sample of the seasonal output of each of the four chosen studios. This selection involved first compiling lists of each studio's seasonal releases, drawing on *Variety, Film Daily Yearbook,* and the *AFI Catalog.* In selecting films from the seasonal releases, I sought to

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[31] Tino Balio, "Feeding the Maw of Exhibition," in *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930–1939*, ed. Tino Balio (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993), 98–102; "Production Trends," in Balio, *Grand Design,* 310–1; John Izod, *Hollywood and the Box Office* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London: Routledge, 2000), 5, 233; Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (New York: Pantheon, 1988).

include the range of production levels or budgets in the sample.[32]

While precise information on budgets is not always available, a film's runtime is a reliable index of its budget and relative status within the studio's seasonal program.[33] A runtime of 55 to 70 minutes indicates a relatively low budget; 90 minutes or more indicates a relatively high budget. I sampled about one-third of each studio's output, for a total of 57 films from the 1935–1936 season and 55 films from the 1939–1940 season. The sample films are skewed toward those released in the earliest two-thirds of the seasonal calendars, because films released late in the season would not be well represented in my summer-to-summer samples of local newspapers. It took at least several months for releases to move through all their first and subsequent runs in large and small exhibition markets.

Sample films for the 1935–1936 season are displayed, by studio, in Tables 1 through 4, and those from the 1939–1940 season are displayed in Tables 5 through 8. Each studio's releases are organized from longest to shortest running time to provide a rough sense of the positions the films occupied within each seasonal program's budget hierarchy. The basic hierarchies of the sample films laid out in tables 1 through 8 provide

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[32] Information on budgets is available from various sources: the trade press, archival documents, and studio ledgers summarized by Richard Jewell and Mark Glancy in several articles published in *The Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television*. Mark Glancy, "MGM Film Grosses, 1924–1948: The Eddie Mannix Ledger," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television* 12, no. 2 (1995): 55–73; Richard B. Jewell, "RKO Film Grosses, 1929–1951: The C.J. Tevlin Ledger," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television* 14, no. 1 (1994): 37–49.

[33] F. Andrew Hanssen, "Vertical Integration during the Hollywood Studio Era," 528–9. Of course, there are differences across studios—for instance, MGM's shortest films are around 70–75 minutes, which is closer to a medium-length picture at Paramount or Warner Bros.

a foundation for the analysis of exhibition market structures performed in Chapter Three; in Chapter Four, I introduce the sample films in greater detail and explore how the trade press characterized different releases' most appropriate audiences and distribution/exhibition strategies.

Consider the 1935–1936 MGM releases. Atop the list is the literary adaptation *Mutiny on the Bounty*, which would become the top grossing film of 1935 and win the 1936 Academy Award for Best Picture. Budgeted at approximately $2,000,000, *Mutiny* featured two lead players (Clark Gable and Charles Laughton) who had recently won Academy Awards for Best Actor as well as a rising star (Franchot Tone). At 130 minutes, the film was significantly longer than most other releases—high- or low-budget—of the time. The next-longest MGM sample film, *Rose Marie*, runs 100 minutes. In the top half of the table of MGM releases we see many of the studio's top directors (Clarence Brown, Sam Wood) and stars (Greta Garbo, William Powell, Spencer Tracy) working on relatively prestigious projects, such as costume dramas adapted from literature (*Anna Karenina*) and sophisticated comedies (*Escapade*). As we approach the bottom we see in leading roles a range of lower-wattage and/or niche-oriented performers, from children (Jackie Cooper) to dogs (Rin-Tin-Tin) to recently arrived emigres (Peter Lorre) to reliable character actors (Frank Morgan). Here we find more action, horror, and crime melodrama (e.g *Tough Guy, Mad Love,* and *Woman Wanted*).

The Markets

I tracked the circulation of these sample films within and across approximately

thirty exhibition markets of varying sizes and in different parts of the country. In order to get a sense of the *national* distribution network, and national release patterns, it was important to select and group case study locations in a manner consistent with how the major distributors imagined and carved out the domestic market—that is, by *exchange area*.

Exchange areas, or distribution territories, were anchored by key cities, which were home to the distribution offices of most of the major studios. Not only was film selling organized by territory, but each exchange area shared a set number of release prints that wound their ways from the key cities to other cities and towns in the area. Though not every distribution company used identical boundaries for their exchange areas, *Film Daily Yearbook* provides a reasonable "average" of these 31 territories.[34] These "average" boundaries are imprecisely defined. For example, unspecified parts of Arizona are listed as falling within either the Los Angeles or Salt Lake City territories. Parts of Nevada were served by the Los Angeles, Salt Lake City, or San Francisco exchanges. *Film Daily Yearbook* also lists sales expectancies for each territory—that is, each territory's income as a percent of total domestic rentals. For example, the territory anchored by New York City included "Long Island, Greater New York City, [and] New York State as far as Poughkeepsie and Northern N.J." and made up 17.62% of national sales (by far the largest of any territory). In contrast, the most financially marginal territory was anchored by Memphis and includes "Arkansas, Northern Mississippi and

[34] I worked primarily from the distribution territories list in the 1937 edition of *Film Daily Yearbook.* Jack Alicoate, ed., *Film Daily Yearbook of Motion Pictures 1937* (New York: Film Daily, 1937), 769.

Western Tennessee." It accounted for just .82% of national sales.

I collected distribution data from three to four sites in each of ten selected territories. These sites are geographically/regionally diverse and include all of the top five territories in terms of sales expectancies. (The sample keys are mapped in Chapter Three.) Because of the imprecision described above, and because distributors did not adopt uniform territory boundaries, it is difficult to say which exchanges most likely served cities like Phoenix (in south-central Arizona), Yuma (southwest Arizona), and Reno (central-western Nevada). In such instances, I've made reasoned guesses. For example, Yuma's location near the border between Arizona and Southern California makes the Los Angeles exchange the most logical choice. The limited availability of small-town newspapers from Utah and Nevada constrained my choices and led me to select Reno as a case study site for the Salt Lake City territory. Though Reno is closer to San Francisco, which is not in my sample, than Salt Lake City, it can be tentatively assigned to the Salt Lake City territory. Each town's data are valuable regardless of whether its exchange area (as defined by any particular distributor) can be definitively ascertained; my main goal was to assure sufficient geographic variation in the sample.

Sample Markets

-Territory: New York City (includes Long Island, Greater NY City, NY State as far as Poughkeepsie and Northern NJ)
    -Manhattan, New York City, NY (pop. 1.87mil)
    -Brooklyn, New York City, NY (2.56mil)
    -Elizabeth, NJ (114k)

-Territory: Boston (Maine, MA, except extreme W part, NH, RI, all but extreme section of VT)
    -Boston, MA (780k)
    -Lowell, MA (100k)
    -Fitchburg, MA (41k)

-Territory: Philadelphia (Most of Delaware, Southern New Jersey and Eastern Pennsylvania)
    -Philadelphia, PA (2mil)
    -Chester, PA (59k)
    -Lebanon, PA (25k)

-Territory: Chicago (Northern Illinois and part of Indiana)
    -Chicago, IL (3.4mil)
    -Hammond, IN (64k) and greater Calumet area

-Territory: Los Angeles (Part of Arizona, Southern California and parts of Mexico, New Mexico, and Nevada)
    -Los Angeles, CA (1.2mil)
    -Bakersfield, CA (26k)
    -Yuma, AZ (5k)

-Territory: Kansas City (Kansas and Western Missouri)
    -Kansas City, MO (400k)
    -Joplin, MO (33k) and nearby Webb City, MO (7k)

-Territory: Seattle (Washington, Western Montana)
    -Seattle, WA (365k)
    -Butte, MT (39k)
    -Centralia, WA (8k) and nearby Chehalis, WA (5k)

-Territory: Atlanta (Alabama, Florida, Georgia, parts of Mississippi and South Carolina and Tennessee east of the Tennessee River)
    -Atlanta, GA (270k)
    -Augusta, GA (65k)
    -Panama City, FL (5k)

-Territory: Dallas (Texas)
    -Dallas, TX (260k)
    -Galveston, TX (53k)
    -Lubbock, TX (20k)

-Territory: Salt Lake City (parts of Arizona, Idaho, Nevada and Southern Oregon)
    -Salt Lake City (180k)
    -Phoenix, AZ (48k) and other theaters in rural Arizona
    -Reno, NV (16k)

Primary Sources

Richard Maltby characterizes the history of film distribution as a "logistical and strategic" one "that expresses itself archivally in multiple discursive forms of involuntary testimony: theatre records, newspaper reviews, the trade press and business correspondence."[35] This project draws on a similar range of sources, chief among them film industry trade publications, studio archival documents, legal records, and dozens of local newspapers.

The Trade Press

The film industry trade press is crucial for analyzing the circulation of the sample films within the exhibition markets described above. Important film trade publications for my study include *Film Daily Yearbook*, *Variety*, and *Box Office*. Among the relevant features in them are:

a) Reviews

The reviews in *Variety* and other publications are essential to understanding films' imagined audiences—as described in terms of theaters and distribution strategies. Major variables and distinctions include: whether a film would play better in the keys or in smaller cities and towns; whether a film was more suited to first-run engagements or the "regular runs" (and, related, to "deluxe" theaters or "lesser spots"); whether a film could carry a solo bill; whether it could carry a dual bill; whether it would fare best at matinees or evening screenings; and whether it would appeal primarily to male, female, adult,

[35] Maltby, "New Cinema Histories," 16.

juvenile, or family audiences. As an example of these assessments, take *Variety*'s review of Paramount's *It's a Gift* (1935), a W.C. Fields comedy: “will get laughs in lesser spots […] packing a load of belly laughs for people who like that kind of [coarse] humor—and a great many do. Not for polite houses because of the doubtfulness of several spots in the dialog."[36] Or its judgment on Paramount’s *Preview Murder Mystery* (1936): “Apparently planned to meet the indie competition on duals, but thanks to good direction, excellent acting and a good script, this picture gets beyond its class in spite of a trite central idea. It should be able to solo in the smaller spots and front the lesser duals.”[37] Of Warner Brothers’ *Song of the Saddle* (1936), which bypassed a Broadway debut for one at the Brooklyn Strand, was described as "One that will do well at the window of family and western fave houses."[38] This trade review discourse is closely analyzed in Chapters Four and Five.

b) Data and commentary about the domestic film market

Beyond the reviews, there is a large amount of additional qualitative and quantitative information about domestic film distribution in the trade press. Coverage in the front pages is more relevant for learning about the operations of film exchanges while the back matter contains exhibition data relevant to my case study sites and sample films. Particularly important are *Variety*'s “Picture Grosses” pages, which include dispatches

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36 "It's a Gift," *Variety Film Reviews*, 8 January 1935.

37 "Preview Murder Mystery," *Variety Film Reviews*, 25 March 1936.

38 "Song of the Saddle," *Variety Film Reviews*, 25 March 1936.

from approximately 200 theaters in 30 key cities, along with the "Behind the Keys" section of Epes Winthrop Sergeant's "Exploitation" column.[39]

Local Newspapers

To track films' distribution histories—including not just the theaters but the types of programs in which they appeared—I collected two years' worth of movie schedules from each sample market's local newspaper. I sampled three to four days per week, as few theaters changed programs more frequently. Using the newspaper listings, I manually identified and catalogued the screenings of each sample film. In all but the largest cities, tracking the circulation of around 50 films over a year is not particularly difficult, nor does it generate an unwieldy amount of data. However, in cities like Chicago and New York, which had dozens or hundreds of neighborhood theaters—the subsequent-run system is too dense for comprehensive tracking. For those big-city neighborhood runs, I generated a rough sketch (by sampling particular theaters or neighborhoods) rather than a complete picture. The distribution/exhibition data I logged into a spreadsheet included the theater at which a film played, its playdates, and, when discernible, its placement on a program.

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[39] As John Sedgwick and Mark Glancy, who carried out a quantitative study of one portion of the "Picture Grosses" section, have noted, these pages "remain largely unexploited by scholars […] most likely due to the density of information in each issue as well as the manner in which it is presented on the page; it is not easily or readily digestible." I can circumvent this problem, to some degree, by limiting my scope to the reports from the key cities in my study. John Sedgwick and Mark Glancy, "Cinemagoing in the United States in the mid-1930s: A Study Based on the *Variety* Dataset," in *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema*, ed. Richard Maltby, Melvyn Stokes, and Robert C. Allen (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press), 156.

Archival Records

My primary sources also include a small set of archival materials, chiefly from the Warner Brothers collection at the University of Southern California. These materials included distribution contracts, correspondence between representatives from regional exchanges and executives at the home office, and some data on production and budgeting of sample films from Warner Brothers. I also consulted a 1934 federal legal filing that describes the workflow of the distribution sector.

Data Analysis

Perhaps the biggest challenge of this project is the useful triangulation of the data described above. I ultimately created two types of distribution profiles, one organized by town and another organized by film. The former, described above, catalogs all the sample films' appearances in local theaters over the course of a summer-to-summer year. This profile helps reveal the hierarchical structures of local exhibition markets and how different films moved through them. From the data in these spreadsheets, I generated another set that included a sheet for each film. This set followed the chronological movement of a particular film across *all* the locations in the sample. This approach helps visualize several aspects of a film's national rollout, including how concentrated it was and patterns in its movement from key cities to other locations. It also provides a rough count of the total bookings across the sample markets. Though created in Excel as spreadsheets, these profiles are not suited for automated quantitative analysis or

comparison. Rather, they provide a rough visualization of a film's distribution, allowing major differences in variables such as run and clearance length, booking frequency, and billing practices to stand out from film to film, theater to theater, and town to town.

One cannot make reasonable inferences about domestic distribution patterns without understanding theaters' ownership/affiliation status, as well as their positions in the run system of a given distribution zone. For example, in small-town and subsequent-run markets, where theaters typically changed programs several times a week, a film's playdate (particularly weekend vs. weekday) is an important variable—one partially correlated with how distributors or exhibitors expected a film to fare in a given market. Theaters with more clout, i.e. studio-owned/affiliated theaters and ones that were part of chains, were often able to choose or negotiate their own playdates, while playdates for block booking independent exhibitors were specified in distribution contracts.[40]

Newspaper listings can reveal a great deal about theaters. But in order to understand ownership of particular theaters as well as the broader complexion of a city or town's exhibition market, I combined two data sets published in *Film Daily Yearbook*. The first is a more-or-less comprehensive list of U.S. movie theaters, arranged by state and city/town (it also includes each house's seating capacity). The second is a list of the nation's chains of four or more theaters, organized alphabetically. I used the second to label the first, thus creating a visual representation of theater ownership across the entire U.S.

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[40] Huettig, 124–5.

Chapter Organization

The bulk of the chapters herein are devoted to analyzing the data from my film and market samples, aided by the trade and archival sources described above. But before delving into this data, I offer an overview of the process and logistics of film distribution in the 1930s. Chapter Two reviews the scholarly literature on studio-era film distribution and presents new information gleaned from industry trade publications and archival documents. It focuses on the operations of film exchanges—the companies and regional offices that controlled the movement of films from studios to theaters. It explains who worked there, how distribution and booking contracts were negotiated, and what happened between the time a contract was signed and the time a particular film appeared on a local theater screen. It also establishes how many prints were struck for films from different budget categories and how these print orders affected distribution patterns. This account of the distribution sector improves our understanding of the material factors that came to bear on the circulation of, and individuals' access to, Hollywood films in the 1930s. It also demonstrates that *program-oriented* planning, production, and selling of films shaped their national circulation in the 1930s. But crucially, program-oriented selling did not mean that theaters simply block booked an entire year's worth of films. Most theaters made deals for smaller blocks of films and worked with multiple distributors. There was usually room for negotiation and strategic adjustments in film contracts at various points in the selling and booking processes. Understanding these

practices enables us to make better sense of the patterns we see in the on-the-ground exhibition data.

Chapters Three and Four analyze distribution data from my thirty sample markets—supplemented by trade press coverage of the sample films and exhibition markets—from different vantage points. These correspond to the bilateral hierarchies of theaters and films described above. Chapter Three analyzes the structures of particular exhibition markets. It compares and contrasts those in key cities and small towns. It further compares and contrasts distribution strategies in the larger, more lucrative first-run houses and the smaller, more marginal subsequent-run theaters. My analysis demonstrates that hierarchies were constructed among theaters within the same run tier according to how they split the majors' programs. Most broadly, this chapter explores how distribution strategies and practices related—or were adapted—to the "ecosystems" of local theater hierarchies and film cultures.

While Chapter Three identifies distribution patterns along the axis of exhibition markets, Chapter Four identifies patterns along the axis of annual film programs. To do so, it tracks the national circulation of the sample films, grouped by studio and arranged by budget. It address how the films were discussed in trade press (and other) reviews—in particular, the audiences, theaters, and distribution strategies that were associated with different types, or "classes," of films. By tracing the films' national releases, this chapter demonstrates that high-, low-, and intermediate-budget films, which are often simplified through an "A"- and "B-film" binary, received markedly different releases. Differences

can be seen in their initial rollouts down through their subsequent runs. They include not just the sheer numbers of bookings but also the types of theaters in which they played, their run and clearance lengths, and other variables. When we look at the data for a program, organized hierarchically, it is possible to identify films that under- or over-performed relative to their class—whether nationally or within particular exhibition markets.

Chapters Two through Four demonstrate that budget was the dominant factor in a film's distribution. To the extent that genre and subject matter played a role, it was largely at the level of large-scale program planning, as studios saw fit to commit different resources to different types of stories. Chapter Five explores the connections among genre, budget, and distribution patterns, using the western as a case study. Westerns are important not only because they represented an outsized portion of U.S. film releases, but also because more than any other genre they were associated with particular audiences, theaters, and distribution strategies. For most of the 1930s, the western was almost exclusively a low-budget genre. But late in the decade, major studios showed a renewed commitment to producing mid- and high-budget westerns. This shifting status within the industry makes the western a particularly instructive case for assessing how genre related to distinctions within the U.S. theatrical market in the classical era. This chapter surveys trade press reviews of major-studio westerns from the late 1930s through the early 1940s, presents a typology of national release patterns for these films, and offers a close analysis of the distribution of Westerns in three small markets—the kind the genre was

discursively associated with—in the watershed year of 1939. My concluding chapter summarizes my findings and situates distribution history within the subfield of "new cinema history."

This study builds upon, but also moves beyond, the large-scale, structural analysis of distribution and theater ownership that has guided much scholarly work on film distribution. By detailing the day-to-day (or season-by-season) operations of the distribution sector and tracing the cross-country trajectories of a range of films, this project reveals how the vertically integrated Hollywood majors envisioned and exploited the domestic market. It examines their strategies for maximizing profits by controlling the movement of films through a carefully constructed and closely regulated hierarchy of theaters. In so doing, it sheds light on how particular films—standardized products, in a sense, but still unpredictable and irreducible to pure formula—functioned within this system. The close analysis of distribution has much to tell us about Hollywood business strategies as well as the conditions structuring the experience of cinema.

Table 1. Selected MGM Releases, 1935–1936

Title	Director	Star(s)	Release	Runtime
Mutiny on the Bounty	Frank Lloyd	Clark Gable, Charles Laughton	11/8/35	130
Rose-Marie	W.S. Van Dyke	Nelson Eddy, Jeanette MacDonald	1/31/36	100
Anna Karenina	Clarence Brown	Greta Garbo, Frederic March	9/6/35	95
Rendezvous	William K. Howard	William Powell, Rosalind Russell	10/25/35	95
A Night at the Opera	Sam Wood	Marx Bros.	11/15/35	90
Escapade	Robert Z. Leonard	William Powell	7/5/35	90
Wife vs. Secretary	Clarence Brown	Clark Gable, Jean Harlow, Myrna Loy	2/28/36	88
O'Shaughnessy's Boy	Richard Boleslawski	Wallace Beery, Jackie Cooper	9/27/35	87
Whipsaw	Sam Wood	Spencer Tracy, Myrna Loy	12/18/35	80
The Bohemian Girl	James W. Horne	Laurel & Hardy	2/14/36	80
Tough Guy	Chester M. Franklin	Jackie Cooper, Rin-Tin-Rin	1/24/36	76
The Voice of Bugle Ann	Richard Thorpe	Lionel Barrymore, Maureen O'Sullivan	2/15/36	70
A Perfect Gentlemen	Tim Whelan	Frank Morgan	11/22/35	70
Woman Wanted	George B. Seitz	Maureen O'Sullivan, Joel McCrea	8/2/35	70
Mad Love	Karl Freund	Peter Lorre, Colin Clive	7/12/35	70
Calm Yourself	George B. Seitz	Robert Young, Madge Evans	6/28/35	70

Table 2. Selected Paramount Releases, 1935–1936

Title	Director	Star(s)	Release	Runtime
The Crusades	Cecil B. DeMille	Loretta Young, Henry Wilcoxon	10/25/35	125
Trail of the Lonesome Pine	Henry Hathaway	Henry Fonda, Sylvia Sidney, Fred MacMurray	2/19/35	100
Big Broadcast of 1936	Norman Taurog	George Burns, Gracie Allen, Bing Crosby, etc.	9/20/35	100
Desire	Frank Borzage	Marlene Dietrich, Gary Cooper	4/11/36	90
So Red the Rose	King Vidor	Margaret Sullavan, Randolph Scott	11/22/35	90
Soak the Rich	Ben Hecht	Walter Connolly	1/17/36	87
Paris in Spring	Lewis Milestone	Mary Ellis	7/5/35	82
Mary Burns, Fugitive	William K. Howard	Sylvia Sidney, Melvyn Douglas	11/15/35	80
Her Master's Voice	Joseph Santley	Edward Horton, Peggy Conklin	1/17/36	75
Give Us This Night	Alexander Hall	Jan Kiepura, Gladys Swarthout	3/8/36	73
Man on the Flying Trapeze	Clyde Bruckman	W.C. Fields	7/26/36	66
Timothy's Quest	Charles Barton	Dickie Moore, Elizabeth Patterson	1/31/36	65
It's a Great Life!	Edward F. Cline	Joe Morrison	12/18/35	64
The Virginia Judge	Edward Sedgwick	Walter C. Kelly, Stepin Fetchit	9/27/35	62
Preview Murder Mystery	Robert Florey	Reginald Denny, Frances Drake	2/28/36	60
Drift Fence	Otho Lovering	Buster Crabbe, Tom Keene	2/14/36	57

Table 3. Selected Warner Bros. Releases, 1935–1936

Title	Director	Star(s)	Release	Runtime
A Midsummer Night's Dream	Max Reinhardt	Dick Powell, Ian Hunter, James Cagney, et al.	10/30/35	132
Captain Blood	Michael Curtiz	Errol Flynn, Olivia de Havilland	12/28/35	119
Page Miss Glory	Mervyn LeRoy	Marion Davies, Pat O'Brien	9/7/53	90
Colleen	Alfred E. Green	Dick Powell, Ruby Keeler	3/21/36	89
The Irish in Us	Lloyd Bacon	James Cagney, Pat O'Brien	8/3/35	84
The Petrified Forest	Archie Mayo	Bette Davis, Leslie Howard	2/8/36	82?
Dangerous	Alfred E. Green	Bette Davis, Franchot Tone	12/26/35	78
Stranded	Frank Borzage	Kay Francis, George Brent	6/19/35	75
Boulder Dam	Frank McDonald	Ross Alexander, Patricia Ellis	3/7/36	70
Dr. Socrates	William Dieterle	Paul Muni, Ann Dvorak	10/19/36	70
The Murder of Dr. Harrigan	Frank McDonald	Ricardo Cortez, Kay Linaker	1/11/36	67
Broadway Hostess	Frank McDonald	Wini Shaw, Genevieve Tobin	12/7/35	67
Freshman Love	William McGann	Patricia Ellis, Warren Hull	1/18/36	65
The Payoff	Robert Florey	James Dunn	11/9/35	64
I Love for Love	Busby Berkeley	Dolores del Rio, Everett Marshall	9/28/35	64

Table 4. Selected Universal Releases, 1935–1936

Title	Director	Star(s)	Release	Runtime
Magnificent Obsession	John M. Stahl	Irene Dunne, Robert Taylor	1/6/36	110
Sutter's Gold	James Cruze	Edward Arnold, Lee Tracy	4/13/35	94
Diamond Jim	A. Edward Sutherland	Edward Arnold, Jean Arthur	9/2/35	90
Three Kids and a Queen	Edward Ludwig	May Robson	10/21/35	85
The Invisible Ray	Lambert Hillyer	Boris Karloff, Bela Lugosi	1/20/36	75
King Solomon of Broadway	Alan Crosland	Edmund Lowe, Dorothy Page	9/21/35	70
Don't Get Personal	William Nigh	James Dunn, Sally Eilers	2/17/36	67
Lady Tubbs	Alan Crosland	Abbey Mitchell, Douglass Montgomery	7/15/35	67
She Gets Her Man	William Nigh	ZaSu Pitts, Hugh O'Connell	8/19/35	66
Dangerous Waters	Lambert Hillyer	Jack Holt, Robert Armstrong	2/10/36	65

Table 5. Selected MGM Releases, 1939–1940

Title	Director	Star(s)	Release	Runtime
The Women	George Cukor	Joan Crawford, Norma Shearer, Rosalind Russell	9/1/39	140
Northwest Passage	King Vidor	Spencer Tracy, Robert Young	2/23/40	125
Goodbye, Mr. Chips	Sam Wood	Robert Donat, Greer Garson	7/28/39	110
Ninotchka	Ernst Lubitsch	Greta Garbo, Melvyn Douglas	11/3/39	110
Another Thin Man	W.S. Van Dyke	William Powell, Myrna Loy	11/17/39	105
I Take This Woman	W.S. Van Dyke	Spencer Tracy, Hedy Lamarr	2/2/40	96
On Borrowed Time	Harold S. Bucquet	Lionel Barrymore	7/7/39	95
Babes in Arms	Busby Berkeley	Mickey Rooney, Judy Garland	10/13/39	93
The Earl of Chicago	Richard Thorpe	Robert Montgomery	1/5/40	85
Young Tom Edison	Norman Taurog	Mickey Rooney, Fay Bainter	4/1/40	82
Dancing Co-Ed	S. Sylvan Simon	Lana Turner	9/29/39	80
The Man from Dakota	Leslie Fenton	Wallace Beery, Dolores Del Rio	2/16/40	74
Congo Maisie	Henry C. Potter	Ann Sothern, John Carroll	1/19/40	70
Fast and Furious	Busby Berkeley	Franchot Tone, Ann Sothern	10/6/39	70
Henry Goes Arizona	Edwin L. Marin	Frank Morgan	12/8/39	66

Table 6. Selected Paramount Releases, 1939–1940

Title	Director	Star(s)	Release	Runtime
Beau Geste	William Wellman	Gary Cooper, Ray Milland	7/24/39	114
The Light That Failed	William Wellman	Ronald Colman	2/2/40	97
Honeymoon in Bali	Edward H. Griffith	Fred MacMurray, Madeline Carroll	9/29/39	95
Geronimo	Paul Sloane	Preston Foster, Allen Drew	1/12/40	89
Our Leading Citizen	Alfred Santell	Bob Burns	8/11/39	87
Remember the Night	Mitchell Leisen	Barbara Stanwyck, Fred MacMurray	1/19/40	86
The Star Maker	Roy del Ruth	Bing Crosby	8/25/39	85
Road to Singapore	Victor Schertzinger	Bob Hope, Bing Crosby	3/22/40	84
Our Neighbors, the Carters	Ralph Murphy	Fay Bainter, Frank Craven	11/24/39	83
What a Life	Jay T. Reed	Jackie Cooper	10/6/39	75
The Cat and the Canary	Eliot Nugent	Bob Hope, Paulette Goddard	11/10/39	72
Knights of the Range	Lesley Selander	Russell Hayden,	2/23/40	70
All Women Have Secrets	Kurt Neumann	Virginia Dale, Joseph Allen, Jr.	12/15/39	59
Parole Fixer	Robert Florey	William Henry, Virginia Dale	2/2/40	57
Bulldog Drummond's Bride	James Hogan	John Howard	6/30/39	55

Table 7. Selected Warner Bros. Releases, 1939–1940

Title	Director	Star(s)	Release	Runtime
Virginia City	Michael Curtiz	Errol Flynn, Miriam Hopkins	3/23/40	120
Four Wives	Michael Curtiz	Lane sisters, Claude Rains	12/25/39	110
The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex	Michael Curtiz	Bette Davis, Errol Flynn	11/11/39	106
The Roaring Twenties	Raoul Walsh	James Cagney, Priscilla Lane	10/28/39	105
Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet	William Dieterle	Edward G. Robinson, Ruth Gordon	3/2/40	103
On Your Toes	Ray Enright	Vera Zorina, Eddie Albert	10/13/40	93
Brother Rat and a Baby	Ray Enright	Eddie Albert, Wayne Morris, Priscilla Lane	1/13/40	87
Indianapolis Speedway	Lloyd Bacon	James Cagney, Pat O'Brien	8/5/39	82
Nancy Drew and the Hidden Staircase	William Clemens	Bonita Granville, Frankie Thomas	9/9/39	78
Castle on the Hudson	Anatole Litvak	John Garfield, Ann Sheridan	2/17/40	77
Angels Wash Their Faces	Ray Enright	Dead End Kids, Ann Sheridan	8/26/39	76
A Child is Born	Lloyd Bacon	Geraldine Fitzgerald, Jeffery Lynn	1/6/40	75
Pride of the Blue Grass	William McGann	Edith Fellows, James McCallion	11/7/39	65
The Return of Dr. X	Vincent Sherman	Humphrey Bogart, Rosemary Lane	12/2/39	60
The Cowboy Quarterback	Noel Smith	Bert Wheeler, Marie Wilson	7/29/39	56

Table 8. Selected Universal Releases, 1939–1940

Title	Director	Star(s)	Release	Runtime
It's a Date	William Seiter	Deanna Durbin, Kay Francis, Walter Pidgeon	3/22/40	100
Tower of London	Rowland Lee	Basil Rathbone, Boris Karloff	11/17/39	92
Destry Rides Again	George Marshall	Marlene Dietrich, James Stewart	12/29/39	90
The Under-pup	Richard Wallace	Gloria Jean, Robert Cummings	7/7/39	87
My Little Chickadee	Edward F. Cline	Mae West, W.C. Fields	2/9/40	83
The Invisible Man Returns	Joe May	Cedric Hardwicke, Vincent Price, Nan Grey	1/12/40	81
Hawaiian Nights	Albert Rogell	Johnny Downs, Mary Carlisle	9/8/39	65
The Forgotten Woman	Harold Young	Sigrid Gurie, William Lundigen	7/7/39	63
Danger on Wheels	Christy Cabanne	Richard Arlen, Andy Devine	2/2/40	61
Oklahoma Frontier	Ford Beebe	Johnny Mack Brown	10/20/39	59

Chapter Two

Distribution and the Film Exchanges

> "When any one of the eighty-five million moviegoers walks down Main Street of an evening saying, 'Shall we go to the Majestic or the Bijou?' he imagines that he is making up his mind about his evening's entertainment. As a matter of fact the decision is very far from being a matter of free will. The choice was predestined months ago, predestined by forces working so steadily and so subtly that the chooser is usually quite unaware how he got it fixed in his mind that *The Life of Mr. Blank* is a film he really ought to see. For the last six months or more that idea has been impinging upon him constantly, painlessly, obliquely, without his really being aware of its presence until the moment for action came."—Margaret Farrand Thorp, 1939[1]

Introduction

The work of industry-focused film historians, including Tino Balio and Douglas Gomery, has given us a strong understanding of the Hollywood majors' oligopolistic control over the U.S. film industry during the studio era. And such scholarship highlights the central role that studios' control over the distribution sector played in those practices. That many of the same companies continued to dominate the film industry even after they were compelled to relinquish their theater chains in the decade following the 1948 Paramount Decision is but one indication of the power conferred by controlling distribution. We have a basic understanding of the agents involved in, and process of, film distribution before the Paramount decision: exchange men negotiating with exhibitors for films—often grouped into large blocks—that were sold for either flat rental

1 Margaret Farrand Thorp, *America at the Movies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1939), 26.

fees or a percentage of the eventual box office returns. Some theaters, particularly those that were part of chains (including the majors' affiliated circuits) and/or situated in the most desirable locations, were able to secure better deals than more marginal houses. A theater's place within its local distribution ecology was significantly shaped by its status within contractually defined run, zone, and clearance schema. Contract terms could be, and often were, renegotiated depending on various circumstances, such as a film's unexpectedly strong or weak performance in a market. There was some variation in selling strategies across studios—for instance, United Artists sold its films singly rather than block booking—and from year to year. The majors' selling practices provoked exhibitors' ire, frequently to the point of litigation and/or appeals for legislative intervention. But much about the particulars of film distribution remains hazy.

What was a film exchange in the 1930s? Who worked there? How did exchanges function in relation to other exchanges, home offices, and studios' production wings? When and how were distribution contracts negotiated, and what happened between the time a contract was signed and the time a particular film appeared on a theater screen? How many prints were struck for typical films, and how did print orders affect distribution patterns (and were there significant differences in this regard between, say, As and Bs?)? What forms of local/regional variation obtained in film selling and distribution hierarchies? How was distributor-exhibitor strife expressed and managed? These are among the questions this chapter addresses. In tracing the logistics of film distribution, I aim to produce a better understanding of the material factors that came to

bear on the circulation of Hollywood films in the 1930s. These factors determined exhibitors' access to films and hence the access of particular neighborhoods and demographic groups.

Drawing on previous scholarship, I begin with a structural overview of the distribution and exhibition sectors in the 1930s. I then identify the major components and functions of a regional film exchange office. Finally, I trace the seasonal process of film distribution carried out by exchanges—from the unveiling of studios' annual film programs to the negotiation of contracts with theaters to the circulation of physical prints within exchange territories. This account lays a foundation for the subsequent chapters on the local and national distribution trajectories of my sample films and on what these histories can tell us about Hollywood's construction of its domestic audience.

A close look at the operations of film exchanges—and particularly at their multi-phased negotiations with theaters—demonstrates that exhibitors, both affiliated and unaffiliated, could exercise at least some choice in what films they showed and when they played them. This flexibility was certainly greater for affiliated theaters and members of chains. But all theaters had some capacity to tailor their programming choices to the perceived tastes of local audiences and/or in response to releases' national, regional, or local critical and commercial reception.

Distribution and Exhibition under the Mature Oligopoly: the Basics

As discussed in the previous chapter, the work of scholars such as Mae Huettig, Michael Conant, and Tino Balio emphasizes the role of vertical integration in the majors' oligolopistic control of the film industry in the studio era.[2] Such work shows how the major producers' connections to distribution networks as well as to major exhibition outlets barred new competition and thus secured their "monopoly of discourse."[3] While the majors owned less than 20% of the nation's theaters, those theaters took in over 70% of domestic box office revenue. This feat was possible because the majors' theaters were disproportionately urban first-run houses with over 1,000 seats. The importance of these urban markets is underscored by the overall share of rentals they generated; the majors drew over 60% of their rentals from the country's thirteen biggest cities.[4]

Theater acquisition was highly strategic, with the first-run markets of most large cities being dominated by a single major. Figure 1 provides a rough sketch of the majors' relative dominance in theater ownership across the 100 largest urban areas in the U.S. as of 1935. The map does not capture all the nuances of these markets—for example, in a few areas two or more majors have a significant presence and one simply owned a plurality of theaters. However, it shows the general contours of theater ownership, such as Fox's relative dominance of large west coast markets and Warner Brothers' strength in

2 Wyatt Phillips places Huettig's research on oligopolistic control in the film industry in the context of ongoing antitrust actions (ones that would eventually result in the 1948 consent decrees banning full vertical integration). See Phillips, "'A Maze of Intricate Relationships,'" 135–63.

3 Giuliana Muscio, *Hollywood's New Deal* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 14.

4 Huettig, *Economic Control of the Motion Picture Industry*, 74–7.

the northeast. Paramount's significant presence in the south and upper mid-west, unique among the majors, stems from its extensive acquisitions of or affiliations with major chains in these regions. RKO and MGM owned the fewest theaters but nonetheless had some strongholds in the northeast and near mid-west. By “dividing and conquering,” the majors left little opportunity for independent first-run exhibitors to gain enough of a foothold to threaten the majors' position atop the national exhibition hierarchy.

Figure 1. Majors' Dominance of First-run Exhibition in Top 100 U.S. Urban Areas c. 1935

(Blue = Fox; Yellow = Paramount; Green = Warner Bros.; Purple = MGM/Loew's; Fuchsia = RKO; Coral = mixed ownership; Teal = data unavailable)

Theaters owned by or affiliated with the Big Five showed the best films—that is, those perceived as having the best chances of box-office success. Affiliated theaters drew films from their parent firms, other Big Five studios, and the "Little Three" studios (United Artists, Columbia, and Universal), in that order. "Flagship" theaters in major first-run markets were the most likely to play exclusively or primarily the films of its affiliated studio. An analysis of the Los Angeles first-run market published in *Variety* in 1940—and summarized by Mae Huettig in her 1944 study *Economic Control of the Motion Picture Industry*—revealed that, in the course of a year, MGM/Loew's theaters played exclusively the films of MGM, Fox, and United Artists (44, 46, and 7 films, respectively). Similarly, Fox theaters played their own films (38) along with those of MGM (41) and United Artists (10). Warner Brothers' theaters played 50 of their own films, 15 from the Little Three, and 2 from RKO. Of RKO's 90 offerings, 35 were its own while 27 and 28 came from Universal and Columbia, respectively. Paramount's single theater showed films from Paramount (34), Universal (6), RKO (1), and Grand National (1).[5] These "splits," sometimes involving profit pooling, as was the arrangement between Paramount and RKO in Minneapolis and St. Paul, helped minimize rivalry in markets where multiple majors owned first-run theaters. However, the majors did often compete to secure bookings for their films "in the best of the non-affiliated theaters for the longest periods of time."[6] Though the key city flagship theaters were the most concentrated

5 Ibid., 75.

6 Conant, *Antitrust in the Motion Picture Industry*, 61–4.

sources of revenue, the majority of the majors' theaters were more modest venues, including urban subsequent-run and small-town houses. These venues tended to play the films of multiple studios rather than only the releases of their affiliates.[7] (These trends are explored in detail in Chapter Three, which analyzes exhibition market structures of a variety of U.S. cities and towns.)

The most strategically valuable of the non-affiliated theaters, which were often part of chains, could wield considerable bargaining power. The collective purchasing power of a chain allowed member theaters to demand more favorable booking terms from distributors. As Huettig explains, percentage-of-gross rental schemes (discussed further below) helped ensure that chains made up a significant share of total domestic rentals. Further, chain theaters were "rarely in direct competition" with affiliated theaters, as they were concentrated in small towns and urban subsequent-run markets more than in the downtown areas of key cities.[8] *Film Daily Yearbook*s of the 1930s catalog all circuits comprising four or more theaters; some of the most powerful held upwards of 100 theaters in multiple states. One such circuit was Griffith Amusement, which operated 95 houses in Oklahoma and Texas.

Theaters that were not affiliated with a major, part of a chain, or located in a particularly valuable location—and these made up the majority of the nation's screens—were not so fortunate. Their default distribution agreement was through block booking,

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7 F. Andrew Hanssen calls these the "ordinary Big Five Cinemas." Hanssen, "Vertical Integration during the Hollywood Studio Era," 524–5.

8 Huettig, *Economic Control of the Motion Picture Industry*, 123–4.

whether partial- or whole-program. Because subsequent-run theaters served smaller constituencies than large downtown theaters—and because subsequent-run films were "stale" by virtue of having already been shown locally—these venues typically changed programs two to three times each week. This meant that they block booked from multiple members of the Big Five or Little Three. They could also supplement their programs with contracts (for single films or small blocks) from independent distributors that offered the releases of low-budget studios.[9] In contrast, affiliated and chain theaters enjoyed the privilege of voluntary block booking, often in smaller and more appealing and negotiable "blocks."[10] Because many films were still in production at the time of contract negotiations, releases were contracted sight unseen, a practice known as "blind selling." In conjunction with block booking, blind selling limited exhibitors' control over their programming. Following years of exhibitor complaints, a 1940 consent decree capped the size of film blocks and mandated better access to advance trade screenings.

The structural advantages enjoyed by affiliated theaters was preserved through a national network of run, zone, and clearance systems. Regulated by regional film boards of trade (or, after the implementation of the National Recovery Act, "clearance and

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9 Some of the more powerful of these low-budget, or "Poverty Row" outfits, such as Republic, operated their own exchanges in key cities. Others distributed their films through Republic's exchanges or independent companies that functioned effectively as "states' rights" distributors. The guide to U.S. film exchanges in *Film Daily Yearbook* is organized by key city and lists the producers represented by each exchange. For instance, the Standard Film Exchange in Buffalo is listed as offering films from Monogram, Mascot, and Majestic. In other markets, Republic exchanges handle the films of one or more of those producers. Richard Maltby's research on a small theater in rural Virginia shows that the venue booked with at least seven distributors. Maltby, "The Standard Exhibition Contract," 140.

10 Huettig, *Economic Control of the Motion Picture Industry*, 122.

zoning boards"), these systems hierarchized local theaters according to when they could access releases. "First-run" houses had first access, followed by second-run venues, etc. Run distinctions were enforced temporally as well as geographically: a "clearance" established a mandatory waiting period between local runs, while a "zone" defined the boundaries within which these rules were in force. Buttressing these systems were minimum ticket prices for each run, which were written into distribution contracts. By dictating minimum prices, boards protected against theaters (especially subsequent-run houses) driving down overall admissions prices and siphoning audiences from theaters higher up the chain.[11]

As Huettig notes, a film's movement between its first and subsequent runs varied from city to city. Thus, distribution must be understood not simply as a film's movement from first to subsequent run but also as a function of the configurations of theaters in specific markets. In some cities (e.g. New York), there were large first-run houses in suburbs/neighborhoods, while in others (e.g. Atlanta), the largest first-run houses were primarily located downtown. In addition, the first-run exhibition market in some cities was dominated by theaters affiliated with a single major producer-distributor (e.g. the Balaban & Katz chain, a Paramount affiliate, in Chicago), while in others (e.g. New York), ownership was more diversified (these trends are discussed in Chapter Three). In cities and towns with few theaters, variations in the patterns of theater ownership could distinctly shape the local distribution and exhibition market.

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11 Balio, *The American Film Industry,* 258–60.

The distribution of particular releases was also closely connected to their budgets. Distribution contracts differentiated between "A" films, rented for a percentage of the box office gross, and "B" films, rented for flat fees. "A" films typically received coordinated national releases, with major advertising campaigns and calculated rollouts in the largest first-run theaters in key cities, while "B" films were released in a more piecemeal fashion.[12] Though the industry had a long tradition of flat-fee rentals, the practice of renting Bs at a fixed price solved a new problem created by the emergence of the double bill: how to determine percentage-of-gross revenues for two films on the same bill.[13] B films were by no means exclusively shown on double bills, however. As *Variety* reviews attest, and as my analysis of my film sample in Chapters Three and Four will show, Bs could carry solo bills at certain types of theaters and under certain circumstances.

In practice, the standard distribution contract typically specified a certain *number* of films per pricing scheme (e.g., X films at 35% of receipts, Y films at 25% of receipts, Z films at a flat fee of $200, etc.). A particular film's status within the hierarchy of distribution options was thus somewhat flexible. Based on a film's reviews and performance in key cities, or exhibitors' perceptions of its chances with local audiences, it could be demoted or promoted across the "A" and "B," or percentage-of-gross and flat-

12 Brian Taves, "The B Film: Hollywood's Other Half," in Balio, *Grand Design*, 314–5; Balio, "Feeding the Maw of Exhibition," 100–3; Lea Jacobs, "The B Film and the Problem of Cultural Distinction," *Screen* 33, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 1–13.

13 F. Andrew Hanssen, "Revenue Sharing in Movie Exhibition and the Arrival of Sound," *Economic Inquiry* 40, no. 3 (2002): 395.

rate, categories.[14] The later a theater's position in the local run sequence, the more likely it was to book most or all of its films for a flat fee, because the potential income from these marginal houses was not worth the expense to distributors of verifying receipts.[15] Studios' most lavish and prestigious pictures often bypassed the standard distribution/exhibition routes in favor of roadshow releases, in which films played long engagements in "legitimate" theaters for premium admission prices. By the mid-1940s, "blitz exhibition," an early form of saturation booking, had emerged as an alternative release model for special high-budget films.[16]

The oligopoly power exerted by the vertically integrated Hollywood majors through film selling practices such as block booking and blind buying constrained the operations of exhibitors at all levels—but especially at the bottom of the theater hierarchy. Further, the production sector's rationalized budget tiering effectively pre-set films' release patterns by connecting different budget classes to different rental schemes. Regardless, there were opportunities for flexibility, variation, customization, and negotiation within this system. These opportunities were made possible at the level of local film exchanges, which facilitated variations in the agreements between producer-distributors—who determined company-wide as well as film-specific selling strategies—

14 Taves, 314–6; Jacobs, "The B Film and the Problem of Cultural Distinction."

15 Hanssen, "Revenue Sharing in Movie Exhibition and the Arrival of Sound," 394–5; Hanssen cites Balio (*Grand Design*, 27) as saying that distributors charged such theaters from $7 to $15 per *day*, though Balio in fact says that this was a typical charge per *film*.

16 Sheldon Hall and Steve Neale, *Epics, Spectacles, and Blockbusters: A Hollywood History* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011), 129–31.

and exhibitors. What follows is a close examination of these exchanges' operations, highlighting the practical, logistical work of bringing films to market.

Film Exchanges in the 1930s

The major producer-distributors carved the U.S. (and Canadian) market into about thirty distribution territories. As discussed in Chapter One, the exchange areas were roughly congruent across studios. Each territory was identified by its key city, which was not only the area's largest exhibition market but also headquarters of the distribution offices, or exchanges, of most or all of the majors. These offices tended to be located near one another, as being in close proximity facilitated efficient shipping and visits from local exhibitors. These corridors of exchanges were each known locally as "Film Row."[17] In the case of Los Angeles, Film Row occupied a two-block strip of Vermont Ave., southwest of downtown.[18] Chicago's Film Row was located around Wabash Ave. in the south Loop.[19] These districts were home to other film-related businesses, as well—for example, Kansas City's Film Row included a popcorn factory.[20] They were also home to the offices of large chains, some of which developed their own distribution and shipping infrastructures to

17 William K. Everson, *American Silent Film* (New York: Da Capo, 1998), 106.

18 "Los Angeles' Film Row Growth Denotes Big Pic Interest," *Daily Variety*, 24 October 1938, 300. The exchanges moved from downtown *en masse* in 1925.

19 John Owens, "Timeless 'Let's All Go to the Lobby' Has Deep Local Roots," *Chicago Tribune*, 24 January 2013.

20 "We Ought to Be In Pictures!" Missouri's Motion Media Industry 2008. MERIC. <http://www.missourieconomy.org/pdfs/MMI_Final_LR.pdf>

maximize efficiency within the circuit. This was the case with the Griffith Brothers circuit, which located its headquarters on Oklahoma City's Film Row.[21]

The majors grouped their exchanges, each of which was overseen by a branch manager, into regional clusters, or "districts," each with its own manager. These managers might be headquartered at one of their district's exchanges, as was the case with the Paramount district head whose offices occupied part of the second floor of the Los Angeles exchange.[22] In the case of mini-major Republic, which as of 1935 operated thirty-three exchanges in thirteen districts, at least one branch manager (for the Seattle office) also served as a district manager.[23] Trade press coverage of Fox's 1937 sales convention indicates that the company employed eight district managers.[24] As of 1938, Paramount had ten.[25] Districts were grouped into a few "divisions" (e.g. "south," "east," "west"), each with its own sales manager. In the case of Paramount, and likely other studios as well, these managers were based at the company's distribution "home office" in New York City.[26] The majors' home offices were headed by their respective national sales

21 Deborah Carmichael, "The Griffith Brothers Circuits of Oklahoma: Film Exhibition Success Outside the Hollywood Studio System" (Ph.D. diss., Oklahoma State University, 2008).

22 "Par Distrib Org Spreading Brand New Layout," *Daily Variety*, 19 November 1935, 4.

23 "Republic Org Now Set with 33 Exchanges Ready to Go," *Daily Variety*, 6 May 1935, 4.

24 "20th Execs Forging Convensh Way West," *Daily Variety*, 27 May 1937, 7.

25 "Par's District Realignments," *Variety*, 12 January 1938, 24.

26 Ibid. Another *Variety* piece from the same year distinguishes between division and district sales managers at Warner Bros: "67 Kincey Theatres Will Play Warners Product," *Daily Variety*, 12 July 1938, 7. Confusingly, it seems that companies sometimes gave districts and divisions the same name (the Warner Bros. piece just cited offers one example). Another *Variety* piece refers to Universal having a "western district" ("Panay Gunboat Films Slated Here First," *Daily Variety*, 27 December 1937, 3).

managers.

Film exchanges were most often one- or two-story masonry structures. One such example, Warner Bros.'s Cincinnati exchange (photographed in 1939) is displayed in Figure 2. In some key cities, including Detroit, larger (e.g. five-or-more-story) buildings housed multiple major-studio tenants, with offices located on the upper floors and the loading docks on the ground floor (Figure 3). Due to the extreme flammability of nitrate film stock, exchange facilities had to satisfy stringent safety standards such as the use of fireproof vaults. In correspondence between Warner Bros.'s Atlanta exchange and the home office from the late 1940s, branch manager Bernard R. Goodman expressed surprise at recently published reports that MGM was opening a shipping station in Jacksonville, Florida. Goodman noted, "We were of the impression that there were no buildings in Jacksonville equipped with fire proof vaults to handle films."[27] A diagram of the first floor of Atlanta exchange building from 1939 indicates the facility's brick walls, cement floors, and an extensive sprinkler system.[28] These constraints likely contributed to the relative uniformity of exchange buildings as well as to the efficiency of sharing space.

Exchanges typically had most of the following facilities: offices (for branch or district managers, salesmen, and bookers), a screening room, a poster and accessories rooms, multiple storage vaults, a film inspection room, and a shipping room that opened

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27 Correspondence from Bernard R. Goodman to Jack Kirby, 21 January 1948, Warner Bros. Archives, School of Cinematic Arts, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

28 Floor plan of first level of Vitagraph, Inc. Building, Warner Bros. Archives, School of Cinematic Arts, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

onto an outdoor loading dock.[29] RKO's Seattle exchange, which seems to have been more or less representative, occupied a one-and-a-half story building and had approximately 9,000 square feet of floor space.[30] The aforementioned Atlanta exchange floor plan (and the correspondence between various exchange men about the facility) indicates that films were kept in six fireproof vaults, located across a seven-foot hallway from a 500-square foot inspection room.[31] Figures 4 and 5 show adjacent areas of the main floor. In inspection rooms, workers assessed the quality of prints before they were shipped to (and after they were returned from) theaters. They also made any cuts that were mandated by local/state censorship authorities. And starting in the mid-1930s, they took the 1,000-foot reels sent from laboratories and transferred them to 2,000-foot reels for release to theaters.[32] Poster rooms housed various exploitation (advertising) materials, referred to in the trade press as "accessories." Distributors, who expected theater operators to purchase —not rent—promotional materials from their local exchange's accessories department,

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29 "Par Distrib Org. Spreading Brand New Layout," 4; Floor plan of first level of Vitagraph, Inc. Building, Warner Bros. Archives, School of Cinematic Arts, University of Southern California, Los Angeles; Karen Gordon, "Report on Designation," The City of Seattle Landmarks Preservation Board, 10 December 2010. <http://www.seattle.gov/neighborhoods/preservation/documents/DesRptRKO.pdf>

30 Gordon.

31 Correspondence from A.W. Schwalberg to Mr. R.L. McCoy, 17 February 1939, Warner Bros. Archives, School of Cinematic Arts, University of Southern California, Los Angeles. Schwalberg notes that Atlanta's 500-square foot shipping room "is more actual square footage than is available for the New York Exchange."

32 "2,000 Foot Spools Set to Debut Next April 1," *Daily Variety*, 20 November, 1935, 4; Rick Mitchell, "Hurricane Katrina and Film Distribution," *Rick's Cafe*, From Script to DVD, 2005 <http://www.fromscripttodvd.com/hurricaine_katrina_rick_mitchell.htm>. Another mention of film inspection at an exchange office: "Circus Guy Ropes Snare Indie Film Man," *Daily Variety*, 15 February 1935, 5.

were vexed throughout the decade by both a perceived decline in exhibitors' use of accessories and the emergence of accessories rental firms, some of which peddled pirated product. These developments led to distributor proposals to win back exhibitors' business by pooling accessories departments into a joint, authorized rental service.[33]

Exchanges employed a range of white- and blue-collar workers, including shippers, inspectors, clerks and secretaries, accessories agents (called "ad men" in the trades), and office managers.[34] The three types of staffers most directly involved in process of film selling were branch managers, salesmen, and bookers (their particular duties are discussed in more detail below). These employees were the ones most likely to attend their company's national or regional sales conventions each spring or summer to be apprised of upcoming releases and selling policies. During the convention season, the members of individual exchanges' convention delegations were regularly reported in the trade press and usually numbered around three to seven: the branch manager, one to three salesmen, and perhaps one or two bookers and the advertising sales manager.[35]

Such numbers may have represented the entire sales force for some exchanges. In February 1933, *Variety* reported that an unnamed midwestern exchange laid off three of its six salesmen as the selling season waned but expected to bring on new staff in the

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33 "Accessories Exchange," *Variety*, 11 December 1935, 27; "Accessories Given More Attention by Distribs-Drive on Bootleggers," *Variety*, 29 August 1933, 35.

34 "Cuts Reported Cause for Unionization of Exchange Personnel," *Variety*, 21 March 1933, 27; *Daily Variety*, 3 April 1937, 8.

35 Delegation photos can be seen in: "Camera Does Nip-up on UA'ites," *Daily Variety*, 9 July 1935, 7; and "20th Century Chanticleers Gallivant in," *Daily Variety*, 1 June 1937, 12.

spring.[36] By dividing 18,000 (the approximate number of U.S. theaters in the mid-1930s) by thirty (the approximate number of exchange areas used by the majors), we can estimate that each exchange area covered an average of 600 theaters. (Of course, some exchange areas were more populated, and home to more theaters, than others.) This average would suggest that, at an exchange with a staff of three to five salesmen, each might be responsible for between 120 and 200 *potential* theater accounts. These numbers seems plausible when taking into consideration that, in many cases, theaters that were part of circuits negotiated contracts collectively. Further, exchanges did not sell even the biggest films to every theater in their territories, thus limiting the number of theater accounts to be negotiated. MGM claimed that *Grand Hotel*, one of the top releases of 1932, played in approximately 10,000 of the nation's theaters.[37] In March 1935, nearly at the end of the selling season for the 1934–1935 program, Universal announced that it had negotiated contracts with 8,000 theaters.[38] Early in the release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, RKO projected that its exchanges would ultimately broker between 12,000 and 15,000 contracts for the film, including some repeat engagements—and that this number would be without precedent.[39]

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36 *Variety*, 28 February 1933, 38.

37 *Daily Variety*, 12 July 1934, 3.

38 *Daily Variety*, 18 March 1935, 1.

39 *Variety*, 27 April 1938, 27.

The Process of Film Distribution

The Conventions

The major film studios planned production by developing annual (aka "seasonal") programs of features, usually numbering between forty and sixty. But the film season did not follow the calendar year; rather, it spanned one summertime to the next. Thus, studio's programs or seasons are expressed as a two-year span: "the 1934-1935 program." Business was slower in the summer months, when studios were either dumping the last films on their program or launching the first features of the new season. (Sometimes they did both at once, as undelivered films from one season could be transferred to the next season's program.) More of the studios' prestige and otherwise high-profile features appeared in the fall and winter, with the program again winding down over the following spring and summer. This pattern is borne out by my sample films for the 1935-1936 and 1939-1940 seasons. The four studios' biggest films (in terms of budget, star power, and press coverage) among the sample were: *Anna Karenina, Rose-Marie, Mutiny on the Bounty*, *The Crusades, The Trail of the Lonesome Pine*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Captain Blood*, *Magnificent Obsession, Sutter's Gold*, *Ninotchka*, *Northwest Passage*, *Beau Geste*, *Elizabeth and Essex*, *The Roaring Twenties*, and *Destry Rides Again*. Of these top releases, only two (*Beau Geste* and *Sutter's Gold*) were released between March and August.

All the major producer-distributors held annual sales conventions at which they unveiled the coming year's program of feature films, announced strategies, policies, and

talking points for selling, and otherwise established the party line. These meetups took place as early as April and as late as July. The location and scale of the conventions varied from year to year. Some years, companies held gala national events, bringing virtually the entire sales force to Los Angeles, New York City, or Chicago. Other years, they held multiple regional conventions, each visited by the national sales chief and other executives. *Variety* covered the conventions extensively, sometimes publishing day-by-day event schedules. A typical day might include a mix of the following: plenary sessions led by production or distribution executives; awards ceremonies honoring top salesmen; breakout sessions for salesmen, bookers, branch managers, office managers, ad men; division meetings; film screenings; distribution of promotional yearbooks; and parties or outings.[40] MGM's 1937 conference attendees had a chance to attend a rodeo and to go on an excursion to Catalina Island.[41] That convention was the site of an infamous alleged sexual assault; an aspiring starlet who was employed as a hostess at an alcohol-fueled party for delegates claimed she was raped by a salesman from Chicago. One studio employee testified that "the party was the worst, the wildest, and the rottenest" he had ever seen.[42] In 1938, *Variety* reported that most studios were holding regional conferences for "top men" only rather than national meetups, which "too often...turn[ed] out to be no

40 Columbia and Paramount schedules are described in: *Daily Variety*, 30 June 1937, 6; *Daily Variety*, 19 June 1934, 4.

41 *Daily Variety*, 30 April 1937, 8.

42 *Daily Variety*, 4 June 1937, 6; qtd. in David Stenn, "It Happened at MGM," *Vanity Fair*, April 2003. <http://www.vanityfair.com/fame/features/2003/04/mgm200304>

more than vacation parties for delegates."[43]

Selling & Contracts

Armed with selling guidelines for, and talking points about, upcoming films, salesmen began negotiating contracts soon after the conventions closed. They spent months on the road and were regularly still negotiating contracts in late winter and early spring—chiefly with independent and subsequent-run houses that received product weeks or months into a film's release. In contrast, they tried to secure the most important contracts early in the selling season. The biggest contracts were those with major theater circuits (affiliated or non-affiliated), which, according to Huettig, were not compelled to block book.[44] However, many of these theaters did so voluntarily, with the benefit of negotiating smaller and more favorable blocks. Affiliated, national circuits' contracts with the majors were often brokered by representatives from the home office (perhaps in conjunction with division, district, or branch managers) and circuit heads. For instance, in June 1938, Fox-West Coast Theatres made a deal with Warner Bros. "for an aggregate of 113,736 playing days in more than 400 picture houses." The agreement included features, short, and trailers.[45] Three years prior, gridlock in the negotiations between Fox-West Coast and Paramount sales executives led to Paramount features "piling up in LA" and leaving strapped subsequent-run houses that received films after Fox theaters:

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43 *Variety*, 16 March 1938, 5.

44 Huettig, *Economic Control of the Motion Picture Industry*, 123–4.

45 *Variety*, 29 June 1938, 4.

> Circuit nabe and suburban houses are particularly hard hit as Paramount theatre, handling first-run in Los Angeles, has cleaned up three or four of new season's features, which are now lying on shelf at Par exchange, awaiting settlement of F-WC deal. Santa Monica first-run has only Fox, Metro and RKO picts for a four-time weekly split, requiring considerable juggling on part of circuit bookers [...] "Difficulty also hits nabe first runs, all of which are now being held up on Par releases, with the subsequent run circuit and indie houses also forced to rearrange their skeds.[46]

Variety indicated that Fox's circuit buyer spent much of his summer in New York bargaining with Paramount over percentage splits for various films.[47] Sometimes piecemeal deals broke impasses in negotiations, as when United Artists gave Fox-West Coast first-run access to all of the releases in its program *except* features produced by Samuel Goldwyn, which would show in the chain's subsequent-run theaters.[48]

Non-affiliated regional chains were more likely to bargain with their proximate division, district, and branch managers. For instance, in summer 1938 Warner Bros. block booked their entire program (with shorts) into dozens of North and South Carolina houses affiliated with the Kincey chain. To make the deal, two Warner Bros. branch managers, a district manager, and a division manager negotiated with a Kincey representative.[49] Though the phenomenon was on the wane in the 1930s, independent theaters could form

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46 *Variety*, 2 October 1935, 7.

47 Ibid.

48 *Daily Variety*, 5 October 1936, 1. Given UA's practices, the terms for each release were presumably still negotiated individually.

49 "67 Kincey Theatres Will Play Warners Product," 7.

chain-like cooperatives known as "booking circuits." Booking circuits could increase member theaters' bargaining power by engaging in amalgamated film buying.[50] The 1936 edition of *Film Daily Yearbook* lists two booking circuits, both in the midwest. One, the Rose, represented twenty-six theaters, while Co-operative Theaters of Michigan, Inc. represented eighty-six.[51] In Chapter Three, we will see the coordinated booking strategies employed by Rose in several northwest Indiana theaters.

Booking

The contracts brokered by exchange salesmen left many details to be worked out later. These documents typically included films' titles and/or stars (though sometimes only a production number assigned to the project), a ballpark estimate of the film's national release date, the number of days the theater would show the film, and a pricing schedule that listed the number of releases to be assessed at various rental fees (e.g. flat fee, straight percentages, sliding percentages, etc.). These rental fees might not be linked with particular titles, providing room for maneuvering the pricing schemes upon a film's arrival in a particular market. Thus, distribution contracts entailed a two-part process: the *selling* of, or contracting for, films, usually *en masse*; and the *booking* of individual releases into theaters on particular dates. Hence the division of labor at the exchanges between salesmen and bookers.[52] In his 1938 book *The Management of Motioni Picture*

50 *Variety*, 29 August 1933, 6.

51 Jack Alicoate, ed., *Film Daily Yearbook of Motion Pictures 1936* (New York: Film Daily, 1936), 979, 997.

52 Bookers competed for prizes in sales drives, just as salesmen did—though the standards by which they were judged are not clear from the trade press coverage. *Daily Variety*, 29 June 1938, 4; *Daily Variety*, 12 July 1938, 7; *Daily Variety*, 13 December 1937, 1; *Daily Variety*, 17 October 1938, 4.

Theatres, Frank Ricketson of the Fox Inter-mountain circuit indicates the "de luxe" houses conducted booking negotiations on a weekly basis. His sample itinerary reads, "Reserve afternoon for conferences with film men. Iron out and liquidate details of film contracts." Smaller theaters, Ricketson suggests, might sketch out bookings six weeks ahead of time and firm them up three weeks later.[53]

The process is summarized in a filing from a 1934 Los Angeles federal suit against Fox-West Coast and the eight majors, brought by the Chotiner circuit. Once a film was far enough into production, it was assigned a release date. The home distribution office then informed exchanges of this release date, as well as when the film was to be made available within the various exchange areas. Exchange representatives then relayed these dates to exhibitors and worked out contracted playdates, or bookings, for the individual houses contracted to show the film. Many theater chains employed head bookers to facilitate this process.[54]

Printing, Shipping, Screening, and Checking

In the 1930s, most majors did not produce release prints at their in-house laboratories in Los Angeles. Rather, they cut the negatives there and made release prints out of state.[55] The release prints were then parceled out to individual exchanges. In the

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53 Frank H. Ricketson, Jr., *The Management of Motion Picture Theatres* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1938), 110–1, 116.

54 *Chotiner Theaters v. Fox West Coast Theatres*, Equity 267-H, 1–16 (S.D. Cal. 1934). Held at National Archives and Records Administration, Riverside, CA.

55 The Chotiner filing states that, as of 1934, all release prints were made outside of California. Mitchell states that, at least at some point, both Columbia and MGM used local laboratories. A *Variety* piece affirms that the Los Angeles labs focus on negative work: *Daily Variety*, 12 February 1936, 27. But

mid-1930s, studios produced an average of 250 release prints per film. For B films, which were less in demand from exhibitors and received fewer bookings, the average was around 180. For high-profile A films, the total could be 300 or more. Examples of large print runs include Fox's order for *The Country Doctor* (1936), which capitalized on the Dionne Quintuplet craze. The film was scheduled already scheduled for 300 simultaneous bookings over three months before its release date. The number eventually increased to 350.[56] MGM opened *Idiot's Delight* (1939) simultaneously in forty-two "key spots," with a print order of 375.[57] About 100 to 150 prints were struck for short subjects, and 450 to 500 for newsreels (since, as one writer quipped, news "wears out quicker than film"). Typical printing expenses totaled 10% or more of a film's negative cost.[58]

When a playdate approached, exchanges were responsible for releasing a print of the film to the theater. The exhibitor was responsible for shipping fees and for arranging for an employee, trucking company, postal agent, or other service to pick up a print at the exchange.[59] Ideally, bookings would be arranged such that theaters received regular, usually weekly, deliveries. When a film completed its booking at a theater, that theater

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another *Variety* piece supports the claim that MGM did its print work in California. It states that, in the previous year, MGM shipped 10,223 feature-length prints (an average of 237 each for forty-one films) and nearly 7,000 short subject prints out of the state of California (*Daily Variety*, 2 October 1937, 6).

56 *Variety*, 25 December 1935, pg. 2; *Daily Variety*, 17 February 1936, 6.

57 *Daily Variety*, 25 January 1939, 3.

58 *Variety*, 6 January 1937, 6. Michael Conant's numbers, which are drawn from the 1948 Paramount Case finding, indicate an average print run of 350 (59).

59 *Daily Variety*, 6 April 1938, 2. The Chotiner filing states that exhibitors were responsible for shipping costs but that distributors arranged the delivery.

would ship the print back to the exchange, where it would be inspected and shipped to another house in the territory with an upcoming booking.[60] Spent prints were removed from circulation after about 200 projections and ultimately scrapped in New York.[61] Distributors maintained estimates of the numbers of prints required in each exchange area, and in a pinch, a print could be sent from one exchange to another to help meet unexpected demand.[62] A 1934 *Variety* report states that each major exchange used eight to twelve prints per release.[63] But there was variation by company and exchange area. According to *Variety*, the average number of prints per distributor for the Los Angeles exchange area was nine or ten, with Paramount typically circulating nine prints (up from seven). MGM, which, as we know, secured the most bookings of all the majors, circulated between twelve and fourteen prints per territory, "with four to six extra prints available on special or outstanding attractions."[64]

After a film had completed its booking, the exhibitor had to send back the print and settle his rental fees, if he had not already done so. For flat-rental films, contracts often required payment three days prior to the start of the booking.[65] For films rented on a

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60 *Chotiner*.

61 *Variety*, 6 January 1937, 6. Shoddy projection equipment, or projection technique, at theaters could shorten the life of a print considerably.

62 *Chotiner*.

63 *Daily Variety*, 1 March 1934, 6.

64 *Daily Variety*, 12 September 1935, 4. Similar numbers are cited in *Daily Variety*, 5 April 1937, 4.

65 *Variety*, 21 February 1933, 7.

percentage basis, the exhibitor had to submit the appropriate portion of the film's earnings. Ever wary of the "chiseling" exhibitor who might underreport his box-office take, distributors enlisted "checkers" to examine theaters' books, usually through in-person audits.[66] During lean times, exchanges put idle or laid-off salesmen to work as checkers.[67] Many outsourced this work to contractors such as the Ross-Federal Checking Service.[68] In addition to ensuring that distributors received the returns they had bargained for, the checking process helped exchanges stay abreast of local tastes:

> While the expense of checking item for most major distributors, the film firms hold it to be the most successful and accurate way of knowing what a picture is good for in a designated locality. Not only does the sales department learn what sort of a grosser a given pic is for certain spots but it also secures invaluable data on waehter [sic], opposition and other elements in influencing the gross.[69]

The expense of checking could be further justified in that the knowledge gained from it helped give salesmen the best possible bargaining position for future seasons' contract negotiations. Salesmen could counter exhibitors' claims that certain pictures weren't worth the percentages offered by citing figures for similar films the previous season. They could anticipate exhibitors' objections and thus prepare rebuttals for their sales talks. In this way, checking prevented a cycle of lowballing in which exhibitors claimed

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66 Hanssen discusses three methods of "checking" in "Revenue Sharing in Movie Exhibition and the Arrival of Sound," 397–8.

67 *Daily Variety*, 10 March, 8; *Variety*, 14 March, 21.

68 *Variety*, 21 March 1933, 30.

69 *Variety*, 7 August 1935, 7.

poor returns in one season and used those to argue for more favorable rental schemes the next.[70]

Exhibitors, not surprisingly, bristled at the practice of checking. An uncharacteristically even-handed *Variety* consideration of distributor-exhibitor struggles articulated theater managers' concerns:

> A distributor will rarely ever believe that an account got the most out of 'Susie Sued' or 'Love Among Lice' when on percentage dates. Even if a house record is broken by one of the Hollywood epics, the wholesaler will always add on another couple hundred bucks when talking about the gross and may finally end up believing his own figures, wondering at the same time whether or not Ross Federal gave him the right check on the business.[71]

Exhibitors at the 1938 convention for the Northwest Allied group claimed that Ross-Federal agents divulged trade secrets to rival exhibitors (and to exchanges).[72] Checking was but one source of tension in the negotiation and execution of contracts between distributors and exhibitors.

Conclusion

In the 1930s, the regular availability of films at local theaters was a logistical feat that involved, annually, the execution of 750,000 contracts and 11,000,000 print

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70 Ibid. Methods of 'chiseling' described in this article include "palming of admission tickets, attempting to bribe a checker, selling passes, or trying to prevent a thorough check of admish ducats."

71 *Variety*, 5 January 1938, 40.

72 *Variety*, 22 June 1938, 12.

transfers.[73] From his analysis of a small set of theater records from rural Virginia, Maltby concludes that "we know much less than we think we can assume about the circulation of Classical Hollywood cinema." He notes, for instance, that some of the nation's most far-flung, marginal theaters received releases relatively soon after their key city debuts—and that the release patterns for one distributor's films at a given theater did not necessarily obtain for films from a different distributor. Not all films played in all places, and while "the trade practices that determined who got to see what were intensely local matters [...] these local histories were themselves embedded in larger, national processes of circulation."[74]

In the following three chapters, I trace these national and local processes of film distribution. The possibility for variation and flexibility was built into the film selling process, which ultimately determined the distribution pattern of any given film. As we have just seen, most theaters did not block book entire programs of films but instead took portions of different studios' programs. Further, while theaters may have signed contracts for blocks of films months before their release, the actual booking and scheduling of prints for specific playdates occurred one to three weeks before the film was to be shown. By this point, exhibitors would have had opportunities to learn more about particular releases through the trade press, local newspapers, and word-of-mouth. They could exercise their cancellation privileges (which ranged from limited to generous) or try to

73 Maltby, "The Standard Exhibition Contract," 142.

74 Ibid., 140–141.

obtain a film they had not initially signed up for. They could attempt to negotiate playdates, rental fees, or other variables. For their part, the major distributors competed for prime bookings in the high-stakes first runs and also sought to place films optimally in theaters further down the hierarchy. Chapter Three looks closely at release patterns on a market-by-market and program-by-program level, revealing the complex exhibition "ecosystems" in cities and towns and how different films moved through them.

Figure 2. Warner Bros. Cincinnati Exchange Office, 1939[75]

75 Warner Bros. Archives, School of Cinematic Arts, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

Figure 3. Film Exchange Building, Detroit, c. 1930s[76]

76 "Film Exchange Building," *Historic Detroit*. <http://historicdetroit.org/building/film-exchange-building/>

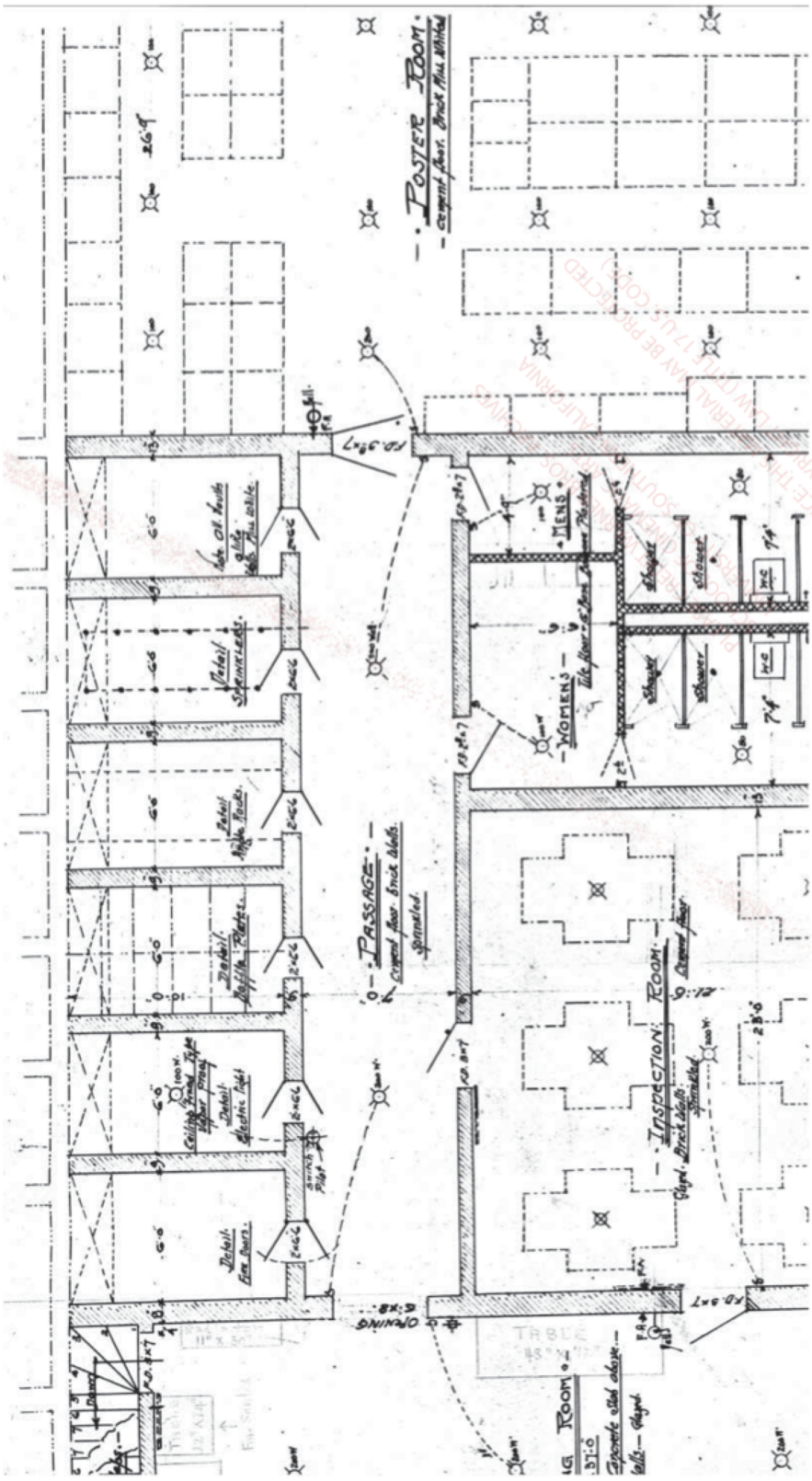

Figure 4. Warner Bros. Atlanta Exchange Floor Plan (Partial)

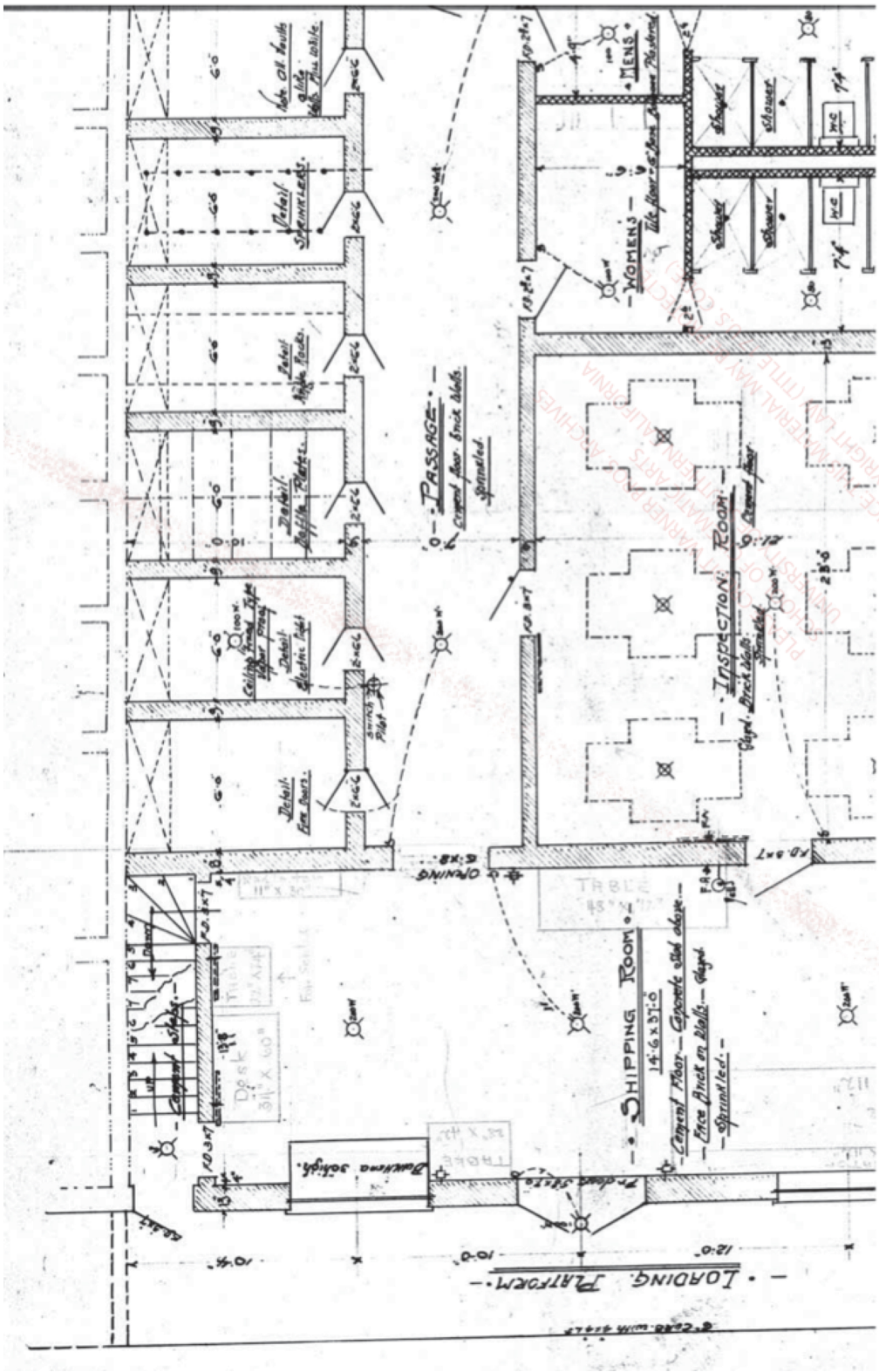

Figure 5. Warner Bros. Atlanta Exchange Floor Plan (Partial)

Chapter Three

Theater Hierarchies in the Sample Markets

Introduction

The previous chapter explored film selling—the means by which a producer-distributor's program of features, differentiated by budgets, were placed into theaters, differentiated by run status. Here we see the linking of the bilateral hierarchies introduced in Chapter One. This process allowed room for flexibility, as most theaters did not book the entire programs of any producer-distributor. Instead, they received parts of different programs. The exhibition data from the case study sites explored in this chapter make clear that these splits were not haphazard. Rather, they indicate the strategic and stratified apportionment of films of different budget classes to different theaters within each run. My analysis of market structures and exhibition trends is divided by market type; I first examine key cities and then smaller markets.

Part One: Distribution in the Keys

A film's performance in the "keys" was a crucial factor in its commercial success or failure—not just because key cities represented a significant portion of the nation's population, screens, and theater seats, but because how a film fared in the keys was a predictor of its strength in secondary markets. But how did the film industry understand and use the term "key city" in the 1930s? What made a city a key? There are at least three ways to parse this categorization. The term was a designation by the trade press, used as

shorthand for, basically, 'the largest U.S. urban areas and most important exhibition markets.' It appeared commonly in the forecasts of box-office performance that were staples of *Variety* reviews. Further, *Variety* reported the programming and box-office results of first-run theaters in approximately thirty key cities each week in its "Picture Grosses" pages.[1] The term could also refer to any city that was home to a studio's distribution exchange office.[2] There was considerable overlap in these senses of "key city" (large urban area; market profiled in *Variety*'s "Picture Grosses"; and distribution/exchange hub). However, they were not identical. Some of the nation's largest urban areas were not covered in the picture grosses while some much smaller ones were. In addition, some small cities were home to exchange offices of one or more studio. Table 1 lists each of the U.S.'s most populous urban areas, according to 1930 census data, and its status as a *Variety* key and/or an exchange hub as of 1935. Table 2 lists a number of less populous cities that were nonetheless *Variety* keys and/or exchange hubs.

Explanations for some of the discrepancies are fairly intuitive. For example, Baltimore was the largest city without exchange offices, presumably because the nearby Washington, D.C. exchanges could handle distribution for both cities. (The same logic

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[1] Over time, certain cities were dropped and others added. About twenty-five cities were consistently included in tabular grosses reports in *Variety*, while those cities and an additional five or so were covered in prose programming reports elsewhere in the "Pictures Grosses" pages. As John Sedgwick and Mark Glancy, who carried out a quantitative study of one portion of the “Picture Grosses” section, have noted, these pages “remain largely unexploited by scholars […] most likely due to the density of information in each issue as well as the manner in which it is presented on the page; it is not easily or readily digestible.” Sedgwick and Glancy, “Cinemagoing in the United States in the mid-1930s," 156.

[2] For example, in the 1936 edition of *Film Daily Yearbook*, listings of exchanges and "product-managers" are "arranged by key city" (726).

likely applies to Newark and New York City.) Particularly revealing are the locations, most in the south and west, that were home to exchange offices of Poverty Row studios but few or none of the majors. The status of these less populous, less urban, and thus less profitable areas as "the sticks" was inscribed in the distribution network itself. It makes sense that Paramount, the studio with by far the most affiliated theaters, operated exchange offices in some places, such as San Antonio and Jacksonville, that most other studios did not bother with. Both Texas and Florida were home to large numbers of Publix-affiliated theaters and few houses affiliated with other majors. Other cities were distribution hubs for independent concerns only. Some of the exchanges that sold Poverty Row fare represented a single studio, like the relatively powerful Republic, while others served a conglomeration of more marginal companies like Chesterfield-Invincible, Majestic, Resolute, Imperial, and DuWorld. As of 1936, cities whose only exchanges were those representing independent companies were Louisville, Kentucky; Tampa, Florida; Little Rock, Arkansas; and Butte, Montana. That independents but not the majors saw fit to operate exchanges in these areas suggests the firms' different priorities and strategies and their implications for local film cultures—in terms of the types of *theaters* as well as the types of *films* associated with these locations. That is, Poverty Row studios seem to have identified some opportunities to exploit small-town and rural markets in the south and west that the majors did not exploit quite as thoroughly, or with as much attention, as they did elsewhere. The theaters in these markets were, on average, smaller and less likely to be affiliated with the major studios or large chains. And these are

precisely the kinds of theaters most closely associated with the low-budget films—and particularly juvenile/action fare like westerns—that Poverty Row studios were best known for. All this is not to say that the majors' films did not still dominate these hinterland markets, or that Poverty Row product didn't find a foothold elsewhere, but rather that the markets' marginal status (in terms of population, theater stock, and profitability) made them somewhat more accessible to the non-majors.

I researched distribution in ten key cities and their surrounding exchange areas. They, along with the other keys identified by *Film Daily Yearbook 1936*, are mapped in Figure 1. Among my sample areas are the top five U.S. territories in terms of sales percentages (according to data from *Film Daily Yearbook*): New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Also represented are a variety of smaller territories such as Salt Lake City and Seattle. Together, the sample areas represent a range of regions, market shares, and patterns of theater ownership. Table 3 lists the territories by key city, approximate geographic boundaries, percentage of national sales, and sales ranking among all territories.[3] The first-run markets of several of the eleven key cities, including Chicago, Dallas, and Atlanta, were dominated by Publix-owned or affiliated theaters. Again, this is not surprising given that Publix owned or was affiliated with substantially more houses than any other studio. Table 4 lists which, if any, major studio (or its affiliates) operated a significant portion of the first-run houses in each key city.

This section examines various facets of distribution in the keys. To start, we

[3] Data in Table 3 are drawn from *Film Daily Yearbook 1937*, 769.

should consider the exhibition markets that were most important in the early phases of films' national rollouts. Chief among these was New York City—whether on Broadway or in Brooklyn—and Los Angeles. After examining debuts in these markets, I analyze first-run distribution in the other sample keys, identifying major similarities and differences in market structures and programming strategies across cities. Next, I consider subsequent-run, aka neighborhood or "nabe," distribution. In each section, I highlight the role of two primary factors in film selling and booking: a film's studio, and its budget or "class."

First, it is necessary to clarify the concept of a "run." The term "first run," for instance, can refer to at least two different ideas. On the one hand, it can refer to a classification assigned by film zoning boards or boards of trade. This classification defined a theater's hierarchical status (in terms of access to new releases) in relation to other theaters within a certain geographic range. The tiers into which theaters were slotted were usually accompanied by a codified or de facto tiering of ticket prices. In this sense, a first-run theater was one which had exclusive first access to new films within a defined area—and charged the most for this fresh product. On the other hand, the term "first run" can describe a film's initial appearance in a particular market, regardless of the run status assigned by zoning boards to the theater that booked it. A theater might nominally be second, fifth, or tenth in line for new releases, but it would only show a movie in its second, fifth, or tenth run, respectively, if *all* the theaters ahead of it also booked that film. This, of course, was often not the case, particularly with B films and

Poverty Row releases. Thus, a film that bypassed a town's top theater or theaters received its first local run in a subsequent-run house. When this happened, the theater could boast of offering the film's area premiere—though presumably it was only able to offer the first local engagement because theaters with better run statuses declined to book the film, whether via the exercise of cancellation privileges or other means. Further, the same theater might typically show releases from one studio in first run and releases from another studio in second run.

One cannot always intuit a theater's precise, codified run classification from exhibition patterns alone. The best sources for this information are distribution contracts and/or records from film zoning boards. Warner Bros. distribution contracts and booking forms from the 1930s and 1940s include spaces labeled "Protection" or "Run-Clearance-Playing Arrangement" to keep track of these schema. For instance, a 1949 contract for the Bronx's Avalon Theater reads:

> Avalon and Metro Theatres to receive same availability.
> After Valentine Theatre.
> Ahead of Tremont, Burnside, and Devon Theatres.[4]

However, such sources are hard to come by. Fortunately, tracking the exhibition patterns of a robust sample of releases has proven a viable means of reverse-engineering this system and determining a general sense of local theaters' hierarchies of access to new releases. Thus, when I use the noun phrase "first run" or "second run" below, I am

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[4] The Avalon and the Metro were located about half a mile apart in the West Bronx. Avalon Theater/Bronx 1940–1949, Warner Bros. Archives, School of Cinematic Arts, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

referring to a film's first or second appearance, respectively, in a town. If a theater most commonly showed films in their second local run, I use the term as an adjective phrase and call the venue a "second-run" theater, because that is how the theater functioned in its local distribution/exhibition ecosystem at that time. The caveat is that this does not necessarily reflect the theater's run status as defined by regional film zoning boards. It is possible that a theater occupied the third or lower tier of its local distribution hierarchy but still played many films in second run.

To summarize: a theater's run status, as assigned by film zoning boards, cannot necessarily be determined from looking only at programming data. In a case where, say, theater A shows MGM's best releases in first run and theater B shows MGM's lesser releases in first run, there are at least two possibilities. One is that theaters A and B are both first-run houses but A has a preferential booking relationship with MGM. Another is that theater A has first-run designation and theater B has second-run designation but can show, in first run, releases that were passed over by theater A. As we will see, further complicating matters is the fact that preferential booking relationships apparently could vary by distributor, such that a theater might have first access to one producer-distributor's top releases but to the lesser releases of another.

Table 1. Most Populous U.S. Urban Areas and/as "Key Cities," c. 1935

City	Pop.	*Variety* key	Exchange hub
New York City	7m		*
Manhattan		*	
Brooklyn		*	
Chicago	3.4m	*	*
Philadelphia	1.95m	*	*
Detroit	1.5m	*	*
Los Angeles	1.2m	*	*
Cleveland	900k		*
St. Louis	821k	*	*
Baltimore	804k	*	
Boston	781k	*	*
Pittsburgh	669k	*	*
San Francisco	634k	*	*
Buffalo	573k	*	*
Washington, D.C.	487k	*	*
Milwaukee	578k		*
Minneapolis	464k	*	*
New Orleans	458k		*
Cincinnati	451k	*	*
Newark	442k	*	
Kansas City	400k	*	*
Seattle	366k	*	*
Indianapolis	364k	*	*
Rochester	328k		
Jersey City	316k		
Louisville	307k		* (indep's only)
Portland, OR	301k	*	*

City	Pop.	*Variety* key	Exchange hub
Houston	292k		
Toledo	290k		
Columbus	290k	*	* (Paramount only)
Denver	287k	*	*
Oakland	284k		
St. Paul	271k		
Atlanta	270k		*
Dallas	260k		*
Birmingham	259k	*	
Akron	255k		
Memphis	253k		*
Providence	252k		
San Antonio	231k		* (Paramount + two indep's)
Omaha	214k	*	*
Dayton	201k		
Worcester	195k		
Oklahoma City	185k		*
Richmond	183k		
Youngstown	170k		
Grand Rapids	169k		
Hartford	164k		
Fort Worth	163k		
New Haven	163k	*	*
Flint	156k		
Nashville	154k		

Table 2. Additional Key Cities

City	Pop.	*Variety* key	Exchange hub
Des Moines	143k		*
Salt Lake City	140k		*
Jacksonville	130k		* (Paramount and RKO only)
Albany	127k		*
Tacoma	107k	*	
Tampa	101k		* (indep's only)
Charlotte	83k		*
Little Rock	82k		* (Republic only)
Lincoln	75k	*	
Portland, ME	71k		* (Paramount only)
Butte	40k		* (Republic only)
Sioux Falls	33k		* (Paramount, RKO, and Universal)

Figure 1. Exchange Centers and Sample Keys

(light-colored pins mark sample cities)

Table 3. Sample Exchange Areas and Sales Percentages

Territory/Key City	Geographic Range	Sales %	Ranking (of 31)
New York City	"Long Island, Greater New York City, New York State as far as Poughkeepsie and Northern NJ"	17.62	1
Boston	"Maine, Massachusetts, except extreme western part, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and all but extreme section of Vermont."	7.01	2
Philadelphia	"Most of Delaware, Southern New Jersey and Eastern Pennsylvania"	6.08	3
Chicago	"Northern Illinois and part of Indiana"	5.61	4
Los Angeles	"Part of Arizona, Southern California and parts of Mexico, New Mexico and Nevada"	4.17	5[5]
Dallas	"Texas"	3.03	10
Kansas City	"Kansas and Western Missouri"	2.47	15
Atlanta	"Alabama, Florida, Georgia, parts of Mississippi and South Carolina and Tennessee east of the Tennessee River"	2.24	16
Seattle	"Washington and Western Montana"	1.67	21
Salt Lake City	"Part of Arizona, Idaho, Nevada and Southern Oregon"	1.31	26

[5] With 4.32% of sales, the nation of Canada is the fifth-ranking territory in terms of sales percentages; Los Angeles is the fifth-ranking U.S. territory.

Table 4. Sample Key Cities and First-run Theater Ownership

Key City	Dominant first-run theater owner/affiliate
New York City (Broadway)	none/mixed
Boston	none/mixed
Philadelphia	Warner Bros.
Chicago	Publix
LA	none/mixed
Dallas	Publix
Kansas City	none/mixed
Atlanta	Publix
Seattle	Fox
Salt Lake City	Publix

The Rollout: New York and Los Angeles

For studios' biggest releases, successful early runs in the keys—and particularly in New York and Los Angeles—were crucial to generating desirable bookings and solid box-office returns further down the distribution hierarchy. Studios gave higher-budget films more tightly coordinated releases across key cities in order to capitalize on national publicity campaigns. The higher a film's budget, the more likely it was to receive substantial coverage outside the film industry trade press. A publicity campaign could include promotions such as a feature in *Life* magazine or puff pieces supplied by a studio for newspaper syndication. In contrast, lower-budget films received more haphazard, and less high-profile, rollouts that were not accompanied by extensive advertising.[6] These films, which yielded profits based on the total number of (flat-rate) bookings rather than through their total grosses, might reach the sticks before the urban picture palaces or bypass downtown theaters entirely to play in a smattering of neighborhood houses. Thus, where a film's initial screenings were scheduled—especially its premiere in New York City, whether in one of Broadway's picture palaces or in downtown Brooklyn—were indicative of its studio's assessment of the picture's "class," box-office potential, and most appropriate venues and audiences.

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[6] Jacobs, "The B Film and the Problem of Cultural Distinction," 1–13.

The films in my 1935–1936 sample made their New York City debuts in twelve Broadway theaters, plus three in Brooklyn (no films went unaccounted for). Though each of the Big Five owned or was affiliated with a Broadway flagship house that showed many of its related studio's biggest releases, those theaters were not necessarily the sole or even primary venue for their associated studios' films. Rather, studios placed their films in a variety of theaters, which were most clearly distinguished by the class of films they typically offered. This finding challenges generalizations made by F. Andrew Hanssen regarding the distinctions between flagship affiliated houses in the key cities and "ordinary" Big Five affiliates. (The former, he claims, showed exclusively films from its related producer-distributor).[7] The MGM sample films premiered in five Broadway houses (flagship: Capitol, capacity 5,486), Paramount's films in four (flagship: Paramount, capacity 3,664), Warner Bros.'s in seven (flagship: Strand, capacity 2,758) and Universal's in three (flagship, though not owned: Roxy, capacity 5,886).[8] Table 5 lists the Broadway venues and the 1935–1936 sample films that premiered there, along with a brief profile of the types of releases most common to each theater.[9] We can see, for instance, how the relatively tiny Rialto (capacity 750) earned its reputation as a grindhouse; the sample films that played there were from various studios and all Bs. It

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7 Hanssen, “Vertical Integration during the Hollywood Studio Era," 519–43.

8 MGM films played in the Ziegfeld, Capitol, Roxy, Center, Rialto, and the (Brooklyn) Metropolitan. Paramount films played at the Paramount, Capitol, Astor, Rialto, and (Brooklyn) Strand. Warner Bros. films played at the Strand, Hollywood, Globe, Rivoli, Palace, Music Hall, Astor, and (Brooklyn) Strand. Universal films played at the Roxy, Radio City Music Hall, Rialto, and the (Brooklyn) Fox.

9 Unless noted otherwise, seating capacities listed in Table 5 and throughout this chapter are taken from the 1936 edition of *Film Daily Yearbook*, 868–970.

was common for the majors to reserve their top releases for either their flagship theaters or special roadshow venues, while parceling out programmers and Bs to a variety of other houses. The data for the 1939–1940 season is similar, with a few changes (e.g. the Loew's Criterion emerged as a venue for programmers, while no sample films opened at the Center).

While studios tended to book their As and better programmers into their flagship venues, they often chose to go elsewhere for extra-special releases. Universal was able to place its biggest release of the season, *Magnificent Obsession,* into Radio City Music Hall, by seating capacity (6,200) the largest theater in not just New York but the entire country. Warner Bros. released *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, perhaps its most ambitious production of the decade (and a clear appeal to high-class respectability), as a roadshow. For its New York run, the film took over the Hollywood (capacity 1,553), a Warner Bros.-affiliated venue usually dedicated to live entertainment. Paramount's *The Crusades*, directed by Cecil B. DeMille and running over two hours, received a part-roadshow, part-traditional national release. In New York, it opened at the Astor Theater (capacity 1,141). MGM similarly engaged the Astor for *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*, one of its top releases of the 1939-1940 season. This venue typically offered more modest fare like *Boulder Dam* (recall from *Variety*: "More for the neighborhood than downtown trade") or *Soak the Rich* ("To be questioned whether the picture can stand alone in any location").[10] It appears, then, that it was because the Astor was not a particularly high-value, high-stakes theater

[10] "Boulder Dam," *Variety Film Reviews*, 2 April 1936; "Soak the Rich," *Variety Film Reviews*, 2 February 1936.

that turned over A programs on a regular schedule that it was a desirable venue for special releases like *The Crusades* or *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*, for which studios desired unrushed bookings that could accommodate anticipated holdovers without committing to full-blown roadshow releases. How studios and theaters planned for and managed holdovers is particularly important, because it demonstrates that the market had the built-in flexibility to adjust bookings depending on a film's local performance and to wring as much money as possible from successful films while maintaining product flow.

A studio's less promising films could be released in a few ways. They could be placed in smaller, cheaper, and/or non-affiliated houses, like the Astor (as seen with *Boulder Dam* and *Soak the Rich* above), Center (capacity 3,400), Globe (capacity 1,416), Palace (1,757), or Rialto. Such a debut was usually sufficient to at least generate a review in the *Times*. A more extreme strategy was adopted by MGM for one of its weakest Bs, *Calm Yourself*, which was branded by *Variety* as "strictly for nabe double bills, where a not too discriminating family trade seeks merely surcease from time signals and patent medicine plugs of the radio."[11] *Calm Yourself* debuted at the Ziegfeld (capacity 2,000), a second-run house.

Indeed, Broadway theaters did not always have a strict first or second-run designation; first- and second-run films could even be mixed on the same bill. This was the case with Universal's *Hawaiian Nights* (1939), which opened at the Palace accompanied by Warner Bros.'s *The Old Maid.* The latter film was simultaneously

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[11] "Calm Yourself," *Variety Film Reviews*, 31 July 1935.

entering subsequent runs in RKO neighborhood theaters "in Manhattan, the Bronx, and Westchester."[12] *Hawaiian Night*'s status as a probable dud (and thus its suitability for such a release strategy) is indicated in Frank S. Nugent's brief and dismissive review of the film for the *Times*; he suggested that timing one's arrival at the Palace to catch *The Old Maid* was "much the safer course."[13]

The remaining option for weaker releases was to book their premieres into one of a few downtown Brooklyn theaters. MGM, Warner Bros., and Universal did so once each, and Paramount five times, for the 1935–1936 sample films.[14] In many cases, these films were not reviewed in the *Times*; this was especially likely if they were on the bottom halves of double bills.[15] Indeed, a Brooklyn premiere was a near-sure indication that a film was intended primarily for the neighborhood and/or double-bill market.[16] One such release was Paramount's *Drift Fence*, a fifty-seven minute western starring Buster

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12 "Of Local Origin," *New York Times*, 28 September 1939, 28.

13 Frank S. Nugent, "The Screen: Hawaiian Nights," *New York Times*, 29 September 1939, 27.

14 The five films, all of which played at the Brooklyn Strand, were: *The Virginia Judge*, *It's a Great Life*, *Her Master's Voice*, *Timothy's Quest*, and *Drift Fence*.

15 Jacobs discusses the smaller number of column inches devoted to B films in the *Times* ("The B Film and the Problem of Cultural Distinction," 7). In some cases a film on the bottom half of the double bill would be mentioned by title, and nothing more, at the end of a review.

16 Some quotes from *Variety* reviews associating the Brooklyn-premiering films with the double feature market: "looks suited only as a secondary feature on dual programs, with running time of more than an hour against it" ("She Gets Her Man," *Variety Film Reviews*, 11 September 1935); "limit this one to the double-programmer stables and some nabes [...] chief appeal seems to be for neighborhoods and where they go for sugary melodrama" (Timothy's Quest," *Variety Film Reviews*, 4 March 1936); "won't startle with its grosses but should get its share of the dual biz; also looks suitable because of frothy humor for family and nabe audiences also" ("Her Master's Voice," *Variety Film Reviews*, 4 March 1936); "good enough supporting program matter" ("It's a Great Life," *Variety Film Reviews*, 12 February 1936); "can't stand by itself in the better first runs [...] Most likely to find dual bookings" (I Live for Love," *Variety Film Reviews*, 23 October 1935).

Crabbe that premiered at the Brooklyn Strand (capacity 2,870), a Warner Bros. affiliate. The film received a three-sentence summary at the end of a short *Times* review focusing on its top-billed companion film, *Woman Trap.* The piece plainly states the status of the two pictures and their release strategy: "The industrious Paramount studio is exhibiting two of its lesser contributions this week at the Strand Theatre in Brooklyn. 'Woman Trap' and 'Drift Fence' are, to give them their trade designations, Class B and C pictures respectively. With that in mind, then, put down 'Woman Trap' as tolerable melodrama."[17] *Variety*'s assessment of *Drift Fence* similarly characterized it as a lower-tier release but was more generous. A reviewer called it a "de luxe western that will go big in family and nabe houses and will collect full share of double-harness biz."[18] Another Paramount film that made a similar Brooklyn debut was *The Virginia Judge*, which starred William C. Kelly, a vaudevillian who specialized in southern dialect humor, and Stepin Fetchit. It appeared on the bottom of a double bill with another sample film, Warner Bros.'s *I Live for Love. Judge* immediately followed its Brooklyn run with several non-Broadway Manhattan bookings, making a "tour" of several large Loew's houses on the bottom of a bill carried by Paramount's *Big Broadcast of 1936,* the latter film having completed a clearance after its first run at the Paramount.[19]

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17 T.M.P., "At the Brooklyn Strand," *New York Times*, 7 March 1936, 11.

18 "Drift Fence," *Variety Film Reviews*, 11 March 1936.

19 "Screen Notes," *New York Times*, 16 Oct 1935, 27.

Table 5. Sample Films in Broadway Theaters, 1935–1936

Theater	Cap.	Major	Sample films	Summary
Astor	1141	n/a	MGM: n/a	Primarily for Bs, but could be commandeered for weeks at a time to provide an extended Broadway or roadshow release for a major film.
			Paramount: *Soak the Rich*, *The Crusades*	
			WB: *Boulder Dam*	
			Universal: n/a	
Capitol	5486	Loew's	MGM: *Escapade, Anna Karenina, O'Shaughnessy's Boy, Rendezvous, Mutiny on the Bounty, A Night at the Opera, Whipsaw, Rose-Marie, Wife vs. Secretary*	Flagship MGM venue; showed studio's top films, plus one Paramount release.
			Paramount: *The Man on the Flying Trapeze*	
			WB: n/a	
			Universal: n/a	
Center	3400	RKO?	MGM: *The Perfect Gentleman, The Voice of Bugle Ann*	Outlet for some of the majors' weaker fare, plus non-Big Five releases.
			Paramount: n/a	
			WB: n/a	
			Universal: n/a	
Globe	1416	n/a	MGM: n/a	Outlet for some of the majors' weaker fare, plus non-Big Five releases.
			Paramount: n/a	
			WB: *The Payoff, The Murder of Dr. Harrigan*	
			Universal: n/a	
Hollywood	1553	WB	MGM: n/a	Primarily a live entertainment venue; could be hired for roadshow releases.
			Paramount: n/a	
			WB: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*	
			Universal: n/a	

Theater	Cap.	Major	Sample films	Summary
Palace	1757	RKO	MGM: n/a	Outlet for some of the majors' weaker fare, plus non-Big Five releases.
			Paramount: n/a	
			WB: *Freshman Love*	
			Universal: n/a	
Paramount	3664	Publix	MGM: n/a	Flagship Paramount venue; showed most of studio's top films.
			Paramount: *Paris in Spring, The Big Broadcast of 1936, Mary Burns Fugitive, So Red the Rose, Give Us This Night, The Trail of the Lonesome Pine, Desire*	
			WB: n/a	
			Universal: n/a	
Radio City	6200	RKO	MGM: n/a	World's largest movie theater at the time. Used for some studios' major releases.
			Paramount: n/a	
			WB: *The Petrified Forest*	
			Universal: *Magnificent Obsession, Sutter's Gold*	
Rialto	750	n/a?	MGM: *Tough Guy, The Bohemian Girl*	Legendary grindhouse; showed majors' B films, along with Poverty Row fare.
			Paramount: *The Preview Murder Mystery*	
			WB: n/a	
			Universal: *Dangerous Waters*	
Rivoli	2092	n/a	MGM: n/a	
			Paramount: n/a	
			WB: *Dangerous*	
			Universal: n/a	
Roxy	5886	Fox?	MGM: *Mad Love*	Venue for a variety of Universal releases (As, programmers, and Bs) and weaker fare of some other majors.
			Paramount: n/a	
			WB: n/a	
			Universal: *Lady Tubbs, Diamond Jim, King Solomon of Broadway, Three*	

			Kids and a Queen, The Invisible Ray, Don't Get Personal	
Strand	2758	WB	MGM: n/a	Flagship WB venue; showed many of studio's top films.
			Paramount: n/a	
			WB: *Stranded, The Irish in Us, Page Miss Glory, Dr. Socrates, Broadway Hostess, Captain Blood, Colleen*	
			Universal: n/a	
Ziegfeld	2000	Loew's	MGM: *Calm Yourself*	Primarily a second-run house; could be used for first run of weak film.
			Paramount: n/a	
			WB: n/a	
			Universal: n/a	

Los Angeles was usually one of the first key cities to receive films—some played there before they reached New York. And the local first-run market was particularly important to the industry as a home-base proving ground for previews, test screenings, and gala premieres. Though its theaters were on average smaller than the Broadway picture palaces, Los Angeles had a robust first-run market in which all the majors had at least one affiliated house. In contrast to Manhattan debuts, which were concentrated exclusively in the Broadway theater district, some films opened in Los Angeles via synchronized bookings in two theaters in different parts of the city center (e.g. one in downtown Los Angeles and another in Hollywood). By combining the seating capacities and potential ticket sales of two theaters, films in Los Angeles could have, in a sense, a release as big as or bigger than they might on Broadway. The default options for first-run exhibition in Los Angeles involved, then, a few variables. A film could play in synchronized bookings in two theaters, or at just one of those theaters—or, in the case of weaker releases, at another, less prestigious venue. And within any of those options, a film could appear on a single or a double bill depending on its class and perceived strength.

MGM's default Los Angeles distribution strategy was to launch films simultaneously in the Loew's State (capacity 2,422) and Grauman's Chinese (capacity 2,028) theaters, which were located about nine miles apart, the former downtown and the latter in Hollywood. But there was considerable variety in programming strategies according to the calibre of picture. A formidable A picture like *Anna Karenina* could

carry a solo bill at both houses. As and strong programmers like *Escapade* or *O'Shaughnessy's Boy* were placed at the top of double bills at both venues (each of those two films was paired with a Fox release). A weaker programmer or B like *Calm Yourself*—which had premiered at a second-run theater on Broadway—could be placed at the bottom of a double bill at both theaters (*Calm* was also paired with a Fox film). But the most common option for MGM's B films was to place them on double bills at neither the State nor Grauman's but rather at a different, single theater. For instance, *Mad Love* was placed atop a double bill with a Universal film at the Pantages (capacity 2,812), while *Woman Wanted*—the only sample film that MGM opened in Brooklyn rather than on Broadway—appeared alongside a Paramount B (*The Virginia Judge*) and six acts of vaudeville at the Orpheum (capacity 2,000). The Orpheum's relatively marginal status in comparison to the flagship theaters is evident in its advertising in the *Los Angeles Times.* It commissioned a large picture advertisement only sporadically, such as when it was offering a first-run film on the program.

Warner Bros.'s default strategy was similar to MGM's: book films simultaneously in two large houses, one downtown and the other in Hollywood. Sometimes the two theaters were the Warner Bros. Hollywood (capacity 2,756) and the RKO Hillstreet (capacity 2,916), other times the Warner Bros. Hollywood and the Warner Bros. Downtown (capacity 2,500). The films played mostly on single bills. For a special/roadshow picture, the studio went beyond its standard first-run houses—and beyond central Los Angeles entirely—to a venue that could be occupied for long periods

of time without disrupting the steady flow of the season's releases. In the case of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the studio chose the Warner Bros. Beverly Hills theater (capacity 1,620, located roughly eleven miles from downtown.

As in the case of its New York first-run distribution, where the bulk of the studio's releases in the sample played at the Broadway flagship, Paramount's range of strategies was narrower than other studios'. Most often, Paramount films played on single bills at the Paramount Theater (capacity 3,347), accompanied by premium live entertainment (e.g. a performance by Eddie Cantor to complement *Paris in Spring* in early August 1935). The least promising B films, including releases like the southern-themed *The Virginia Judge* (discussed above), were relegated to double bills in other, less high-profile theaters.

Universal's first-run distribution strategies for the Los Angeles market usually involved the Pantages Theater (capacity 2,812). The studio's most ambitious and promising fare was booked simultaneously into two theaters, for instance the Pantages and the RKO Hillstreet (capacity 2,916), on either a single (*Magnificent Obsession*, *Diamond Jim, Three Kids and a Queen*) or a double (*King Solomon of Broadway*) bill. *Lady Tubbs* and *She Gets Her Man*, both mid-to-low tier Universal releases, played only at the Pantages atop double bills with films from, respectively, Columbia and Liberty.

First-run Distribution in Other Keys

As we have long known, first-run theaters in large cities were, on average, larger and more profitable than their neighborhood and small-town counterparts. They were also the most likely to be owned by or affiliated with the Big Five studios. Indeed, it was through their control of these venues that the majors maintained their oligopolistic power over the entire film industry. The approximate average capacity of the first-run theaters in my eleven sample key cities was well over 2000 seats.[20] A theater's studio affiliation status is sometimes hard to determine and may have changed over time, but by a very rough estimate, around 65% of these venues (50/78) were affiliated. First-run theaters in the keys and, to a slightly lesser extent, in smaller cities and towns, were significantly more likely than other theaters to offer weekly program changeovers. Two to four weekly program changes was the norm at subsequent-run venues.[21] Though many first-run venues adopted double-billing policies during the latter half of the 1930s, these theaters were still somewhat more likely than others to offer single bills and/or live entertainment. The cities surveyed below represent a range of market structures and ways in which films' releases could be divided hierarchically among first-run theaters.

The city of Boston, which anchored the country's second-most significant territory

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[20] This is a conservative estimate based primarily on data from *Film Daily Yearbook 1936* and supplemented by capacity statistics from the Cinema Treasures website (www.cinematreasures.com), though the latter typically lists one capacity for a theater that may have had numerous renovations (and thus changes in capacity) over time.

[21] This trend has been noted by Catherine Jurca in *Hollywood 1938: Motion Pictures' Greatest Year* (Berkeley: University of Californa Press, 2012). See also John Sedgwick and Mark Glancy, "Cinemagoing in the United States in the mid-1930s," 155–95.

in terms of national distribution sales, provides a useful starting point for mapping out first-run market structures and distribution strategies. As of the 1935–1936 season, at least six of its seven first-run theaters were affiliates: three with Publix; two with Loew's; and one or two with RKO.[22] Among these were two pairs, Loew's Orpheum and State and Publix's Fenway and Paramount, whose bookings were typically synchronized in a manner similar to the Loew's and Warner Bros. theaters in Los Angeles. Figure 2 shows the locations of the Loew's venues, and Figure 3 the Publix ones.

Paramount exercised two main options for first-run exhibition in Boston, both involving its affiliated theaters. In some instances, the studio's films appeared on a single bill at the large Metropolitan (capacity 4,300), while in others, they open in synched runs and on double bills at the Fenway and the Paramount, two smaller houses (capacities 1,361 and 1,797, respectively). The Warner Bros. films in my sample all played in these Publix theaters, following a similar pattern: top As on single bills at the Metropolitan; other releases in synched double-bill runs at the Fenway and Paramount. MGM films debuted almost exclusively in the synched runs at the two Loew's theaters. Muscular fare like *Mutiny on the Bounty* could carry a bill alone, while more typical As, programmers, and Bs appeared on double bills. For example, *Whipsaw*, a romantic crime drama starring Spencer Tracy and Myrna Loy, topped a program that also featured *The Perfect Gentleman*, starring the less bankable Frank Morgan. Only one MGM sample release, the B horror film *Mad Love,* opened outside the Loew's theaters; it was instead booked into

[22] The status of the Keith-Memorial between 1935 and 1940 is unclear, though, as part of the Keith's chain, it was almost certainly an RKO affiliate at some point.

an RKO house. All the Universal films in my sample opened in either the RKO-Boston (capacity 2,907) or the Keith-Memorial (capacity 3,212), with the latter theater receiving the studio's most high-profile releases (*Diamond Jim*, *Magnificent Obsession*, and *Sutter's Gold*).

First-run exhibition trends in Boston are somewhat less variable than those in New York or Los Angeles. Nearly all the MGM releases played in the Loew's-affiliated houses, nearly all the Paramount and Warner Bros. releases played in Publix houses, and the Universal releases played in RKO venues. Distribution strategies for stronger and weaker releases were differentiated largely by different programming practices within a single theater (e.g. solo vs. double bill). But in most of the other sample cities, there was a clear hierarchy among the first-run theaters.

New York, Los Angeles, and Boston anchored, respectively, the first, second and fifth largest of the thirty-one U.S. distribution territories in terms of national sales percentages. Next, we can compare and contrast three smaller key cities: Atlanta (population 270,000), with a territory sales percentage ranking of 16th; Dallas (population 260,000), ranking 10th; and Salt Lake City (population 140,000), ranking 26th.[23] The first-run markets of these key cities were all dominated by Publix affiliates.

In the 1935–1936 season, Atlanta was a solo-bill market. Of Atlanta's six first-run theaters, four (the Paramount, the Fox, the Georgia, and the Capitol) were Publix

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[23] *Film Daily Yearbook* lists a significantly larger (180,000) population for Salt Lake City, but for all cities I have used the 1930 census numbers.

affiliates and one (the Grand) was a Loew's affiliate.[24] Looking at distribution patterns shows that, among the Publix affiliates, there was a hierarchy corresponding to seating capacity. Of my sample films, the Paramount (capacity 2,476) and Fox (capacity 5,000) both played releases from Paramount, Warner Bros., and Universal. They seem to have split the studios' top releases fairly evenly, though the larger theater, the Fox, may have had a slight edge. The third Publix affiliate, the Georgia (capacity 2,500), served a few functions. As a first-run house, it showed primarily programmers and B films from Warner Bros. and Paramount (e.g. *Paris in Spring*, *The Virginia Judge*, and *The Murder of Dr. Harrigan*). It also served as a downtown holdover venue that received product from the two other Publix theaters, which could send a successful film there to continue its downtown run while maintaining a steady flow of product in the other houses. (Holdover films were *Magnificent Obsession, The Trail of the Lonesome Pine,* and *The Irish in Us*.) Additionally, the Georgia was a place for special/roadshow releases like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which played there in two separate two-day engagements in February 1940. With 1,560 seats, the Capitol was the smallest of the Publix affiliates and the only one advertised as offering "picture and stage shows." Of the sample films, the Capitol showed several Universal programmers and some Warner Bros. Bs.

The Loew's Grand (capacity 2,500) showed most of MGM's top releases, plus most of its programmers, along with one Paramount release. Atlanta's other two first-run

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[24] The Publix affiliates were in fact part of the Lucas & Jenkins chain, which operated several other theaters in the area that were not Publix-affiliated. The remaining downtown theater, the Rialto, was independently operated.

theaters received generally weaker fare. One notable exception to standard protocol for MGM films was for *The Voice of Bugle Ann*, a literary adaptation set in the Ozarks about a man's love for his dog. *Bugle Ann* was given its Atlanta first run via simultaneous two-day bookings in four neighborhood houses, none of them major studio affiliates. Figure 4 shows an advertisement for this proto-saturation booking, clearly noting that the shows constitute the film's "first run in Atlanta." Atlanta's non-affiliated first-run theater, the Rialto (capacity 1,000), was the smallest of the first-run houses and received notably weaker fare than the Publix and Loew's venues. Of the 1935–1936 sample films, it showed two MGM Bs and one Universal release.

In Atlanta, the most relevant factor determining the hierarchy among first-run houses seems to have been studio affiliation (that is, the affiliates received the best product), followed by size. In Dallas, however, a hierarchy existed independent of theater ownership, since all five of the city's first-run theaters were Publix affiliates. At the top of this hierarchy was the Palace (capacity 2,435), which had exclusive access to the cream of the crop—that is, *all* the majors' top As and prestige films. Examples include *The Big Broadcast of 1936*, *Anna Karenina*, *Mutiny on the Bounty*, *The Crusades* (following a special pre-release), *Captain Blood, Magnificent Obsession*, and *Rose Marie*. In Atlanta and Boston, the presence of at least one Loew's-affiliated house in addition to the Publix affiliates meant that the majors' top product was split across multiple theaters, whereas in Dallas the dominance of Publix seems to have led to all the best releases being concentrated in one theater. Complementing the Palace was the Rialto (capacity 1,457), a

smaller theater that served as a roadshow/prerelease venue (for *The Crusades* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) and as a holdover/extended first-run house for films that opened at the Palace. Presumably, moving films over to the Rialto allowed exhibitors to keep a successful film in the downtown market without continually throwing off the Palace's schedule (which needed to be kept moving since it was the premier venue for the majors' top films).

While the Palace took the best, the Majestic, Melba, and Capitol shared the rest. The Majestic (capacity 2,774), the city's largest theater, played weeklong runs of modest As and programmers—films like *The Irish in Us*; *Diamond Jim; Mary Burns, Fugitive*; and *Whipsaw*. The Capitol (capacity 1,034) and the Melba (capacity 1,806) played split-week programs, changing, respectively, two and three times weekly. Both theaters relied heavily on the majors' Bs as well as Universal films. Some of the most marginal studio Bs (like Warner Bros.'s *The Payoff*, *Broadway Hostess,* and *Freshman Love*) received only one-day bookings at the Melba.

Salt Lake City's four first-run theaters, the city's largest, were all Publix affiliates. As in Dallas, they split the sample films in a generally hierarchical fashion. But while in Dallas one theater showed all studios' top releases, in Salt Lake City two theaters, the Paramount and the Capitol, shared them (excepting Universal films). The Paramount (capacity 1,400) seems to have had a slight edge, receiving a somewhat larger share of the season's biggest A pictures (*Mutiny on the Bounty, Anna Karenina, Rose-Marie, The Trail of the Lonesome Pine, The Crusades*), though the Capitol (capacity 1,894) played

many As and programmers (*Captain Blood, Desire, Stranded, Mary Burns Fugitive*). Further down the food chain was the Victory (capacity 1,153) which showed MGM, Paramount, and Warner Bros. releases, primarily Bs and programmers (e.g. *The Payoff, Mad Love, The Preview Murder Mystery*).[25] At the bottom was the Orpheum (capacity 2,300), the largest first-run house, which played no sample films other than Universal releases. It seems to have had exclusive access to Universal product, as no other first-run theater in Salt Lake City played any from my sample.

Seattle's first-run market was also dominated by a major-affiliated theater chain, though not Publix. Four of its five leading first-run houses were operated by the Hamrick-Evergreen Circuit, a Fox affiliate.[26] For the most part, these houses shared the major studios' films among them rather than segregating releases by studio. Programming strategies in Seattle most closely resembled those in Salt Lake City, with two theaters splitting the season's top releases and others splitting the rest hierarchically. The 5th Avenue (capacity 2,420) showed A pictures (e.g. *Page Miss Glory, Anna Karenina, Mutiny on the Bounty*) on solo bills. The Orpheum (capacity 3,000) also showed As (e.g. *The Irish in Us, O'Shaughnessy's Boy, Rendezvous, The Big Broadcast, Diamond Jim*) on solo bills, sometimes holding them over a week or achieving the same effect by immediately moving the film to one of the smaller downtown houses (the Blue Mouse,

[25] The capacity of the Victory, which is not listed in *Film Daily Yearbook*, comes from Cinema Treasures.

[26] *Film Daily Yearbook 1936* does not identify Hamrick-Evergreen as a Fox affiliate, but multiple other sources do (see Bjork, 40). For another analysis of exhibition patterns in Seattle a few years later, see Ulf Jonas Bjork, "Double Features and B Movies: Exhibition Patterns in Seattle, 1938," *Journal of Film and Video* 41, no. 3 (1989): 34–49. Bjork reviewed only Friday newspaper listings for spring 1938.

capacity 980, or Music Box, capacity 970) for an extended run. The Orpheum occasionally showed double bills for iffier fare, as when the Universal B *Lady Tubbs* occupied the bottom spot, playing with *Dante's Inferno*.

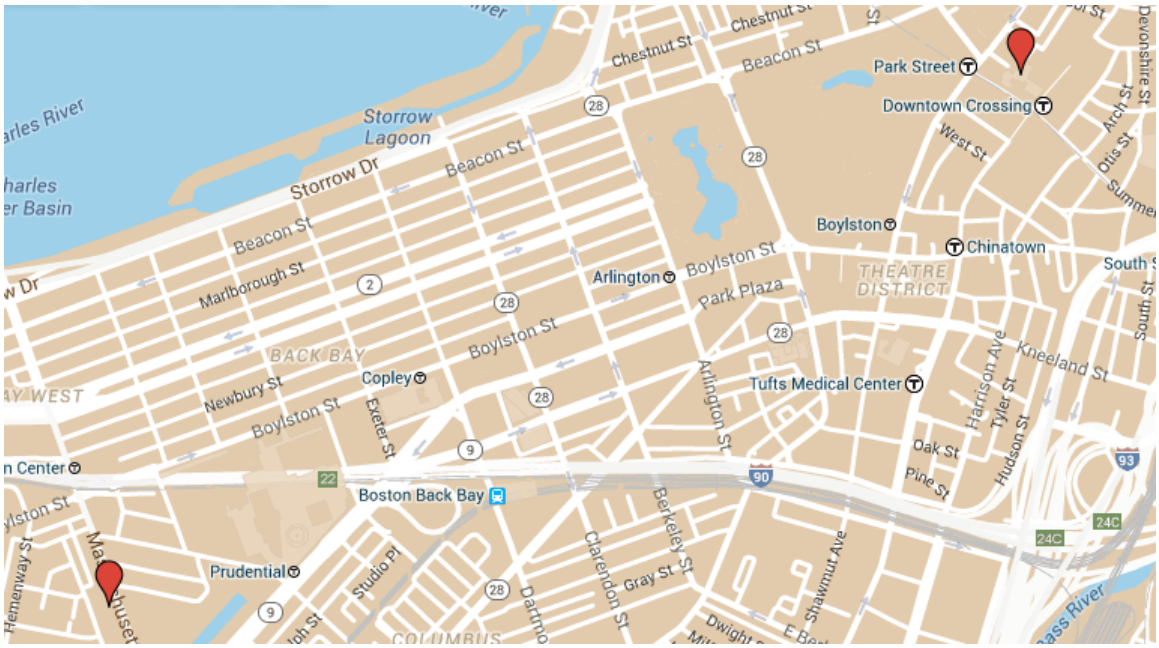
The Paramount (capacity 3,000) showed double bills, mostly featuring programmers and Bs. For example, *Dr. Socrates* topped a bill with the feature documentary *Wings over Ethiopia*. MGM Bs *Calm Yourself* and *Woman Wanted* each played at the bottom of double bills (with higher-profile films *The Virginian* and *Every Night at Eight*, respectively). *King Solomon of Broadway*, one of Universal's more ambitious releases, was strong enough to lead a bill, accompanied by *Bad Boy*, a B from Fox. The Rex Theater (capacity 2,000), part of the Sterling/Farwest chain, showed single bills of Bs (e.g. *Paris in Spring, She Gets Her Man, The Payoff*) accompanied by major touring vaudeville acts.

The first-run key city markets we've examined above reveal a range of options for managing the flow of new releases through the nation's largest and most profitable theaters. The larger the first-run market, the more likely it was to have a wider range of major affiliates, some of which served as "flagship" venues. But flagships did not show films exclusively from their affiliated studios, nor did they show all of their affiliates' programs. Rather, different films from the same studio program were placed strategically across a variety of affiliated and non-affiliated venues. Releases at either extreme of the program hierarchy—ultra-special releases and the most marginal Bs—were the most likely to be allocated to different theaters than "regular" releases. The majors dealt with

limitations in theater size or idiosyncrasies of local geography through synchronized first-run bookings at multiple venues.

In the smaller keys' first-run markets, we can see clear hierarchies even when all or most of the theaters are affiliated with the same major. In the cases of Atlanta, Seattle, and Salt Lake city, two theaters split the best releases from all (or most) of the studios and the other venues were used for holdovers, programmers, and Bs. In Dallas, the top releases were concentrated in just one theater. These hierarchies correlated with theater size and with standard run length (that is, weaker releases tended to open in smaller houses that changed programs more often).

Figure 2. Synchronized Loew's Theaters in Central Boston (w/modern roadways)



at left = Loew's State; at right = Loew's Orpheum

Figure 3. Synchronized Publix Theaters in Central Boston (w/modern roadways)

at left = Fenway; at right = Paramount

Figure 4. First-run Neighborhood Saturation Booking in Atlanta

Subsequent-run Distribution in the Keys

Salt Lake City, the smallest key city in my sample, was home to about fifteen theaters in the mid-to-late 1930s. Despite this low number, it had five distinct tiers of subsequent-run distribution.[27] Larger urban areas like Philadelphia and Chicago had dozens upon dozens of cinemas within the city limits, plus scores more in the suburbs. Los Angeles and Chicago newspapers each published daily listings for between one and two hundred theaters. These cities' subsequent-run hierarchies were therefore extremely complex. The best way to clarify these sprawling markets is to distinguish between 1) downtown second-run houses, plus large subsequent-run theaters located not far from downtown (often in dense, bustling neighborhoods with their own shopping districts); and 2) garden-variety neighborhood theaters. The former type occupied a higher rung on the distribution ladder, receiving exclusive or near-exclusive access to films following their first run downtown. The latter type, typically smaller, received films later, often in large "waves." That is, a release would be cleared to enter many neighborhood theaters across the city around the same time, and would then move into another set of houses following a minimal (or no) clearance.[28]

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[27] Films' forking paths throughout the city's theaters was largely determined by studio. The first tier consisted of the Rialto, the Gem, and the Studio; the State made up the second tie; the Broadway the third; the Tower, Marlo, and Star the fourth; and the Roxy the last (some films bypassed tiers three through five and went straight to the Roxy, but never did a film play at the Roxy and later at another Salt Lake City theater).

[28] Of course, there were intermediate cases as well as exceptions to these characterizations. Sometimes theaters that were very large and opulent, and/or situated in prime locations, could not secure a desirable run status and were worse off than some more modest neighborhood houses. One such venue was the Jackson Park Theater in Chicago. Conant, *Antitrust in the Motion Picture Industry*, 161–7.

Boston had three centrally located second-run theaters. Two, the Scollay Square (capacity 2,542) and the Modern (capacity 496), were Publix affiliates separated by only a few blocks. Figure 5 shows the location of these theaters near Boston Common. Of my sample films, these theaters showed primarily Paramount films (and always in synchronized bookings); other studios' major releases usually went to the Bowdoin (capacity 1,400) for their exclusive second runs. There were many possible paths a film could take after appearing in these theaters (if it did at all). Among my 1935–1936 sample, *The Irish in Us* appeared in the largest number of theaters—ten—and had the most booking days, at seventy-three. In comparison, *Mutiny on the Bounty* played in six theaters for a total of fifty-two booking days. However, *Mutiny* spent more time in its first run, with a much-ballyhooed two-week synchronized booking at the Loew's State and Loew's Orpheum. *The Irish in Us* had a more modest and typical first run, spending one week at the Metropolitan—but it saturated the neighborhood theaters more thoroughly. The smallest number of bookings among the sample films was for the horror B *Mad Love*, which played in only one other theater after its downtown first run.

In Chicago, many neighborhood theaters were as large or larger than the downtown ("Loop") houses. There were about thirty subsequent-run venues with over 2,000 seats and about a dozen with over 3,000. All of these theaters were members of chains—chief among them Balaban & Katz, which owned all of the 3,000+ seaters and all the large subsequent-run venues on the West and Northwest sides. The Warner Bros., Essaness, and Schoenstadt chains each staked out some territory on the North and South

sides. Table 6 lists the size and affiliation of the largest neighborhood theaters, grouped by city area. The largest theaters in each area were: the Uptown (North Side, capacity 4,320), which was one of the largest movie theaters in the U.S.; the Tivoli (South Side, capacity 3,520); the Marbro (West Side, capacity 3,978); and the Harding (Northwest Side, capacity 2,962).[29]

After playing in the Loop and observing a clearance of at least a week, films made the rounds of these large neighborhood houses. The largest venues had weeklong standard runs and exclusive first access—if they booked a film, no one else could have it at the same time. After this run, films could play in several local theaters simultaneously and thus saturated the neighborhood houses in waves, separated by short clearances. As a release entered its late stages and hit the smallest subsequent-run theaters, these waves and clearances became less distinct.

But not all films were treated equally. A top release might stop by nearly all of an area's large chain-affiliated theaters, while a more marginal one might bypass them entirely. Take *Mutiny on the Bounty*'s distribution in the South Side. It made its debut at the Tivoli, the area's largest venue, where it stayed a week; it then went immediately to the next-largest venue, the Southtown, for another week. Following a one-week clearance, it played half-week runs at the three next-largest theaters (the Tower, the Piccadilly, and the Capitol). A two-week clearance passed and the film then played short

[29] City area classifications follow those in the *Chicago Tribune* movie listings from 1935–1936. Capacity and ownership information comes from *Film Daily Yearbook 1936*. The Regal Theater, which is included in Table 6, is listed in *Film Daily Yearbook* but does not appear in *Chicago Tribune* listings.

runs in at least six other South Side houses (including two more of the large ones included in Table 6). Similar patterns were unfolding simultaneously on the North, West, and Northwest sides.

Other films bypassed these huge theaters and landed more erratically in other venues. *Calm Yourself*, an MGM B film, made its South Side debut at the Jeffrey, a 1,400-seat Warner Bros. affiliate, a week after its Loop run. But not all B films skipped past these theaters, nor did all higher-budget films play in them. And the major-affiliated chains appear not to have given preference to films from their corresponding studio—they wanted use these venues to milk the best releases, regardless of studio. Paramount's Civil War film *So Red the Rose* is an instructive case. After its first run in the Loop, it moved not to the large Balaban & Katz theaters but to other chain theaters. On the South Side, it opened at the Piccadilly, a member of the Schoenstadt chain. On the North and West sides, it was booked into, respectively, the Sheridan and the Broadway Strand, which were both members of the Essaness circuit. On the Northwest Side, it debuted at the Mont Clare, a theater affiliated with the Rose Booking circuit. This example suggests that after *So Red the Rose*'s downtown engagement, Balaban & Katz made a calculated decision to keep the film out of its own premier houses and instead shunt it off to other exhibitor.[30]

The Dallas subsequent-run market was smaller and less labyrinthine. The single downtown non-Publix affiliate, the Mirror (capacity 920), was a second-run house. It was

[30] It appears that the top-flight Warner Bros. affiliates took a pass on the film as well, though it did play at the Highland.

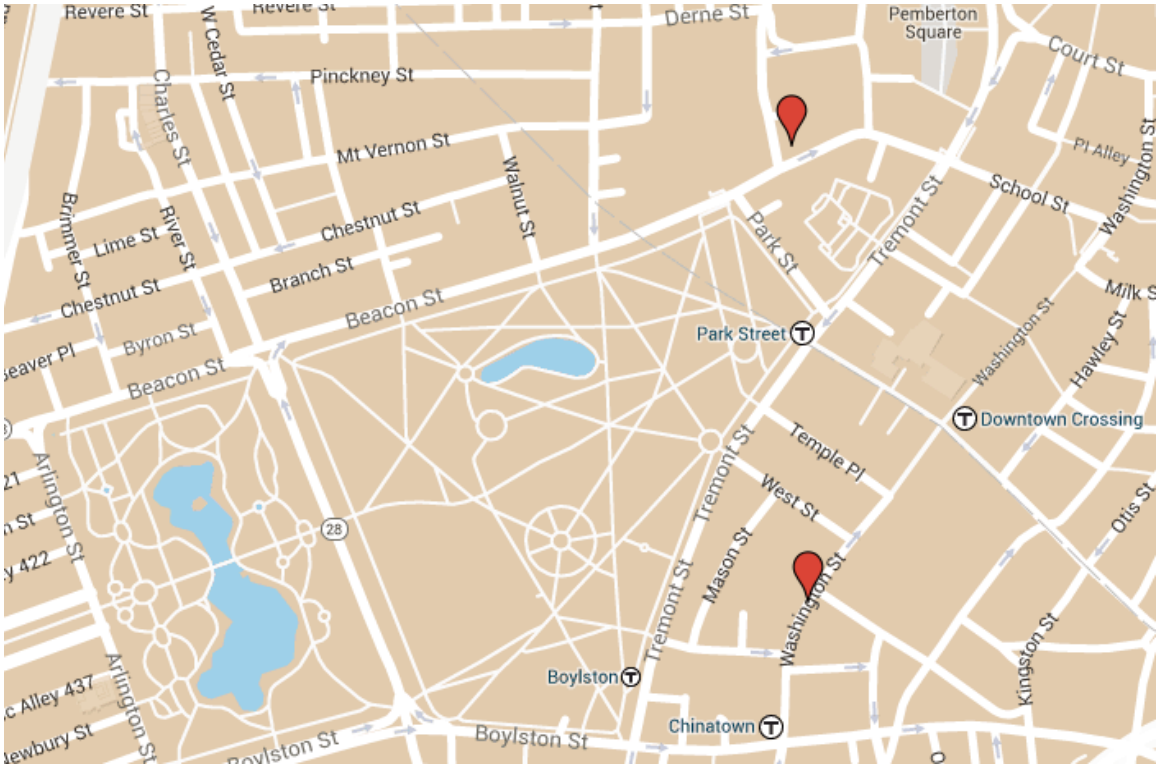
connected to the Robb & Rowley chain, which also operated three neighborhood theaters. The Mirror showed a mix of films that had debuted at any of the other five downtown theaters. About twenty neighborhood/suburban houses, nearly all showing single bills and split-week programs during both seasons, were regularly advertised in the *Dallas Morning News*. The second-largest of these, the Arcadia (capacity 1,042) was an Interstate/Publix theater, and, not surprisingly, it was often the first to receive films following their one or two downtown runs. Also near the top of the neighborhood theater hierarchy was the Texas (at 1,600 seats, the largest), which was part of the Robb & Rowley chain.

Atlanta had two downtown second run theaters, six "colored" theaters affiliated with the Bailey Circuit, and around twenty neighborhood houses, about a third of which were affiliated with the large Lucas & Jenkins (L&J) chain. Following their one or two downtown runs, Paramount films typically played in one or more of the black theaters before moving into other neighborhood venues. This pattern did not obtain for other studios' films, which cropped up in the Bailey theaters more erratically. The most common number of neighborhood theater bookings (including in black theaters) was around eight. Films that achieved such distribution included As like *Diamond Jim* and *The Irish in Us,* along with programmers like *Stranded*. Notably, Paramount's *The Virginia Judge*, a film that found very few bookings in cities like Boston and Chicago, played in eight different neighborhood houses in Atlanta. (These engagements were not disproportionately in Publix affiliates.) In contrast, *The Payoff*, a comparably humble B

from Warner Bros., found just a single neighborhood playdate. This discrepancy may be due in part to Paramount's strong position in the Atlanta market—*The Crusades* and even the programmer *Mary Burns, Fugitive* received over a dozen bookings each—but it likely has also to do with the strong regional appeal of *The Virginia Judge* and Kelly's vaudeville act.

Looking at subsequent-run hierarchies in the key cities reveals the privileged positions occupied by theater chains (major-affiliated and not) beyond the Broadways of the U.S. exhibition market. In these population centers, the most powerful exhibitors found ways to continue capturing profits from the best-performing films while diverting more lackluster fare to other theaters. (Earlier we saw how holdovers served this function in the first-run markets.) One way of doing so was to operate downtown second-run theaters. Another was to control large, strategically situated neighborhood theaters throughout a city. As films fanned out beyond downtown, these theaters could, in a sieve-like fashion, trap the ones that had enjoyed promising first runs and let the others pass through to other theaters. As we saw with examples like *The Irish in Us* (in Boston) and *The Virginia Judge* (in Atlanta), taking films of similar caliber and comparing their total numbers of subsequent-run bookings in different markets may provide a way of gauging local tastes—at least, as filtered through the actions of exhibitors and distributors.

Figure 5. Synchronized Downtown Second-run Theaters, Boston



top = Scollay bottom = Modern

Table 6. Largest Chicago Neighborhood Theaters, c. 1935

Location/Zone	Theater	Size	Affiliation
North Side	Uptown	4320	Balaban & Katz
	Granada	3447	Balaban & Katz
	Belmont	3257	Balaban & Katz
	Century	3056	Balaban & Katz
	Norshore	3017	Balaban & Katz
	Sheridan	2654	Essaness
	North Center	2500	Essaness?
	Nortown	2086	Balaban & Katz
	Pantheon	2035	Balaban & Katz
	Belpark	2004	Balaban & Katz
South Side	Tivoli	3520	Balaban & Katz
	Southtown	3200	Balaban & Katz
	Tower	3015	Balaban & Katz
	Regal	*2798*	*Balaban & Katz*
	Capitol	2504	Warner Bros.
	Piccadilly	2500	Schoenstadt
	Stratford	2460	Warner Bros.
	Peoples	2400	Schoenstadt
	Avalon	2385	Warner Bros.
	West Englewood	2065	Warner Bros.
	Highland	2059	Warner Bros.
West Side	Marbro	3978	Balaban & Katz
	Paradise	3612	Balaban & Katz
	Senate	3097	Balaban & Katz
Northwest Side	Harding	2962	Balaban & Katz
	Congress	2890	Balaban & Katz
	Terminal	2456	Balaban & Katz
	Gateway	2093	Balaban & Katz
	Tiffin	2000	Balaban & Katz

Part Two: Distribution beyond the Keys

In addition to the eleven key cities analyzed above, I studied distribution/exhibition patterns in multiple smaller cities and towns within each of the sample exchange areas. Table 7 lists these locations, along with their approximate populations as of 1930. Whenever feasible, I selected one location with a population of 50,000 or more and another with 50,000 or fewer. But a larger population did not necessarily mean more local theaters. Of the two sample towns in Massachusetts, Lowell's population was two and a half times greater than Fitchburg's, but both towns had five active theaters. In fact, about half of the towns had either four or five theaters, and three-quarters had between four and seven. But to add a further wrinkle, two towns with the same number of theaters could handle substantially different volumes of product depending on how often those theaters turned over their programs, and whether they showed double or single bills.

In sparsely populated regions, especially in the West, a single newspaper could serve a huge geographic area. Thus, many local newspapers published movie listings for not just their home bases but also for neighboring towns. The *Phoenix Sun*, for instance, included listings for over a dozen towns, including Willcox (population 800), located nearly 200 miles southeast of Phoenix. This expansive coverage allowed me to track film distribution in several more towns than I had originally planned and to analyze how films moved, often hierarchically, among neighboring towns. This broader perspective is essential, because film zoning was not necessarily organized by municipality. Rather,

zoning committees established hierarchies of access among theaters in multiple towns or communities near each other.

My discussion of distribution beyond the key cities is divided into three parts and follows a different logic than the discussion of the keys. I divide the sample towns into two broad categories: first, those with a more developed run hierarchy (usually, a minimum of three runs for at least some of the sample films); and second, those in which the sample films typically received only one or two runs. Most towns in the former category had five or more theaters, while most in the latter had four or fewer. But making these distinctions (which, again, does not necessarily correlate with population size) is not a science. Every sample site is a moving target, since theaters opened and closed, and/or gained and lost status within the local distribution hierarchy, between 1935 and 1940. I simply wish to highlight some characteristics of more or less highly differentiated subsequent-run markets. But looking at distribution/exhibition hierarchies within individual towns only tells part of the story. As mentioned earlier, run, zone, and clearance systems were not drawn up municipality by municipality; they often established protocols for film distribution in multiple towns, communities, or neighborhoods that were near each other. Thus, I end this chapter by tracing how films circulated among neighboring towns.

Table 7. Sample Secondary Markets

Exchange Area/ Key City	Secondary Markets	Pop.
New York City	*Brooklyn, NY*[31]	2.56m
	Elizabeth, NJ	115k
Boston	Lowell, MA	100k
	Fitchburg, MA	41k
Philadelphia	Chester, PA	59k
	Lebanon, PA	25k
Chicago	Hammond, IN / Calumet area (inc. Indiana Harbor, East Chicago, Whiting)	136k
Los Angeles	Bakersfield, CA	26k
	Yuma, AZ	5k
Cincinnati	Columbus, OH	290k
	Portsmouth, OH	43k
Dallas	Galveston, TX	53k
	Lubbock, TX	20k
Kansas City	Joplin, MO (also nearby Webb City)	33k/ 7k
Atlanta	Augusta, GA	65k
	Panama City, FL	5k
Seattle	Butte, MT	40k
	Centralia, WA (also nearby Chehalis)	8k/5k
Salt Lake City	Phoenix, AZ	48k
	Reno, NV	16k

[31] Because it sometimes served as a New York City premiere/first-run market for B films, I discuss Brooklyn distribution in the section on key cities.

Basic Market Structures

As was the case with the key cities, the local distribution/exhibition hierarchies in smaller towns revealed themselves clearly as I tracked the appearances of my sample films. These structures were quite similar across locations. To begin, I will consider the town of Butte, Montana. Four theaters regularly published listings in *The Montana Standard*, the local newspaper; all were clustered within a few blocks near downtown, as seen in Figure 6. Table 8 describes their programming practices and status in the town's distribution hierarchy as of the 1935–1936 season. The Rialto (capacity 1,200), a Fox affiliate, was Butte's chief first-run venue. It showed double bills and changed programs three times each week. The town's other Fox affiliate, the American (capacity 998), played some films that had shown at the Rialto, including the bulk of the season's most high-profile releases. But the American also screened programmers and Bs that were appearing in town for the first time. The American showed sample films from MGM, Paramount, and Warner Bros. but not from Universal; Universal releases that debuted at the Rialto went instead to another theater, the Park, for their second runs. The fourth theater, the Broadway, advertised only three films from my 1935-1936 sample, all playing their third run in Butte. In theory, theaters that showed few or none of the films in my sample could have booked with Fox, RKO, and Columbia that season. But usually, the absence of sample films indicates that a theater did not book substantially with any of the majors but rather obtained most of their films from Poverty Row studios. (Indeed, the theaters for which there were few data points were consistently those near the bottom of

the run hierarchy.)

Figure 6. Butte's Movie Theaters, c. 1935 (w/modern roadways)

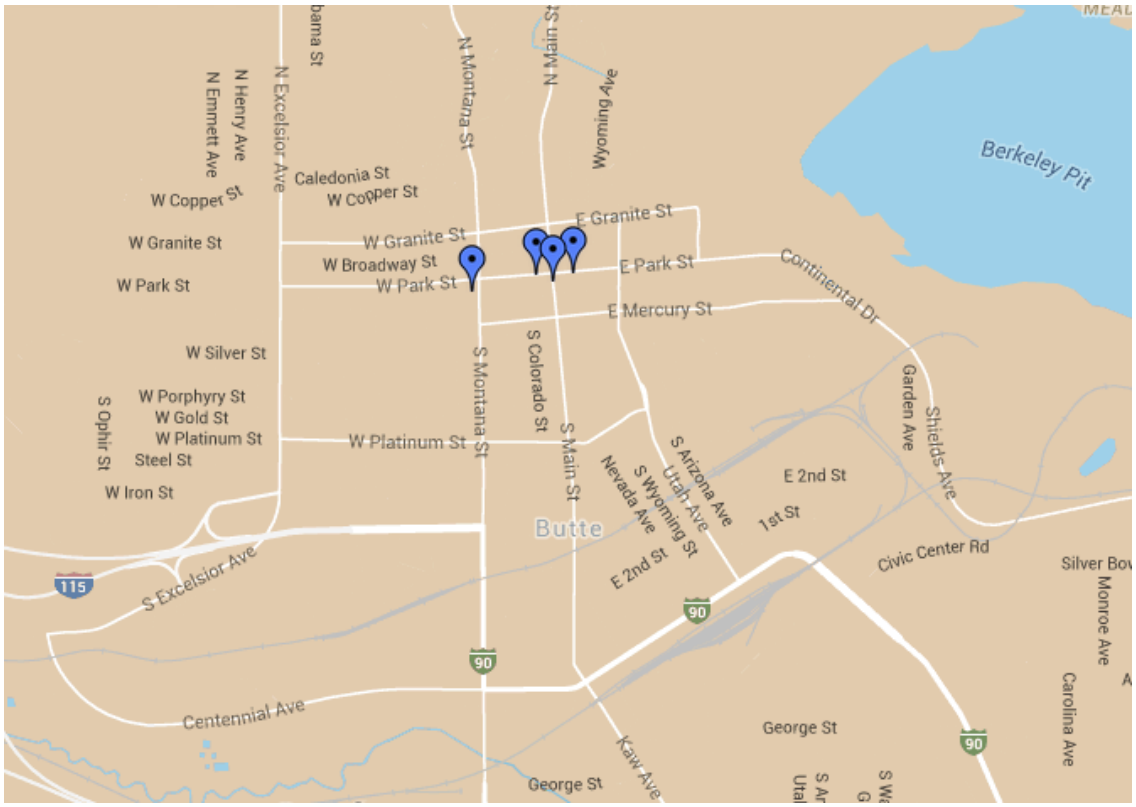


Table 8. Theater Hierarchy in Butte, MT, 1935-1936 Season

Tier	Theater Name	Bills	Turnover	Description
1	Rialto (Fox affiliate)	Double	3x/week	Showed top releases from all sample studios in first run
2	American (Fox affiliate)	Mix (single/ double)	2-3	Showed top releases from MGM, Paramount, and Warner Bros. in second run; showed programmers and Bs from those three studios in first run
3	Park	Mix	2-3	Showed releases from all sample studios in second run (previously shown at either Rialto or American, but not both)
4	Broadway	Mix		Showed a few sample films in third run

Bakersfield, California is a more complicated example. Like most of the towns I studied, it had two first-run theaters, one of them with a clear edge in product quality. Both houses were Fox affiliates, but the year's top releases were heavily concentrated at the Fox (capacity 1,527), while the Nile (capacity 1,096) showed more programmers and Bs. (The Fox was the town's largest theater; as we have seen across the sample, seating capacity correlated roughly with theater clout.) Both theaters booked films from all four of our sample studios. Because the division of first-run films across these two theaters—and the films' placement onto single or double bills—is such a clear illustration of how studios' programs were differentiated along the lines of prestige and perceived quality, I have listed all the first-run engagements of the sample films, by theater and by studio, in Table 9.

First, we see that the Fox showed all the top MGM releases of the season, most notably *Anna Karenina*, *Mutiny on the Bounty,* and *Rose-Marie*. When it showed the studio's low-profile releases, it usually kept them for only brief engagements (e.g. a one-day run for *Woman Wanted*) and/or on the bottom of double bills (e.g. *The Perfect Gentleman*), which it began offering in January 1936. Trends for Paramount and Warner Bros. films were similar, with the major exception being the Nile's booking of *The Crusades*—though, as we saw in the previous section, the "special" status of *The Crusades* sometimes resulted in bookings at lower-caliber houses where it wouldn't be as rushed. The Nile seems to have had a preferential booking relationship with Universal, as it screened nearly all that studio's films in the sample, including *Magnificent Obsession,*

which played for a longer-than-usual run of one week. (The Fox booked only a couple of Universal's Bs.) We can confirm the Nile's status by looking at the kinds of films that were sharing the bills with our sample films: the MGM B *Calm Yourself* was paired with the Fox B *Hard Rock Harrigan*; the Warner Bros. B *Broadway Hostess* was accompanied by *Grand Exit,* a 68-minute Columbia film about an insurance investigator. The Nile was also one of the few unlucky theaters to get stuck with *Soak the Rich*, a political comedy that advance reviews had labeled box office poison. (This film's distribution is discussed further in the next chapter.)

Table 10 lays out the hierarchy of Bakersfield's theaters and the paths that films followed for their subsequent runs. No Paramount film in my sample saw more than three runs. A number of Warner Bros. and Universal releases had four engagements, and some from MGM had five. We can think how these theaters received films specific studios on specific runs in terms of booking arrangements. As we saw a moment ago, both first-run theaters booked with all four of our sample producer-distributors. In contrast, the subsequent-run theaters all booked with either two or three of them. MGM fared best in that in secured bookings with four of the five theaters. Universal and Warner Bros. each booked with three, and Paramount with only two.

Table 9. Division of First-run Releases in Bakersfield, CA, 1935-1936 Season

Fox: more top releases	MGM: *Escapade* (solo), *Woman Wanted* (solo 1 day), *Anna Karenina* (solo), *O'Shaughnessy's Boy* (solo), *A Night at the Opera* (solo), *Mutiny on the Bounty* (solo), *Rendezvous* (solo), *Whipsaw* (solo), *Rose-Marie* (top), *The Perfect Gentleman* (bottom), *The Voice of Bugle Ann* (bottom), *Wife vs. Secretary* (top), *Bohemian Girl* (bottom)
	Paramount: *Man on the Flying Trapeze* (solo), *Big Broadcast of 1936* (solo), *The Virginia Judge* (bottom), *Her Master's Voice* (bottom), *Desire* (top), *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine* (top), *It's a Great Life* (bottom)
	Warner Bros.: *The Irish in Us* (solo), *Page Miss Glory* (solo), *The Payoff* (bottom), *Captain Blood* (top), *The Murder of Dr. Harrigan* (bottom), *Freshman Love* (bottom), *The Petrified Forest* (top), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (solo), *Colleen* (top), *Boulder Dam* (bottom)
	Universal: *Lady Tubbs* (solo 1 day), *Don't Get Personal* (bottom)
Nile: more programmers and Bs	MGM: *Calm Yourself* (bottom), *Mad Love* (bottom), *Tough Guy* (top)
	Paramount: *Paris in Spring* (top), *The Crusades* (solo), *Mary Burns Fugitive* (top), *Timothy's Quest* (bottom), *The Preview Murder Mystery* (bottom), *Soak the Rich* (top), *Give Us This Night* (bottom)
	Warner Bros.: *Stranded* (top), *Doctor Socrates* (top), *I Live for Love* (solo 1 day), *Dangerous* (top), *Broadway Hostess* (bottom)
	Universal: *She Gets Her Man* (solo), *Diamond Jim* (top), *3 Kids and a Queen* (top), *King Solomon of Broadway* (top), *Magnificent Obsession* (top), *Invisible Ray* (top), *Sutter's Gold* (top)

Table 10. Theater Hierarchy in Bakersfield, CA, 1935-1936 Season

Tier	Theater Name	Bills	Turnover	Description
1	Fox (Fox affiliate)	Mix[32]	2-3x/week	Showed most top releases from sample studios in first run
	Nile (Fox affiliate)	Double	1-3	Showed mostly programmers and Bs in first run (plus top Universal releases)
2	Fox California (Fox affiliate)	Double	2	Showed MGM and Warner Bros. releases in second run
3	Rex	Double	2-3	Showed Paramount and Universal releases in second run; Showed Warner Bros. releases in third run
4	Granada	Double	3	Showed MGM and Paramount releases in third run; showed Warner Bros. releases in fourth run
5	Virginia	Double	3	Showed Universal releases in fourth run; showed MGM releases in fourth or fifth run;
	Rialto	Double	3	Showed Universal releases in fourth run; Showed MGM releases in fourth or fifth run

[32] This theater switched from single to dual bills partway through the 1935–1936 season.

Galveston and Lubbock, the two Texas towns in my sample provide a useful point of comparison to Bakersfield. Both towns had numerous theaters that were connected to large regional chains. Lubbock's two largest theaters, the Palace (capacity 934) and the Lindsey (capacity 784), and one of the smaller houses, the Texan (capacity 400), were identified in the local newspaper as "Lindsey Theaters." In *Film Daily Yearbook*, they are listed as part of the Oklahoma-based Griffith Amusement Company, which operated 95 houses in Texas and Oklahoma. All of the Galveston theaters advertised in the newspaper were, according to *Film Daily Yearbook*, part of the powerful Interstate Circuit, a 92-theater regional chain based in Dallas. This chain was either partially or wholly affiliated with Paramount-Publix. Its President and General Manager (Karl Hoblitzelle and R.J. O'Donnell) are listed as operating dozens of Publix-affiliated theaters, two of them in Galveston (the Queen and the Tremont). It is not clear whether all the Interstate/Texas Consolidated theaters were affiliated with Publix. Theaters in both towns presented single bills only in both the 1935–1936 and 1939–1940 seasons. One possible explanation for this practice is that single billing was connected to circuit membership, as the more powerful exhibitors—the kind that dominated the Motion Picture Theater Owners of America—tended to oppose the encroachment of double bills.

Tables 11 and 12 lay out the theater hierarchies in Galveston and Lubbock. As we have seen elsewhere, affiliates of the same chain could vary greatly in status (even if chain theaters were in general more powerful than independents). Both towns had two first-run houses. Lubbock's were quite like Bakersfield's, with one receiving the bulk of

the majors' biggest releases. The two Galveston theaters split the product more evenly. For example, the Martini (capacity 1,200) screened *Anna Karenina* and *Magnificent Obsession*, while the Queen (capacity 792) got *The Crusades*, *The Big Broadcast of 1936*, and *Captain Blood*. The Martini does seem to have gotten a greater share of the highly coveted MGM As, while the Queen booked more Paramount and Warner Bros. releases. The Martini often showed Saturday midnight previews of films that would later appear at either of the two theaters, perhaps evidence of some coordination between the venues.

Table 11. Theater Hierarchy in Galveston, TX, 1935–1936 Season

Tier	Theater Name	Bills	Turnover	Description
1	Martini (Interstate)	Single	2x/week	First run (all sample studios)
	Queen (Interstate)	Single	2	First run (all sample studios)
2	Tremont (Interstate)	Single	3	Second run (all sample studios)
	Dixie No. 1 (Interstate)	Single	2	Second run (all studios); first run of some Bs (all sample studios)
	Key (Interstate)	Single	3	Second run of some Bs, most of which had debuted at the Dixie

Table 12. Theater Hierarchy in Lubbock, TX, 1935–1936 Season

Tier	Theater Name	Bills	Turnover	Description
1	Palace (Lindsey/Griffith affiliate)	Single	3x/week	First run, top releases (only 1 Universal)
	Lindsey (Lindsey/Griffith affiliate)	Single	3-4	First run, more programmers/Bs (no Universal)
3	Broadway	Single	3	First run of most Universal releases; second run of MGM and Paramount films that had shown at the Palace
	Texan (Lindsey/Griffith affiliate)	Single	4	Second run
4	Lyric	Single	3-4	Second run of Universal releases and films that had first run at Lindsey; third run of films shown at the Palace and Texan

We can compare the two Texas towns to a pair in the northeast–Lowell and Fitchburg, in Massachusetts. In contrast to the Lubbock and Galveston theaters, those in Lowell and Fitchburg showed almost exclusively double bills. Unlike in Fitchburg (or most of the other non-key sites we've looked at so far), where first-run theaters changed their programs several times a week, Lowell's first-run theaters kept its programs for a full week. Tables 13 and 14 show the theater hierarchies in Lowell and Fitchburg.

Lowell, the larger of the two towns, had three first-run theaters, all affiliated with one of the majors' exhibition chains. The Merrimack Square (capacity 1,635) and the Strand (capacity 1,637), both Publix affiliates, were Lowell's premier first-run venues. They seem to have had exclusive first-run access to A films from MGM, Paramount, and Warner Bros. (and Fox, as well, though that is outside my sample). Each theater showed a mix of films from these studios (i.e., they did not limit the films from a particular studio to one theater or the other). The Merrimack and Strand did not show any of the Universal films from my sample. These played instead at RKO Keith's (capacity 1,697), the other studio-affiliated first-run house. Keith's showed films from RKO, Universal, Columbia, and Poverty Row outfits like Republic and Mascot.[33] Unsurprisingly, the Poverty Row films appeared almost exclusively on the bottom halves of double bills, while Universal releases could play on the top or bottom, depending. For example, *Diamond Jim* topped a bill accompanied by Mascot's *Waterfront Lady*, while *Lady Tubbs* was the second feature for RKO's top-billed *She*. In the 1935–1936 season, two subsequent-run houses regularly

[33] In many markets, RKO's product found a home with downmarket fare, and with releases from the Little Three about as often as other members of the Big Five.

advertised their listings. At the top are the Royal (capacity 900) and the Gates (capacity 1,410); the former occasionally showed B films that had not been booked by any of the first-run venues.[34] In the 1939–1940 season, two new (or under-new-management) theaters, the Tower (capacity 977) and Crown (capacity 800), added an additional rung to the bottom of the local theater hierarchy.[35]

Like many of the towns we've seen thus far, Fitchburg had two first-run houses: the Fitchburg (capacity 1,700), a Publix affiliate, and the much smaller Shea's (capacity 750). The Fitchburg had broad access to Big Five/Little Three product. It put the cream of the crop on single bills (e.g. *Captain Blood, Rose Marie, Trail of the Lonesome Pine*, *The Crusades*, *The Big Broadcast of 1936*, and *Magnificent Obsession*). Other films appeared on double bills, following a fairly intuitive A/programmer plus B model. For example, the Civil War drama *So Red the Rose* (with the moderate star power of Randolph Scott and Margaret Sullavan) topped a bill, accompanied by *Your Uncle Dudley*, a 70-minute Fox B starring character actor Edward Everett Horton. RKO's *The Rainmakers* (starring the comedy team Wheeler & Woolsey), running 78 minutes, was paired with Warner Bros.'s *The Payoff*, a 64-minute crime drama starring James Dunn. Shea's, which presented exclusively double bills, was left with the lower end of the major studio first runs. It offered programmer-plus-B bills similar to those at the Fitchburg (e.g. a double feature of

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[34] *Film Daily Yearbook* does not list a Royal Theater in Lowell. According to Cinema Treasures, the Royal was once known as the Jewell, which is listed with a capacity of 900.

[35] *Film Daily Yearbook* does not list a Tower Theater in Lowell. According to Cinema Treasures, the Royal was once known as the Victory, which is listed with a capacity of 977.

Paramount's *Mary Burns, Fugitive* and Warner Bros.'s *Personal Maid's Secret*), and it got some of the more high-profile films from lower-budgeted studios like Warner Bros. and Universal (e.g. *The Petrified Forest* or *Sutter's Gold*). But it's clear that the majors' top films went to the Fitchburg Theater.

Fitchburg's subsequent-run houses fall clearly into a hierarchy of their own. At the top is the Universal (capacity 745), part of a small chain, which showed films that had previously played at either the Fitchburg or Shea's. Beneath the Universal is the Strand, (capacity 789) which typically showed films that had already passed through one of the first-run houses as well as the Universal. In some cases, a film bypassed the Universal and went straight to the Strand (e.g. *Mad Love*, *King Solomon of Broadway*). The last stop for films in Fitchburg was the Cumings, which offered their third or fourth local engagements.

Table 13. Theater Hierarchy in Lowell, MA, 1935–1936 Season

Tier	Theater Name	Bills	Turnover	Description
1	Merrimack Square (Mullins & Pinaski/Publix)	Mix	weekly	First run for MGM, Paramount, Warner Bros.
	Strand (Mullins & Pinaski/Publix)	Double	weekly	First run for MGM, Paramount, Warner Bros.
	Keith's (RKO)	Double	weekly	First run for Universal (plus RKO, Columbia, Poverty Row) releases
2	Royal	Double	4x/week	Second run; first run of some Bs
	Gates	Mix	2-3	Second run

Table 14. Theater Hierarchy in Fitchburg, MA 1935–1936 Season

Tier	Theater Name	Bills	Turnover	Description
1	Fitchburg (ME & NH/ Publix)	Mix	2x/week	First run, top releases (all sample studios)
	Shea's	Double	2	First run, mostly programmers/Bs (all sample studios)
2	Universal (E.M. Loew's) [not MGM]	Double	3	Second run
3	Strand	Double	4	Third run; some second-run releases that bypassed the Universal
4	Cumings	Double	3	Third or fourth run

The Smallest Situations

Of the smaller markets in my sample, Augusta, Georgia was the only "company town"; all its four theaters were affiliated with Publix via the Lucas & Jenkins chain, which was also a major player in Atlanta exhibition. All four showed single bills with two to four weekly program changes. But while all four houses were affiliates, there was nonetheless a clear hierarchy among them vis-a-vis their access to top-shelf product. The two largest theaters, the Imperial (capacity 1,154) and the Modjeska (capacity 800), were first-run houses. The Imperial received nearly all the top releases, while the Modjeska was left with programmers and Bs. The other two houses, the Rialto (capacity 550) and the Dreamland (capacity 495), were second-run, with the former having the best pickings (e.g., *Mutiny on the Bounty, Magnificent Obsession*, *The Crusades*). The Rialto screened eighteen of the films in my sample, while the Dreamland screened only five, which suggests that the latter theater relied more heavily on non-major-studio fare. In the rare instances when films received three Augusta bookings, the Dreamland showed them last. Table 15 shows the Augusta theater hierarchy.

Table 15. Theater Hierarchy in Augusta, GA, 1935–1936 Season

Tier	Theater Name	Bills	Turnover	Description
1	Imperial	Single	2x/week	First run, top releases
	Modjeska	Single	3	First run, more programmers/Bs
2	Rialto	Single	3-4	Second run
	Dreamland	Single	3-4	Second or (one instance) third run; often marginal releases/studios

Reno, Nevada was similar to Augusta in that three of its four theaters were affiliated with a chain (California-based T. & D., Jr., Enterprises). Two of these theaters, the Majestic (capacity 900) and the Granada (capacity 800), showed films in first run, with the former receiving the lion's share of the top releases. Both showed single bills, with the exception of the Granada's additional feature for Saturday matinees. The third affiliated house, the Wigwam (capacity 700), offered a mixture of single and double bills, primarily featuring films that had first played at either the Majestic or the Granada - and more from the former than the latter, which makes sense given that the Majestic showed more of the season's most sought-after releases). The fourth and smallest house, the Reno (capacity 300), offered primarily special-event and exploitation fare and advertised none of the sample films.

In some towns, it was rare for a film to receive more than one local booking, even if there were several local theaters. Lebanon, Pennsylvania is one example. It had four theaters, the three largest of which shared most of the majors' films (all on single bills). They split the sample films in a clear manner. One venue, the Academy (capacity 1,300), had a lock on Paramount product in the area in the 1935–1936 season: it showed all the Paramount films in my sample and none from the other three studios. The other two, the Colonial (capacity 1,342) and the Capitol (capacity 844), showed a mix of Warner Bros., MGM, and Universal releases, with the former receiving most of the season's top releases and the latter emphasizing programmers and Bs. Lebanon's other theater, the Jackson (capacity 640), which had switched to double-billing by the 1939–1940 season, was more

marginal and showed very few films from my sample. It seems that a single local engagement was enough for Lebanon, though films did spread in a hierarchical fashion to a number of surrounding towns. Of the releases screened in Lebanon, about 60% subsequently went to the Seltzer (capacity 928), a Warner Bros. affiliate in Palmyra, a town of 4,300 about 10 miles west. Of those films, about 60% subsequently went to the Astor theater (capacity 250) in Annville, an even smaller town halfway between Lebanon and Palmyra. No sample films that played in Annville had not previously played in both Palmyra and Lebanon.

Panama City, Florida (population 5,400) is another example. In the 1935–1936 season, it was home to just two theaters, the Bay (capacity 300) and the Panama (500), both of which showed single bills. The Bay, which got the top releases, changed programs four to five times per week and the Panama three. No sample film from the 1935–1936 season received more than one local booking, but some did get longer-than-usual bookings in anticipation of demand. *Mutiny on the Bounty* played at the Bay for five days, and the theater's newspaper advertising indicates that this was the pre-arranged timespan and not a holdover.[36] By the 1939–1940 season, the Bay had closed and its place atop the local theater hierarchy had been assumed by a new house, the Ritz (capacity 460).[37] The Panama showed none of the MGM films in my sample, and fewer sample films overall compared to the 1935–1936 season, which suggests that it in the later

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[36] The 21 March 1936 issue of the *Panama City Herald* announces a planned five-day run for *Mutiny*, to begin the following day.

[37] Capacity for the Ritz, later known as the Martin, comes from Cinema Treasures.

season it was relying more heavily on Poverty Row fare. It served as a second-run venue for only two films that debuted at the Ritz.

The only other of the sample markets with two theaters was Centralia, Washington, a town of 8,000. Of the two houses, the Fox (capacity 1,085) and the Liberty (capacity 1,000), the Fox was clearly in a superior position. That is, if a film played twice in Centralia, it always played first at the Fox. But film exhibition in Centralia was closely related to exhibition in Chehalis, an even smaller (pop. 5,000) town about four miles south. Chehalis was also home to two theaters, both smaller than Centralia's: the St. Helens (capacity 800) and the Grand (200). The Chehalis venues followed a similar logic to those nearby: if a film played twice in Chehalis, it always played first at the St. Helens. All four theaters changed programs three to four times weekly. And in each town, the top theater showed single bills and the other a mixture of double and single bills.

But the possible film distribution trajectories within and across Centralia and Chehalis were sophisticated and patterned. Very rarely did a film play in one town but not the other. Rather, the default patterns of circulation were: 1) for a film to play in one theater in each town; or 2) for a film to play in all four area theaters. The two-theater option was by far the most common; around two-thirds of the sample films circulated in this manner. It was slightly more common for films to arrive first in Centralia, which makes sense given its larger population and larger theaters. But the key distinction for films exhibited once in each town was whether they played in the towns' top venues or in the secondary houses. As we would expect, studios' A pictures were most likely to play in

the top venues and B's in the secondary ones. The films that played in all four area theaters always moved from the top theater in one town to the top theater in another, then, in some order, to the two secondary theaters; they never moved through both theaters in one town followed by both theaters in the other. There are further trends by studio. For example, the MGM films in my sample played almost exclusively in the top theaters. And the films that received four area bookings were generally not the season's top releases (like *The Crusades* and *Mutiny on the Bounty*), but instead moderate As and programmers like *Page Miss Glory* and *Mary Burns, Fugitive*. Table 16 breaks down the 1935-1936 sample films' trajectories first by distribution pattern and then by studio.

Table 16. Patterns of Film Distribution in Centralia, WA and Chehalis, WA, 1935-1936 Season

<table>
<tr><td rowspan="4">Option 1. Two Theaters (41 sample films)</td><td rowspan="2">Option 1A. Top Theaters</td><td>Fox (Centralia) to St. Helens (Chehalis)
MGM: O'Shaughnessy's Boy, Whipsaw, Mutiny on the Bounty, Wife vs. Secretary, The Voice of Bugle Ann
Paramount: So Red the Rose, The Crusades, Desire [Trail of the Lonesome Pine][38]
Warner Bros.: Dangerous, The Petrified Forest, Boulder Dam [Colleen]
Universal: Three Kids and a Queen, Magnificent Obsession</td></tr>
<tr><td>St. Helens (Chehalis) to Fox (Centralia)
MGM: Escapade, Woman Wanted, Anna Karenina, A Night at the Opera, Rose-Marie
Paramount: n/a
Warner Bros.: The Irish in Us
Universal: She Gets Her Man, Lady Tubbs</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Option 1B. Secondary Theaters</td><td>Liberty (Centralia) to Grand (Chehalis)
MGM: n/a
Paramount: Paris in Spring, Virginia Judge, It's a Great Life!, Timothy's Quest, Her Master's Voice, Drift Fence, The Preview Murder Mystery, Give us This Night
Warner Bros.: The Payoff, Freshman Love
Universal: Dangerous Waters, Don't Get Personal</td></tr>
<tr><td>Grand (Chehalis) to Liberty (Centralia)
MGM: n/a
Paramount: Soak the Rich
Warner Bros.: Broadway Hostess
Universal: Invisible Ray</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2" rowspan="3">Option 2. Four Theaters (8 sample films)</td><td>Fox (Cent.) to St. Helens (Che.) to Liberty (Cent.) to Grand (Che.)
MGM: n/a
Paramount: Man on the Flying Trapeze
Warner Bros.: Stranded
Universal: Diamond Jim</td></tr>
<tr><td>St. Helens (Che.) to Fox (Cent.) to Liberty (Cent.) to Grand (Che.)
MGM: n/a
Paramount:
Warner Bros.: Dr. Socrates, Page Miss Glory
Universal: [King Solomon of Broadway - St-Fox-Lib]</td></tr>
<tr><td>Fox (Cent.) to St. Helens (Che.) to Grand (Che.) to Liberty</td></tr>
</table>

[38] Titles in brackets opened near the end of the season, so it's possible that they went through additional runs after my newspaper sample ended.

	(Cent.) MGM: n/a Paramount: *Big Broadcast of 1936, Mary Burns Fugitive* Warner Bros.: n/a Universal: n/a
	St. Helens (Che.) to Fox (Cent.) to Grand (Che.) to Liberty (Cent.) (none)

Patterns of Film Circulation among Neighboring Towns

The relationship between film distribution in Centralia and Chehalis points to the importance of considering individual towns not as an autonomous, self-contained hierarchy of theaters but rather part of local or regional networks of other towns and their theaters. Run, zone, and clearance protocols set standards not just within but across towns. For example, a 1944 contract for the Embassy, a theater in North Bergen, New Jersey (a densely populated township just across the Hudson from Manhattan) notes the theater's position in the local "playing arrangement":

> To play fourteen (14) days after Lincoln, Union City. To receive same availability as Roosevelt, Union City. Fourteen (14) days clearance over Seacaucus, Weehawken, West New York, Fairview, Cliffside, Grantwood, Ridgefield Park, Woodcliffe, Grant Lee, West Hoboken, Guttenberg, Leonia. Seven (7) days Clearance over Bogota, Palisades Park.[39]

We can see here that a film can play at Embassy in North Bergen after it has played at a theater in Union City (just southeast of North Bergen), and at the same time as it enters subsequent run houses in Union City. Without rules like this, clearance periods would not have their intended effects, as patrons from Union City would be able to hop over to North Bergen to see a release rather than wait for it to come to one of Union City's subsequent run theaters. Or alternately, someone from North Bergen, knowing that a highly anticipated release would be coming to his town soon, might forego a trip to the (potentially more expensive) Union City theater. The areas over which the Embassy has

[39] Contract/Schedule #7581 (Embassy Theater), Warner Bros. Archives, School of Cinematic Arts, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

one- to two-week clearances are all other North Hudson municipalities.

To start with a simple example, let's consider the town of Joplin, Missouri. Seven theaters regularly advertised their listings in the *Joplin Globe*; six were in Joplin and the seventh in Webb City, a town of 7,000 about seven miles northeast (Figure 7). Nearly all the sample films that played at the Civic did so soon after playing at one of Joplin's two first-run houses (the Fox and the Paramount)—and *between* those films' first and second runs in Joplin. Thus, Joplin first run houses had clearance over Webb City, and Webb City's Civic had clearance over Joplin subsequent run houses. Of the other area towns (namely Carthage, Neosho, and Galena, Kansas) that were large enough to have movie theaters, Joplin was the only one large enough to have a significant subsequent-run market.

Figure 7. Joplin/Webb City, Missouri Zone (w/Modern Roadways)

A more complicated example is northern Lake County, Indiana, an area anchored by the industrial cities of Hammond and East Chicago. The *Hammond Times* included movie listings for Hammond's four movie theaters as well as nine other houses in East Chicago, Indiana Harbor, and Whiting. These municipalities are mapped in Figure 8. The areas then referred to as "Indiana Harbor" and "East Chicago" were actually different parts of the city of East Chicago. They had separate business and, thus, theater districts. Indiana Harbor lay nearest Lake Michigan, with East Chicago to its west. Between the two neighborhoods were railyards and a canal.[40] Figure 9 shows the different parts of the city where these theaters were clustered. Though independent and niche distribution is beyond the scope of this study, I should note that the East Chicago and Indiana Harbor regularly showed Hungarian, Polish, Czech, and other foreign language films. This can be explained by the area's large (40%) immigrant population. Most had come from central, southern, and eastern Europe—and especially from Poland, Hungary, and Austria —to work in Lake County's booming heavy industries.[41]

Of the four locations, Hammond received films first. It had the largest population and was also the only one to have major-studio affiliates among its theaters. Hammond had two first-run houses, the Parthenon (capacity 2,162; affiliated with Warner Bros) and the Paramount (capacity 1,991; affiliated with Publix during the 1935–1936 season and Warner Bros. for most of the 1939–1940 season). These theaters split the majors' product

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40 "The Chicago Title and Trust Index, Book 154—Indiana Harbor," *RootsWeb.* <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~innwigs/Archives/ChicagoTitleTrust-IndHarbor.htm>

41 Ibid.

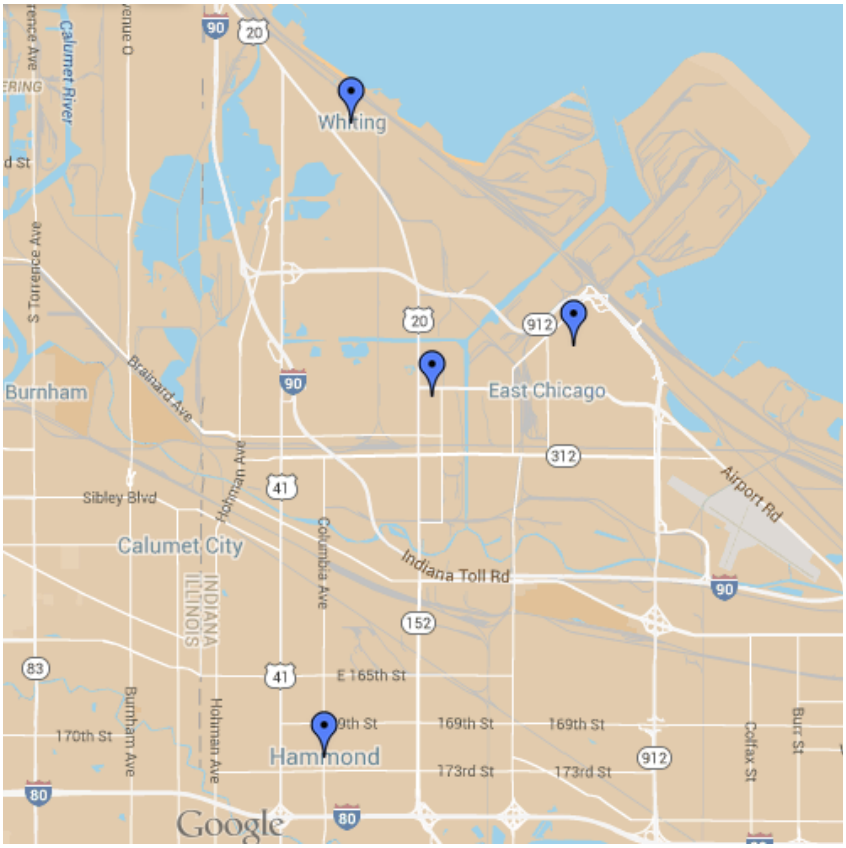
by studio, with the Paramount showing Universal and Paramount films and the Parthenon showing Warner Bros. and MGM films. The Orpheum (capacity 874; affiliated with Warner Bros.) was a second-run house, showing films that had first played at either the Paramount or the Parthenon. The Calumet (capacity 750) was a third-run house.

After playing in Hammond, films went to Indiana Harbor and Whiting, usually at the same time. Four of these towns' theaters were part of the Rose Booking Circuit (recall the Mont Clare Theater from the discussion of Chicago). A booking circuit was different from a chain in that member theaters were not owned or operated by the same company. Rather, independent theaters could form a buying/booking group as a means of increasing their power in negotiations with distributors, as chains were able to do. It was a kind of collective bargaining for film buying, and the major distributors fought to eliminate them throughout the 1930s.[42] Two of the Rose Booking affiliates, the Indiana (in Indiana Harbor; capacity 1,200) and the Hoosier (in Whiting; capacity 750), synchronized their bookings, as seen Figure 10. These were their respective towns' main first run venues. The Vic (capacity 423), another Rose affiliate in Indiana Harbor, was a second-run house. Two more marginal theaters, the Broadway (capacity 345) and the American (capacity 400), played films in third or fourth run, along with Poverty Row and foreign films that didn't play at the Indiana or the Vic. In Whiting, The Hoosier played a wide range of major studio product (from *Mutiny on the Bounty* to *The Payoff*), while the Capitol (capacity 939), another Rose affiliate, showed films from RKO, Little Three, and Poverty

[42] A discussion of booking circuits' "block-buying" can be found in *Variety,* 29 August 1933, 6.

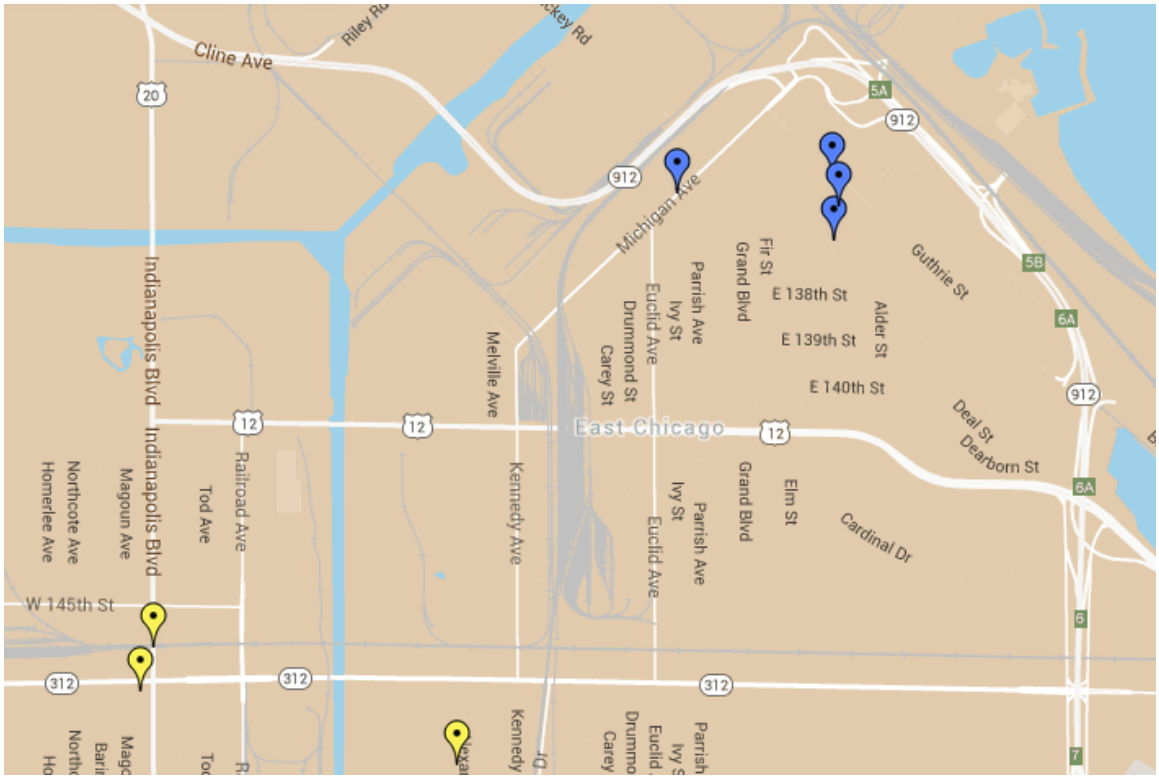
Row studios. Major releases usually reached East Chicago last. Its main venue was the Forsyth (capacity 778), which showed a similar range of films as the Hoosier and Indiana (indeed, releases were occasionally synched across all three theaters). Another venue, the Midway, advertised in the newspaper only sporadically and offered subsequent-run and Poverty Row product.

Figure 8. Northwestern Area of Lake County, Indiana (w/modern roadways)



bottom: Hammond; top: Whiting; center: East Chicago; right: Indiana Harbor

Figure 9. Locations of Theaters Designated "Indiana Harbor" and "East Chicago"



lower left: East Chicago; upper right: Indiana Harbor

Figure 10. Advertisement for Synchronized Runs at the Indiana (Indiana Harbor) and Hoosier (Whiting) Theaters, March 1936

Conclusion

This chapter has described the different market structures of the local case study sites—and how those markets functioned according to various distinctions, including: key cities vs. non-keys; small towns vs. medium-sized ones; "company towns" vs. those with more diversified theater ownership. It identified a number of patterns in how theaters in individual markets split the major studios' output, as well as how these bounded exhibition hierarchies were connected to ones in neighboring and regional markets. Indeed, distribution contracts as well as exhibition patterns attest to the importance of considering individual neighborhoods, towns, and cities in the context of larger regions. First-run theaters in key cities were the most likely to show films in week-long runs—to capitalize on novelty, milk the initial release, and concentrate profits in the venues with the highest admissions prices. Outside these first-run theaters in the keys, whether in urban neighborhood houses or small-town theaters, more frequent turnover was the norm.

But across all the sites, we repeatedly see that local theaters—even those on the same rung of the run ladder, and even those owned by the same chain—split films among themselves in unequal ways. That is, certain theaters were afforded greater access to high-budget films with stars, while others were given more marginal fare. It is crucial to recognize that this kind of splitting clearly demonstrates that, however unfair the majors' business practices, the vast majority of theaters did not block book entire seasonal programs of films from one or more producer-distributor. Rather, they selected—or were

offered—only portions of a program. And, as we saw in Chapter Two, there were opportunities at various points in the selling and booking processes to further "curate" their selections. And it is in the splitting and curating that we can begin to see how certain theaters might be associated with different films, audiences, and experiences.

Questions remain about the role of intent, or agency, behind the often neat splits of the major producer-distributors' product among first-run houses. In order for two (or more) theaters to be showing first-run releases at the same time, these venues had to be offering complementary and not competing program. Were these arrangements coordinated among theaters (e.g. via "pooling" arrangements) or distributors?[43] Did each distributor adopt a policy of only booking with one local first-run theater, or of designating which first-run house would have access to its best product and which would receive the lesser releases? Did local theater managers tacitly or explicitly abide by certain defaults? From the trade press, as well as the legal record, we know that exhibitors expressed frustration not only at the problem of being stuck with an undesirable run status, but also at the problem of being unable to access high-quality films, regardless of run status.

In this chapter, we have seen that, by tracking movies' advertised playdates at different theaters, we can reveal the sophisticated hierarchies that structured the

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[43] A pooling/splitting arrangement between two Manhattan theaters is discussed in Nathaniel Brennan, "The Great White Way and the Way of All Flesh: Metropolitan Film Culture and the Business of Film Exhibition in Times Square, 1929–1941," *Film History* 27, no. 2 (2015): 1–32. "Splitting" is usually discussed in relation to post-1948 distribution and exhibition. See, e.g., Conant, *Antitrust in the Motion Picture Industry*, and Stanley I. Ornstein, "Motion Picture Distribution, Film Splitting, and Antitrust Policy," *Hastings Communication and Entertainment Law Journal* 17, no. 2 (1994–5): 415–44.

movements of films within particular exhibition markets. This reverse-engineering approach also points toward the nature of the agreements negotiated by distributors and exhibitors. To the extent that we see common strategies at work across markets, this analysis suggests how distribution was orchestrated nationally (after all, we know that companies developed general selling strategies for their seasonal programs and announced them at each annual sales convention). But how films moved through individual markets only tells part of the story. To understand better the different national releasing strategies for different types of films, we need to look *across* markets—that is, at how particular films moved around the country during the selling season. This analysis, which occupies the next chapter, uses the same set of data but looks at it from a new angle.

Chapter Four

Release Patterns in the National Market

Introduction

Distribution patterns reflected studios' expectations of and aspirations for their releases. Making calculations and assumptions about each film's place in the exhibition market was a basic part of rationally managing a seasonal program of releases. Market data, gleaned on the ground by exchange men, guided studios' efforts to keep up with—or, better yet, get ahead of—trends and tastes. When they sketched the outlines of a seasonal program and carried out preproduction activities such as story development, budgeting, and casting, they were tentatively committing to certain release strategies, which were open to modification during or after a film's production.

Distribution strategies did not only reflect how studios expected films might perform; they also reflected how films actually did perform. As a film's critical and commercial reception became clearer, the release could be elevated or demoted relative to others in the program. The impetus for such a shift could come from distributors (e.g., by adjusting the film's rental pricing or other contractual variables) or exhibitors (e.g., by securing holdovers or canceling/abbreviating contracts). Though a film's release pattern is not necessarily a direct index of its box office performance, certain distribution strategies indicate where, when, and how producers sought to maximize profits. Some of the relevant variables here include: which—if any—of a market's major first-run theaters a film played in; the number and length of early runs (including special "pre-releases,"

holdovers, and downtown second runs); the pacing and coordination of subsequent-run openings; and the number and length of subsequent-run bookings. All of these variables can be tracked, with reasonable accuracy, through a film's advertised playdates in local newspapers.

This chapter explores to what degree, and in what ways, films' releases were coordinated nationally. The release patterns of the sample films suggest that the vast majority of the major producer-distributors' films appeared at least once in the vast majority of the sample markets. But this ubiquity does not mean that one film was interchangeable with the one playing across the street, or with another one in its studio's annual program. As discussed in Chapter 2, studios typically struck around 250 (and occasionally 300 or more) prints for A pictures and around 180 prints for B pictures. Given these constraints, what strategies did distributors employ to roll films out across the U.S.? How did they parcel out the programs of films they sold? Temporality is one key variable—that is, how long did it take different types of films to wind their way across the country? Were their debuts in key cities clustered within a relatively short timespan, or more spread out (or perhaps erratic)? Were certain types of films more likely to linger in particular markets via numerous bookings or to leave quickly? This chapter seeks to answer such questions. Identifying patterns across markets and territories can shed light on producer-distributors' assumptions about, and best practices for, different types of films. It also provides an on-the-ground view of the systematic way in which studios deployed their seasonal programs of releases.

I begin by identifying the means by which studios' releasing schedules were tracked and publicized in *Variety*; doing so helps us understand the terms upon which a film was considered to be "in release." Next, I explore types of differentiation—including budget, subject matter, and generic appeals—within annual programs of films. I show how, in trade press reviews, these variables were associated with different theaters, audiences, and releasing strategies. I then identify actual distribution trends for films of different budget categories, moving from high to low. These sections compare and contrast films' national rollouts, using "release calendars" created from my distribution data to show how concentrated films' debuts in markets across the country were.[1] After analyzing the release calendars—which document primarily first-run engagements—I go on to consider subsequent-run bookings, focusing on large urban neighborhood markets. Throughout, I highlight differences in duration and location as they correlate with different subsets of the studios' annual programs.

Defining Releases

The major studios' summer-to-summer production schedules, each including roughly fifty features, gave them a steady supply of about one major release per week. Debuts were timed strategically across the season and set the stage for later bookings—

1 Because this section is concerned with how films' *debuts* were or were not coordinated across the sample markets, the booking calendars include only the films' initial appearances in the sample markets. Because data were collected and logged by town/newspaper, analyzing the release of individual films *across* localities required extracting, film by film, booking data from the local datasets and combining them into new tables.

films remained in circulation for months or even years. In its weekly issues, *Variety* provided several guides to help exhibitors and distributors keep track of recent releases. Each "Picture Grosses" section included two tables, one listing films currently or soon to be in first run at major Broadway theaters and another listing "National First Runs." Figures 1 and 2 show examples of these tables.[2] The national first-runs table identified a selection of first-run theaters where a particular film had recently played, was currently playing, or was about to play. It listed not just key cities but all kinds of markets: Springfield, MA; Sioux City, IA; Madison, WI; Rutland, VT; Meridian, MS. *Variety* also published regular "Calendars of Current Releases," which listed, by studio, features in their first sixth months of release—for the majors, usually around twenty to thirty titles. These calendars included one-sentence plot summaries, or sometimes only genre descriptors like "Western," along with the films' running times and director and star names. They also included an acknowledgement that some theaters received films more than six months after a film's initial release and a recommendation that managers retain the calendar for such an eventuality.[3]

In the late 1930s, *Variety* discontinued the Calendar of Current Releases and presented similar information in the "Film Booking Chart," which targeted "theatre and exchange bookers." Figure 3 shows an example of a booking chart.[4] It was organized

2 *Variety*, 14 August 1935, 4, 8.

3 *Variety*, 10 July 1935, 23.

4 *Variety*, 6 September 1939, 18.

chronologically rather than by studio, listing all major releases "from the current quarterly period." Quarters were rolling rather than fixed; that is, any given chart listed releases from the past eight to ten weeks as well as those approaching in the next month or so. A film's published release date is often different from the date on which it was reviewed in *Variety*—and, as we will see, the date that it premiered in New York or Los Angeles. These guides were one of the ways that the trade press helped exhibitors track the progress and performance of current releases. They offered information about films that exhibitors may have booked months earlier but knew nothing about at that time. In conjunction with the Pictures Grosses pages, the booking charts could help an exhibitor identify contracted films that might be candidates for cancellation or uncontracted films to seek out for bookings.

Figure 1. Typical *Variety* Listing of "First Runs on Broadway"

1st Runs on Broadway
(Subject to Change)

Week of Aug. 16

Capitol—'China Seas' (Metro) (2d wk).

Music Hall—'Alice Adams' (Radio) (15).

Paramount—'Accent on Youth' (Par) (2d wk).

Rivoli—'Call of the Wild' (UA) (14).

Roxy—'Keeper of the Bees' (Monogram).

Strand — 'Bright Lights' (WB) (14).

Week of Aug. 23

Capitol — 'Anna Karenina' (Metro).

Music Hall—'Jalna' (Radio) (22).

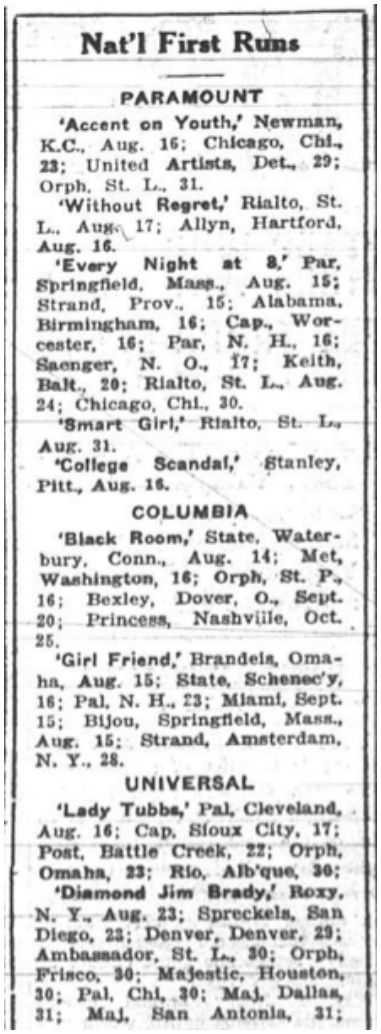
Paramount—'Annapolis Farewell' (Par) (23).

Rivoli—'Call of the Wild' (UA) (2d wk).

Roxy—'Diamond Jim' (U).

Strand—'Page Miss Glory' (WB) (21).

Figure 2. Typical *Variety* Listing of "National First Runs" (excerpt)



Nat'l First Runs

PARAMOUNT

'Accent on Youth,' Newman, K.C., Aug. 16; Chicago, Chi., 23; United Artists, Det., 29; Orph, St. L., 31.

'Without Regret,' Rialto, St. L., Aug. 17; Allyn, Hartford, Aug. 16.

'Every Night at 8,' Par, Springfield, Mass., Aug. 15; Strand, Prov., 15; Alabama, Birmingham, 16; Cap., Worcester, 16; Par, N. H., 16; Saenger, N. O., 17; Keith, Balt., 20; Rialto, St. L., Aug. 24; Chicago, Chi., 30.

'Smart Girl,' Rialto, St. L., Aug. 31.

'College Scandal,' Stanley, Pitt., Aug. 16.

COLUMBIA

'Black Room,' State, Waterbury, Conn., Aug. 14; Met, Washington, 16; Orph, St. P., 16; Bexley, Dover, O., Sept. 20; Princess, Nashville, Oct. 25.

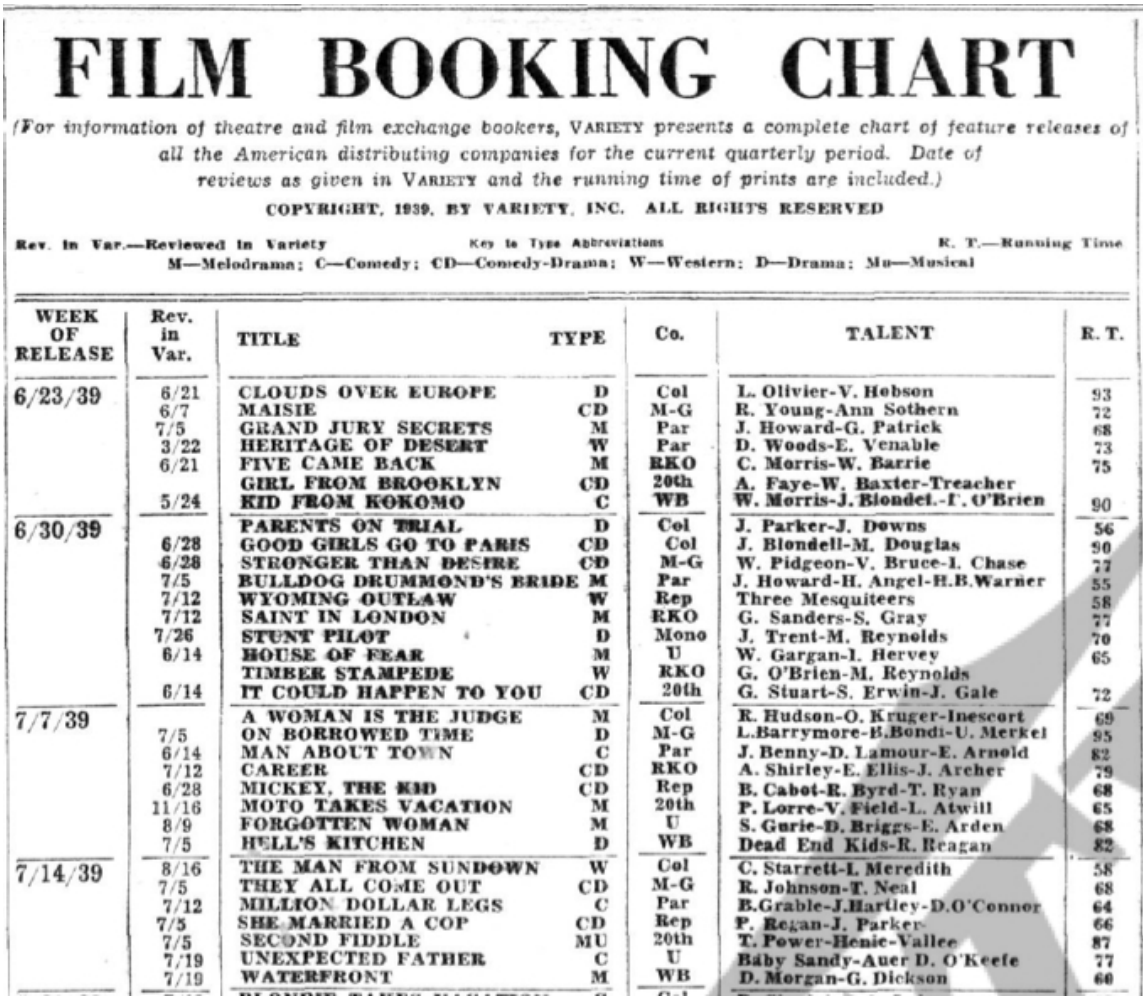
'Girl Friend,' Brandeis, Omaha, Aug. 15; State, Schenec'y, 16; Pal, N. H., 23; Miami, Sept. 15; Bijou, Springfield, Mass., Aug. 15; Strand, Amsterdam, N. Y., 28.

UNIVERSAL

'Lady Tubbs,' Pal, Cleveland, Aug. 16; Cap, Sioux City, 17; Post, Battle Creek, 22; Orph, Omaha, 23; Rio, Alb'que, 30;

'Diamond Jim Brady,' Roxy, N. Y., Aug. 23; Spreckels, San Diego, 23; Denver, Denver, 29; Ambassador, St. L., 30; Orph, Frisco, 30; Majestic, Houston, 30; Pal, Chi, 30; Maj, Dallas, 31; Maj, San Antonia, 31;

Figure 3. Typical *Variety* "Film Booking Chart" (excerpt)



FILM BOOKING CHART

(For information of theatre and film exchange bookers, VARIETY presents a complete chart of feature releases of all the American distributing companies for the current quarterly period. Date of reviews as given in VARIETY and the running time of prints are included.)

Rev. in Var.—Reviewed in Variety Key to Type Abbreviations R. T.—Running Time
M—Melodrama; C—Comedy; CD—Comedy-Drama; W—Western; D—Drama; Mu—Musical

WEEK OF RELEASE	Rev. in Var.	TITLE	TYPE	Co.	TALENT	R. T.
6/23/39	6/21	CLOUDS OVER EUROPE	D	Col	L. Olivier-V. Hobson	93
	6/7	MAISIE	CD	M-G	R. Young-Ann Sothern	72
	7/5	GRAND JURY SECRETS	M	Par	J. Howard-G. Patrick	68
	3/22	HERITAGE OF DESERT	W	Par	D. Woods-E. Venable	73
	6/21	FIVE CAME BACK	M	RKO	C. Morris-W. Barrie	75
		GIRL FROM BROOKLYN	CD	20th	A. Faye-W. Baxter-Treacher	
	5/24	KID FROM KOKOMO	C	WB	W. Morris-J. Blondell-P. O'Brien	90
6/30/39		PARENTS ON TRIAL	D	Col	J. Parker-J. Downs	56
	6/28	GOOD GIRLS GO TO PARIS	CD	Col	J. Blondell-M. Douglas	90
	6/28	STRONGER THAN DESIRE	CD	M-G	W. Pidgeon-V. Bruce-I. Chase	77
	7/5	BULLDOG DRUMMOND'S BRIDE	M	Par	J. Howard-H. Angel-H.B.Warner	55
	7/12	WYOMING OUTLAW	W	Rep	Three Mesquiteers	58
	7/12	SAINT IN LONDON	M	RKO	G. Sanders-S. Gray	77
	7/26	STUNT PILOT	D	Mono	J. Trent-M. Reynolds	70
	6/14	HOUSE OF FEAR	M	U	W. Gargan-I. Hervey	65
		TIMBER STAMPEDE	W	RKO	G. O'Brien-M. Reynolds	
	6/14	IT COULD HAPPEN TO YOU	CD	20th	G. Stuart-S. Erwin-J. Gale	72
7/7/39		A WOMAN IS THE JUDGE	M	Col	R. Hudson-O. Kruger-Inescort	69
	7/5	ON BORROWED TIME	D	M-G	L.Barrymore-B.Bondi-U. Merkel	95
	6/14	MAN ABOUT TOWN	C	Par	J. Benny-D. Lamour-E. Arnold	82
	7/12	CAREER	CD	RKO	A. Shirley-E. Ellis-J. Archer	79
	6/28	MICKEY, THE KID	CD	Rep	B. Cabot-R. Byrd-T. Ryan	68
	11/16	MOTO TAKES VACATION	M	20th	P. Lorre-V. Field-L. Atwill	65
	8/9	FORGOTTEN WOMAN	M	U	S. Gurie-D. Briggs-E. Arden	68
	7/5	HELL'S KITCHEN	D	WB	Dead End Kids-R. Reagan	82
7/14/39	8/16	THE MAN FROM SUNDOWN	W	Col	C. Starrett-L. Meredith	58
	7/5	THEY ALL COME OUT	CD	M-G	R. Johnson-T. Neal	68
	7/12	MILLION DOLLAR LEGS	C	Par	B.Grable-J.Hartley-D.O'Connor	64
	7/5	SHE MARRIED A COP	CD	Rep	P. Regan-J. Parker	66
	7/5	SECOND FIDDLE	MU	20th	T. Power-Henie-Vallee	87
	7/19	UNEXPECTED FATHER	C	U	Baby Sandy-Auer D. O'Keefe	77
	7/19	WATERFRONT	M	WB	D. Morgan-G. Dickson	60

The Well-rounded Program

The sample films tracked in this study reflect the vast generic range covered by the annual programs of the classical Hollywood studios. Studios are sometimes characterized as having specialized in certain genres—for instance, Universal with horror, Warner Bros. with gangster films, and MGM with musicals. It would be more accurate to say that individual studios sometimes launched major film cycles, which were then quickly pursued by other studios. Claims of genre specialization obscure the fact that every major studio made films from a variety of genres; offering a diverse program let them court various sectors of the national audience and distribute films in a range of theaters. It was good business sense to cast one's net widely.

However, as Steve Neale has demonstrated, empirical studies of classical Hollywood cinema require a much looser notion of genre than that traditionally found in genre scholarship. Challenging the notion that genre hybridity flowered only in the "post-classical" era, Neale notes that "Hollywood's feature films have always tended to alternate comedy and drama, excitement and pathos, reflection and action." Studios had no particular stake in the genre purity of their releases; in fact, genre hybridity offered a means of "hedging bets" by offering a mix of appeals for different audiences *within an individual film* (versus simply across the annual program of releases).[5] However, this hybridity should not be taken as evidence supporting industry rhetoric concerning the supposedly "universal" appeal of films or the existence of a "mass audience." The

5 Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, 237–8.

Production Code and industry self-censorship helped ensure that Hollywood's releases would not be accused of overtly traumatizing juvenile audiences. But this does not mean that all films produced in the era of the Production Code should be rightly understood as "family entertainment." Trade press reviews regularly referred to discrete "adult," "juve," and "family" trades. Noel Brown contends a coherent "family film" genre—designed for wide demographic appeal—did emerge in the early 1930s but that, in fact, "relatively *few* Hollywood films [...] were family orientated" during the classical era.[6]

Film industry trade publications offered some standardized genre classification schema. In the late 1930s, *Variety* began labeling films with a "type" code in its weekly "Film Booking Chart," which was a reference guide for current releases. The six "types" were: Melodrama, Comedy, Comedy-drama, Drama, Western, and Musical.[7] The magazine *Boxoffice* used these terms and several others, including Adventure, Thriller, Mystery, Action, Romantic Drama, and Satire. In addition, *Boxoffice* classified new releases within a smaller set of audience-based categories: Adult, Family, and Juvenile. While some familiar genre descriptors can be found in the industry trade press, films were just as often described in terms of "production and exhibition categories," "series or cycles," or "star names."[8] Further, the same genre descriptor can mean one thing in the

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6 Noel Brown, *The Hollywood Family Film: A History, From Shirley Temple to Harry Potter* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 13; Noel Brown, "'A New Moviegoing Public': 1930s Hollywood and the Emergence of the 'Family' Film," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television* 33, no. 1 (2013): 1–23.

7 See, for example, the "Film Booking Chart" in *Variety,* 23 August 1939, 26.

8 Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, 234–235.

film industry trade press and something entirely different in genre scholarship. The most significant term in this regard is "melodrama." Though in film studies the term is now associated with sentiment, domestic dramas, and women's pictures, "melodrama" signified action and suspense in the industry trade press of the 1930s and 1940s.[9] Popular-press critics used the term similarly, as is neatly captured by Frank S. Nugent's praise of the film *Whipsaw* (1935): "Managing somehow to combine a quiet romance with the more adventurous details of life among the G-men, the new film is at once an effective melodrama and a pleasant love story."[10]

Tables 1 through 4 present information related to subject matter and genre for the 1935–1936 sample films, which are grouped by studio and organized from longest to shortest runtime (and thus roughly from highest to lowest budget). In each table, the third columns list any "official" genre categories assigned by *Variety* and *Boxoffice.* In the fourth columns, I have also tagged each film with more detailed keywords that help capture its major themes, formulas, and appeals. For instance, take *Stranded* (Frank Borzage) and *Boulder Dam* (Frank McDonald), two mid-level (in terms of budget/runtime) Warner Brothers releases from the 1935–1936 season. Both could be broadly classified as "dramas," and both feature construction- or engineering-related plots. But they are differently inflected. *Stranded* follows the romance of a Travelers Aid

9 Neale, "Melo Talk: On the Meaning and Use of the Term 'Melodrama' in the American Trade Press," *The Velvet Light Trap* 32 (1993): 66–89.

10 Frank S. Nugent, "'Whipsaw,' With Myrna Loy and Spencer Tracy, and the Capitol—'Calling of Dan Matthews,'" *New York Times*, 27 February 1936, 18.

Society representative (Kay Francis) and an engineer overseeing the building of a bridge, which is threatened by a strike. *Boulder Dam* is an outdoor drama with action; its protagonist (Ross Alexander) is a criminal on the run who finds work on the titular project and forms a relationship with a nightclub singer (Patricia Ellis). While *Variety* noted that *Boulder Dam* had a "lack of names," Francis and Brent gave *Stranded* some marquee draw.[11]

The topical *Boulder Dam* can be contrasted with another outdoor drama from the same season, Paramount's *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine* (Henry Hathaway). *Trail* featured three recognizable stars (Henry Fonda, Fred MacMurray, and Sylvia Sidney) and lavish production values—it was the second Technicolor feature and the first filmed primarily outdoors. Adapted from a successful novel that had been filmed several times before, *Trail* depicts a feud among two Appalachian families. Finally, we can contrast *Trail* with another rural drama adapted from a novel, MGM's *The Voice of Bugle Ann* (Richard Thorpe). At 70 minutes, the film is near the bottom of the MGM hierarchy, though it is important to note that MGM invested as much in its lower-tier films as some studios did in their mid- and upper-tier films. *Voice* stars Lionel Barrymore, an actor with respectable marquee draw. The film is set in the Ozarks, and like *Trail*, follows an inter-family feud; however, it is centrally about the protagonist's undying love for his fox-hunting dog—the Bugle Ann of the title. *Variety* predicted that the film's "appeal will be very limited" and that it would be "appreciated chiefly by dog lovers."[12] Writing for the

11 "Boulder Dam," *Variety Film Reviews,* 2 April 1936.

12 "Trail of the Lonesome Pine," *Variety Film Reviews,* 4 March 1936.

New York Times, Frank Nugent was more sanguine, calling the film "tender, sentimental and richly human." While predicting that it would be of *particular* interest to "every lover of dogs," he claimed that others might still find it "entirely satisfactory."[13] These brief comparisons highlight just a few of the possible configurations of subjects, themes, and topoi within the broad category of "drama" films.

Richard Maltby has argued that U.S. film audiences were often described in generic terms.[14] The primary goal of this project is to explore how these discursive connections also extended to theaters, distribution strategies, and programming practices. Trade press reviews like the ones cited above can help us map out these distinctions and thus complement on-the-ground distribution data.

Variety and other major trade publications, including *Boxoffice, Hollywood Reporter,* and *Motion Picture Herald*, published reviews of most domestic, and many foreign, releases. These reviews were written with distributors and exhibitors in mind and provided highly detailed, sophisticated assessments of films' commercial prospects across a range of taste cultures—that is, in different markets and theaters, on different programs, and before different audiences. Of *Desire,* a high-budget Lubitschian romance starring Marlene Dietrich and Gary Cooper, a *Variety* critic asserted, "This'll have no trouble getting the money. The names on the marquee virtually insures that, and the picture has

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13 Frank S. Nugent, "Fox-Hunting Complications in Missouri, As Noted in 'The Voice of Bugle Ann,' at the Center," *New York Times,* 27 February 1936, 23.

14 Richard Maltby, "Sticks, Hicks, and Flaps: Classical Hollywood's Generic Conception of Its Audiences," 23–41.

intrinsic merit for big business."[15] The reviews made fine-grained distinctions even within general classes of theaters, such as urban first-run houses. We see this differentiation in a review of *The Irish in Us,* a comedy starring James Cagney and Pat O'Brien; it was predicted to be "in for good returns, especially in the nabes and *those downtown spots whose audiences go for a robust laugh and are not too particular about literary or production values*" [emphasis mine].[16] While *Irish* was seen as a strong performer in both first and subsequent runs, the topical outdoor drama *Boulder Dam* was described as "more for the neighborhood than downtown trade."[17] Similarly, the rags-to-riches farce *Lady Tubbs* offered "questionable box-office pull for the major spots" but was "an entertainment natural for the nabes."[18] *I Live for Love,* a backstage romance-drama, was deemed unsuitable for "the better first runs" on a single bill but a contender for "intermediate houses and dualers."[19] Some reviews framed films only in terms of the distinction between single- and double-bill programs, while others overlaid this distinction with others (such as downtown/nabe, adult/juvenile, etc.).[20]

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15 "Desire," *Variety Film Reviews,* 15 April 1936.

16 "The Irish in Us," *Variety Film Reviews*, 7 August 1935.

17 "Boulder Dam," *Variety Film Reviews*, 2 April 1936.

18 "Lady Tubbs," *Variety Film Reviews,* 24 July 1935.

19 "I Live for Love," *Variety Film Reviews*, 23 October 1935.

20 Of *She Gets Her Man*: "extremely thin program fare [...] looks suited only as secondary feature on dual programs, with running time of more than an hour against it" (*Variety Film Reviews*, 11 September 1935). Of *Timothy's Quest:* "a weak job [...] will limit this one to the double-programmer stables and some nabes. Title will be no help either [...] Selling this as a kid picture may help in certain localities but its chief appeal seems to be for neighborhoods and where they go for sugary melodrama" (*Variety Film Reviews*, 4 March 1936).

While reviews often highlighted films' relative suitability for first or subsequent-run theaters, they also framed films in terms of a cosmopolitan/heartland divide. *O'Shaughnessy's Boy,* a paternal melodrama that reunited *The Champ* and *The Bowery* stars Wallace Beery and Jackie Cooper, was predicted to be "better off once it gets past the keys."[21] The small-town family drama *Our Neighbors, the Carters* was deemed best suited for the bottom of double bills in the keys but bill-topping or solo outings in "the subsequents and smaller towns."[22] Another film that critics deemed best suited to small-town theaters was *Our Leading Citizen*, starring Bob Burns, a comedian and newspaper columnist with a Will Rogers-esque "homespun" persona.[23] Southern audiences were more commonly described as constituting a distinct market than those in other regions. For instance, a review of *The Virginia Judge* associated the film with "secondary theatres," "family audiences," and southerners.[24] *The Man from Dakota,* a 1940 Civil War film starring Beery as a northern spy, would be "tough going in the southern states, where Union heroes of the Civil War are still unwanted in film form."[25] In contrast, *So Red the Rose*, with Confederate protagonists, had "south of the Mason-Dixon boxoffice chances

21 "O'Shaughnessy's Boy," *Variety Film Reviews,* 9 October 1935.

22 "Our Neighbors, the Carters," *Variety Film Reviews*, 8 November 1939.

23 "Picture is not strong enough to garner top spots in the key runs, except in a few isolated instances where Burns enjoys an especially strong personal following. It will carry through as a strong supporting programmer, with possibilities of getting by nominally in the smaller communities." "Our Leading Citizen," *Variety Film Reviews*, 2 August 1939.

24 "The Virginia Judge," *Variety Film Reviews*, 23 October 1935.

25 "The Man from Dakota," *Variety Film Reviews*, 28 February 1940.

[...] superior to the Yank belt."[26]

In sum, *Variety* reviews invoke several overlapping, and sometimes ambiguous, dichotomies between different types of theaters and markets. Sometimes key city theaters (first- and subsequent-run alike) are contrasted with non-metropolitan venues (first- and subsequent-run alike).[27] Other times, all first runs are contrasted with all subsequent runs (on *Geronimo*: "good boxoffice for the first runs, it will show greater strength in the subsequent runs and action houses").[28] In other instances, however, the "the keys" (a term that usually refers to a type of city) are contrasted with "the subsequents" (a term that usually refers to a type of theater.)[29] We also find ambiguous phrasing like "key runs" (key-city runs, or the most important early runs?) and "regular runs."[30]

Reviews also differentiated audiences by gender. For instance, *Magnificent Obsession* was described as "a strong woman's picture and a cinch for the matinee trade," while a reviewer wrote of *Captain Blood,* "The swashbuckling rapier and brigandry of

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26 "So Red the Rose," Abel., *Variety Film Reviews,* 4 December 1935.

27 See note 11; the review of *Our Neighbors, the Carters* (note 12) contrasts "the keys" with both "the subsequents" and "smaller towns."

28 "Geronimo," *Variety Film Reviews*, 22 November 1939.

29 For instance, "It's a top programmer for upper bracket bookings in the keys, and will hit a consistent stride down the line in the subsequents." ("The Cat and the Canary," *Variety Film Reviews*, 1 November 1939.) A review for *Castle on the Hudson* similarly contrasted "the keys" with a type of theater: action houses ("will click better in the action houses than the keys"; "Castle on the Hudson," *Variety Film Reviews*, 28 February 1940.)

30 "Our Leading Citizen," *Variety Film Reviews*, 2 August 1939; "Honeymoon in Bali," *Variety Film Reviews*, 13 September 1939. It's possible that "regular runs" refers to runs occurring after any special "pre-release" period.

'Capt. Blood' are undeniable for the male fan appeal."[31] Sometimes critics cast a film's gendered appeals in a positive light while other times warning of the limitations this could pose in the market. *The Light That Failed*, a Rudyard Kipling adaptation that was oriented toward "class trade rather than general audiences," was said to face "a substantial obstacle" in its lack of appeal to women.[32] The highest-budget films—even those that, in subject matter, seemed clearly to court one gender—needed to offer at least *something* for both. Trade press reviews (along with studio pressbooks) identified exploitation angles for exhibitors. For instance, *Northwest Passage*, which depicts a brutal episode, from the French and Indian War, could appeal to women through its "pictorial qualities," which included Technicolor cinematography and impressive wilderness locations.[33] *The Women* offered for male audiences "plenty of spicy lines and situations."[34]

31 "Magnificent Obsession," *Variety Film Reviews*, 8 January 1936; "Captain Blood," *Variety Film Reviews*, 1 January 1936. The *Captain Blood* review goes on to note that exhibitors could balance out the film's masculine appeals by highlighting the film's romance storyline.

32 "The Light That Failed," *Variety Film Reviews*, 27 December 1939.

33 "Northwest Passage," *Variety Film Reviews*, 14 February 1940.

34 "The Women," *Variety Film Reviews*, 6 September 1939.

Table 1. Sample MGM Releases, 1935–1936 (with Genre Keywords)

Title	Runtime	Genre(s)	Keywords
Mutiny on the Bounty	130	adventure	spectacle
Rose-Marie	100	musical, adventure	"operatic western"
Anna Karenina	95	drama, romance	somber, dignified
Rendezvous	95	comedy, melodrama	espionage, "chill-and-chuckle"
A Night at the Opera	90	comedy	satire
Escapade	90	comedy, romance	farce, Vienna, costume
Wife vs. Secretary	88	comedy-drama	love triangle
O'Shaughnessy's Boy	87	drama	father/son, tearjerker
Whipsaw	80	melodrama, romance	road movie, crime, sophisticated
The Bohemian Girl	80	musical, comedy	operetta, gypsies
Tough Guy	76	drama	juvenile, dog, crime, action
The Voice of Bugle Ann	70	drama	rural, dog
A Perfect Gentlemen	70	comedy	music hall, British
Woman Wanted	70	drama	crime, romance
Mad Love	70	horror	chiller, macabre
Calm Yourself	70	comedy	burlesque

Table 2. Sample Paramount Releases, 1935–1936 (with Genre Keywords)

Title	Runtime	Genre(s)	Keywords
The Crusades	125	adventure	costume, epic
The Trail of the Lonesome Pine	100	drama	outdoor, rural
The Big Broadcast of 1936	100	variety, musical	radio, television, backstage, farce
Desire	90	comedy, romance	jewels, Europe, Lubitsch
So Red the Rose	90	drama	Civil War, southern
Soak the Rich	87	comedy	campus, politics
Paris in Spring	82	comedy	farce, French, songs
Mary Burns, Fugitive	80	drama	melodrama, crime, woman
Her Master's Voice	75	comedy	theater adaptation
Give Us This Night	73	comedy-drama	operetta, backstage
The Man on the Flying Trapeze	66	comedy	gags
Timothy's Quest	65	comedy-drama	juvenile, melodrama, sentiment
It's a Great Life!	64	comedy-drama	outdoor, songs
The Virginia Judge	62	comedy	Southern, vaudeville
The Preview Murder Mystery	60	mystery	studio behind-the-scenes
Drift Fence	57	western	Zane Grey

Table 3. Sample Warner Bros. Releases, 1935–1936 (with Genre Keywords)

Title	Runtime	Genre(s)	Keywords
A Midsummer Night's Dream	132	fantasy	Shakespeare, prestige
Captain Blood	119	adventure	swashbuckling
Page Miss Glory	90	comedy	rags-to-riches
Colleen	89	musical	fashion
The Irish in Us	84	comedy	boxing, brothers
The Petrified Forest	82?	drama	crime, melodrama, desert, cerebral
Dangerous	78	drama	romance, alcohol
Stranded	75	drama	romance, construction
Boulder Dam	70	drama	outdoor, construction
Dr. Socrates	70	drama	gangsters, small town, melodrama
The Murder of Dr. Harrigan	67	mystery	hospital
Broadway Hostess	67	musical	nightclub, gambling
Freshman Love	65	comedy	college, rowing, song/dance
The Payoff	64	drama	melodrama, crime, newspaper, sports
I Love for Love	64	musical	backstage

Table 4. Sample Universal Releases, 1935–1936 (with Genre Keywords)

Title	Runtime	Genre(s)	Keywords
Magnificent Obsession	110	drama, romance	woman's picture, blindness
Sutter's Gold	94	western	biopic
Diamond Jim	90	comedy-drama	biopic, romance
Three Kids and a Queen	85	comedy-drama	hokum, family
The Invisible Ray	75	horror	chiller, mad scientist
King Solomon of Broadway	70	drama	nightclub, racketeering, melodrama
Don't Get Personal	67	comedy, romance	road trip
Lady Tubbs	67	comedy	farce, rags-to-riches
She Gets Her Man	66	comedy	gangsters, hokum
Dangerous Waters	65	drama	maritime melodrama

The Early Runs

Regular As, Specials, and Holdovers

The first-run exhibition market was where films stood to earn the most profits, as well as where they could attract "buzz" to fuel successful subsequent runs. Recall from the previous chapter that first-run houses had higher admissions prices, greater seating capacities and longer default run lengths than subsequent-run houses. With each step further down the run hierarchy a film was less "fresh" and thus less able to sustain a long booking. A film's status within a studio's annual program, then, was reflected in how it was booked into first-run theaters. "Regular" As, and some programmers, played on first-run screens for standard run lengths (usually a week), while a few special high-budget releases were intended to spend as much time as possible in the most lucrative downtown venues through holdovers.

Tables 5 through 8 display first-run booking data for sample films from the 1935–1936 season. (As in Tables 1 through 4, the films are listed in descending order of their runtimes). We can identify the "regular" As by looking not at the very top of the tables, but just beneath. These are the films that were not generally expected to garner holdovers—instead, their default was to play regular bookings in the major first-run theaters. These films might fare well in deluxe big-city venues, but these bookings were at least as important for generating attention and interest for the downstream theaters for which they were perceived best suited—where they would truly hit their stride. (These types of bookings are discussed below.)

These regular As and programmers include releases such as MGM's father-son weepie *O'Shaughnessy's Boy* and Paramount's *Mary Burns, Fugitive*, a crime thriller with a major star (Sylvia Sidney). Other typical A films include MGM's William Powell features, such as *Escapade,* a romantic comedy set in Europe, and *Rendezvous,* a "chill-and-chuckle" spy film with romance that clearly followed the formula set by Powell's recent hit *The Thin Man* (1934).[35] We can see a similar star strategy at work with Bette Davis in the Warner Bros. program. After her breakout role as a manipulative, sickly fallen woman in RKO's *Of Human Bondage* (1934), Warner Bros. cast Davis in two major dramas of its 1935–1936 program: *Dangerous*, in which she played an alcoholic actress; and the theatrical adaptation *The Petrified Forest*. Within this broad class of films there were still significant differences in which theaters and audiences critics deemed most appropriate. Recall, for instance, *Variety*'s prediction that *O'Shaughnessy's Boy* would be "better off once it gets past the keys." In contrast, *The Petrified Forest* would "have to depend largely on the upper cultural brackets" to turn out.[36] *Dangerous*, a dour romantic drama, was said to lack "ordinary elements of boxoffice appeal" but might still generate satisfactory returns with the strength of its "femme drag."[37]

We can identify possible underperforming A films by looking in the top halves of the tables for titles that skipped over the first-run markets in which they were expected to

35 "Rendezvous," *Variety Film Reviews*, 30 October 1935.

36 "The Petrified Forest," *Variety Film Reviews*, 12 February 1936.

37 "Dangerous," *Variety Film Reviews*, 1 January 1936.

play. One such film is Paramount's *Paris in Spring*, a summer-doldrums release that was not well reviewed. The *New York Times* called it an "ancient wooden horse of farce."[38] *Variety* warned that its strong production values were "squandered on a French farce type of story practically certain to deny it justice at the pay window."[39] The film went straight to subsequent-run venues in two of the sample markets and apparently skipped two others entirely.

In contrast to regular As, some high-budget productions were released with not just the hope, but the expectation, that they would secure holdover bookings. For my purposes, a "holdover" occurred when a film played in a first-run theater for significantly longer than the standard run length. "Significantly longer" can be defined as double or nearly double—e.g., two weeks instead of one, or a full week instead of a three- or four-day booking. Booking agreements typically specified a range of days (for instance, two to four) that a film had to play to fulfill its contract. This built-in flexibility gave theaters some leeway to get rid of underperforming films or to retain successful ones. Further adjustments were sometimes made extra-contractually at studio-owned or affiliated theaters.[40] Minor adjustments to standard booking schedules are often not discernible from newspaper listings, but major ones such as keeping a film for a full additional week are. And these major discrepancies are what distinguished the season's top films. It should

38 *New York Times,* 13 July 1935, 16.

39 Bon., "Paris in Spring," *Variety Film Reviews,* 17 July 1935.

40 Hanssen, "Vertical Integration during the Hollywood Studio Era."

be noted that the same effect as a holdover—that of a film's extended, uninterrupted presence in the local first-run market—could be achieved by moving a picture from one theater immediately into another. This "moveover" option, usually seen in key cities, allowed studios to maximize first-run profits from their top films while still keeping product moving through their flagship theaters. An inferior alternative to a holdover was a return engagement, in which a film would reappear, after a break, in the same first-run theater where it had made its debut.[41] Returns engagements were uncommon in my sample but did occur a few times.

Variety reviews from both sample seasons commented upon films' holdover prospects, confirming that accommodations for these types of runs were built into the distribution and exhibition systems. Per the reviews, holdovers in key city first-run theaters were essentially pre-ordained for some films. On *The Women*: "one of the smash hits of the season. Extended runs, holdovers and top grosses will be the rule, with deluxers in metropolitan centers garnering particularly hefty biz."[42] On the Mickey Rooney-Judy Garland musical *Babes in Arms*: "It will click mightily in the key de luxers, with extended runs indicated."[43] Other films were seen as having qualities that made them *possibilities* for holdovers—which meant that exhibitors needed to pay close attention to their performances in its early key city runs. The family-oriented *3 Kids and a Queen* was

41 Ibid., 538. A return engagement was less efficient than a conventional holdover in that it required additional shipping of prints, ballyhoo, etc. The delay between bookings also meant the inability to capitalize on immediate audience interest.

42 "The Women," *Variety Film Reviews*, 6 September 1939.

43 "Babes in Arms," *Variety Film Reviews*, 20 September 1939.

identified as having "all the ingredients for strong word-of-mouth which may build it into better holdover proportions," while *Remember the Night* was "a holdover prospect for many key runs."[44] These reviews distinguished between the likelihood of holdovers in the key-city first runs and extended runs in the subsequents. Some films were projected to achieve both, while others were best suited to the "deluxers" and others to the neighborhood and small-town theaters. Per *Variety, Honeymoon in Bali* was "ideally suited to the femme matinee trade" and would thus "click substantially in the regular runs." However, it also had "holdover potentialities for the deluxe houses."[45] *It's a Date*, with teen star Deanna Durbin in a mature role, seemed suited to achieve "extended runs up and down the line."[46]

Tables 6 through 9 include data on holdover frequency for the 1935–1936 sample films, by studio. One column counts full-week holdovers, including the number of markets in which the film was held over and the total number of extra weeks played (since some films were held over for multiple weeks). This column largely, but not entirely, reflects key city bookings. The next column counts partial-week holdovers—for instance, when a film played a full week in a theater that regularly changed programs at least twice a week.[47] The sample films that were among the top grossers of 1935 and

44 "3 Kids and a Queen," *Variety Film Reviews*, 13 November 1935; "Remember the Night," *Variety Film Reviews*, 10 January 1940.

45 "Honeymoon in Bali," *Variety Film Reviews*, 13 September 1939.

46 "It's a Date," *Variety Film Reviews*, 27 March 1940.

47 Of course, it's not impossible that a partial week holdover at a theater with weekly changeover could actually indicate a weak box office performance (it could mean, for instance, that a film that had been slated to play for an extra week was actually pulled halfway through the extra week).

1936 all enjoyed extended first runs in many markets. *Mutiny on the Bounty*, which topped the 1935 box office, was held over in fourteen locations—including every sample key city. But just as significant as the number of markets in which its first run was extended are the extraordinary durations of some of these extensions. For instance, *Mutiny* stayed in the Chicago Loop and downtown Los Angeles for a month. In Seattle, its first run lasted five weeks. Other top grossers of 1935 and 1936 in my sample are *Anna Karenina* (four weeklong holdovers), *Wife vs. Secretary* (five weeklong and one partial week), and *Captain Blood* (five weeklong and two part-week).

Just as, earlier, we used the tables to identify potential underperforming A films, we can look to see which As and programmers may have overperformed in some markets by earning unanticipated holdovers. One such release was *Whipsaw*, a film that blended elements of crime drama and sophisticated comedy with a road-trip narrative (a la the recent *It Happened One Night*). *Whipsaw*, which starred Spencer Tracy and Myrna Loy, was well reviewed in both *Variety* and *The New York Times*. The former predicted "better than average takings," calling it "entirely a studio victory for smart treatment" of its clichéd subject matter.[48] *Whipsaw* found two first-run holdovers. So did *The Petrified Forest*, which reviews had warned might be too cerebral for general audiences.

The two most atypical instances of first-run holdovers are instructive. Two were

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48 *Variety Film Reviews*, 29 January 1936. Writing for the *New York Times,* Frank S. Nugent called *Whipsaw* "at once an effective melodrama and a pleasant love story." Frank S. Nugent, "'Whipsaw,' With Myrna Loy and Spencer Tracy, at the Capitol—'Calling of Dan Matthews,'" *New York Times,* 25 January 1936, 18.

Paramount titles, and they followed a similar pattern of alternative first-run booking. *Give Us This Night*, an operetta starring Polish tenor Jan Kiepura, spent two weeks in the Chicago Loop. However, it was booked into the World Playhouse Theater, which usually showed foreign films. No other film in my sample, from Paramount or any other studio, played there. *Soak the Rich*, the Hecht-MacArthur political satire discussed further below, made its Los Angeles debut in a two-week run at the Filmarte but was distributed scarcely elsewhere. The final anomaly is *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which was something of a prestige-generating loss-leader for Warner Bros. In some key cities the film had a typical roadshow opening. For instance, in Los Angeles it played continuously for several weeks at a Warner Bros. affiliate in Beverly Hills. In many smaller towns, like Lubbock, Joplin, or Bakersfield, the film played for just a single day. *Midsummer* was different from standard roadshows not just in its limited playdates but in its total lack of general release/subsequent-run bookings, at least during the period I examined. It was decidedly not made for the nabes.

Table 5. First-run Trends for MGM Releases, 1935–1936

Film	Runtime (min)	Full-week holdovers (total extra weeks)	Part-week holdovers	Bypasses
Mutiny on the Bounty	130	8 (15)	6	0
Rose-Marie	100	6 (10)	5*	0
Anna Karenina	95	4	0	0
Rendezvous	95	1 (2)	0	0
A Night at the Opera	90	2 (3)	0	0
Escapade	90	0	0	1
Wife vs. Secretary	88	5 (6)	1	0
O'Shaughnessy's Boy	87	0	0	0
Whipsaw	80	2	0	0
Bohemian Girl	80	0	0	0
Tough Guy	76	0	0	3
The Voice of Bugle Ann	70	1**	0	1
The Perfect Gentleman	70	0	0	2
Woman Wanted	70	0	0	1
Mad Love	70	0	0	4
Calm Yourself	70	0	0	2

*includes return downtown engagement in Lebanon
**special venue

Table 6. First-run Trends for Paramount Releases, 1935–1936

Film	Runtime (min)	Full-week holdovers (total extra weeks)	Part-week holdovers	Bypasses
The Crusades	125	3 (6)	1	0
The Trail of the Lonesome Pine	100	7 (11)	2***	0
The Big Broadcast of 1936	100	3	2	0
Desire	90	2	1	0
So Red the Rose	90	0	0	1?
Soak the Rich	87	1*	0	4
Paris in Spring	82	0	0	2
Mary Burns, Fugitive	80	0	0	1?
Her Master's Voice	75	0	0**	5
Give us This Night	73	1*	0	2
The Man on the Flying Trapeze	66	1 (2)	0	1
Timothy's Quest	65	0	0	5
It's a Great Life!	64	0	0	5
The Virginia Judge	62	0	0	5
The Preview Murder Mystery	60	0	0	4
Drift Fence	57	0	0	5

*special venue
**stayed a day or two extra in Bakersfield, but this was likely due to the top-billed film, *Follow the Fleet*
***includes return downtown engagement in Lebanon

Table 7. First-run Trends for Warner Bros. Releases, 1935–1936

Film	Runtime (min)	Full-week holdovers (total extra weeks)	Part-week holdovers	Bypasses
A Midsummer Night's Dream	132	n/a*	n/a	n/a
Captain Blood	119	5 (7)	3***	0
Page Miss Glory	90	2	0	0
Colleen	89	2	0	0
The Irish in Us	84	3 (4)	1	0
Dangerous	78	0	0	0
The Petrified Forest	75	2	0	0
Stranded	75	0	0	1
Boulder Dam	70	0	1	1
Dr. Socrates	70	0	0	0
The Murder of Dr. Harrigan	67	0	0	5
Broadway Hostess	67	0	0	2
Freshman Love	65	0	1**	2
The Payoff	64	0	0	5
I Live for Love	64	0	0	3

*odd roadshow release

**stayed a bit extra in Bakersfield, but this was likely due to the top-billed film, *Rose-Marie*

***includes return engagement in Augusta

Table 8. First-run Trends for Universal Releases, 1935–1936

Film	Runtime (min)	Full-week holdovers (total extra weeks)	Part-week holdovers	Bypasses
Magnificent Obsession	110	8 (13)	3*	0
Sutter's Gold	94	1	0	
Diamond Jim	90	1	0	0
Three Kids and a Queen	85	0	0	3
The Invisible Ray	75	0	0	4
King Solomon of Broadway	70	1	0	1
Don't Get Personal	67	0	0	2
Lady Tubbs	67	0	0	1
She Gets Her Man	66	0	0	3
Dangerous Waters	65	0	0	7

***includes return downtown engagement in Lebanon

To understand better how films were rolled out, we can consider the *sequencing* of different films' first-run engagements around the country. To be clear, when I describe a sequence of first-run engagements, unless noted otherwise I am describing its appearances among my sample markets, as a representative subset of all U.S. markets. First, we will compare some A releases from the same studio (Paramount, 1935–1936 season), and then we will look at films from other studios.

The *Crusades* was one of Paramount's most high-profile releases. It received roadshow distribution (i.e. reserved-seating, premium-price engagements) in some markets but "general release" in others. The film premiered in New York at the Astor in late August 1935 and stayed there seven weeks. Only in the final week of its Broadway run did it debut in another of my sample cities, Boston. Within the next month, it opened in seven other key cities. With those openings, the film had played in all of my sample key cities except one, Seattle; it was another month before the film played there. At the same time it was opening in the keys, *The Crusades* played in two additional markets, Brooklyn (arriving at the Paramount two weeks after the end of the film's Broadway run) and Galveston (arriving about a week after its first run in Dallas). In the three weeks following this flurry of key city openings, it appeared in eight smaller markets. These engagements were not concentrated in a particular region; they included playdates in Phoenix, Augusta, Joplin, and Lebanon. By late November, the film had opened in nineteen sample markets, and seventeen of these engagements were during a six-week period between mid-October and late November. There were an additional six scattered

openings between December 1935 and March 1936.

We can compare *The Crusades*, a top A picture, to a slightly less high-powered one, the Civil War drama *So Red the Rose*. The releases were similar in many respects. *So Red the Rose* opened in nine key cities, and three additional markets, within a seven-week period. And like *The Crusades*, immediately following this period of key city saturation it opened in several secondary markets (six for *Rose* versus eight for *The Crusades*). Tables 9 and 10 visualize this comparison by presenting excerpts of the films' release calendars showing these concentrated early weeks. Over the next four months, *So Red the Rose* found its way to eight other locations. If we set aside *The Crusades*'s anomalous holdover Broadway run, we see that both films circulated through the sample markets in roughly the same amount of time (twenty-four versus twenty-five weeks). Indeed, the main difference between the two releases is how their earliest key city openings were handled. While *The Crusades* parked itself on Broadway for several weeks before it opened in other keys, *So Red the Rose* debuted in five other sample keys before it received a Broadway release. The earliest of these key city engagements was in Atlanta, where the film opened as part of a day-and-date release in eleven southern cities, in "co-operation with the Daughters of the Confederacy."[49] *Variety's* coverage of theater exploitation described a particularly elaborate opening in Richmond that included historical re-enactors and a speech from Virginia's governor. It also noted that Paramount sent six trade paper critics from New York to catch the debut.[50] Though the "southern strategy"

49 "'Rose's' Dixie Bally," *Variety*, 23 October 1935, 7.

50 Epes W. Sargent, "Premiering 'Rose,'" *Variety*, 20 November 1935, 21. "...folks down here were

used for the rollout of *So Red the Rose* was not typical, it was nonetheless surprisingly common for films, even As, to open in other key cities before or at the same time as they debuted in New York (this trend is further discussed below).

The female-centered crime melodrama *Mary Burns, Fugitive* had a runtime (84 min) similar to *So Red the Rose* but a significantly smaller budget (around $340,000 versus $1,000,000). With the marquee draw of Sylvia Sidney, it had more star power than *So Red the Rose* but not its literary or historical pedigree. Regardless, the films' release patterns were similar. *So Red* opened in 18 sample markets in its first seven weeks and *Mary Burns* in nineteen. (Table 11 shows *Mary Burns*'s early weeks.) Both films played in all but one of the sample key cities in the first five weeks.

The Man on the Flying Trapeze had star talent in W.C. Fields but a runtime of just over an hour, which would generally mark it as a B film. (It also contains no aerial acrobatics, leading *Variety* to brand it a "misnomer.")[51] But the film received the most concentrated release of the Paramount films discussed thus far. (Table 12 presents the early weeks of *Man*'s release calendar.) It opened in fourteen sample markets (more than *Crusades, So Red the Rose*, or *Mary Burns*) in its first three weeks. Half of these fourteen were key cities and half were non-keys (including Lubbock, Joplin, and Centralia). This trend means that, to a greater extent than the films previously discussed, *Man on the*

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impressed and gave indication that the film was sure-fire below the Potomac."

51 "The Man on the Flying Trapeze," *Variety Film Reviews*, 14 August 1935. The *New York Times* noted that the film's title "has almost as little connection with the film's theme as "Dante's Inferno" had with the writings of the late Alighieri. Andre Sennwald, "'The Man on the Flying Trapeze,' With W.C. Fields, at the Capitol—'Every Night at Eight,'" *New York Times*, 3 August 1935, 16.

Flying Trapeze was opening in small markets at the same time it was opening in the keys. Within seven weeks, the film had opened in all the sample keys, and in twenty-four sample markets total (compared to fourteen for *The Crusades*, eighteen for *So Red the Rose*, and nineteen for *Mary Burns, Fugitive*).

MGM's A pictures followed broadly similar patterns as the Paramount releases. We can start with the big-budget literary adaptation *Anna Karenina*, which starred Greta Garbo. It opened in six sample key cities—and none of the smaller sample markets—in its first week. However, it landed in Lubbock and Phoenix the next week. The paternal melodrama *O'Shaughnessy's Boy* debuted in three. The same was true for *Whipsaw*, a caper-melodrama/romance with Myrna Loy and Spencer Tracy. Both *Anna Karenina* and *O'Shaughnessy's Boy* had appeared in all the sample keys within seven weeks; *Whipsaw* had reached all but one.

Warner Bros.'s releases show trends similar to MGM's. The As appeared in all, or all but one, of the sample keys within the first couple of months. *The Irish in Us* took six weeks, *Captain Blood* seven, and *Page Miss Glory* eight. But there are some subtle differences even among these films. Tables 13 and 14 compare the early weeks of *Captain Blood* and *The Irish in Us*; we can see that the release of *Irish* resembled that of *Man on the Flying Trapeze* (discussed below), with a very concentrated first three weeks in which it opened at a mix of key cities and smaller markets. In contrast, *Captain Blood*'s key city openings were more spread out. We can compare these As to two Bs, the newspaper crime drama *The Payoff* and the mystery-thriller *The Murder of Dr. Harrigan*.

These features each reached eight of the sample key cities, but they took one to two months longer than the As to do so.

We usually think of a film's Broadway run as its debut. But it should be noted that, for many A films (and even more B films), the Broadway run—if there was one—took place after the film had already played in at least one other location. There may not have been an imperative for distributors to make the film's Broadway run its very first; perhaps the objective was simply to get top new releases into the biggest key cities as early as possible given the current film traffic in the flagship key city theaters. This strategy would have helped distributors and exhibitors optimize the flow of these films through the country's most profitable theaters and made it easier to accommodate strategies like holdovers and early cancellations. These strategies were ways of, respectively, increasing the number of playdates of lucrative films and reducing the number of playdates for flops. Concentrating the release in this way allowed studios to capitalize on national advertising campaigns, radio tie-ins, and press coverage.[52] B films generally did not receive these kinds of promotion and had to rely on press kit boilerplate in local newspapers and in-house exhibitor ballyhoo.

52 Jacobs, "The B Film and the Problem of Cultural Distinction," 1–13.

Table 9. Release Calendar Excerpt for *The Crusades*

	The Crusades
18 August-24 August	NYC
25 August-31 August	
1 Sep-7 Sep	
8 Sep-14 Sep	
15 Sep-21 Sep	
22 Sep-28 Sep	
29 Sep-5 Oct	BOS
6 Oct-12 Oct	
13 Oct-19 Oct	DAL, ATL, KC
20 Oct-26 Oct	PHI, SLC, Brooklyn
27 Oct-2 Nov	LA, CHI, Galveston
3 Nov-9 Nov	Phoenix, Reno, Augusta, Butte
10 Nov-16 Nov	
17 Nov-23 Nov	Lubbock, Elizabeth, Lebanon, Joplin

Table 10. Release Calendar Excerpt for *So Red the Rose*

	So Red the Rose
10 Nov-16 Nov	ATL, BOS
17 Nov-23 Nov	LA, KC, PHI, Phoenix
24 Nov-30 Nov	NYC
1 Dec-7 Dec	DAL, Galveston
8 Dec-14 Dec	CHI, SEA, Bakersfield
15 Dec-21 Dec	Elizabeth, Fitchburg
22 Dec-28 Dec	Chester, Lebanon, Lubbock, Augusta

Table 11. Release Calendar Excerpt for *Mary Burns, Fugitive*

	Mary Burns, Fugitive
10 Nov-16 Nov	NYC, PHI, Augusta
17 Nov-23 Nov	SLC
24 Nov-30 Nov	BOS, CHI, Lebanon
1 Dec-7 Dec	ATL, KC, Fitchburg, Galveston, Lubbock
8 Dec-14 Dec	DAL, SEA, Elizabeth
15 Dec-21 Dec	Phoenix, Chester
22 Dec-28 Dec	LA, Reno
29 Dec-4 Jan	Centralia
5 Jan-11 Jan	Hammond, Panama City

Table 12. Release Calendar Excerpt for *Man on the Flying Trapeze*

	Man on the Flying Trapeze
21 July-27 July	BOS, DAL, PHI, Lubbock
28 July-3 August	NYC, ATL, Reno, Phoenix, Galveston
4 August-10 August	CHI, SEA, Joplin, Centralia, Lebanon
11 August-17 August	
18 August-24 August	LA, Bakersfield, Fitchburg
25 August-31 August	SLC, Lowell, Chester
1 Sep-7 Sep	KC, Elizabeth, Hammond, Casa Grande

Table 13. Release Calendar Excerpt for *Captain Blood*

	Captain Blood
15 Dec-21 Dec	DAL
22 Dec-28 Dec	NYC, BOS
29 Dec-4 Jan	LA, PHI, Brooklyn, Lubbock, Elizabeth
5 Jan-11 Jan	CHI, Phoenix
12 Jan-18 Jan	SLC, Reno
19 Jan-25 Jan	SEA, Bakersfield, Chester, Lebanon
26 Jan-1 Feb	ATL, KC, Galveston, Fitchburg, Panama City

Table 14. Release Calendar Excerpt for *The Irish in Us*

	The Irish in Us (Warner Bros.)
28 July-3 August	NYC, PHI, KC, Butte
4 August-10 August	LA, DAL, Galveston, Reno, Phoenix
11 August-17 August	ATL, SEA, SLC, Bakersfield, Lubbock
18 August-24 August	
25 August-31 August	CHI, Lowell, Chester
1 Sep-7 Sep	BOS, Centralia
8 Sep-14 Sep	Lebanon

Bs and Bypasses

Most major studios' B films played at first-run theaters in most of the sample markets. However, they were much more likely to be relegated to the non-flagship or non-affiliated houses, to fill out a double bill, and/or to play split-week runs. Some of the most marginal Bs, however, bypassed local first-run markets entirely. This trend makes sense, because major first-run houses were less likely than subsequent-run theaters to engage in compulsory block booking of large chunks (or all) of an entire seasonal program. They also enjoyed greater latitude to reject films they found undesirable. To detect some of the better-performing Bs (some of which would qualify as "programmers"), we should look for titles in the bottom halves of Tables 6 through 9 that skipped no, or almost no, first-run markets. One such film is Universal's *King Solomon of Broadway*, a racketeering melodrama featuring Edmund Lowe, long past his silent-era prime. *Variety* described it as "mostly for doubles."[53] However, it played in all but one of the sample first-run markets, securing bookings in more markets than at least two films farther up the program hierarchy. And it was even held over in one location.

Though detecting instances of "bypasses" from newspaper listings is the part of my research most vulnerable to error, my first-run data are sufficiently complete to draw some conclusions.[54] Almost no first-run houses changed programs daily, and many

53 "King Solomon of Broadway," *Variety Film Reviews*, 23 October 1935.

54 That is, it is not easy to determine with certainty that a film did *not* play somewhere, because there could be several possible explanations for not finding a film's listing in the local newspaper (e.g. gaps in the newspaper sample, listing errors, etc.). It's possible that some screenings slipped through the cracks.

theaters advertised not just the current day's program but ones for upcoming days. These redundancies protect against errors. The most marginal B films—the ones that logically would have been most likely to bypass first-run theaters—are in fact the most likely to be missed, since they were given shorter runs and less conspicuous promotion. Regardless, if a film appears to have bypassed numerous first-run markets, it is a good indication of its marginal status within its studio's seasonal program.

In addition to the holdover data discussed above, Tables 6 through 9 show the number of times each sample film bypassed a first-run market and received its first local booking in a subsequent-run house. As we saw in the previous chapter, such instances allowed subsequent-run theaters to boast, accurately, of offering "first-run" attractions. These data do not include occasions when a film was entirely absent from the town's theaters; this information is presented in a separate column for films released in the first two-thirds of the 1935–1936 season. They also do not include instances in which a film played at a "special" downtown venue—like the art cinema releases of *Give us this Night* and *Soak the Rich* (discussed below), or the screening of *Paris in Spring* at a vaudeville house in Seattle. Figure 4 presents a newspaper advertisement that specifies that the theater is offering the film's "First Seattle Showing!"

Figure 4. ***Paris in Spring*** **in Seattle, 29 August 1935**

So, which films were most likely to bypass first-run theaters? At least eleven titles did so four or more times. Top among them, with seven bypasses, was Universal's *Dangerous Waters*, a nautical drama starring Jack Holt, best known for his westerns, as a ship's captain. Per *Variety*: "The most that this sputtering firecracker can figure is on a dual setup."[55] Ten films bypassed four or five first-run markets. They include: *Mad Love*; *It's a Great Life!*, a topical outdoor drama about a CCC project; *The Virginia Judge*; *Timothy's Quest*, starring juvenile actor Dickie Moore as an orphan who goes to live on a farm; *Drift Fence*, a Buster Crabbe western; *The Murder of Dr. Harrigan*; and *The Invisible Ray*, a sci-fi/horror film starring Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi. Most of these films are among the shortest in each studio's sample. *The Invisible Ray* is an exception, perhaps suggesting that horror films gravitated toward secondary venues regardless of star power. Films with three bypasses were also near the bottom of their respective program hierarchies, with two exceptions in the Paramount sample. Based on their runtimes, we might expect *Soak the Rich* (87 min) and *Her Master's Voice* (75 min) to be distributed more like As or programmers, but they more closely resemble Bs.

In terms of its distribution, *Soak the Rich* was the most marginal release in my sample—from Paramount or any studio. Something of a film maudit, it was written and directed by Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur. Frequent collaborators, the two were known primarily as writers (for stage and screen) but were nonetheless hired by Paramount to direct a handful of their own projects in the mid-1930s. Set on a college

55 "Dangerous Waters," *Variety Film Reviews*, 29 January 1936.

campus and running nearly 90 minutes, *Soak the Rich* lampooned contemporary politics. According to *Los Angeles Times* critic Philip Scheuer, the authors target "everything—the administration, the Reds, rich men, poor men, campus "pinks," G-men and love's young dream. The world most often repeated is 'radical'—247 times, not by actual count."[56] In addition to noting the film's mix of intellectual appeal and "horselaughs," Scheuer described the film as surprisingly candid for a Hollywood feature:

> it does succeed in reflecting, to a degree both amusing and disturbing, the near-chaos of today's political and economic set-up. Clearly, sometimes brilliantly, the many divergent views of radical and conservative are shouted to the skies [...] (you don't, as a matter of fact, generally hear such frank opinions emanating from the screen).[57]

Frank Nugent's *New York Times* review singled out a campus radical character "who could put Lenin in one packet, Stalin in the other pocket and still have room for Karl Marx."[58]

In large part due to this comic but cerebral and potentially incendiary political topicality, *Soak the Rich* appears to have alienated theater managers in droves. I found listings for it in only seven of my sample markets, plus two additional towns whose theater listings appeared in the same local newspapers. (Table 15 shows the full release calendar for *Soak the Rich*.) The first booking I've identified for it was not in a key city

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56 Philip K. Scheuer, "'Soak the Rich' Satirical Comedy of Current Affairs," *Los Angeles Times*, 8 February 1936, A7.

57 Ibid.

58 Frank S. Nugent, "'Soak the Rich,' at the Astor, in which Hecht and MacArthur Lampoon College Radicals," *New York Times*, 5 February 1936, 14.

but in the small town of Chehalis, Washington. Soon after, it was reviewed in both the New York and Los Angeles *Times*, and in both cities it received what could somewhat anachronistically be called art cinema releases in the same week in early February 1936. In New York, it played at the Astor, the same theater that had hosted *The Crusades'* seven-week Broadway run. This occurrence suggests that, as with *Crusades*, Paramount deemed it necessary to go outside their default for Broadway first-run distribution for *Soak the Rich*. In Los Angeles, *Soak the Rich* played at the newly reopened Filmarte Theater ("whose alleged aim is film art," according to Scheuer).[59] A few weeks later, the film played in Washington, D.C. at the Belasco—per *Variety*, an "arty spot." According to *Variety*'s Pictures Grosses dispatch, it was "covered by second string critics, who were kind to film *that ace spots wouldn't touch*" (emphasis mine).[60] The meager, scattershot distribution of *Soak the Rich,* as well as its relatively inflated runtime and incendiary political themes, might be explained by Paramount's willingness to indulge screenwriter Ben Hecht, one of the industry's top talents, in his vanity projects regardless of their box office potential.

59 Ibid.

60 *Variety,* 4 March 1936, pg. 9.

Table 15. Release Calendar Excerpt for *Soak the Rich*

	Soak the Rich
19 Jan-25 Jan	(Chehalis)
26 Jan-1 Feb	
2 Feb-8 Feb	NYC, LA
9 Feb-15 Feb	(Prescott)
16 Feb-22 Feb	
23 Feb-29 Feb	
1 March-7 March	Centralia
8 March-14 March	
15 March-21 March	CHI (?), Reno
22 March-28 March	Panama City
29 March-4 April	
5 April-11 April	Bakersfield

Another bypass-heavy film was *Her Master's Voice*, a domestic comedy adapted from a play. At 75 minutes, the film was of intermediate length, but it had a low budget (just over $160,000) and no high-wattage stars. The lead role was played by Edward Everett Horton, best known for his supporting roles. It may thus have represented a mismatch of budget and star power.[61] (In this casting, as well as in its genre, *Her Master's Voice* is very similar to an MGM film from the same season, *The Perfect Gentleman*, which starred character actor Frank Morgan. That film is discussed below.) *Her Master's Voice* opened in the key cities more sporadically than did the previous films discussed. By the end of its first seven weeks, it had played in five sample keys. It bypassed some urban first runs entirely. The film's New York premiere was in Brooklyn, on a double bill, and not on Broadway. *Her Master's Voice* also appears to have skipped over the Chicago Loop, instead cropping up in a few neighborhood houses months after its earliest engagements. It opened in over a dozen of the subsidiary markets—a number slightly below that of higher-tier films. Table 16 shows the full release calendar for *Her Master's Voice*.

A typical low-tier release was *The Virginia Judge,* a 62-minute B starring southern dialect comedian Walter Kelly and Stepin Fetchit, was similar to *Her Master's Voice* in that it opened in Brooklyn, on a double bill, rather than on Broadway. It also bypassed the Chicago loop and seems to have received only scattered neighborhood theater screenings.

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61 Though a *Variety* critic ("Her Master's Voice," *Variety Film Reviews,* 4 March 1936) predicted the film would "get its share of dual biz," he also noted that it would "have to depend on Horton name and comedy angle" to draw audiences.

But *The Virginia Judge* received even fewer engagements at the major first-run houses in the keys than *Her Master's Voice*—four versus seven. Further, those engagements were more spread out. It took *Judge* nine weeks to open in those four keys, while *Her Master's Voice* had opened in as many keys in its first month. Table 17 shows a near-complete release calendar for *The Virginia Judge* (there was just one additional sample market engagement, over five months after the last ones included in the excerpt).

Table 16. Release Calendar Excerpt for *Her Master's Voice*

	Her Master's Voice
26 Jan-1 Feb	BOS, PHI
2 Feb-8 Feb	Augusta
9 Feb-15 Feb	LA, Lubbock
16 Feb-22 Feb	Brooklyn, Butte
23 Feb-29 Feb	SEA, Phoenix, Centralia
1 March-7 March	ATL, Bakersfield, Chester
8 March-14 March	Fitchburg, Reno
15 March-21 March	SLC, Lebanon
22 March-28 March	Panama City
29 March-4 April	Elizabeth
5 April-11 April	
12 April-18 April	
19 April-25 April	Galveston (Webb City)
26 April-2 May	CHI (?)
3 May-9 May	DAL

Table 17. Release Calendar Excerpt for *The Virginia Judge*

	The Virginia Judge
29 Sep-5 Oct	BOS, Lubbock
6 Oct-12 Oct	
13 Oct-19 Oct	Brooklyn, DAL
20 Oct-26 Oct	Phoenix
27 Oct-2 Nov	Lebanon, Centralia
3 Nov-9 Nov	
10 Nov-16 Nov	Hammond, Butte
17 Nov-23 Nov	LA, Elizabeth
24 Nov-30 Nov	SLC, CHI (?)
1 Dec-7 Dec	Chester, Joplin
8 Dec-14 Dec	Galveston, Reno

The previous three examples are from Paramount. How did other studios' Bs compare? MGM's Bs appeared in most of the sample markets but fewer than the As. *Mad Love*, a horror film starring Peter Lorre in his first leading role in a U.S. film, reached eight of the sample keys, appearing in the last of them seven to eight months after its first engagements. *The Perfect Gentleman*, the British-themed domestic farce starring Frank Morgan that, as mentioned above, was comparable in genre and status to Paramount's *Her Master's Voice*, played in six keys in twelve weeks. The two films received about the same number of total first-run engagements, but *Mad Love's* were spread over a much longer timespan—around nine months, versus four for *The Perfect Gentleman*.

We have so far looked at instances in which films skipped over a city or town's first-run theaters and found bookings only in subsequent-run houses. But what about when they skipped a market entirely? Tables 18 through 21 show the number of markets in which selected titles had no advertised playdates in any theater.[62] The numbers affirm that most films played in most locations but that Bs were the most likely to be passed over. But of course, the sheer number of cities and towns in which a film played only tells part of the story. The discrepancy is, of course, compounded by the discrepancy in the types of bookings that the B films found where they *did* play—split weeks, double bills, and cheaper and smaller theaters. And it is further compounded by the smaller number of

62 Given the number of sources involved, there is certainly room for error and minor discrepancies. There are gaps in coverage for some newspapers. Sometimes listings are erroneous. It's possible I've missed a screening here or there. However, if I did it's likely to have been in a marginal theater and not a major first-run house, which were the most consistently and prominently advertised (their bookings are also available from multiple sources—local newspapers, the *Variety* Picture Grosses pages, etc.). I'm confident that these numbers provide a basic sense of the breadth of these films' releases.

subsequent-run engagements the films received. *Variety* reviews attest to there being types of films that would likely bypass many markets. One such release was Paramount's *All Women Have Secrets* (1939), a 60-minute comedy-drama about balancing college and marriage. A *Variety* critic identified it as "one in the 'B' division that will have trouble getting anywhere. It is very weak and appears destined for minimum dating, mostly as the No. 2 flat buy dualer."[63]

63 "All Women Have Secrets," *Variety Film Reviews*, 22 November 1939.

Table 18. Number of Sample Markets with at Least One Booking (for Selected 1935–1936 Paramount Films)

Film	Approximate # of First Runs
The Man on the Flying Trapeze	27
So Red the Rose	26
The Crusades	25
Mary Burns, Fugitive	23
Her Master's Voice	22
The Virginia Judge	18
Soak the Rich	7-9

Table 19. Number of Sample Markets with at Least One Booking (for Selected 1935–1936 MGM Films)

Film	Approximate # of First Runs
Anna Karenina	26
Whipsaw	26
O'Shaughnessy's Boy	25
Mad Love	22
The Perfect Gentleman	21

Table 20. Number of Sample Markets with at Least One Booking (for Selected 1935-1936 Warner Bros. Films)

Film	Approximate # of First Runs
Captain Blood	27
The Irish in Us	26
Page Miss Glory	26
The Murder of Dr. Harrigan	22
The Payoff	23

Table 21. Number of Sample Markets with at Least One Booking (for Selected 1935-1936 Universal Films)

Film	Approximate # of First Runs
Magnificent Obsession	27
Diamond Jim	26
Lady Tubbs	24
Three Kids and a Queen	23
She Gets Her Man	22

Subsequent-run Bookings

As we have seen, first-run distribution falls into fairly reliable patterns that are correlated to a film's budget (as reflected in its runtime). Subsequent-run data are more unruly and variable. In the largest cities, some of which boasted over 100 neighborhood theaters, there arrived a time in a film's release upon which single-theater exclusivity ended and multiple local theaters could show a film simultaneously. (Recall from the previous chapter that the Warner Bros. distribution contracts stated that neighborhood houses often shared a position in the run hierarchy with several others.) In smaller markets, these kinds of overlaps were not permitted.

Distribution practices had a built-in flexibility that can help explain the variability we see in the subsequent-run market. Recall from Chapter Two, on the operations of the exchanges, that film selling was a two-or-more stage process. The first agreements were made months in advance, when many releases were still in production; these films might be represented on contracts with placeholding verbiage. As the tentative playdates approached, the distributor and exhibitor shared another round of interactions to finalize the contracts, arrange print delivery, and hash out other logistical matters. Because the first phase occurred before a film's release and the second phase after, theaters could, to the extent they were able, seek various contractual adjustments in response to films' critical and commercial reception—nationally or locally.

We can begin to get a sense of the differences in the sample films' rollouts after their first runs by looking at the numbers of local bookings they received in the sample

markets. Tables 22 through 25 present these numbers, grouped by studio and location.[64] Because subsequent-run data are more likely to be incomplete for films released at the end of the season, these tables include only films released in the first two-thirds of the 1935–1936 season. These films had wound their way to most locations by early summer 1936.

Though trends in key-city subsequent-run bookings are not as readily identifiable as in first run, a few broad patterns emerge. The top A films tend to rank highly in the number of bookings, which confirms that such releases aspired to a muscular rollout in all classes of theaters and not just the downtown picture palaces. If we remove the outlier *Soak the Rich*, the number of subsequent-run bookings ranges from 11 to 113.[65] All but one of the seven films that received more than 90 subsequent-run bookings ran 80 minutes or longer (and the seventh ran 78 minutes). In the case of two studios, MGM and Universal, the longest sample film was also the one that, by a fair margin, received the most subsequent-run bookings. But of the Paramount and Warner Bros. subsample, other releases found their way into more theaters.

The B films tended to fall on the lower end of the range of subsequent-run bookings. Again excepting the perennial outlier *Soak the Rich*, all but one of the seven

64 The Chicago data represent the majority, though not all, of the theaters advertised in the *Tribune*. I sampled around ten houses on the north side and all the theaters listed for the northwest, west, and south sides. The numbers of bookings in Chicago versus the other key cities reflects Chicago's much larger population. At 3.4 million, it had over four times the population of Boston, the next-largest city represented in the table (and many of the Boston area's neighborhood theaters were actually in surrounding communities like Somerville).

65 With *Soak the Rich* included, the low end of the range is 2.

films that received fewer than 30 subsequent-run bookings was under 70 minutes long (the seventh was the 75-minute *Her Master's Voice*, discussed above). Comparing the total bookings of B films with similar runtimes can also help identify which ones were punching above their weight class. One such example is *The Payoff*, which found over twice as many bookings as the other three Warner Bros. releases of similar length. *Variety* called *The Payoff* "better than average James Dunn material" and would "get by with the family trade": It is the type of material which is picked for Dunn, being another success item with romantic angles, but in both story and production it's much better than some Dunn has recently made."[66] *The Man on the Flying Trapeze*, which, as discussed earlier, had in W.C. Fields more star power than most films of its length, performed far better than its peers in the Paramount program such as *It's a Great Life!* and *Her Master's Voice*.[67]

The remaining As and programmers usually fell somewhere between, though some of them rivaled or exceeded the bookings of the top As. For instance, of their respective studios' programs, *Dangerous* and *Mary Burns, Fugitive,* both noted for their

66 "The Payoff," *Variety Film Reviews*, 13 November 1935. In his history of the B film from Balio's *Grand Design*, Brain Taves makes a strange claim about *The Payoff*: he identifies it as a well received, upwardly mobile B film that made the jump from the bottom to the top of double bills. The exhibition data collected here suggest that this was not the case. Like most B films, *The Payoff* appeared on the top of *some* bills (and even on solo bills) at some types of theaters. But it was certainly not distributed like an A film. Its success is best understood in terms of its relatively high total number of bookings.

67 Of *Trapeze, Variety* claimed that "Whatever business this picture drags into theatres will be entirely due to W.C. Fields' name on the marquee. Picture itself is light-weight, a misnomer and a weakie. Comic's drawing power may build it up to moderate rating in the nabes, which is the best it can hope for." ("The Man on the Flying Trapeze," *Variety Film Reviews*, 14 August 1935. The *New York Times* was more favorably disposed, calling it "easily the best of the summer comedies" (Sennwald).

appeal to females, received the most subsequent-run bookings in Chicago.[68] It is at this mid-range level of releases, which includes both lower budget As and higher budget Bs, that we can find the films designed to find their firmest footholds not in the major first runs but instead in the rank-and-file neighborhood and subsequent-run theaters. It is also at this mid-level that we are most likely to find films that can rise or fall relative to their cohort releases, whether across its national distribution trajectory or within particular markets.

Looking at the data by studio makes it clear that, in the different keys, films fared differently in relation to one another—that is, just because film A received more bookings than film B in Chicago did not mean that the same would be true of Dallas. It is in the subsequent-run bookings that distribution trajectories can most clearly be shaped according to local reception, box office performance, and other contingencies. We saw examples of such "customization" in in the previous chapter. Recall, for instance, the large number of subsequent-run bookings of *The Irish in Us* in Boston, or the relatively strong performance of *The Virginia Judge* in the neighborhood theaters of Atlanta. *So Red the Rose*, Paramount's other southern-themed feature, also fared relatively well in the Atlanta subsequent-run market. Compare it, for instance, to the film's performance in Chicago. As we can see in Table 24, it received a smaller total number of subsequent-run

68 *Magnificent Obsession*, which *Variety* had called "a strong woman's picture and a cinch for the matinee trade," received more subsequent-run bookings in Chicago than any other film in the 1935–1936 sample. (It also received the most total subsequent-run bookings across all the key cities tallied in tables 23 to 26.) ("Magnificent Obsession," *Variety Film Reviews*, 8 January 1936.) Unlike *Dangerous* and *Mary Burns*, *Magnificent Obsession* was a program-topping spectacular that earned deluxe engagements and holdovers in first run.

bookings than we might except for a film of its budget; both *Mary Burns, Fugitive* and *The Man on the Flying Trapeze* received significantly more. And, as we saw in the previous chapter, this lower number of bookings cannot be attributed to *So Red the Rose* earning a disproportionate share of its admissions in the city's deluxe early-run houses. Recall that *So Red the Rose* did not spend weeks making the rounds of Chicago's large studio-affiliated neighborhood theaters as did the top-performing A films. Rather, it went to smaller theaters affiliated with local chains like Schoenstadt and Essaness.

Table 22. Subsequent-run Bookings for Selected MGM Releases, 1935–1936

Film	# Subsequent-run bookings								Run time
	Keys							Other mrkts	
	ATL	BOS	CHI	DAL	SEA	SLC	Total		
Calm Yourself	3	2	13	12	4	3	37	19	70
Mad Love	1	1	8	6	2	2	20	11	70
Woman Wanted	5	4	41	11	6	2	69	23	70
Whipsaw	1	5	39	18	14	---	77	25	80
O'Shaughnessy's Boy	4	4	45	16	12	5	86	26	87
Escapade	1		44	13	6	3	67	29	90
Rendezvous	2	5	42	14	12	3	78	27	95
Anna Karenina	2	5	---	11	8	5	---	19	95
Mutiny on the Bounty	2	4	60	18	14	2	100	33	130

Table 23. Subsequent-run Bookings for Selected Paramount Releases, 1935–1936

Film	# Subsequent-run bookings								Run time
	Keys							Other mrkts	
	ATL	BOS	CHI	DAL	SEA	SLC	Total		
The Virginia Judge	8	1	20	13	13	1	56	20	62
It's a Great Life!	5	1	4	2	1		13	10	64
The Man on the Flying Trapeze	8	3	45	13	14	2	85	31	66
Her Master's Voice	5	1	2		3		11	13	75
Mary Burns, Fugitive	13	5	54	16	13	4	105	23	80
Paris in Spring	3	4	20	5	11	1	44	13	82
Soak the Rich			2				2	2	87
So Red the Rose	14	5	33	16	15	2	85	24	90
The Big Broadcast of 1936	10	5	44	18	16	4	97	39	100
The Crusades	12	5	42	9	16	2	86	19	125

Table 24. Subsequent-run Bookings for Selected Warner Bros. Releases, 1935–1936

Film	# Subsequent-run bookings								Run time
	Keys							Other mrkts	
	ATL	BOS	CHI	DAL	SEA	SLC	Total		
I Live for Love		3	10	5	8	2	28	13	64
The Payoff	1	3	35	8	12	1	60	23	64
Freshman Love	1	2	10	7	6		26	15	65
Broadway Hostess		2	8	6	10	1	27	18	67
Dr. Socrates	1	5	47	13	16	4	86	29	70
Stranded	9	7	49	3	17	3	88	25	75
Dangerous	9	4	61	15	14	2	105	22	78
The Irish in Us	11	9	45	13	17	5	100	31	84
Page Miss Glory	7	6	39	13	12	4	81	29	90
Captain Blood	13	6	50	13	10	2	94	18	119

Table 25. Subsequent-run Bookings for Selected Universal Releases, 1935–1936

Film	# Subsequent-run bookings								Run time
	Keys							Other mrkts	
	ATL	BOS	CHI	DAL	SEA	SLC	Total		
She Gets Her Man	12	3	20	7	12	3	57	13	66
Lady Tubbs	8	6	13	9	14	5	55	18	67
King Solomon of Broadway	6	7	42	11	13	2	81	20	70
The Invisible Ray	6	3	32	8	9		58	12	75
Three Kids and a Queen		5	43	6	2	2	58	21	85
Diamond Jim	8	6	46	12	18	4	94	18	90
Magnificent Obsession	10	4	68	15	12	4	113	21	110

Conclusion

This chapter and the previous one examined the distribution trajectories of a large group of films within and across a large number of markets. These trajectories were structured by two hierarchical systems: the studios' seasonal programs of releases and local exhibition markets. A film's budget largely determined its rental pricing scheme and initial print order, making it undoubtedly the most salient factor shaping the film's release pattern. Genre and subject matter also were important variables, though they were largely subsidiary to budget classifications. That is, certain kinds of stories were associated with particular theaters, audiences, and programming strategies. But these associations were nonetheless often filtered through the influence of budget—because, whether through necessity or convention, some genres were concentrated in particular budget categories. Costume pictures, for instance, tended toward the high end and horror films the low. As I will argue in Chapter Five, the western presents a special case. It is important not just because there were so many made in the 1930s but also because, more clearly than any other genre, the western was discursively associated with certain audiences and theaters. Even more significant is that the western's status in the film industry shifted at the end of the decade, as studios began to produce westerns in a wider range of budget categories than they had in years prior.

Chapter Five

Distribution and Genre: the Case of the Western[1]

> There will be more of them made in the high budget class this next six months than anytime [sic] in the last decade. Not the mill run stuff constantly turned out for the sticks and nabes on Saturday pm, but for the Broadways of the world.[2]—*Variety*

Introduction

As the report above suggests, the return in 1939 of the big-budget Hollywood Western—a development marked by the release of films including *Jesse James, Stagecoach, Destry Rides Again, Union Pacific,* and *Dodge City*— threw into relief the extent to which the Western had by that point come to be associated with low-budget filmmaking. As during the 1920s, Westerns had for much of the 1930s constituted roughly a quarter of the US film industry's output.[3] Unlike in the 1920s, however, these Westerns were almost exclusively low-budget productions. In 1934, for example, no big-budget Westerns were released; in the years that followed there were only four, three, seven, and four Westerns respectively.[4] The flight from the production of lavish Westerns was in part due to the costly failure of several expensive Westerns released in 1930,

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1 A version of this chapter was previously published in *Iluminace* 3 (Fall 2012): 51–68.

2 "Hollywood Inside," *Daily Variety*, 25 February 1939, 2.

3 According to Edward Buscombe, Western production dropped to around ten to twenty percent of total US output during and just after the transition to sound but returned to about twenty-eight percent by 1935. Edward Buscombe, ed., *The BFI Companion to the Western* (New York: Atheneum, 1998), 37–43; 426–8.

4 Ibid. These numbers represent, respectively, zero, three percent, two percent, five percent, and three percent of US Western productions. MGM's *Viva Villa!* might be considered a big-budget 1934 western, although I follow Buscombe in not counting it as such.

including *The Big Trail* and *Billy the Kid*.[5] The ghettoization of the Western was concurrent with the widespread implementation across the exhibition sector of double-bill programming and the demand it created for low-budget, flat-rental features.[6] Accordingly, disproportionate numbers of 1930s Westerns came from Poverty Row, often as parts of film series. The ratio of big-budget to low-budget Westerns became slightly less lopsided toward the end of the decade when some of the major studios began to increase their own B-unit output. This move represented the majors' reluctant acceptance of the commercial realities of the double-bill market, although many studios continued to attempt to end the practice of double-billing.[7] The *Variety* report above also illustrates in succinct fashion how Westerns were associated (discursively, and with respect to their domestic circulation) with particular audiences—as those audiences were understood in terms of the nature and hierarchical position of the theaters that they frequented.

Their sheer volume, coupled with their shifting status within the industry, makes Westerns of the late 1930s and early 1940s an instructive case for examining how genre related to distinctions within the U.S. theatrical market in the classical era. Further, they show how such distinctions were connected to industry conceptions of audiences. As we have seen in previous chapters, budget was the primary factor shaping a film's

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5 Buscombe, *The BFI Companion*, 43; Peter Stanfield, *Hollywood, Westerns, and the 1930s: The Lost Trail* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2001).

6 Brian Taves, "The B-film: Hollywood's Other Half"; Don Miller, *B Movies* (New York: Ballantine, 1987).

7 Gary Rhodes, "'The Double Feature Evil': Efforts to Eliminate the American Dual Bill," *Film History*, 23, no. 1 (2001): 57–74.

distribution trajectory. And indeed, variation in budget guided the different release strategies among films within any particular genre, including the western.[8] But the western is a special, if not unique, case in the way that its generic status achieved salience in the distribution and exhibition markets. It also offers an example of a large-scale shift in production/program planning—a realignment of budget and genre whose impacts can be observed throughout the distribution system.

This study draws primarily on two datasets: press coverage of Westerns, including reviews of individual films as well as commentary about genre more broadly, and distribution information drawn from the U.S. trade and popular press. It first establishes the manner in which different kinds of Western were associated with different target audiences and distribution strategies. A key issue in this respect is the intricate range of options delineated in the press—a range of options that far surpasses a simple A picture/ B picture binary. I then complement this discourse analysis with an examination of distribution histories, approaching the question of Western distribution from two angles. First, I contrast the release patterns of a range of Westerns, from top-budgeted As to the lowest-budgeted Bs, highlighting not just the ways in which a particular film's status (as determined by criteria including production budget and presence of stars) underwrote the form of distribution it received, but how that status could be renegotiated or complicated

8 This scheme is, of course, complicated by different understandings of "genre" among, on the one hand, modern critics/scholars, and, on the other hand, members of the film industry. As discussed in the previous chapter, the films of classical Hollywood exemplified genre hybridity rather than genre purity. And the trade press used different, and more general, terms to describe the configurations of story and subject matter that shape critical conceptions of genre. Recall from the previous chapter that *Variety* categorized films by "type" (and regularly used hybrid designations such as "comedy-drama").

over the course of its release. Second, I offer a snapshot of the distribution of Westerns in three small markets in the watershed year of 1939. Together these findings illustrate how Westerns functioned within local film ecosystems and particularly the connections between Westerns and certain classes of theaters and types of programming practices.

Reception and the Hierarchy of Westerns

By the mid-to-late 1930s, low budgets had, for critics and audiences alike, come to define the Western's cultural profile.[9] The revival of the A Western in 1939 and subsequent seasons was, at best, greeted as the rebirth of a great cinematic tradition—a response evident, for example, in the rapturous *New York Times* review of *Stagecoach* by critic and future John Ford collaborator Frank S. Nugent.[10] Nugent praised the film as "a movie of the grand old school" that "swept aside ten years of artifice and talkie compromise."[11] At worst, big-budget Westerns were deemed pretentious, even tedious dressings-up of standard B-grade material.[12] The previous year, Nugent had called Paramount's *The Texans* "just another romance with unjustified pretensions to importance."[13] Similarly, Bosley Crowther of the *New York Times* dubbed MGM's *Billy*

9 Stanfield, *The Lost Trail*, 116.

10 Ibid., 150.

11 Frank S. Nugent, "A Ford-powered 'Stagecoach' Opens at Music Hall', *New York Times*, 3 March 1939, 27.

12 Stanfield, *The Lost Trail*, 160.

13 Frank S. Nugent, "'The Texans,' with Randolph Scott and Joan Bennett, Opens at the Paramount," *New York Times*, 28 July 1938, 23. Paramount was among the only studios to continue occasional forays into A Westerns in the mid-1930s, with films like *The Plainsman* (1936) and *Wells Fargo* (1937).

the Kid (1941) a "western with trimmings" and a "routine horse opera."[14]

Perhaps the worst offender was the Western that was presumed to have abandoned the genre's strengths by forsaking action for psychodrama. Both the *New York Times* and *Variety* lambasted Paramount's *The Roundup* (1941), a film directed by Harry Sherman, a veteran of the popular Hopalong Cassidy series that the studio had for several years distributed. Their very similar reviews indicated that Sherman should have known better than to dwell on a love triangle at the expense of, to use the *New York Times*' critic's terms, "a good bang-up riding and shooting fracas."[15] While there was certainly a degree of condescension in some reviews of B Westerns, and particularly in reviews of ultra-low-budget fare, critics expressed with some regularity their appreciation of the films' terseness and skillful adherence to action formulas. For example, critics praised RKO's Westerns starring George O'Brien as being among "the best in the field."[16] *Variety* called *The Renegade Ranger* (1938) "a very good western, filled with brawling, gunning, and outlawry"[17] and described *Gun Law* (1938) as being "long on tensity [sic], nose-flattening fights and hard riding" and deserving of "grade A western playing time."[18] Criticisms

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14 Bosley Crowther, "'Billy the Kid,' a Western with Trimmings, Opens at the Capitol," *New York Times*, 20 June 1941, 28.

15 "The Roundup," *Variety Film Reviews*, 10 September 1941; "At Loew's Criterion," *New York Times*, 13 March 1941, 25. The *New York Times* critic cited here lamented that "[g]enerally, the more money a producer spends on a Western, the less happens."

16 "Gun Law," *Variety Film Reviews*, 29 June 1938.

17 "Renegade Ranger," *Variety Film Reviews*, 5 October 1938.

18 "Gun Law."

such as these were imbricated within assumptions of Westerns' intended audiences. Of *The Roundup,* a *Variet*y critic noted that "[w]hat makes it doubly a liability is that it has too much psychological drama to be a western and too little story to be a straight feature […] it will neither please the cowboy 'n' injuns fans nor the drama lovers."[19] As we have seen in previous chapters, reviews, especially those in *Variety* and other trade publications, reveal much about a film's imagined audiences, for they existed in part to help exhibitors make informed choices about what films to book. These audiences are typically discussed in conjunction with extremely precise assessments of a film's box office potential and recommendations for appropriate distribution strategies. For instance, a *Variety* review of Paramount's *Cherokee Strip* (1940) read:

> [w]ith [Richard] Dix starring and rating marquee draw in the family and action houses that go for better-than-usual program westerns, *Cherokee Strip* will satisfy in those spots. [The] [p]icture's story is both too trite and filled with obviously overwritten dialog on the [melodramatic] side, to give it much chance for dual supporter in the first runs.[20]

In what follows, a sample of these reviews is presented to sketch out a U.S. distribution hierarchy—comprising cities, towns, theaters, and programming slots—within which Westerns and other films circulated. I catalogued approximately 300 Westerns (A pictures and B pictures) distributed by the Big Five and Little Three, as well as a further fifty Westerns handled by smaller independent companies, between 1937 and 1943. I collected *Variety* and/or *New York Times* reviews of most of these films. Because

19 "The Roundup."

20 "Cherokee Strip," *Variety Film Reviews*, 2 October 1940.

B films did not receive the amount of popular press coverage that A films received, in many cases only a *Variety* review could be examined.[21] I emphasize the majors' releases because they best capture the range of distribution strategies associated with different classes of Western (major studio releases included nearly all of the period's A Westerns and a rich variety of its Bs).

It seems clear that the top-grossing Westerns of the late 1930s were able to succeed in the major metropolitan first-run houses—and indeed, to garner holdovers. *Variety* called Fox's *Jesse James* "a cinch extended run attraction" and predicted correctly that the film would "wind up in the top list of biggest grossers for the first half of 1939".[22] MGM's *Northwest Passage* (1940), produced for over $2,000,000, promised to be a "top attraction for both grosses and extended runs," in part because its purported educational value gave it the capacity to "hit audiences that seldom attend[ed] theaters."[23] Fox's *Western Union* (1941), a "super-western of upper-budget proportions," was deemed "strong enough to catch a good share of holdovers" in key cities.[24]

Beyond this top tier of upper A films deemed capable of achieving genuine hit status, were a number of lower As and strong programmers. Although *Variety*'s review of Goldwyn/United Artists' *The Westerner* (1940) does not mention holdovers, it

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21 Kyle Edwards examines how B/Poverty Row studios marketed themselves in the trade press. See Kyle Edwards, "'Monogram Means Business': B-film Marketing and Series Filmmaking at Monogram Pictures," *Film History* 23, no. 4 (2011): 386–400.

22 "Jesse James," *Variety Film Reviews*, 11 January 1939.

23 "Northwest Passage," *Variety Film Reviews*, 14 February 1940.

24 "Western Union," *Variety Film Reviews*, 5 February 1941.

nonetheless predicts strong, steady business: "[the film] should hit a profitable stride in the first runs and roll along through the [subsequent run theaters] to consistently heavy traffic."[25] While MGM's top-budget Westerns, such as *Northwest Passage* and *Honky Tonk* (1941), tended to star matinee idols like Clark Gable and Spencer Tracy, most of the studio's Westerns starred the rough-hewn (but still bankable) Wallace Beery. *Variety* predicted that one such film, *The Bad Man of Brimstone* 1938), would grab "nice money solo" (that is, as the only feature film on the bill, presumably accompanied by short subjects or live acts). However, the film was characterized as ideally suited for top billing in first-run theaters that offered double-bills.[26] Fox's *Frontier Marshal* (1939), a more modest Western than the studio's *Jesse James*, was said to fall narrowly short of the "requirements for general top billing in the major keys" (possibly due to its 72-minute length or the moderate marquee draw of stars Randolph Scott and Nancy Kelly). The reviewer nevertheless noted that the film's general audience appeal would allow it to "catch many upper dual bookings in the major houses, and stand on its own in the subsequents."[27] Fox's other Western offering of the season was *The Return of the Cisco Kid*, the first entry in a series that revived the title character following an extended hiatus from Hollywood films. *The Return of the Cisco Kid* was predicted to "hit moderate biz in the keys, but catch the kids and adventure-lovers in the subsequents for better than

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25 "The Westerner," *Variety Film Reviews*, 25 September 1940.

26 "Bad Man of Brimstone," *Variety Film Reviews*, 19 January 1938.

27 "Frontier Marshal," *Variety Film Reviews*, 27 July 1939.

average take."[28] Columbia's *Texas* (1941), one of the studio's most lavish Westerns of the period, was greeted as "an upper B programmer that will catch a good share of solo and billtopping bookings in the secondary houses."[29] In a similar vein, Paramount's *The Parson of Panamint* (1941), which boasted mild religious themes, was called "a topnotch program action melodrama that will provide strong support for the key duals," the best reaction to which would come from "family and small town bookings."[30]

Further down the budget/distribution hierarchy were B Westerns assumed to be designed and destined for the bottom of double-bills and/or the smaller houses outside the key first-run markets. Unsurprisingly, films that were not released by the Big Five or Little Three were usually relegated to this lower category. Typical in this respect is a *Variety* reviewer's remark that the "brevity" of Monogram's *Pals of the Silver Sage* (1940) ″will allow it to fill many double bills, especially independent houses."[31] The aforementioned George O'Brien/RKO Westerns represent the best regarded and most promising of this category. *Variety* placed one such film, *Triple Justice* (1940), in the "A-bracket" of low-budget Westerns, adding that it "ranks among the cream for the action places, just as the star-studded colossals go with deluxers" (that is, *Triple Justice* was to neighborhood and grindhouse theaters what prestigious A films were to downtown movie

28 "The Return of the Cisco Kid," *Variety Film Reviews*, 26 April 1939.

29 "Texas," *Variety Film Reviews*, 8 October 1941.

30 "The Parson of Panamint," *Variety Film Reviews*, 15 September 1941.

31 "Pals of the Silver Sage," *Variety Film Reviews*, 23 May 1940.

palaces).[32]

Less charitably, *Variety* described the same studio's *Valley of the Sun* (1942) as "an action supporter […] geared to catch attention of western addicts and kids," predicting that the film would flop if placed on the top of double-bills in key engagements.[33] Similarly, *Variety* characterized Universal's *Lady from Cheyenne* (1941) as "a minor league programmer destined for the supporting dual grooves."[34] While the "programmer" label implies that a film like *Lady from Cheyenne* could play in a variety of theaters that offered double-bills, other films were deemed appropriate only for bottom-rung houses. For example, *Cherokee Strip* (1937), a 55-minute B from Warner Bros., starring singing cowboy Dick Foran (a different film than the one of the same titled mentioned earlier), was labeled "strictly suitable for nabe double-headers."[35] Near the bottom of the Western hierarchy was a film like Columbia's *Thunder over the Prairie* (1941), which was associated exclusively with naïve audiences and cheap theaters. For instance, one reviewer called the film "wild hokum […] strictly a filler for the action houses and juve matinees."[36] A *Variety* report from a trade screening of the film called it "the kind of picture that exhibitors hope will not be made any more after the consent decree goes fully into effect"—that is, once theaters had more access to advance

32 "Triple Justice," *Variety Film Reviews*, 9 October 1940.

33 "Valley of the Sun," *Variety Film Reviews*, 14 January 1942.

34 "Lady from Cheyenne," *Variety Film Reviews* 2 April 1941.

35 "Cherokee Strip," *Variety Film Reviews*, 2 June 1937.

36 "Thunder over the Prairie," *Variety Film Reviews*, 30 July 1941.

screenings, were given increased cancellation privileges, and were not compelled to block book groups of more than five releases.[37]

The various distinctions drawn between Westerns of the late 1930s and early 1940s are illustrated neatly by the case of Universal's *Trail of the Vigilantes* (1940). Running at about 75 minutes and directed by Allan Dwan (fresh from helming the A Western *Frontier Marshal* for Fox), *Trail of the Vigilantes* was a cut above Universal's standard Western output, which had in the years immediately prior been dominated by 60-minute B films starring singing cowboy Bob Baker and/or former football player Johnny Mack Brown. *Trail of the Vigilantes* boasted the modest marquee draw of Franchot Tone (probably then best known for his role in *Mutiny on the Bounty*), with support provided by Broderick Crawford and Andy Devine. *Variety* praised the film, calling it a "strong programmer" and suggesting that it mixed "straight western" elements shrewdly with "sideline satire directed at westerns in general." The latter feature potentially afforded the film some appeal to sophisticated audiences. The trade paper noted that *Trail of the Vigilantes* was a:

> […] neatly concocted feature with a double-edged purpose for bookings. In the secondary spots for the keys, the upper strata audiences will catch the thinly-disguised burlesquing of the story with the numerous interjected cracks aimed in that direction. For the action patrons, there are all the ingredients necessary for lusty entertainment.[38]

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37 "Thunder over the Prairie," *Daily Variety*, 25 July 1941, 3. For details on exhibitors' grievances see Huettig, *Economic Control of the Motion Picture Industry*, 117–42; Conant, *Antitrust in the Motion Picture Industry*, 58–83.

38 "Trail of the Vigilantes," *Variety Film Reviews*, 11 December 1940.

The reviewer went on to highlight "two handicaps" which he believed had the capacity to prevent the film from achieving the commercial success it warranted: first, the film's title marked it as a "regulation western," and second, the film's comic undercurrents were not emphasized at an appropriately early stage. As a consequence, the reviewer suggested that "the semi-sophisticates will not catch the satirical intent until along in the third reel."[39] Indeed, *Trail of the Vigilantes* did not receive as prestigious a rollout as comparable intermediate/programmer Westerns. Instead, it made its New York debut at the Rialto, a 750-seat Broadway grind-house known primarily for showing B-grade action and horror fare.[40] In this sense, the release of *Trail of the Vigilantes* was similar to that of standard B Westerns. A number of George O'Brien/RKO B Westerns had, for example, opened at the Rialto (albeit on double-bills).[41] Universal was capable of gaining access to larger and more prestigious New York theaters for some of its Westerns; it had done so for *Destry Rides Again* (shown at the Rivoli theater), 1940's *When the Daltons Rode* (shown at Loew's State), and *Lady from Cheyenne* (which unspooled at the Roxy). A film's New York release strategy is usually a good indicator of its "class"; however, as we have learned, its opening tells only part of the story of how a film circulated

39 Ibid.

40 Bosley Crowther, "The Screen: at the Rialto," *New York Times*, 7 December 1940, 17. See also Tim Snelson and Mark Jancovich, '"No Hits, no Runs, just Terrors': Exhibition, Cultural Distinctions, and Cult Audiences at the Rialto in the 1930s and 1940s," in Maltby, Biltereyst, and Meers, 199–211; David Church, "From Exhibition to Genre: the Case of Grind-house Films," *Cinema Journal* 50, no. 4 (Summer 2011): 1–25; Brennan, "The Great White Way and the Way of All Flesh."

41 Examples of O'Brien Westerns debuting at the Rialto included *Gun Law*, *Painted Desert*, and *Racketeers of the Range*.

nationally.

General Release Patterns

Whether or not the trade press's recommended release strategies and predictions of box office performance were always correct, the highly differentiated range of distribution options sketched out in the reviews above did hold true.[42] What follows is an attempt to trace out some of these options through the distribution histories of selected Westerns in 1) first-run theaters in key cities and 2) a sample of small towns – the kinds of market with which the genre was associated most closely.[43]

Near the top of the Western budget hierarchy were A Westerns like *Jesse James*, which cost approximately $1.6m to produce and which became one of the top grossing films of 1939.[44] First released in mid-January 1939, *Jesse James* was backed by an advertising blitz, including a stunt in which a band of masked horsemen rode through Manhattan and stopped traffic to stage a holdup of an armored vehicle.[45] The film performed so well that it was held over in a number of major cities and theaters, playing,

42 Jacobs and Comiskey, "Hollywood's Conception of its Audience."

43 To do so, this section draws on several sources, including: *Variety*'s "Picture Grosses" pages, which reveal where, and on what programs, films played in important first-run theaters in a number of key cities; mass circulation newspapers including the *New York Times, Chicago Tribune*, and *Los Angeles Times*; and the large collection of small-town newspapers that has been digitized and made accessible through Newspaperarchive.com. For another recent study, also highlighting the degree of differentiation in release patterns across cities and theaters, and based on the *Variety* Picture Grosses pages, see John Sedgwick and Mark Glancy, "Cinemagoing in the United States in the Mid-1930s," 155–95.

44 The AFI Catalog of Feature Films. <http://afi.chadwyck.com>

45 "'Jesse James' Broadway Holdup Best Exploitation of Week," *Variety*, 18 January 1939, 19.

for example, at New York's Roxy for four weeks.[46] *Jesse James* replicated this success in many additional key cities, including Chicago, Detroit, and Pittsburgh. In each location, it enjoyed multiple downtown runs by moving immediately from one downtown theater to another.[47] For its first several weeks in release, the film played mostly solo engagements, and, when it played on a double-bill, it appeared on the top half. Somewhat surprising was the number of smaller locations in which the film played concurrent to its big-city debuts. By late January or early February of 1939, it had reached such towns and cities as: Reno, Nevada; Bakersfield, California; Joplin, Missouri; Miami, Oklahoma; Brownsville, Texas; and all three of the case study towns examined below.

One can compare the muscular rollout of *Jesse James* to that of *Triple Justice,* one of the George O'Brien/RKO B Westerns. Released in the fall of 1940, *Triple Justice* appears only a few times in *Variety*'s Picture Grosses pages, indicating that it played in relatively few important first-run theaters in key cities. The first *Variety* record of its exhibition is a notification of its run at the Memphis Strand, where it played on a single-bill for two days in late September that year and reportedly generated poor grosses.[48] The film was not reviewed in the *New York Times*, although it did receive a downtown New York opening in mid-October at the Central, one of the smaller Broadway houses. *Triple Justice* played as the top half of a double-bill with *Gambling Ship* (1938), a two-year-old

46 *Variety*, 8 February 1939, 9.

47 *Variety*, 8 February 1939, 9–10; *Variety*, 22 February 1939, 9.

48 "'Westerner,' $7,000, Neat in Memphis," *Variety*, 2 October 1940, 10.

series feature distributed by Universal.[49] *Triple Justice* appeared sporadically in a few key cities until the end of 1939, usually for split weeks on double- or triple-bills with films from the Little Three or the Poverty Row studios. For example, in late October, it played for half a week in Cincinnati (a city in which the first-run market was dominated by RKO), topping a bill that also included Monogram's *Who is Guilty* (1939).[50] In mid-November, it played in Omaha on one of the Town theater's three weekly programs, alongside two older British imports: 1936's *The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (aka *Sweeney Todd, The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*) and 1938's *Return of the Frog* (aka *Nobody's Home*).[51] *Triple Justice* was in mid-December playing on the bottom of a double-bill with Universal's *Seven Sinners* (1940) in an RKO-owned theater in Boston.[52] Despite playing relatively few engagements in the nation's most important metropolitan markets, *Triple Justice*—a reasonably well reviewed B Western from one of the Big Five, with a moderately bankable star—was able to maintain some presence there.

Some B Westerns bypassed the major downtown markets almost entirely. One such film was Columbia's *Thunder over the Prairie*, mentioned above for its reception as "wild hokum" and "strictly a filler for the action houses and juve matinees."[53] The film's New York release was not unlike that of *Triple Justice*; it was not reviewed in the *New*

49 "New Films on Broadway," *New York Times*, 13 October 1940, 128.

50 "Crosby, $11,000, Clicks in Cincy," *Variety*, 23 October 1940, 10.

51 "'Mounties' Get $14,500, Omaha," *Variety*, 27 November 1940, 9.

52 "'Alley' $17,000 Hub Fairly Steady," *Variety* 18 December 1940, 11.

53 "Thunder over the Prairie."

York Times and opened at one of the lesser Broadway theaters, the New York—a 600-seat house offering a mixture of first-run films and reissues.[54] Whereas *Triple Justice* played on the top half of a double-bill, *Thunder over the Prairie* played on the bottom, supporting *I'll Sell My Life* (1941), a mystery starring Rose Hobart that was produced by Merrick-Alexander Productions and distributed by Select Attractions.[55] *Thunder over the Prairie* does not appear in the *Variety* "Picture Grosses" pages. When it opened in New York City in early September 1941, the film had already been playing for over a month in smaller cities and towns across the country, mostly on the bottom half of double-bills. For example, during the second week of August, it played in this position during a Thursday-to-Saturday run in Iola, Kansas (population approximately 7,000). On the top half of the bill was *Double Cross* (1941), produced and distributed by Producers Releasing Corporation.[56] *Thunder over the Prairie* also played on the top half of double-bills or as a solo presentation, with repeat appearances in many locations. For example, it had at least four bookings in Bakersfield, California between September of 1941 and March of 1942. The film received a top-billed first run, alongside a cowboy singing act, in the much larger location of Salt Lake City only in April of 1942.[57] If Chicago is a reasonable indicator of the presence of *Thunder over the Prairie* in the neighborhood markets of

54 Cinema Treasures. <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/6604>

55 "Of Local Origin," *New York Times*, 9 September 1941, 27.

56 *Iola Register*, 7 August 1941, 8. *Thunder over the Prairie* is specifically identified as “second feature” in an advertisement.

57 *Salt Lake Tribune*, 22 April 1942, 16. The ad specifies that the film is “First Run”.

major metropolitan areas, this presence seems to have been minimal.[58] The film continued to crop up throughout the summer and fall of 1942—a year after its first bookings—and resurfaced, sometimes on top of double-bills, periodically for another three years.[59] For instance, in June of 1945, it played as the top half of a double-bill (with the 1943 Republic Western *Thundering Trails*) in Middleport, Ohio, a town with 3,000 inhabitants and a single 250-seat movie theater.[60] In sum, its bookings were quite sporadic and unpredictable and were largely limited to small-town theaters and some urban neighborhood houses.

Small-town Release Patterns

In order to understand better the place of Westerns in the exhibition markets of the small towns with which the genre was associated discursively, I selected three case study sites and catalogued all film programs advertised in local newspapers for alternating months of 1939 (starting with January), recording about 770 programs that comprised about 1,300 feature film bookings. The sites were: Portsmouth, New Hampshire; Billings, Montana; and Yuma, Arizona.[61] Before exploring the exhibition of Westerns in these

58 The film makes only a handful of appearances in listings for Chicago theaters. See, for instance, *Chicago Tribune*, 9 January 1942, 17; *Chicago Tribune*, 22 January 1943, 17.

59 Records from a small theater in Christiansburg, Virginia examined by Richard Maltby suggest that the westerns that appeared at the venue were "usually much older" than the other releases. Maltby, "The Standard Exhibition Contract," 140.

60 *Athens Messenger*, 8 June 1945, 8.

61 Portsmouth, with three movie theaters totaling about 2,100 seats, had a population of approximately 15,000; Billings, with five movie theaters totaling about 3,500 seats, had a population of approximately 16,000; and Yuma, with three theaters totaling an unknown number of seats (possibly 900 to 1,700),

markets, it is useful to establish the basic parameters of small-town film exhibition. First, in none of the theaters in any of the three locations did films typically play for more than three or four days. Of the eleven theaters in the sample, ten changed programs three times a week and one theater changed its program twice a week. Films did occasionally play for longer stretches of time; however, releases of this sort were the exception and not the rule. While only one theater screened exclusively single-bills, seven theaters consistently screened double-bills (along with the occasional solo program for special films). Three houses, all located in Billings, utilized a mixed programming policy, offering both solo and double-bills. In terms of ownership, these theaters included ones owned by, or affiliated to, the major studios, ones belonging to small chains, and ones owned independently. Table 1 shows Western programming data arranged by city and theater. For each city, the first theater listed is that market's main first-run theater (i.e. the theater in which the major studios' A films debuted). Beyond that, classifying these theaters by run in the same way one could a group of urban houses is not a straightforward process. While some A films went through a relatively clear series of runs in these markets, the exhibition of B films was significantly less hierarchical. Some B films were slotted into supporting positions in first-run theaters and appeared later at secondary houses (either on

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had a population of approximately 5,000. Portsmouth data were drawn from the *Portsmouth, NH, Herald;* Billings data from the *Billings Gazette*; and Yuma data from the *Yuma Daily Sun and Arizona Sentinel*. All newspapers were accessed through newspaperarchive.com. My study shares something with that conducted recently on the Chief Theater in Kenosha, Wisconsin, in which Mike Chopra-Grant reminds us that film scholars' tendencies to privilege A productions obscure the range of films encountered by everyday audiences in their local theaters. Mike Chopra-Grant, "Dirty Movies or: Why Film Scholars Should Stop Worrying about *Citizen Kane* and Learn to Love Bad Films," *Participations*, 7, no. 2 (2010): 292–315.

the top or on the bottom halves of double-bills). More often than not; however, B films went straight to secondary houses, where they were touted as "first-run" attractions by virtue of their being the first local showings of the film.[62]

In some cases, the sample is too small, or the data not sufficiently comparable, to draw meaningful conclusions.[63] Also, it was not possible to analyze patterns in billing order because of the difficulty of determining from a newspaper advertisement which of the two films advertized featured on the top half of a double-bill and which featured on the bottom. Indeed, the status sometimes appears quite clear only for the billing order to be reversed in subsequent advertisements.[64] This research, and these numbers, should therefore be taken as a first stab at a comparative study of local film distribution, useful in part because it points toward potential strategies and questions that may shape subsequent research. The data nonetheless suggest striking similarities as well as differences across case study sites. First, it appears that at the smallest site, the town of Yuma, Westerns featured on a relatively larger portion of local film programs, with about thirty six percent of advertised programs featuring a Western. The actual percentage of

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62 For example, the Lyric theater in Billings specified that its screenings of Monogram's *The Man from Texas* (1939), a Tex Ritter Western starring a "Billings girl," were the first local showings of the film. This practice was by no means limited to films of special interest. In Portsmouth, the Arcadia billed its double features regularly as 'all first-run programs.' For example, a program of Republic's *Orphans of the Streets* (1938) and Bennett/DuWorld Pictures' *Kliou, the Killer* (1936). See *Portsmouth, NH, Herald,* 21 September 1939, 11; *Portsmouth, NH, Herald,* 3 January 1939, 6.

63 See, for instance, the very small sample size of the number of single-billed Westerns in the main first-run theaters.

64 For example, consider two listings for the Fox theater in Billings, in which the billing order of Fox's *The Arizona Wildcat* (1939) and Paramount's *Zaza* (1938) is reversed from one listing to another. See *Billings Gazette,* 10 January 1939, 7; *Billings Gazette,* 12 January 1939, 6.

Yuma programs with Westerns was likely even higher. This is because listings for the Orpheum theater (where bills were, more than any other theater in the study, dominated by Westerns) only started appearing in the local newspaper in November even though the theater had been operating continuously for some time.[65]

Perhaps the most striking finding of this research is how heavily certain secondary theaters in each market relied on Westerns. For instance, Westerns played on more than half of the bills at two theaters in Yuma: the Lyric and the Orpheum. In Portsmouth, one house, the Arcadia, played Westerns on about half of its bills. One Billings theater, the Lyric, programmed a combination of single and double-bills and seems to have had reliable access to major studio releases (of all of the theaters in Billings, it functioned most like a second-run house). The Lyric played Westerns on only about fourteen percent of its single bills but on nearly sixty percent of its double-bills. The Rio, the Billings theater that relied most heavily on product not from the major studios, often let Westerns carry single bills (it did so forty-four percent of the time, compared to twenty-five percent of double-bills). This pattern is not too surprising: Western productions were predominantly low-budget films, and these low-budget Westerns came disproportionately from independent/Poverty Row companies. (Indeed, Westerns constituted more than half of these companies' total production rosters during the period under discussion).[66] It stands to reason that the houses that relied most heavily on such low-budget fare would

65 *Yuma Daily Sun and Arizona Sentinel*, 4 October 1939, 5.

66 For data for 1941 see Buscombe, *The BFI Companion*, 421.

show a proportionally larger number of Westerns than first-run theaters. But the release strategies for Westerns in first-run and secondary theaters do not simply reflect the general proportions of high- and low-budget Westerns; they are more tightly patterned and calculated because, in certain types of theaters, these films played overwhelmingly on certain days of the week—and particularly on the split-week runs that included Saturdays (most often Thursday/Friday/Saturday runs).

Steve Broidy, longtime head of Monogram, once suggested that, because B films were typically rented for flat booking fees rather than a percentage of the films' gross, small-town exhibitors screened them on Saturdays. This practice allowed them to keep the busiest days' profits to themselves rather than having to share them with distributors. Broidy suggested that films themselves were not particularly important in drawing audiences, because many people (among them, those who traveled from more remote areas) converged upon theaters on Saturdays regardless of the film being shown.[67] In the sites examined in this study, however, Westerns appeared disproportionately among films screened on weekends. Relevant data on playdates are presented in Table 2. In Yuma, for example, about seventy-four percent of the Lyric theater's Saturday programs boasted a Western feature film. At Portsmouth's Arcadia, every Saturday program included a Western feature film. Advertisements for these screenings were often targeted at children,

67 Linda May Strawn, "Steve Broidy," in *Kings of the Bs: Working within the Hollywood System*, ed. Todd McCarthy and Charles Flynn (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1975), 270–1. Broidy refers to theaters that offer two programs between Sundays and Fridays and "keep Saturdays for themselves," a practice that does not seem to have obtained in any of the sites I examined. Other sources indicate that Sundays were as, if not more, important than Saturdays for exhibitors. As discussed in Bjork, "Double Features and B Movies," some editions of *Film Daily Yearbook* report that Sunday business was, on average, 5% greater than Saturday business.

promising perks like free toys or ice cream at matinees (on most other days the theater gave away plates to female patrons).[68] The Rio in Billings also played Westerns on all of its Saturday programs. The Babcock, also in Billings, did so ninety-three percent of the time. The Lyric, a second-run Billings house offering a significant number of the majors' pictures on single bills, did not show the same pattern. Although Westerns sometimes played on Saturdays, they did not make up a majority of these programs, nor were they significantly less likely to appear on other days of the week.[69] In general, the more often a theater booked Westerns, the more likely were two related phenomena: 1) Westerns would be present on all or almost all of its Saturday programs; 2) the theater would place a large majority of its Westerns on its split-week run that included Saturday rather than booking them on other split-week runs (e.g. a Sunday/Monday/Tuesday run).

Conclusion

This chapter has examined genre as a structuring factor in the American film industry's conception of its audiences and the closely related histories of film distribution and exhibition during its classical studio era. In doing so, it has clarified some of the connections between genre and a highly differentiated set of theatrical release strategies

68 See, for example, *Portsmouth, NH Herald*, 25 May 1939, 6; *Portsmouth, NH, Herald*, 23 May 1939, 6.

69 It is possible that theaters like the Lyric did not get to select their playdates; according to Huettig the issue of assigned playdates as part of block-booking agreements was one of independent exhibitors' main grievances. See Huettig, *Economic Control of the Motion Picture Industry*, 124–5. Richard Maltby's analysis of booking records from the Christiansburg, Virginia theater demonstrates that the venue showed films from certain studios on certain weekdays (e.g. Fox releases on Mondays to Wednesdays). However, the theater reserved Saturdays for westerns "sourced from a number of smaller states' rights distributors." Maltby, "The Standard Exhibition Contract," 139–40.

that are no longer used. Westerns of the late 1930s and early 1940s offer a particularly useful test case not just because of their central (and changing) position within the film industry at this time, but because they are so clearly tied to perceived or actual hierarchies of films, audiences, localities, and theaters that shaped industry production strategies as well as the movie-going experiences of U.S. audiences. More complex than an A picture/B picture binary, these hierarchies reflect films' imagined audiences as well as their imagined places within different movie-going experiences.

Looking beyond the ways films were released in major first-run theaters in key cities, this study has sought to establish key parameters for understanding and evaluating the system of film distribution in small markets, including how often different types of film surfaced, the day(s) on which they played, their placement on various programs, and how local theaters differentiated themselves from one another through such variables. It is through these forms of distinction, that we can recreate the "ecosystems" of local exhibition markets and identify the different kinds of theater to which critics and industry-insiders refer when they associate films with concepts like "family bookings" or "action houses". The fact that Westerns appear to have figured so centrally in this system —at least in small-town America—further confirms their crucial, albeit oft-neglected, position in U.S. film culture of the 1930s.

Table 1. Westerns in Advertised Programs of Three Towns, 1939
(January and alternating months)

		Single bills w/westerns	Double bills w/westerns	% single bills w/westerns	% double bills w/westerns	% all bills featuring westerns	Westerns as % of all films
Yuma	Yuma	2/6	13/77	33%	17%	18%	9%
	Lyric	n/a	30/56	n/a	54%	54%	28%
	Orpheum	n/a	11/13	n/a	85%	85%	46%
	Total	**2/6**	**54/146**	**33%**	**36%**	**36%**	**19%**
Portsmouth	Colonial	8/82	n/a	10%	n/a	10%	10%
	Olympia	n/a	14/83	n/a	17%	17%	8%
	Arcadia	n/a	39/82	n/a	48%	48%	24%
	Total	**8/82**	**53/165**	**10%**	**32%**	**25%**	**15%**
Billings	Fox	2/2	6/60	100%	10%	13%	7%
	Babcock	n/a	27/78	n/a	35%	35%	17%
	Lyric	8/57	10/17	14%	59%	24%	20%
	Empire	5/44	8/33	11%	24%	17%	12%
	Rio	22/50	8/30	44%	27%	38%	27%
	Total	**37/153**	**59/218**	**24%**	**27%**	**26%**	**17%**

Table 2. Western Playdates in Advertised Programs of Three Towns, 1939 (January and alternating months)

		% total Western bills on Saturdays	Saturday Western bills as % of total Saturday bills
Yuma	Yuma	(5/15) 33%	(5/25) 20%
	Lyric	(20/30) 66%	(20/27) 74%
	Orpheum	(4/13) 31%	(4/4) 100%
	Total	**(29/58) 50%**	**(29/56) 52%**
Portsmouth	Colonial	(3/8) 38%	(3/26) 12%
	Olympia	(11/14) 79%	(11/26) 42%
	Arcadia	(27/39) 69%	(27/27) 100%
	Total	**(41/61) 67%**	**(41/79) 52%**
Billings	Fox	(5/8) 63%	(5/26) 19%
	Babcock	(26/28) 93%	(26/28) 93%
	Lyric	(7/18) 39%	(7/28) 25%
	Empire	(9/12) 75%	(9/27) 33%
	Rio	(28/31) 90%	(28/28) 100%
	Total	**(75/97) 77%**	**(75/137) 55%**

Conclusion

Classical-era Distribution, the Construction of Audiences, and "New Cinema History"

For independent exhibitors and anti-trust advocates of the 1930s and 1940s, compulsory whole-program block booking most dramatically encapsulated the unfair trade practices of the vertically integrated majors. This type of block booking was widely discussed at the time and remains a potent characterization of the pre-1948 Hollywood studio system. That the majors had engineered the system such that 15 to 20 percent of theaters could be compelled to take an entire year's worth of films is indeed striking and consequential. However, the attention to block booking and oligopoly power has tended to obscure the fact that the vast majority of theaters did *not* book in this manner. And thus, it has obscured the complex and strategic ways that film programs were divided among different types of theaters.

The previous four chapters examined 1930s Hollywood's domestic distribution system from several vantage points. First, we looked at the major producer-distributors' seasonal process of film selling, which was planned and coordinated nationally but carried out through myriad interactions between local exchange offices and exhibitors. Understanding these practices helps us make sense of the hierarchies that obtained in local exhibition markets—large and small—as revealed through the appearances of the sample films. We saw the how the crucial early runs, in the largest and most profitable venues, were optimized. And we saw how, both within and across run designations, local

film exhibition involved a complex and usually hierarchical *splitting* of each distributor's program. This differential treatment of films within a program is also evident in how individual releases made their way around the country. Sales policies and distribution strategies for particular films were, to an extent, "baked in" at the earliest phases of pre-production, as stories were matched with personnel and estimated budgets as part of a stratified program of features. By reconstructing a program's hierarchical structure and identifying its relationship with booking patterns (first- and subsequent-run), we can see how distribution strategies were rationalized in a manner that could accommodate unexpected successes or failures and the vagaries of local exhibition markets and audiences. The changing status of Westerns, which constituted a plurality of U.S. film productions for much of the 1930s, offers a model for understanding the relationship between budget, genre, and distribution patterns. Westerns became closely associated with low budgets and thus with certain audiences and theaters, but these connections were destabilized and reconfigured due to large-scale shifts in the production sector.

Embedded in all of the production, distribution, and exhibition practices discussed thus far are assumptions about film audiences, for the industry sought to divine and keep up with national (and, to a lesser extent, international) tastes. This process, of course, was and remains inevitably a *construction*. That is, the film industry does not tap into or express some discrete popular taste but rather constructs a notion of it based on guesses—some more and some less educated.[1] Margaret Farrand Thorp theorizes this process in her

[1] As Lester Asheim succinctly wrote in 1947: "What must constantly be borne in mind is that an analysis of film content provides an insight only into the *producer's idea* of the national taste, and not the national taste itself." Asheim, "The Film and the Zeitgeist," *Hollywood Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (1947): 414–

1939 book *America at the Movies*, a "sociology of movie culture" that scrutinizes industry personnel as well as rank-and-file audience members:[2]

> [T]he producer is watchful for seasonal variations, trends, whims, changes of public mood. These appear to him to be quite illogical and unpredictable [...] He becomes in consequence highly superstitious, believing in his luck, trusting to hunches, working by feel. He has a profound belief in the movement of popular taste by cycles but he is skeptical of the possibility of predicting cycles scientifically [...] It will not do to rely too much on theories in this gamble of production where you must work nearly a year ahead of the game. You have to play your hunches.[3]

In the 1930s, these hunches about who U.S. film audiences were and what they wanted to see were based largely on a few forms of evidence, which are catalogued and critiqued by audience research director Leo Handel in his 1950 book *Hollywood Looks at Its Audience.* Chief among these sources were box office revenues, which captured "the over-all performance of a motion picture" but did not indicate which elements of a film (title, story, any of a multiple stars, etc.) were most essential to its success or failure.[4]

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2 Dana Polan, "'What Movie Tonight?': Margaret Thorp between the Aesthetics and the Sociology of American Cinema," *Film History* 26, no. 1 (2014): 160.

3 Thorp, *America at the Movies*, 17–18. Part of Thorp's goal here, like Asheim's, is to refute a "zeitgeist" explanation for production cycles as they relate to perceived changes in public tastes: "For the producer the biographical cycle in motion pictures is probably not related to the increased reading of biography; the American history cycle is not a product of our growing nationalism. People go to the biographical films because they saw *Zola* and liked it [...] The G-man cycle, the mysteries, the musicals, the goofy comedies, the films build round opera stars, the stories about doctors are all to be accounted for by some big successful picture that, for a reason, probably inscrutable, struck the public fancy and set the wheel spinning."

4 Leo A. Handel, *Hollywood Looks at Its Audience: A Report on Film Audience Research* (New York: Arno Press, 1976), 8.

Studios regularly held test screenings to solicit audience feedback, but the audiences that attended them, and the smaller number of people who actually filled out test cards, did not constitute a representative sample of the national audience. (Further, individuals' feedback was not cross-referenced with their demographic attributes.) Fan letters were tallied to provide a barometer for the popularity of stars. But again, the problem was one of sampling: most fan mail writers were young girls. Exhibitor feedback, gathered via on-the-ground interactions or trade publications, also had its drawbacks, according to Handel:

> like other people, exhibitors can be subject to biased ideas which they may groundlessly assume are shared by their patrons. Preferences or dislikes, too, observed and reported by one exhibitor, may prevail only in his location. Also, in some respects exhibitors and distributors are pursuing divergent interests, the natural divergence of interests in the seller and buyer relationship.[5]

In sum, prior to the 1940s Hollywood's methods of studying its audiences involved unrepresentative, even haphazard sampling and did not isolate important variables—whether they were related to films (e.g. elements of a story, the appeals of different stars in the same picture) or to viewers (e.g. gender, habits of other entertainment consumption).

It was only around 1940 that Hollywood studios began to employ polling and consumer research firms to study its audience scientifically and systematically. They were late to the game, as this approach had already been implemented in radio and other

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[5] Ibid., 8–11.

media industries. Handel links the move to the decline of large-unit block booking following the first major consent decree—as a result, releases needed to be sold more aggressively on their individual merits. This had not seemed as essential in a program-based system.[6] Pioneering firms were Handel's Motion Picture Research Bureau (retained by MGM) and George Gallup's Audience Research Institute (retained first powerful producers like David O. Selznick and Samuel Goldwyn, and then by RKO). They conducted audience studies at all phases of production, testing viewers' reactions to titles, stories, casts, and rough or final cuts of a film.[7] They also performed general research on viewers' habits, attitudes and preferences. Susan Ohmer argues that these "modern" research programs were based on "a view of media texts as bundles of components that could be manipulated to change audiences' reactions."[8] This view assumed that "that it was possible to define, down to the smallest unit, what aspects of a text produced an audience's feelings of enjoyment, and to use this knowledge to design other texts that would evoke similar feelings."[9] Current film audience research largely follows from the approaches honed in the 1940s.[10]

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6 Ibid., 6–7.

7 Ibid., 21–32, 35–56.

8 Susan Ohmer, "The Science of Pleasure: George Gallup and Audience Research in Hollywood," in Stokes and Maltby, *Identifying Hollywood's Audiences,* 62.

9 Ibid., 64. See also Ohmer, “Speaking for the Audience: Double Features, Public Opinion, and the Struggle for Control in 1930s Hollywood,” *Quarterly Review of Film & Video* 24, no. 2 (2007): 143–69.

10 Ohmer, "The Science of Pleasure," 61.

This project has explored how the distribution sector was engineered to link films with audiences—in order to maximize profits—in a period before the industry's use of modern market research. Analysis of trade discourse, including reviews and summaries of box office revenues, suggests that the industry understood and discussed audiences chiefly in terms of theaters and exhibition/programming practices. That is, different types of theaters (as differentiated by run status, location, etc.), and different types of programs at these theaters, were considered to be optimized for different kinds of films, audiences, and/or moviegoing experiences.

The preceding chapters identified trends in distribution strategies—as evident in the release patterns that can be gleaned from newspaper listings—across a wide variety of films. This mode of analysis traces not the success or failure of the various films but rather the producer-distributors' *visions* of their optimal circulation in the market. The two-phase process of film selling meant that initial contracts were drawn up early, while a film was still in production. The second phase, booking, provided opportunities for contract re-negotiation in response to the film's critical and commercial reception (nationally or locally). The flexible range of playdates enshrined in the standard exhibition contract gave theaters some ability to adjust a booking according to local demand.[11] But beyond the lengthy and obvious holdovers at major early-run theaters, these kinds of adjustments usually cannot be identified (doing so would require large sets

[11] Of course, as discussed above, there remains the problem of isolating variables—it is not possible to determine simply from box office success or failure which aspects of a film (e.g. story, setting, one of multiple stars) are more and less responsible for the film's performance (Handel, 7–8).

of distribution contracts and highly reliable newspaper data).[12]

But if newspaper listings—the primary surviving records of historical film screenings—do not easily reveal the small adjustments in bookings that are suggestive of a film's local performance, they *do* tell us whether, and where, a film was booked at all. They allow us to analyze how hierarchies of films (comprising their studios' annual programs) were mixed-and-matched with hierarchies of theaters in different local markets. The resulting matrix of associations can support some general claims about a film's success or failure, particularly in comparison to others in its program cohort. But more important, it provides evidence of the industry's assumptions about its audiences—that is, the "hunches" described above by Farrand—and how they guided the decisions of the major producer-distributors. A number of assumptions inhere in the large-scale planning of an annual film program, which determines what kinds of films would be produced at what budget ranges. That is, a studio's assessment of, and aspirations for, a particular film are distilled in the earliest phases of production, when different budgets are allocated for different stories. (Below, I discuss this idea's implications for future research.)

As we saw in Chapter 4, a film's budget was a clear predictor of whether it would bypass (or be held over) in any market—large or small, in any part of the country. But the

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[12] A close comparison of distribution contracts and actual playdates might shed light on what types of films fared best at various theaters, but complete sets of contracts are quite hard to come by. F. Andrew Hanssen has undertaken a fine-grained analysis of contracts and actual playdates, but he is concerned only with the rate of cancellations at affiliated versus non-affiliated theaters, not with the rate of cancellations of different types of films at different types of theaters. See Hanssen, “Vertical Integration during the Hollywood Studio Era," 519–543.

question remains of how we might identify and account for local variation in U.S. film distribution. The sample markets analyzed in Chapters 3 and 4 varied not just in population and number of local theaters, but also in theater ownership, the relative concentration of theaters at different run designations, and various idiosyncrasies of local geography, commerce, and culture. Of the data gathered in this study, perhaps most revealing is the sheer number of bookings—and especially subsequent-run bookings—that films received in different markets. For small towns, the low number of theaters makes it difficult to make responsible generalizations. But in large cities with dozens of neighborhood theaters, there is enough information to suggest what kinds of films thrived (or floundered) in different classes of theaters, and/or in different locations. Recall from Chapter 4 that films from the same program did not necessarily receive the same relative numbers of subsequent-run bookings in the different urban markets. Though theaters with a late run designation had the least clout, they were also, at least theoretically, in a position to be the best informed about a film's performance nationally and locally.

As we have seen, this research shares some priorities with economic (and political-economic) approaches to film industry studies, including the work of Mae Huettig, Michael Conant, John Sedgwick, and F. Andrew Hansson. However, it also engages with what is now known as “new cinema history,” a recent turn within the 'historical turn' itself. This term refers to a convergence of research questions and methods relating to the "social experience of cinema."[13] Proponents of new cinema

[13] Recent anthologies that explicitly identify themselves with this trend include: Maltby, Biltereyst, and Meers; Maltby, Stokes, and Allen; Karina Aveyard and Albert Moran, ed., *Watching Films: New Perspectives on Movie-going, Exhibition, and Reception* (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2013); and Kathryn

history posit that individual films—ephemeral by design, and rarely well remembered by audiences—matter little to this story (or, at least, they matter much less than is suggested by the past several decades of academic film studies). They thus seek to shift the priorities of film history away from films themselves—including, for some advocates, a move away from production, reception, and star studies that remain essentially film-oriented. Instead, they seek a turn toward audiences and the social geography of moviegoing.[14] Works of "new cinema history," which tend to be avowedly non-totalizing, are excellent examples of what David Bordwell has called "middle-level research."[15]

This project might be seen as a compromise—or a link—between two domains of inquiry that are contrasted in new cinema history: first, micro-historical and sociological approaches to classical-era exhibition, moviegoing, and reception, in which films themselves and production contexts are of little significance; and second, production- and text-based approaches, in which films are detached from the histories of their circulation among audiences and across locations. While the framers of new cinema history tend to minimize the significance of films themselves, it is well known that producers, distributors, and exhibitors catered to the perceived preferences of audiences in crafting

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Fuller-Seeley, ed., *Hollywood in the Neighborhood: Historical Case Studies of Local Moviegoing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008). Also important, though casting its net a bit wider (to include, for instance, institutional histories, star studies, and production cultures) is Jon Lewis and Eric Smoodin, ed., *Looking Past the Screen: Case Studies in American Film History and Method* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

[14] Eric Smoodin, "The History of Film History," in Lewis and Smoodin, *Looking Past the Screen*, 1–33.

[15] David Bordwell, "Contemporary Film Studies and the Vicissitudes of Grand Theory," in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, ed. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 3–36.

and promoting their film programs. Further, we still have much to learn about the workings of the production and distribution sectors, in general and vis-a-vis particular films.

The analysis of the distribution system conducted in the preceding chapters leaves or raises many questions and thus suggests a variety of opportunities for further research. Some of these relate to the production sector. As discussed earlier, we should know more about how studios' annual programs of films were conceived and rationalized, as this was the process by which producers' guesses about audience tastes were translated into commitments of valuable studio resources. How do the rise and fall of other major film cycles compare to what we have seen here regarding the restoration of the high-budget western at the end of the 1930s? Who, precisely, were the chief decision-makers in the design of a studio's film program? How were annual programs tiered and rationalized, and how did different studios change their approaches over time—particularly after theater divestiture, which was accompanied by a shift toward package production and fewer overall releases? Might we understand the program-oriented approach to film production and selling as one of the core components of the classical system, and what would the implications of this be?

Other questions relate to the distribution sector. How did distributors negotiate local theaters' splitting and/or pooling arrangements? How did local boards of trade, which controlled run, zone, and clearance designations, operate? How did infrastructural changes over time, such as the use of different chemicals in film stocks or the regulation

of transit networks, affect the physical circulation of film prints? The most obvious and important questions, though, relate to the decades-long breakdown of the elaborate theatrical run hierarchies that structured distribution and exhibition for much of the classical period. How did these changes, which were concomitant with the closing or conversion of downtown theaters and emergence of multiplexes and non-theatrical ancillary venues, affect moviegoing habits and the "life cycle" of films? How did these shifts relate to the changes in the production sector described above?

While there is no shortage of exhibition micro-histories, some recent works offer strong models for how a theater's booking/programming practices can be studied in connection with its cultural geography. One such piece is a July 2015 *Film History* article on the Rialto Theater (it is the third scholarly article on that venue in about as many years). In it, Nathaniel Brennan triangulates a number of factors that contributed to the Rialto's self-branding as an "action house." These factors included: changes in ownership that affected the theater's relationship with distributors and access to new releases; broader changes in the "built environment and cultural discourses" of Forty-Second Street and its theaters; an overt posturing on the part of the theater's manager in order to differentiate his venue; a remodeling that changed the Rialto's surroundings and relationship with neighboring businesses; and a transient, working-class audience funneled to the theater by a major transit hub that was literally just beneath it.[16]

Surveying the field of new cinema history, Kathryn Fuller-Seeley writes,

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[16] Nathaniel Brennan, "The Great White Way and the Way of All Flesh," 1–32.

> We are amassing a cornucopia of moviegoing histories of specific villages, towns, cities, and regions across the nation, uncovering diverse audience groupings, and investigating the impact of a wide variety of genres and forms [...] Accounting for a significant uniformity of cinema's impact across divergent communities, and/or many fascinating local variations, may be the ultimate outcome of these case studies.[17]

This project peeked under the hood of Hollywood's distribution sector in order to gain a clear view of the system that linked producers and films to exhibitors and audiences. In attempting to construct a general understanding of a vast system through an array of small local case studies, it highlights the significance of the "and/or" in Fuller-Seeley's assessment above. That is, it shows how the distribution sector indeed produced a "significant uniformity" in how the majors' film programs were parceled out to theaters across the U.S. But it also suggests how variation and differentiation were created across markets and within. Different types of films could and did find themselves at different types of theaters and thus before different audiences. It is beyond the scope of this project to characterize the different experiences that may have obtained at these venues, but I have offered a starting point by laying out the system that structured them.

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[17] Kathryn Fuller-Seeley and George Potamianos, "Introduction," in Fuller-Seeley, *Hollywood in the Neighborhood*, 5.

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