

HOLLYWOOD IN THE TWENTIES

**by
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Introduction

IT IS a dangerous — and perhaps ultimately doomed — undertaking to compress into a book of this length the story of a cinema as prolific and rich as Hollywood in the decade or so between the end of the First World War and the general introduction of talking pictures. All that is really possible is a bird's eye view of things; and my concern has been to show the films and film-makers of this period both in their relationship to the industry and to the general background of American life and culture in the extraordinary epoch which separated the Armistice from the Wall Street Crash. The sixty or seventy film-makers whose careers are treated in greater or less detail are those whom I feel are most significant or at least most representative in their period. Inevitably other judgements will see partialities and omissions in my selection.

The special difficulty in dealing with a period as remote as this now is, is that such a small proportion of the total output has survived for critical appraisal. So much of film history is composed, consequently, of received opinion; and received opinion is rarely better than misleading. Every time a "lost" film is rediscovered you learn again how irrelevant to our own tastes and values are the judgements of earlier periods. However cautiously you accept the views of contemporary or intervening critics, whatever allowances you make for idiosyncracies of taste and changes of time, every second-hand assessment is likely to be meaningless. Lewis Jacobs devoted three lines to Buster Keaton, for example, in his *Rise of the American Film*. Paul Rotha's *Film Till Now* did him more honour with one paragraph and a half dozen passing mentions. Neither approach bears much relation to present-day evaluation of the comedian.

The difficulty becomes acute when you are dealing with a director like James Cruze, in whose case primary material is practically non-existent. To form any sort of view you must weigh the evidence of contemporary reviewers in *The Bioscope* and *Variety*, the opinions of Rotha and Jacobs; and you still know that you are going to arrive at

"Oh — I am very youthful, thank God — and rather beautiful, thank God — and happy, thank God, thank God."

Scott Fitzgerald: *This Side of Paradise*

"The United States is the only nation in history to have passed from barbarism to decadence without the usual interval of civilisation."

Clemenceau

an untrustworthy answer to the questions which we, in the late Sixties, are asking. All I can claim is that I have worked as far as possible from first-hand viewing in arriving at critical assessments; and that in any case the emphasis of this study is factual rather than critical.

The bibliography of the period is far too large to detail. I must acknowledge a continuing debt to Rotha and Jacobs; and to Gertrude Jobes's *Motion Picture Empire*; to the files of *Bioscope*, *Kinematograph Weekly*, *Variety*, *Picturegoer*, *Films in Review*, *Sight and Sound*; to the *Enciclopedia dello Spettacolo*; and to innumerable memoirs of the period. For the social and political background of the Twenties I have referred to Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.'s *The Age of Roosevelt: The Crisis of the Old Order*, Frederick Lewis Allen's *Only Yesterday*, Lloyd Morris's *Not So Long Ago*, Isabel Leighton's *The Aspirin Age* and the *LIFE History of the United States*. Primarily of course I must acknowledge the collections of the National Film Archive.

For personal help I am especially grateful to Miss Brenda Davies, Head of the Information Department of the British Film Institute, and Gillian Hartnoll, Book Librarian of the National Film Archive, who has made many very valuable suggestions; and to Kevin Brownlow, the only authority who has a true grasp of the techniques as well as the art and history of the silent cinema, and whose patience in answering silly questions is astonishing.

1. The Nation

FOUR DECADES after the introduction of talking pictures, there are grave difficulties in the appreciation of the films of America's post-war decade. We are dealing, first of all, with a dead art: the silent cinema developed expressive means that were self-sufficient, but which are now unfamiliar and remote. To add to our problems, we generally see these films in duped and decayed and corrupted copies, which can

recall little of their original brightness and impact. And we see so few of them, in isolation from each other and from the context in which they first appeared and were first seen. They can only profitably be discussed in relation to, and in the terms of the society which produced them and for whose pleasure they were produced.

Perhaps at no time in their history — not even in 1776 or the Civil War — did the American people undergo such profound changes in their ways of life and thought as in the years that began with the Armistice and ended with the Stock Market crash. These years covered just over a decade. When they began the horse and buggy still lingered. They ended to the roar of cars and aeroplanes. The decade began, significantly, with *Broken Blossoms* and *Pollyanna*, and ended with *The Crowd* and *The Wedding March*. It was an era in which, wrote Scott Fitzgerald, "America was going on the greatest, gaudiest spree in history."

Fitzgerald wrote also, "It was characteristic of the Jazz Age that it had no interest in politics at all." Yet the administrations which guided America through these years impose their own strongly defined patterns upon the times. As the war ended, Woodrow Wilson had been in office for five years. At the moment in December 1918 that he went to the Paris Peace Conference, he enjoyed a universal esteem and affection such as few politicians have ever known. He was cheered by crowds in France, Italy and England as enthusiastically as by the Americans who saw him off on the "George Washington".

His triumph was brief. His uncompromising idealism had chimed with the mood of a nation and a world at war. But peace brought a change of outlook. Both in Paris and at home there was reaction: the prevailing mood shifted from the co-operative optimism of war to a general feeling of fear and hate and isolation. The majority of the representatives at the conference table were dedicated to revenge upon Germany — making the pips squeak — and territorial advantage to their own countries. Wilson returned to America in June 1919, perhaps more conscious of how his hopes for a noble settlement had been compromised, than how much worse it would have been without

his wise and stubborn counsels. Back home he met violent criticism of the Treaty of Versailles. Every immigrant community found some objection to it, while the people at large had retreated from Wilsonian idealism to a mixture of isolationist apathy and vindictive Hun-hating. The Committee on Foreign Relations, far from ratifying the treaty, voted amendment after amendment.

Wilson, in desperation, embarked on a marathon speaking tour throughout the West, hoping to win back the support of the people. Already exhausted with overwork, he suffered a severe stroke. Yet for seventeen more months he remained in office, frail, sick, confined to the White House, rarely communicating directly with the outside world, rejecting his closest friends and supporters. Mrs. Wilson was spoken of as a regent, and nicknamed the first woman president of the United States. In these strange times the executive of the United States seemed to have come to a halt. Meanwhile the Treaty for which Wilson had sacrificed his person was defeated.

Ironically, it was during the administration of Wilson, the great liberal idealist, that America underwent the first of the great "Red Scares" that were to leave their scars upon the nation's psychology throughout the twentieth century. This first post-war scare assumed alarming proportions. Ordinary Americans were disturbed by the spectacle of what was taking place in Russia, and by industrial unrest and strikes at home; and their apprehensions were played on by the American business man, who saw his profits threatened by organisation of labour. Radical political activity was blamed for a number of bomb scares in 1919: the majority of thirty-six bombs sent through the post were thwarted for the rather engaging reason that the senders had inadequately franked them. One of a further series of bombs damaged the home of the Attorney-General, Palmer. In retaliation, defenders of law, order and the American way of life — often reinforced by high-spirited and undirected ex-servicemen — smashed up Socialist meetings and premises, inflicting injury and in some cases loss of life. (Scott Fitzgerald describes one such incident in his horrifying little story, *May Day*.)

The Red scare reached a peak of hysteria in the monstrous Palmer Raids, in which some 6,000 suspected Communists were rounded up, and in many cases deported, while people who visited them in prison were quite liable to be themselves arrested. Intolerance, masquerading as patriotism, grew in those years until a writer in *Harpers* in 1922 could say, "America is no longer a free country, in the old sense . . . everywhere, on every hand, free speech is choked off in one direction or another." All-American solidarity led to persecution of other minorities apart from socialists: racial hatred reached unprecedented virulence in the early Twenties, at a time when coloured Americans, returning from the war, felt a new consciousness of equality (cf. G. B. Seitz's film version of *The Vanishing American*). 1919 and 1920 saw fatal colour riots in Chicago and Tulsa.

Jews, equally, were identified with the Bolsheviks and other un-American elements. Henry Ford's anti-Jewish propaganda, which later won him a high award from Hitler, was not the isolated whim of a rich man. Even the Catholic church was blackened with charges of un-Americanism. It was this mood which encouraged the growth of the Ku Klux Klan, which increased from a few hundred members at the end of the war to more than four million in the mid-Twenties; for the Klan offered to frightened, vicious and often poor men the opportunity to work behind masks and to perpetrate all kinds of satisfying cruelties and horrors.

The worst of the scare was over shortly after the start of the Twenties, when Harding's election and other sensations distracted the public's attention; but the Red Scare has proved an enduring element of fear, an indelible fact of American life.

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The genial, small-town, eminently accessible President Warren Gamaliel Harding with his essential realism, and his narrow policy of political isolation, could hardly have provided a more dramatic contrast to Wilson's high-minded and visionary sermons on duty. The Republican elders nominated him as a man they could control, and a Republican

senator described him as "the best of the second-raters", though in after years *Life* amended this: "Harding proved in fact one of the worst of the second-raters." Opposed by another nonentity, Governor James Cox, Harding was swept to office by a clear majority.

William Gibbs McAdoo said that Harding's oratory gave the impression "of an army of pompous phrases moving over the landscape in search of an idea. Sometimes these meandering words would actually capture a straggling thought and bear it triumphantly, a prisoner in their midst, until it died of servitude and overwork." On one occasion, however, his poor command of language and still weaker hold on notions triumphed, to produce the term "normalcy", which seemed to reflect the aspirations and the character of a whole brief era of American history. "The nation was spiritually tired. Wearing by the excitements of war and the nervous tension of the Big Red Scare, they hoped for quiet and healing. Sick of Wilson and his talk of America's duty to humanity, callous to political idealism, they hoped for a chance to pursue their private affairs without governmental interference and to forget about public affairs. There might be no such word in the dictionary as normalcy, but normalcy was what they wanted." (F. L. Allen).

The easy air of the Harding administration suited the times; and somehow the massive public corruption also reflected the public mood — to the extent that when the skeletons all rattled out of the Harding wardrobe, people were not so outraged by the grafters as by those who had exposed them. Harding delighted America with his warmth and neighbourliness, even if the warmth were disproportionately radiated in the direction of business America. Neighbourliness was his undoing. He brought to Washington and high office old cronies from his years in small-town Ohio. At first eyebrows were raised only at the extreme informality of social life at the White House and the President's passion for poker and liquor. Then it was noted that a surprising number of pardons was being granted to criminals who were notorious but also rich. Harding's brother-in-law was superintendent of Federal Prisons. In 1922 one of Harding's best friends, Charles R. Forbes, was found to be using his post as Director of the Veterans' Bureau for million-

dollar graft. Two sinister suicides and increasingly ugly rumours followed. In July 1923 the President left for Alaska for the good of his health, and arrived back dead. Dreadful rumours circulated and were not calmed by the official report that Harding's illness had begun with ptomaine poisoning from crab meat served on the Presidential boat, since the boat's stores carried no crab meat. There were even those who said and wrote that the ambitious Mrs. Harding had murdered her husband, either out of jealousy or to save him from the scandal that was inevitable.

For only after the President's death did the worst secrets emerge — the great oil lease scandals and the corruption of Albert Fall; the sordid revelations of Nan Britton, Harding's mistress, who claimed that her illegitimate child had been conceived in the Senate Office Building; the graft of the Alien Property Custodian's Office; massive protection pay-offs received from prohibition gangsters. "The Harding administration was responsible in its short two years," wrote Frederick Lewis Allen, "for more concentrated robbery and rascality than any other in the whole history of the Federal Government." "Harding was not a bad man," said Alice Roosevelt Longworth, "He was just a slob."

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Harding's successor, another complete contrast, deserves our gratitude because in his obscure small-town youth he had given the young Mack Sennett a terse letter of recommendation to the star comedienne Marie Dressler. The subsequent meeting got Sennett nowhere, but it fired his ambitions to work in show business. Dry, severe, Calvin Coolidge was as cold and remote as Harding had been gregarious. In his limited way he was incorruptible. His policies, domestic and foreign, were conservative and unheroic. His prose and oratory were commonplace and turgid, but correct. But just like Harding he managed to sum up his era and its aspirations with perfect accuracy. "The chief business of the American people is business." "This is a business country; it wants a business government." "The

man who builds a factory builds a temple . . . the man who works there worships there."

This comparison of business and religion was by no means unusual in the mid-Twenties. A best-seller of 1925-6, "The Man Nobody Knows", by Bruce Barton, who was later religious adviser on DeMille's *King of Kings*, solemnly traced the parallels between Christianity and Big Business, identifying Jesus in terms of a modern tycoon. Coolidge was more than sympathetic to American Business, which by 1923 had made a startling recovery from the depression of two years earlier. "Coolidge prosperity" was to increase and last for seven giddy years. The farmers stood outside the general boom, as did certain other industries, including coal and cotton; but most of America wondered and rejoiced at its new prosperity and produced and consumed and spent. Between 1920 and 1929 industrial production increased almost 50% and the national income grew from 79.1 billion dollars to almost 88 billion.

There were a number of causes for prosperity — none of them especially to the personal credit of Calvin Coolidge. America had gained great mercantile advantage from the war, which she was now able to follow up with sheer resources and with the Fordist streamlining of mass production. Investment in industry during these years (as 1930 was so disastrously to prove) was immense. And America, stimulated by salesmanship and advertising — activities which had become patriotic duty — had learned to consume as no people had ever consumed before. Americans bought houses, automobiles, household appliances, radios, washing machines, new foods and refrigerators to keep them in. The frenzy of consumption is constantly reflected in films of the period with their emphasis on clothes and cars and decoration, though never more than in the orgiastic destruction of consumer goods that characterises the Sennett comedies.

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Herbert Hoover was swept into office by a landslide at the peak of the boom. He had campaigned largely on the Republican achievement of

abolishing poverty throughout the States; and when he was elected, the new slogan of American business was "four more years of prosperity." In his election campaign he had said, "We in America today are nearer to the final triumph over poverty than ever before in the history of the land . . . Given a chance to go forward with the policies of the last eight years, we shall soon with the help of God be in sight of the day when poverty will be banished from this nation." Perhaps God withheld His help: this was a mere fifteen months before the great crash.

Speculation had entered America's blood during the Coolidge years. The great bull market came from a mass desire to gamble on prosperity. 1928-9 saw an unprecedented stock-buying spree. Despite an occasional earth-tremor on the market, everyone bought and stocks rose and rose. Scott Fitzgerald, on a trip to New York in 1929, found that his barber had retired after making half a million on the market. In 1928 alone Montgomery Ward stocks went up from 117 to 440 and R.C.A. from 85 to 420.

Nobody has been quite able to explain the causes of the great crash of 1929. A weak banking system, shaky corporate organisation, an unfavourable international balance of trade, above all maldistribution of income, restricting the consumption power of the mass of Americans and exaggerating the power to affect the economy of that 5% of the population which, in 1929, received one third of all personal income were some factors. Whatever the causes, the crash came. Despite brave efforts by the bankers to bolster the market, the crisis began on Black Thursday, October 24th, 1929. By mid-November, paper fortunes worth thirty billion dollars had been wiped out on the New York Stock Market. An era had ended.

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The Twenties was an age of revolution in communications. American life was transformed in varying degrees and varying ways by the effects of cars, radio, advertising and the cinema. The first cars had appeared on American roads in the 1890s and Ford had produced his first T

model in 1908. But it was in the Twenties that the full effects of his revolution in industrial methods and the effects of motorisation upon American civilisation began really to be felt.

Between 1918 and 1929 the national registration of motor vehicles rose from less than six million to more than twenty-three million; while the roads of America progressed from the haphazard mud-track explorations of the nineteenth century to a complex modern highway system that covered the entire area of the United States. In 1909 there were only 725 miles of paved rural roads; twenty years later there were more than 100,000. The whole aspect of the country was changed. Buster Keaton's *Our Hospitality* was shot in 1923 in the Lake Tahoe and Truckee Valley region, three hundred miles north of Hollywood and then in all its wild, unspoiled splendour. Almost before the arrival of talking pictures, it would be invaded by motels and filling stations and tourist camps.

It was not only the rural landscape that was changed by the automobile. Cities spread out along the new roads, and new communities and community centres grew up. People's marketing habits changed. America, generally, grew smaller. Rural communities were no longer isolated, no longer tied to one church, the village school and to the uncertain attentions of the village doctor. The horse and buggy peace of *Tol'able David* vanished before the encroachment of urban ways and standardised metropolitan values. The traffic jam became an established feature of rural as of urban life.

Patterns of leisure changed: camping, golf, touring, the pursuit of the countryside enjoyed new vogues. Static holidays declined — and with them the old holiday centres — as America took to wheels. Cars contributed to the general break-up of social and family habits that was characteristic of the period. The car was a new expression of independence for the young and offered new opportunities of promiscuity to all, for it was said that America now made love in automobiles. Cars were a delight to censorious magistrates, who complained that one third of all sex crimes were committed in automobiles.

The car affected life in more sombre ways. Road accidents increased:

by 1940 they would account for one million injured people every year, and 40,000 deaths. New crimes were introduced — the accident insurance racket, and highway robbery committed by thieves posing as hitch-hikers. And of course the motor car became the principal tool of the gangsters; so that the term "to be taken for a ride" lost all the sunny meaning of pre-prohibition days.

The automobile industry became crucial to American business. In the course of the decade Americans spent something like thirty billion dollars on cars. What was good for General Motors . . . men like William Crapo Durant and Henry Ford were giants. Ford in particular became an archetypal, Horatio Alger folk hero: the Michigan farmboy, the impoverished inventor, the small-town tinkerer who became a multi-millionaire. He gave America Barney Oldfield and the Tin Lizzie. He hallowed big business: "There is something sacred about big business which provides a living for hundreds and thousands of families." He helped establish that confidence in business which is the key to American politics to this day. He created modern production-line methods, so that by 1922 he could boast that there remained no single hand operation at his Highland Park factory. In other respects too he was a pioneer. At the Ford factory, in the pre-war period, twentieth century mass production existed alongside nineteenth century ideas of sweated labour. In 1914 Ford reacted to growing labour problems by announcing a "profit-sharing plan" which would double the standard day's price for common labour to five dollars. Though nobody was under any illusion about Ford's motives, we can date from this moment a whole modern conception of industrial employment and industrial paternalism which was to have a world-wide influence. Ford's Highland Park factory was a social experiment as well as an industrial miracle; even though Ford in later years was to denounce paternalism in industry.

He was always capricious and unpredictable. For years throughout the Twenties and Thirties he opposed labour organisation in his factories, by means of a large and notorious strong-arm force. Yet when finally his methods were exposed, Ford made a complete *volte face* and

not only admitted the unions, but actually co-operated to assist them in their organisation and the collection of dues.

Despite his attacks on the Jews, and the war-time debacle of his celebrated "Peace Ship", Ford retained the affection and reverence of the American people. Perhaps the very meanness and narrowness of his views found some echo in the general public, who saw in him the champion of free enterprise, the living proof of American opportunity and the triumph of big business. Always a strange figure, Ford, the architect of the twentieth century industrial revolution, remained a man of the nineteenth century in his instincts and intelligence; and it is even a little pathetic that in later years he devoted vast sums in a hopeless attempt to buy back the world of his boyhood, dedicating himself to the revival of early American folk music and dance, and building at Greenfield Village a place where no cars ran.

The complex figure of Ford is reflected in its many facets in a hundred characterisations of tycoons in Twenties films. And the motor car is all pervasive in the movies of these times — whether crashing, collapsing or chasing up walls in the Keystone comedy, or roaring to murder and revenge in gangster films, or elegantly carrying dancing mothers and dancing daughters, or providing the erotic arena for the young people of the Jazz Age.

This was also the age of radio. Radio had developed with astonishing speed since Wilson broadcast the fourteen points to the world by means of wireless in January 1918, and Dr. Frank Conrad first began regular transmissions from a radio station built over his garage in Pittsburgh in the spring of 1920. By the end of 1922 there were 220 stations on the air, and manufacturers of receivers were hard pressed to keep up with the demand. Announcers, like early movie stars, were at first anonymous; but as the Twenties went on radio personalities achieved immense popularity. The pattern of commercial broadcasting was established late in 1922 when the American Teleprinter and Telegraph Company transmitted a commercial for a new co-operative apartment house.

Politically and culturally, radio (like the cinema) transformed

America, unifying the nation, breaking through geographical and class barriers to create a vast, cohesive unit. The contrast between the whistle-stop tour which broke President Wilson as he vainly tried to appeal to the American people in 1918 and the effectiveness of Roosevelt's fireside talks at the start of the Thirties, is self-explanatory.

At the same time, and considerably helped by radio, advertising became a key motive force in the consumer society. Articles by Jesse Ransford Sprague in *Harpers* revealed the dreadful pressure that was applied to salesmen to make them pass on the pressure to their customers. The Twenties developed practically all the modern techniques of advertising and salesmanship. Before the war advertisers had sold their goods by means of simple information. By the Twenties contemporary methods of advertising applied a kind of social and sexual blackmail.

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Americans in the Twenties were fascinated (and the fascination is nowhere more clearly reflected than in the movies of the time) with the New Morality. The immediate post-war mood was shot through with a reckless desire to make up for the deprivations and disappointments of the war years. The boys returned from Europe with a new kind of maturity and independence acquired from exposure to European manners and European standards. Some of the girls, too, had seen the independence of service as nurses and war workers; all of them experienced emancipation in several forms. Not only had women won the suffrage in 1920, but a large-scale revolution in domestic life gave them a different kind of independence. Demanding Victorian ideals of domesticity were swept away; smaller houses and the gospel of labour-saving offered a new freedom. "Solitary dishing isn't enough to satisfy me — or many other women," says Carol Kennicott, the heroine of *Main Street*; "We're going to chuck it. We're going to wash 'em by machinery, and come out and play with you men in the offices and clubs and politics you've cleverly kept for yourselves! Oh, we're hopeless, we dissatisfied women!" She voiced the sentiments of many

married women — as well as single ones — who made the revolt and went out to work.

The Younger Generation, as it was called, was in violent reaction against its elders. It had found, said Scott Fitzgerald, "All gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken." "Mother, it's done," says a young lady in *This Side of Paradise*; "you can't run everything the way you did — in the Nineties"; and the hero of the same novel writes:

Victorians, Victorians, who never learned to weep,

Who sowed the bitter harvest that your children go to reap.

Girls frankly smoked, drank, petted, used make-up, rolled their stockings, cut their hair, abandoned corsets and petticoats and wore skirts that got shorter every season, rising by a clear 9 in. between 1919 and 1927. (These trends resulted in striking industrial reactions: the changing habits of American women produced booms in the cigarette, cosmetic and rayon industries, though other textile industries suffered seriously by the reduction of a woman's clothing to barely one third of its pre-war yardage, while corset-manufacturers experienced an almost fatal slump.)

Bad manners and drinking too much were in order in these stridently assertive times. Cecilia Connage thought her sister "average — smokes sometimes, drinks punch, frequently kissed — Oh, yes — common knowledge — one of the effects of the war you know." "None of the Victorian mothers — and most of the mothers were Victorian — had any idea how casually their daughters were accustomed to be kissed. 'Servant-girls are that way,' says Mrs. Huston-Carmelite to her popular daughter. 'They are kissed first and proposed to afterwards . . .'"

"Amory saw girls doing things that even in his memory would have been impossible, eating three-o'clock, after-dance suppers in impossible cafés, talking of every side of life with an air half of earnestness, half of mockery, yet with a furtive excitement that Amory considered stood for real moral let-down. But he never realised how wide-spread it was until he saw the cities between New York and Chicago as one vast juvenile intrigue."

This Side of Paradise was for many people the first, shocking intimation of the new morality — the petting parties, the automobile romances and all. The cinema would provide other, no less vivid instances. The older generation inevitably followed the example of the younger; *Dancing Mothers* followed on the high heels of *Dancing Daughters*.

The extent of pre- and extra-marital experience remains an intriguing mystery. Freud, interpreted mistily at second and third hand, seemed a licence for sexual freedom, and the Twenties astonished themselves with their abandoning of inhibitions of every sort. The mood of the times produced a vogue in sexy literature and sexy films. Subjects that were unmentionable before the war became almost boring as topics of conversation after it. Practically no subject was now taboo, as some of the most successful plays of the years demonstrated.

It would of course be a mistake to imagine all America undergoing the same revolution. The Victorian outlook of Gopher Prairie survived after reaction and disillusion had set in, as it still survives to a degree today. But the watchword was "modern"; and America had its own strong image of its present; and tried to live up to it.

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The Eighteenth Amendment — and Prohibition — was accepted with surprising ease. There was little organised opposition and no one seemed to have any conception of what would be its outcome. The Eighteenth Amendment had been swept along on the wave of war-time idealism. The drying-out of America in 1920 coincided with the birth of the Roaring Twenties, an age yearning for relaxation of every code. Small wonder that from the very first it proved practically impossible to enforce the Volstead Act to the smallest degree. With Harding dispensing hard liquor in the White House itself, and with cocktail parties the current vogue and the speakeasies flourishing as nightspots with the extra spice of criminality to recommend them, those whose task was to enforce the Act found little support in public opinion. Evasion — by smuggling, by diversion of legitimate medical or

industrial alcohol supplies; above all by illicit brewing and distilling — reached massive proportions.

The huge profits waiting for the prohibition racketeer was a root cause of that unparalleled decade of gangsterism and gang warfare which began, properly speaking, around 1920, when Johnny Torrio engaged Al Capone as his lieutenant, and which reached its climax in 1929 with the St. Valentine's Day killings. Other circumstances, of course, favoured gangsterism at this particular period in American history — the automobile, weapons like the Thompson sub-machine gun which had come into their own during the war; political apathy; the increasing power of the Mafia. The gangsters did not confine themselves to liquor activities alone: their incomes were augmented by gambling enterprises, vice and resorts of pleasure, and by some of the cruellest protection rackets ever devised. (In the Thirties, these protection rackets, in relation to labour organisation, would be applied to the cinema itself.)

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A significant phenomenon of the age was the development of the tabloid newspapers. (How useful their dramatic front pages and terse headlines were to prove to film-makers!) *The New York Daily News* began publication in the summer of 1919; by 1920 its circulation was over one and a quarter million. Taken together with the rise of big circulation national magazines, the publicity agent and broadcasting, the tabloids, with their emphasis on crime and sex and sport and every novel excitement, contributed much to the image of the Twenties as the age of ballyhoo and passing crazes among which were Mahjong, Emile Coué, Tut-Ank-Amen, Bathing Beauties, crossword puzzle books (the making of Simon and Schuster), the Prince of Wales, Aimée MacPherson and Billy Sunday, Marathon Dancing and Flagpole Squatting. Cash-and-Carry Piles' Bunion Derby found an echo in Harry Langdon's *Tramp, Tramp, Tramp*. It was an age of wacky hit-songs, though none achieved greater success than "Yes, we have no Bananas", which inspired a "Zit's Comedy" in 1923. It was an age of sensational crime:

the Elwell Case, the Hall-Mills murders; the Snyder Gray trial; Leopold and Loeb, and, on a lighter level, the Daddy Browning divorce case. The Sacco and Vanzetti case wound on from 1920 to 1927, uniting liberal thought against a monstrous official condoning of injustice.

Two events of these years were to provide substantial themes for motion pictures, long after the end of the silent era. A young man named Floyd Collins became front-page news in February 1925, when he was trapped in an underground cave where he died, amidst the glare of arc-lights and publicity, eighteen days later. Collins was the original of Billy Wilder's *The Big Carnival (Ace in the Hole)*. The Dayton Monkey Trial, in which a school teacher was charged with the offence of teaching the theory of evolution (and which later provided the subject for the film *Inherit the Wind*) attracted nation-wide attention later the same year. It was a significant confrontation of the old religion and the new scepticism, within the churches, of the Fundamentalists and the Modernists, the past and the present.

The Twenties were years of great sport and sportsmen. There had never been a bigger fight than the Dempsey-Carpentier match of 1921; but it was only the first of many million-dollar matches which culminated in the two Dempsey-Tunney fights of 1926-27. As Keaton's films in particular reflect, it was a period of intense enthusiasm for baseball and racing and golf and college football. Bobby Jones and Walter Hagen were the most notable of two million golfing Americans. Baseball gates soared; and Babe Ruth was a national hero. Red Grange was the football star of his age. William Tilden won seven American Amateur Tennis Championships. Gertrude Ederle was the first woman to swim the Channel.

In all the ballyhoo years however, nothing was quite so remarkable as the adulation of Lindbergh, after his frankly stunt flight of May 1927. Frederick Lewis Allen, a shrewd observer of American sentiment in these years summed it up: "A disillusioned nation fed on cheap heroics and scandal and crime was revolting against the low estimate of human nature which it had allowed itself to entertain. For years the American people had been spiritually starved. . . . Something that

people needed, if they were to live at peace with themselves and with the world, was missing from their lives. And all at once Lindbergh provided it. Romance, chivalry, self-dedication — here they were, embodied in a modern Galahad for a generation which had forsworn Galahads."

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For the American ideals of the Harding and Coolidge eras had not gone unquestioned. Not all Americans in the Twenties were dedicated to the religion of big business, worship of Tunney, Tilden and Red Grange, committed to the New Morality, wedded to cars and radios, enslaved by advertising. Not all were reading Elinor Glyn, *Confession* Magazines, Bruce Barton or *The Sheik*. Not all were like those inhabitants of Gopher Prairie, "a savourless people, gulping tasteless food, and sitting afterwards, coatless and thoughtless, in rocking chairs prickly with inane decorations, listening to mechanical music, saying mechanical things about the excellence of Ford automobiles, and viewing themselves as the greatest race in the world." There were the others, the rebels like the authors whom Carol Kennicott read, and who were "most of them frightfully annoyed by the Vida Sherwins. They were young American sociologists, young English realists, Russian horrorists; Anatole France, Rolland, Nexo, Wells, Shaw, Key, Edgar Lee Masters, Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Henry Mencken, and all the other subversive philosophers and artists whom women were consulting everywhere in batik-curtained studios in New York, in Kansas farm-houses, San Francisco drawing rooms, Alabama schools for negroes." The young dissenters found leadership in the American Mercury, in which H. L. Mencken's revolt against the business culture led him to an anarchic repudiation of the very principles of democracy. Irving Babbitt likewise questioned the workings of American society. Sinclair Lewis attacked small-town philistinism and self-satisfaction in *Main Street* and *Babbitt* and cheap-jack religion in *Elmer Gantry*. Dreiser, Anderson *et al* encouraged scepticism about the accepted values of American orthodoxy. The intellectuals were in the

vanguard of the disillusion — with sex, science and freedom alike — which began to set in in the last quarter of the Twenties, when the rapture of the first post-war sense of emancipation had worn thin, and which found its most precise expression in Joseph Wood Krutch's *The Modern Temper*, published in 1929.

American culture as a whole acquired a new self-confidence as the Twenties progressed. For centuries, Americans had imported their culture from the old world. Now there began to be a consciousness of the worth not only of American writing, but of American music and painting and above all architecture, in which the New World now took the lead. The American theatre, too, moved in these years from the nineteenth century to the twentieth. Despite all fears of the effects of cinema competition, the live theatre flourished. (Between 1926 and 1928 alone twelve new theatres opened in New York.) In 1915 the Theatre Guild and the Neighborhood Players gave their first performances and in the following year the Provincetown Players were founded. This last company presented most of the early plays of O'Neill, whose most influential work appeared in the course of the post-war decade. Sidney Howard, Robert Emmett Sherwood, Maxwell Anderson (whose collaborator on *What Price Glory?*, Lawrence Stallings, became a Hollywood darling), Hatcher Hughes, Elmer Rice — much influenced by the European *avant-garde* — and John Howard Lawson (later one of the most distinguished Hollywood writers) all made their appearance in the Twenties. Their work, and the work of the great designers like Lee Simonson, Norman Bel Geddes and Robert Edmond Jones (who worked with great success in Hollywood), was ultimately to make its influence felt in the film industry.

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