

Coastlander Reading

The Cultures and Trade Papers of 1920s Los Angeles

Franchon Royer, the editor of Los Angeles's first consistently published film industry trade paper, accomplished some of her best reporting at her favorite restaurant. It was April 1921, and she was working on an editorial addressing "Pictures and the Girl Question."¹ The death of actress Virginia Rappe and the subsequent scandal centering on Fatty Arbuckle and Hollywood's immorality that followed were still a few months away. But the film production community had already been mulling over what Hollywood's external image meant in light of the town's internal social, gender, and labor dynamics.²

Royer asked her waitress, "How long have you resided in Los Angeles?"

"Oh, about a year, I guess," said the waitress. "Came from Wichita. I thought I'd get into the pictures, but even a pretty blonde ain't got a show. She's lucky if she gets on extra, and you hafta eat."

In her *Camera!* column, Royer then speculated about how the waitress felt about this failure. Was she suffering under the weight of crushed hopes, or "had it merely meant a sporting chance taken, an adventure over?"

"The girls who wait on us over counters, wires, and tables are those who having learned about the law of averages are making the best of it," Royer wrote. While "some impressionable souls" had been led to disillusionment, other women had moved West to escape repressive, dysfunctional, or abusive family situations. No, they had not become the next Mary Pickford. But in many cases, waiting tables in Los Angeles brought far more joy and freedom than the lives they'd known before in Wichita or Grand Rapids.

Franchon Royer surely identified with the waitress. She had grown up in Iowa, and her parents divorced when she was six. In 1918, at the age of sixteen, Royer moved to Los Angeles, briefly studying journalism at the University of Southern

California before deciding to pursue a career as an actress. As film historian Lisle Foote has documented, Royer found unsteady work as an extra and struggled to land roles.³ Over the next three years, Royer would stop acting, marry *Camera!*'s business manager, and take over the editorial duties of the paper.

All of these twists and turns led Royer to the moment at hand, interviewing the waitress at her favorite restaurant. Then again, she may have invented the whole episode from her typewriter for the purpose of generating a good column. Either way, the column offered a distinctive perspective on Hollywood culture in the early 1920s. Royer insisted on a middle ground between the discourses of Hollywood as a den of sin and as the land of milk and honey. This was *Camera!* at its best—reminding us of the unexpected ways in which human lives become intertwined and transformed within an industry.

This chapter maps out the overall landscape of 1920s Hollywood and the film industry trade papers that sprang up to serve it. Like the previous chapter on specialty exhibitor papers, I survey a range of publications but look especially closely at three publications that played significant roles within the evolving Hollywood industry. *Camera!*, *Film Mercury*, and *Film Spectator* all spoke to Los Angeles-based communities of creative workers, as well as many readers who wanted to break in. Both on the levels of physical geography and discursive position, the creative communities in Los Angeles were placed at a distance from the communities of New York distribution personnel, independent theater owners, and other industry participants. LA movie people, especially in the late teens and early 1920s, were also a different breed from the nonshow people who had arrived in the Southland years before them and belonged to a different social milieu.⁴

In their address to a distinctive creative community, the Los Angeles papers borrowed from the conventions and structures of New York-based vaudeville papers. One publication, *Inside Facts of Stage and Screen*, modeled itself after *Variety* so closely that it read like a Pacific Coast knockoff of Sime's brand. Meanwhile, *Variety* used the 1920s to pivot from being primarily a vaudeville publication to one focused on motion pictures and radio. These changes came in response to a decline of the market for "straight vaudeville" (meaning vaudeville not staged alongside motion picture presentations). The final section of this chapter explores *Variety*'s transformation in depth. *Variety*'s 1923 acquisition of *New York Clipper* and the 1925 opening of an LA office, headed by a former *Clipper* writer, were especially important for the pivot. But the paper's reputation for its independence, scorekeeping, and distinctive use of language proved to be the most significant strengths of all.

The migration of American motion picture production to Southern California and the construction of permanent studio facilities in and around Los Angeles was largely a movement of the 1910s. But the advent of "Hollywood" as a culture and community—detached from the rest of society within its own "colony" and associated with movies, money, sex, sun, and busloads of aspiring actresses—only truly took form during the 1920s. As film historians have shown, newspapers and fan

magazines both played important roles in disseminating the ideas and imagery of what constituted Hollywood. What has received less attention—and occupies this chapter’s central focus—is how the industry’s Los Angeles trade papers participated in the ways in which movie workers conceived of themselves as belonging to and participating in this community.

EARLY DISPATCHES FROM THE COAST
AND THE EMERGENCE OF CAMERA!

Years before trade papers began emerging on Wilshire, Sunset, and Hollywood Boulevards, *Moving Picture World* and *Motion Picture News* were chronicling Southern California’s growing importance for the film industry. *Moving Picture World* and *Motion Picture News* both published news items that they received from correspondents on the Coast. And all the trade papers took note and devoted considerable ink in 1915 when Carl Laemmle opened Universal City in the San Fernando Valley. By the end of that year, *World* and *News* both had Los Angeles offices staffed by LA editors.

In early 1916, *Motion Picture News*’ William A. Johnston attempted to harness the advertising potential of the Coast by publishing the first edition of the *Motion Picture Studio Directory*—a special section of *Motion Picture News* that primarily contained information and promotional advertisements for LA actors and production personnel.⁵ By the second edition in October 1916, the *Studio Directory* had grown to “over two thousand biographies and many display pages giving correct details and interesting facts about picture people.”⁶ Johnston initially imagined that his existing readership of exhibitors would be the target audience for the *Studio Directory*. “Exhibitors will find this volume . . . a right hand, permanent guide in preparing their copy for house programs, newspapers and for all theatre publicity,” wrote Johnston.⁷ By the third edition of the *Directory* in April 1917, though, Johnson emphasized a different constituency—casting directors. “The casting director has been borne constantly in mind in the make-up of these pages,” wrote Johnston, who went on to call the *Directory* “an invaluable aid to every Casting Director.”⁸ The extent to which any Hollywood casting director ever looked at the *Studio Directory* is unknown. But Johnston clearly persuaded a sufficient number of actors that it was worth taking the chance that it might help them achieve their dreams. *Studio Directory* thrived in an industry environment built on aspirations and insecurities, selling advertising space to actors, writers, and other creative workers keen to keep their names and faces in front of an imagined audience of producers and casting directors who flipped through the book.

Although *Motion Picture News* found ways to sell large volumes of ads to Hollywood workers, it did so only on a semiannual basis with the *Studio Directory*. *Camera!*, founded in 1918, earned the distinction of becoming the film industry’s first weekly trade paper to consistently publish from Los Angeles. It was a

FIGURE 20.
 Production still
 from *The Poverty of
 Riches* (1921), pro-
 duced by Goldwyn
 Pictures and di-
 rected by Reginald
 Barker (seated with
 legs crossed). Los
 Angeles-based
 trade papers
 emerged following
 the migration of
 film production to
 Southern Califor-
 nia. Photograph
 courtesy of the Wis-
 consin Center for
 Film and Theater
 Research.



proof-of-concept that a sufficient advertising base could sustain such a paper. *Camera!* modeled itself on the entertainment industry trade publications published in New York City. The *New York Clipper*, *New York Dramatic Mirror*, *Morning Telegraph*, and *Variety* all covered the intertwined industries of legitimate theater, vaudeville, and motion pictures (the Cincinnati-based *Billboard* was also an active participant in these markets). As we have seen in previous chapters, the cost of producing these papers far exceeded the revenue generated through subscriptions. Advertising revenue was essential for the trade papers to exist. Yet advertising posed risks. Selling ads could damage a trade paper's perceived independence and integrity. Of particular relevance to *Camera!*, the practice of cultivating actors as both readers and advertisers had proven controversial within vaudeville. In 1917, the White Rats union of vaudeville performers claimed that its members had been strong-armed by theater managers into purchasing ads within *Variety*.⁹ Although *Variety* won the resulting FTC case, the episode (detailed in chapter 2) highlighted the coercive pressures that could be placed on performers—the creation of a pay-to-play system.

Camera!'s success in navigating these tricky waters may have stemmed from the fact that its business manager, Raymond Cannon, was also a working actor. He understood the desires of actors seeking to gain notice, shape their perception, and secure employment. In 1919, a year in which Raymond Cannon was consistently listed as *Camera!*'s business manager, he was also credited as an actor in no fewer than five films, including D. W. Griffith's *True Heart Susie* (1919).¹⁰ We can speculate that working simultaneously toward careers in acting and industrial publishing may have been good for business on both fronts. Being on movie sets and interacting with cast and crew members provided opportunities for Cannon to solicit gossip, news items, and advertisements. Meanwhile, *Camera!* elevated Cannon's own status and visibility within the industry. In the age of the silent movie, it is unlikely that any other character actor of his status possessed such a loud voice.

Camera! provided industry news alongside the advertisements that promoted actors, writers, and directors. The "Pulse of the Industry" section tracked active studio productions, and a column titled "Where to Sell Your Scenario?" pointed aspiring screenwriters toward potential buyers (interestingly, this column was discontinued early; perhaps the industry was already moving toward the "no unsolicited submissions" policy that governs contemporary Hollywood).¹¹ One consistent theme, across both news items and opinion pieces, was the address toward the film colony as a particular community with shared interests. *Camera!* bristled at the ways that Southern California's elite institutions discriminated against the industry (banning movie people from the Wilshire Country Club, for example).¹² Yet the trade paper also insisted that the movie industry was special; it needed to be treated differently than other commercial enterprises when it came to taxation and other select business matters.¹³ Most of all, *Camera!*'s editorials opposed all forms of external regulation. The industry community was in the best position to govern itself.¹⁴

The author of most of these editorials was twenty-year-old Franchon Royer, the wife of Raymond Cannon. Like her spouse, Royer came to the trade paper from acting. Just a year earlier, in 1919, she had taken out an advertisement in *Camera!* promoting herself as "a versatile ingénue."¹⁵ Over the next three years, Royer would indeed prove herself versatile. Her editorials sometimes performed the voice of the stern trade paper "thought leader," a position that Chicago-based publisher Martin Quigley had come to embrace around the same time. But in her best writing, like the story that opened this chapter, Royer drew from her own experiences to contribute a nuanced understanding of the industry that was missing elsewhere.¹⁶

Camera! took on an even more forceful approach to its role as an industry gatekeeper under the leadership of Ted Taylor and Ruth Wing (who took the helm in May 1922 and, like Cannon and Royer, were married).¹⁷ Although Taylor and Wing played both editorial roles, it was Taylor who primarily addressed the industry community in *Camera!*'s editorial page. As Peter Lester discusses in his detailed article on this period of *Camera!*'s history, Ted Taylor clashed with certain local

businesses, especially fly-by-night acting schools, that he saw as preying on aspiring actors and tarnishing the industry's reputation. As Lester notes, "The 'fake' schools represented a 'safe' enemy to antagonize," since they held little power within the industry and modest advertising budgets. When Taylor used his editorial page to criticize the increasingly "factory-like" approach to film production, however, it was a different story. *Camera!*'s majority owner was now Walter J. Reynolds, who had purchased Raymond Cannon's interest in the paper in 1922. Reynolds was the secretary of the Motion Picture Producers Association (MPPA), an LA trade-based organization and a major booster of both the film industry and city of Los Angeles (these two threads of boosterism intersected in the disappointing Motion Picture Exposition of 1923, a project that Reynolds helped to orchestrate). Reynolds pushed Taylor out of *Camera!* and replaced him with more obedient editors who did not bite the hand that fed them.¹⁸ The episode highlighted the importance of editorial ownership over a Hollywood paper if one was to take shots at the major Hollywood studios—a lesson that Tamar Lane and Welford Beaton would soon put into practice.

FILM MERCURY AND THE INDUSTRY THAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN

A number of small, competing trade papers soon joined *Camera!* on the Coast. Most of them attempted to carve out some sort of niche. *Hollywood Filmograph* (established in 1922) spoke to the community of Hollywood actors, and its editor, Harry Burns, supported Actors' Equity's attempt to gain a foothold on the Coast. Harry Tullar, in contrast, focused his address to exhibitor communities. Tullar promoted his reviews of short films as the distinguishing feature of *Tullar's Weekly* (established in 1922). *Wid's Weekly* (established in 1923) also emphasized reviews, alongside the fiction that Hollywood's elite were all devoted readers of the paper. Editor Wid Gunning, who had previously created the New York-based *Wid's Daily* (which became *Film Daily*), took the hard-sell approach in lecturing aspiring actors and screenwriters on why they should buy ads: "Wid has never claimed or expected that everyone will always agree with his opinions. The important thing from the viewpoint of the advertiser is that every important personage in the film industry—executive, director, author, player, technical artists and theater owners—does read carefully what he has to say. It is your job to sell yourself . . . WHAT'S YOUR NAME WORTH?"¹⁹ Like *Camera!* before it, *Wid's Weekly* conceived of Hollywood as a community invested in taste, exclusivity, and self-promotion.

Tamar Lane's *Film Mercury* (established in 1924) shared many of the features of *Camera!* and its theatrical trade paper predecessors. *Film Mercury* included news items about the studios, reviews of new movies, and editorials addressing industry problems. And it was advertisements purchased by aspiring actors—along with

ads for the vendors who serviced them, such as drama teachers and plastic surgeons—that made Lane’s publication possible. Yet within this familiar framework, Lane pushed *Film Mercury* in a distinctive, innovative direction. The result may be Hollywood’s first and last avant-garde trade paper.

One year before creating *Film Mercury*, Lane had published a scathing book of film criticism. Titled *What’s Wrong with the Movies?*, Lane’s book provided several answers to this central question, with each chapter offering an indictment of a different sector within the industry. But Lane was able to convey his core thesis in a mere seven words: “The photoplay is an art without artists.”²⁰ The potential of a remarkable art form, in Tamar Lane’s estimation, was being utterly squandered. In *Film Mercury*, Lane offered weekly updates on this same general theme. He was aided in this mission by his sister, Anabel Lane, who contributed film reviews to *Film Mercury* and pulled no punches when it came to calling out Hollywood’s shortcomings.

The Lanes did not arrive on these views within a vacuum. Their taste sensibility combined two critical frameworks of their day: a Mencken-esque cynicism and modernist theories of film art. Because the combination of these critical frameworks tells us something about 1920s Hollywood culture, each of these traditions merits briefly unpacking. In *The Decline of Sentiment: American Film in the 1920s*, Lea Jacobs details how H. L. Mencken and a coterie of other critics in the late 1910s and 1920s established new values for taste culture and the evaluation of literature, film, and art. Mencken’s magazine, *American Mercury*, panned sentimental novels and films, dismissing them with the pejorative label “hokum.” As these taste assumptions spread among film critics at other publications, they resulted in the critics imagining American audiences as bifurcated between sophisticated urban viewers and small-town moviegoers who clung to old-fashioned conventions. Jacobs notes the strong degree to which *Variety*’s film reviewers in New York City adopted this disdain for hokum.²¹ Tamar Lane, however, embraced the sensibility just as vociferously from his office on Hollywood and Vine:

The general public has a right to demand hokum entertainment if that is the sort of silent drama it prefers—and judging from the films that are flooding the theatres of the country the public is getting its belly full. To say, however, that every film must be made in accordance with the mentalities of the morons and nit-wits that make up most of our theatre audiences is nonsense. . . . It is quite possible for an institution to be both popular entertainment and art. That is the point being overlooked.²²

As this passage makes clear, Tamar Lane shared Mencken’s contempt for most of the American public, who bore considerable responsibility for “what’s wrong with the movies.” And Lane’s decision to title his magazine *Film Mercury* may have been a nod to Mencken. But what separated the two writers, at least in the way Lane saw it, were their theories about the potential of film as an art form. Mencken primarily concerned himself with writing and language. From *Film Mercury*’s

perspective, Mencken had only “contempt for the lowly movie” and “disdain for most of those connected with it.”²³ Lane, on the other hand, believed that cinema was “the greatest instrument for stimulating emotion yet born.” Few truly great movies had been produced, in Lane’s estimation, but there were many films with “scenes which expressed beauty, mood, and imagination,” and those scenes held the promise for the brilliant artworks that would one day be made.²⁴

Film Mercury participated in a global theorizing of film as a medium and art. Tamar Lane considered his critical peers to be not the other ink-stained trade paper editors in Los Angeles and New York but a group of avant-gardists publishing their ideas of cinema from Europe. In 1928, Tamar Lane promoted his trade paper within the pages of *Close Up*, a film journal that today is far better remembered than *Film Mercury*. An English-language periodical that was published in Switzerland, *Close Up* was a forum for spirited debates about the nature of cinema and manifestos imagining new forms of filmmaking and spectatorship. The magazine published articles by filmmakers such as Sergei Eisenstein and female literary modernists such as H.D. and Gertrude Stein.²⁵ Tamar Lane contributed to the advertising base of this organ for film theory, purchasing full-page promotions that advised that “Every student of the Silent Drama should read THE FILM MERCURY . . . The most fearless and feared film paper published in America.”²⁶

Lane’s conviction that the Los Angeles film community and European intelligentsia would both find value in *Film Mercury* speaks to a particular moment in Hollywood history—one in which it was possible to believe that a large-scale avant-garde film movement might be commercially viable within the United States. No, Lane did not assume that the nation’s “morons and nit-wits” would abandon their appetite for hokum. But he did believe that a more discerning audience existed, and this audience could be further cultivated. How best to serve the audiences of refined taste? Lane advocated for the creation of a parallel system of distribution and exhibition. As the 1920s continued, he praised the development of art house theaters and networks—such as Symon Gould’s Little Theatre Movement—even though they never reached the stature and scale that he imagined.²⁷

Whereas Lane believed in a division among exhibitors—separating the art theaters from the hokum houses—he was less rigid in his thinking about filmmakers and production personnel. Many directors, screenwriters, and actors had the capacity to create screen art. D. W. Griffith directed the overly sentimental *Orphans of the Storm*, but he had also made *Broken Blossoms*, which Lane considered one of the greatest films ever produced. Lane imagined a system in which the talent, technology, and production resources, all clustered in Los Angeles, would make films to satisfy the discerning theaters and audiences across the country and, more broadly, the world. And, yes, the movie colony would continue making schmaltz and hokum, too. Lane’s assumptions about the industry’s fluidity seemed viable in the 1920s. In his history of the Los Angeles avant-garde, film historian David James has detailed that “through the 1920s stylistic innovations, production

personnel and methods, and career opportunities crossed with no great difficulty between the studios and artisanal practices outside them, between the film industry and the avant-garde.”²⁸ When *Film Mercury* suspended publication in 1931, the Great Depression was at its height, and the resources required to achieve the ideal of a fluid production sector and flourishing art exhibition sector no longer seemed possible. But for a time, industry news, actor self-promotion, and theories of film art could all coexist within the same magazine. The commercial avant-garde had a Hollywood trade paper, even if it never fully materialized within the studio system.

FILM SPECTATOR AND ITS PARTISAN READERS

More Hollywood trade sheets kept cropping up throughout the mid to late 1920s. *Inside Facts of Stage and Screen*, established by Jack Josephs in 1924, wanted to be *Variety* for the West Coast. Visually, *Inside Facts* very much resembled *Variety*, with its large page size and even in its typographical choices. *Inside Facts of Stage and Screen*'s content was also similar (if much briefer), covering vaudeville and legit theater alongside the film industry. Josephs's trade paper gathered much of its “inside facts” about the movies from its office in the Warner Bros. downtown building in Los Angeles (unsurprisingly, Warners featured prominently in its news reporting).²⁹

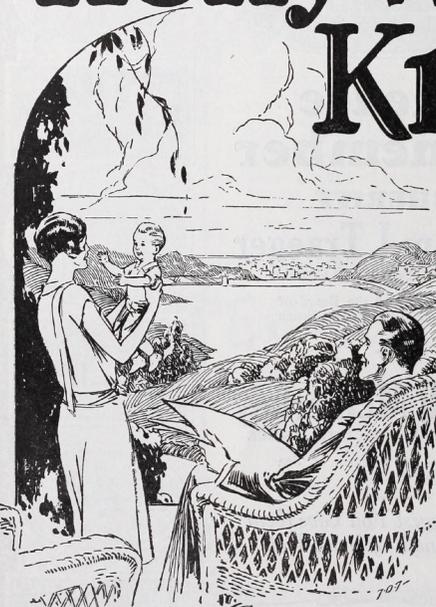
Another paper, *Motion Picture Review*, established in 1925 or 1926, profiled Hollywood film executives like they were movie stars. Irving Thalberg was overrated, according to one of the paper's contributors.³⁰ *Motion Picture Review* did not last long, but the practice of profiling and assessing the performances of film executives would flourish for decades in the pages of *Hollywood Reporter* and *Daily Variety*.

Two additional short-lived LA papers of the period were initially led by the same person. Fred W. Fox, who had previously worked as *Camera*'s advertising manager, was the first editor of *Hollywood Topics*. Debuting in October 1926 and published once every two weeks, *Hollywood Topics* attempted a playful, tongue-in-cheek address to the show business community as it presented Hollywood's news. The paper's subheading read, “Hollywood Topics: -cussed and discussed All Over the World.”³¹ Fox's true talent, though, was in selling ads. *Hollywood Topics* clearly participated in the old quid pro quo arrangement of advertising money for editorial space. Clarence Brown purchased quarter-page ads to keep his name in the press, and *Hollywood Topics* made sure he got his money's worth with puff piece write-ups in multiple issues, tracking his progress across the movies he was making.³²

Fred W. Fox also sold ads to real estate developers, automobile companies, and other businesses that perceived the film industry as potential customers. Just three years earlier, in 1923, a real estate syndicate with the backing of the *Los Angeles Times* had erected the now-famous “Hollywood” sign, promoting the

32 HOLLYWOOD TOPICS

The BEST answer to "Where shall I live in Hollywood?" is UNMISTAKABLY Hollywood Knolls



Plans are maturing for an exclusive "modern art colony" of famous people on one of those spacious summits on Hollywood Knolls which directly overlooks lovely Lake Hollywood. Included among these notables will be famous cartoonists, both retired and active stage celebrities, prominent architects, painters, advertising counselors and others skilled in modern art.

Hollywood Knolls appeals to esthetic artistic tastes — to people who appreciate natural beauty — to those who love broad expanses of blue sky, magnificent sunset, wonderful star-lit nights, entrancing vistas of hills, mountains, city and valley and the delightful scenic advantages of a real blue lake—an aquatic gem in a setting of everlasting hills.

TAFT REALTY CO., Subdividers

General Offices
Taft Bldg., Hollywood Blvd.
at Vine
Hollywood 7190

Hollywood Knolls Tract Office
3172 Cahuenga Blvd. at
Hollywood Way
GRanite 8551

Send me detailed information
about Hollywood Knolls.

Name

Address

H-T-8

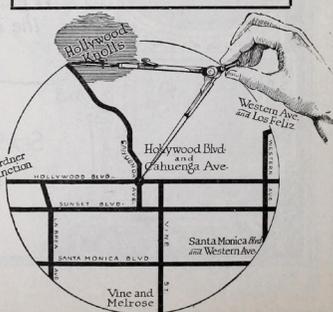


FIGURE 21. "Hollywood Knolls" [Advertisement], *Hollywood Topics*, Nov. 3, 1927, 32, https://lantern.mediahist.org/catalog/hollywoodtopicsoo1holl_0070.

Hollywoodland housing development to those driving along LA's Miracle Mile.³³ In the same boosterish spirit, though far less bold and expensive, the Taft Realty Co. purchased full-page ads in *Hollywood Topics* promoting its Hollywood Knolls development.³⁴ In one of the ads (see fig. 21), a white family overlooks a lush valley—mother standing and holding her child, father sitting and reading the news-

paper. The copy of the ad, tailored for the imagined *Hollywood Topics* audience of show people, promised that “an exclusive ‘modern art colony’ of famous people” was on its way. This enterprise highlights the close relationship between real estate development and the movie industry in 1920s Hollywood.³⁵ As film historians Denise McKenna and Charlie Keil have shown, this relationship played itself out in various and often unexpected ways, including, in this case, providing an advertising base for a superfluous Hollywood trade paper.

After editing only a handful of issues of *Hollywood Topics*, Fox immediately started a new trade paper in collaboration with Billy Joy. Their new paper, *Hollywood Vagabond*, launched in February 1927. Despite bearing the name “vagabond,” the paper was written and organized in a manner that presented itself as the ultimate insider paper, intended only for those fully rooted and immersed in the movie colony. Fox and Joy claimed that their news would be the untarnished dirt on Hollywood, without the massaging or puffery of press agents. Fox once again tapped local real estate developers for advertising support, though *Vagabond* had less advertising pages overall than *Hollywood Topics* and most of the competing LA trade papers. The fact that the annual subscription price was relatively high (\$10 compared to \$1 to \$3 for most of the papers) also suggests that Fox may have overestimated his ability to sell ads in a marketplace of trade papers that had grown so crowded.³⁶ The defining feature of *Hollywood Vagabond* was intended to be the gossipy, occasionally salacious, style in which it dispensed the insider news of show business. The lead story of *Vagabond*'s debut issue concerned a fight between producer Samuel Goldwyn and actress Belle Bennett, “who was rushed to a sanitarium last week, on the verge of a nervous breakdown.”³⁷ Rather than running away at the sight of a scandal—the approach taken by the Hays Office and many of the industry’s power brokers—*Hollywood Vagabond* promised it would seek out and deliver scandalous news to readers. In practice, though, the trade paper quickly took on a more conventional approach to gathering and sharing the industry’s news. It’s unclear whether *Hollywood Vagabond* survived more than a single year. But the idea that the Hollywood community wanted to seek out and read about scandals, not sweep them away, would live on through manifestations in both the trade press and popular press.

Although *Inside Facts of Stage and Screen*, *Motion Picture Review*, *Hollywood Topics*, and *Hollywood Vagabond* all spoke to elements of Hollywood’s culture, none of them had a shred of the impact of Welford Beaton’s *Film Spectator*. Founded in 1926, *Film Spectator* emerged as a magazine primarily devoted to craft-oriented film criticism. But it exploded in popularity when its editor shifted the paper’s incisive criticism away from individual movies and toward the producers, studios, and industry structure that manufactured them. The rise of this particular trade paper can tell us much about Hollywood’s culture—which identified as a single community (“picture people”) yet bore deep partisan fault lines between management and creative workers.

Film Spectator's founder and editor, Welford Beaton, shared many of Tamar Lane's cinematic tastes. Beaton loved the German Expressionist films that had reached American screens, and he detested stale stories. But Beaton's method of expressing his tastes and observations differed from Lane's. Beaton's prose was loose and conversational. He viewed his magazine as an ongoing conversation with filmmakers who wanted to improve their craft and improve the medium as a whole. He was the hardware store owner, leaning over the counter, offering pointers to the carpenters who came in for supplies.

For the first full year of its publication, Beaton's chief nemesis was the close-up—or, more precisely, the rampant overuse of close-ups. "Close-Ups Spoil a Good Picture" read a February 1927 *Film Spectator* headline, concisely summing up one of his theories of filmmaking.³⁸ Earlier that same month, he had commented:

The next time you view a picture note how completely a medium shot presents a scene. Watch how it registers the thoughts of the characters. Notice how clearly you can see the expression on every face on the screen. Then ask the producer of the picture why under the sun he put in so many senseless close-ups. If the direction and editing of a picture be done intelligently there is in no finished production an excuse for more than three or four close-ups. You can measure the degree of the lack of intelligence in a producing organization by the number used in excess of that limit.³⁹

In the summer of 1927, however, Beaton transformed the significance of *Film Spectator* when he provided a whole new rationale to "measure the degree of the lack of intelligence in a producing organization." The industry was abuzz over the issue of budgets, with producers insisting that a salary cut was necessary for all writers, directors, and actors. Beaton framed himself as an objective outsider—a "spectator," one might say—to the whole matter. "I must admit that to one like myself, sitting on the sidelines and with no material interests at stake, the whole affair is so amusing that it is difficult to discuss it with so much gravity that the chuckles will not show through," wrote Beaton. Yet he was unequivocal and unrelenting in his placement of blame, decrying how "producers have brought about the present situation."⁴⁰ For Beaton, poor management by producers was largely responsible for the poor quality of pictures he reviewed. "The artistic emancipation of the screen waits upon its economic reformation, for perfect examples of screen art can be produced only by following perfect scripts," declared Beaton.⁴¹ He pointed out that film budgets would decline, along with his least favorite type of camera framing, if productions followed the script and avoided filming superfluous shots and scenes: "There is no excuse for taking a long shot, a medium shot and a close-up of the same scene. There is no excuse for taking any scene that does not appear in the finished picture. All these extravagances for which I contend there is no excuse enter into the making of every picture produced in Hollywood. That is the way we make them, because we never have mastered the proper method of making them."⁴²

Beaton argued that the producers were wrong, and Hollywood's creative workers were right. Empowering screenwriters, not slashing their salaries, was the key

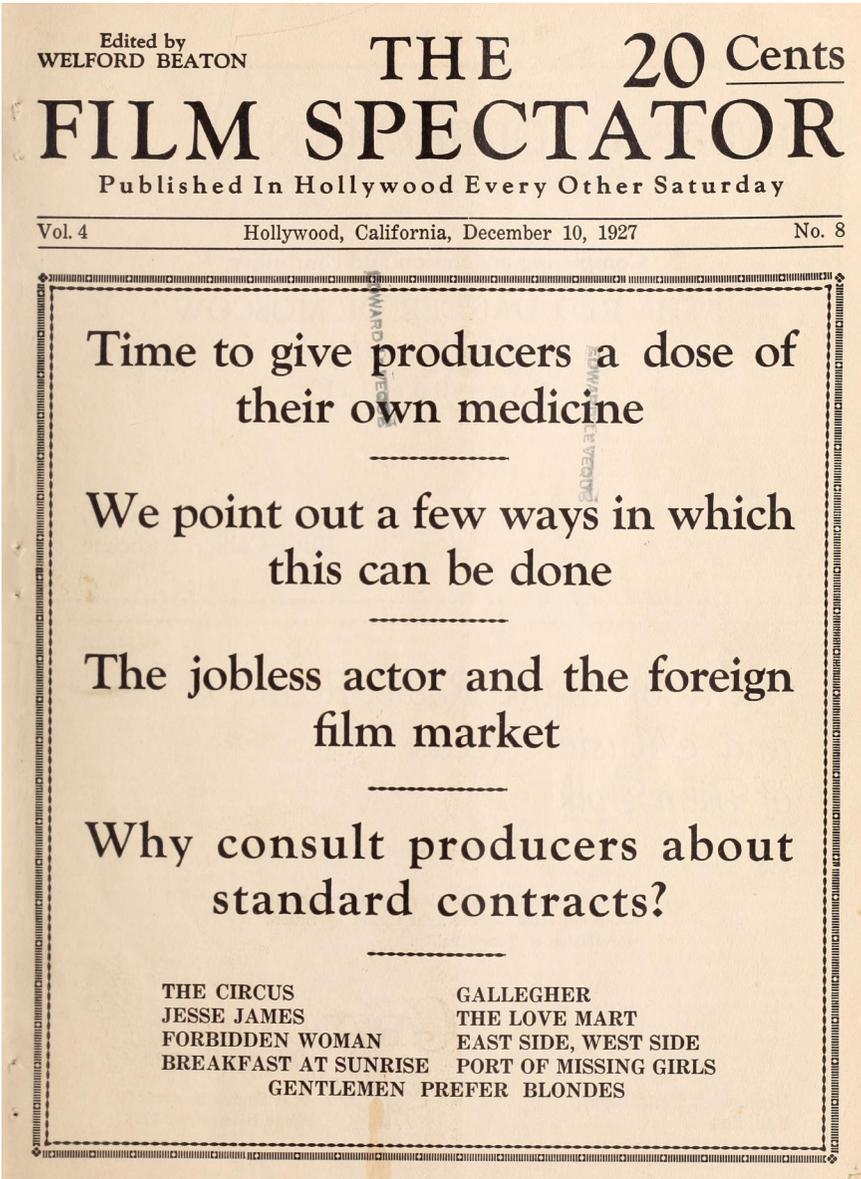


FIGURE 22. The cover of the December 10, 1927, issue of *Film Spectator* emphasized the paper's antagonistic stance toward producers. https://lantern.mediahist.org/catalog/filmspectator_19200film_0337.

toward improving the film industry. And the best strategy for screenwriters to achieve this new level of power—and then for producers and directors to make those better movies—was for creative workers to organize. “I do not believe in unions, but I do believe in waging a fight with the most potent weapon,” wrote Beaton. “Only an organized movement will set matters right; consequently I am glad

to see both the actors and writers organizing to present a united front.⁴³ When the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences stepped in to help mediate the contentious salary cut debates, he dismissed the newly formed organization as a “catspaw to pull the producers’ chestnuts from the fire.”⁴⁴

The response among Hollywood’s creative community was electric. *Film Spectator* became essential reading overnight. Screenwriters, actors, directors, and other craftspeople subscribed in droves. Here was a trade paper that validated their resentments and attacked their opponents. *Film Spectator* was only published once every two weeks, so the creative community did not rely on it for the latest breaking news about negotiations with the producers. Instead, they read it to affirm their anger, connect with others in their community, and relish seeing Beaton tear apart their enemies with such forcefulness and wit. Thousands of exhibitors, and most likely a large number of producers and studio executives, also subscribed to follow along.

When *Film Spectator* published its “second birthday” issue in March 1928, Beaton reflected on the unexpected turning point in his journal’s young life: “For the first eighteen months apparently I was the only one who took [*Film Spectator*] seriously. Then the salary cut crisis arose, and I wrote an open letter to Jesse Lasky. It acted like an explosion with an element of humor in it. Within thirty days the circulation of *The Spectator* more than doubled, and it has turned over a couple of times since. I think it now has twice the combined circulation of all the other film papers published in Hollywood.”⁴⁵

Beaton credited his success to his policy of “absolute honesty.” He believed that “honest opinions in a paper are like honest emotions on the screen.”⁴⁶ But it requires a viewing audience to observe, interpret, and feel those emotions. And it took a community of creative workers, who felt under attack, to respond to Beaton’s opinions and elevate *Film Spectator* into becoming the most important trade paper for the LA film industry of the late 1920s.

VARIETY GOES TO THE MOVIES

Of all the publications discussed in this book, the hardest to place, to generalize about, to fit into a clear category also happens to be the film industry’s most famous trade paper: *Variety*. Unlike *Camera!*, *Film Mercury*, and *Film Spectator*, *Variety* was not published in Los Angeles during the 1920s. But *Variety* did make a critical change to its LA office in the mid-1920s and greatly expanded its coverage of film. And in terms of its sensibility and mode of address, *Variety* had far more in common with the LA trade papers than with *Exhibitors Herald* or the New York nationals. For these reasons, it makes more sense to analyze *Variety*’s turn toward the film industry here than in any of the other chapters. Besides, as *Variety* would occasionally quip, we have some extra space here we need to fill.

During the mid-1920s, *Variety* had come to position itself as the film industry’s scorekeeper and, more broadly, the most distinctive voice in show business.

Whereas *Motion Picture News* and *Exhibitors Herald* concentrated the voices of their publisher-editors within their editorial pages, *Variety* had come to weave its point of view into nearly every article and story. It was leveraging its distinctive voice—along with the reputation for independence that it had won from drawn-out fights with vaudeville’s power players (see chapter 2)—toward greater recognition within the film industry and, important for its bottom line, greater film-related advertising revenue. If the 1920s were the decade that Hollywood became “Hollywood,” then they were also the decade that *Variety* became the “*Variety*” that comes to mind for most film historians—a trade paper, written in the lingo of showbiz, with close ties to Hollywood (or the “Coast,” “Colony,” or “Tinseltown” as it would just as likely be described). How did this come to be?

Variety’s embrace of slanguage—and the close association it took on with the paper’s brand—followed a more straightforward path than the paper’s ever-shifting relationship with the film industry. For this reason, it’s worth examining slanguage before exploring the paper’s connections to the film industry. As will quickly become clear, however, the two threads were interrelated. Among a crowded field of film industry trade papers, *Variety*’s use of “industry-speak” differentiated it from its competitors and invited readers to imagine themselves as members of a part of the global community of show business.

Variety did not always zowie its readers. “The emergence of slanguage was essentially a phenomenon of the 1920’s,” notes Peter Besas in *Inside “Variety.”* By contrast, “over the first two decades of the paper’s existence, slang and abbreviations and acronyms were rarely used,” Besas writes.⁴⁷ Reading and searching through *Variety* issues of the 1910s confirms Besas’s claim that “*Variety*’s prose style was similar to that of other trade publications of the time.” Besas credits post-World War I changes in writing culture, the addition of new *Variety* staffers (most importantly Jack Conway, the inventor of “palooka”), and the type of chatter long heard outside of Broadway’s stage doors for the rise of *Variety*’s distinctive style.⁴⁸ A key moment in forging the link between show business lingo and *Variety*’s brand occurred in 1926 with the publication of an essay by Hugh Kent in *American Mercury*. Kent celebrated the trade paper’s use of language, seeing it as an extension of Sime Silverman’s editorial independence and street-smarts. “*Variety*’s grammar is barbarous; its style is original and unique and completely independent of any other writing; its phraseology is wild and revolutionary and its diction is the result of miscegenation among shop talk, slang, Broadway colloquialism, sporting neologisms and impatient short-cutting,” wrote Kent.⁴⁹

Kent’s essay brought *American Mercury* readers into the world of *Variety*, calling attention to how, in *Variety*-speak, a bad act “nosedived” and a great act was an “outstander.”⁵⁰ Kent and, writing much later, Besas both argue that *Variety* primarily popularized and innovatively reused show business slang rather than inventing terms outright. The data mining research on which I collaborated with Derek Long, Kit Hughes, and Tony Tran reached much the same conclusion.⁵¹ *Annet*, *extant*, *legit*, *copped*, *fave*, and other terms associated with *Variety* appeared in *New*

York Clipper years before Sime Silverman established the paper. *Variety* appropriated, popularized, and creatively utilized the slang we associate with it. The significance of the slanguage was to build and reinforce an imagined community of show business readers. “Like all jargon, it creates a sense of an ‘in-crowd;’” notes linguist David Wilton in his analysis of *Variety*’s slang.⁵² Some media depictions of *Variety*, including the film *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942), emphasize the translation work required for laypeople to make sense of the trade paper. Yet there is a risk of exaggerating the difficulty of reading *Variety*, misrepresenting this slang-rich English language publication for something written in an alien tongue. The genius of *Variety*’s slanguage was that it was fun to read and that with enough reading, most people could figure it out. For those within the entertainment industry, this reinforced the sense of reading the slang-heavy news as participation in the industry’s culture. But, equally important, it created a porous boundary for those outside the industry: a fence to some, a passageway for others. Learning how to read *Variety* could give aspiring actors or writers the sense that they had crossed over and become members of the show business community, even if they had never set foot in Los Angeles or New York.

Ironically, *Variety*’s distinctive, Broadway-infused approach to language was taking off in the early to mid-1920s during the same time that the trade paper’s traditional bread and butter—the US vaudeville industry—was in decline. The marketplace for straight vaudeville (that is, vaudeville not staged alongside movie presentations) had shrunk, creating employment challenges for vaudeville performers and managers, as well business challenges for the New York theatrical trade papers that had grown accustomed to their advertising revenue. In 1922, the *New York Dramatic Mirror* changed from a weekly to monthly publication, then ceased publication soon afterward.⁵³ It appeared as though the country’s oldest theatrical trade paper—the *New York Clipper*—would soon follow. Sure enough, in 1923, *Variety* swooped in and acquired the financially imperiled paper. At the time, Sime Silverman assumed that his competitor’s biggest asset was the title splashed across its front page. “*Clipper* has a good name, in and out of show business,” wrote *Variety*. “It is a better known name as a theatrical paper today than all of the theatrical papers of the world, which of course takes in *Variety*. It is a fact we admit.”⁵⁴ The announcement reveals that *Variety*’s title and brand had not yet assumed the global status that they would soon enjoy. *Variety* briefly operated both papers as separate entities (*Variety* covering indoor entertainment, *Clipper* covering outdoor) before folding the *Clipper* entirely in 1924, which also happened to be the year that H. L. Mencken and George Jean Nathan founded *American Mercury*.⁵⁵

It was in this context of slanguage innovation and vaudeville’s decline that, in the mid-1920s, *Variety* strategically pursued greater advertising from the film industry. *Variety*’s early relationship with film has been so difficult to chronicle, in part, because it does not fit a linear or neat narrative (the paper gave more space to film in 1908 than it did four years later in 1912). Figure 1 in my introduction

graphs *Variety's* pages per category over the period of 1906 to 1940. These findings, gathered through a quantitative content analysis of six issues per year, challenge the standard accounts chronicling *Variety's* turn toward film.⁵⁶ In their books on *Variety's* history, Peter Besas and Dayton Stoddart have suggested that *Variety's* film coverage increased following increases in film advertising. As Besas puts it, "Throughout the 1920s, *Variety's* advertising from the film sector had increased spectacularly, gradually eclipsing that from vaudeville, music, and legit [theater]. . . . [Film's] place grew in importance as advertising from the pictures ballooned."⁵⁷ The data reveal, however, that the inverse was true. It was only after devoting substantial resources to covering the film industry that *Variety* reaped the benefits of increases in film advertising. This makes sense given how competitive the landscape for film industry trade papers was throughout the 1920s. As the next chapter will detail, the total number of film companies purchasing advertisements decreased in the 1920s, and those companies that remained periodically cut back on their trade paper advertising expenditures. Within this industry landscape, *Variety* needed to actively pursue strategies to persuade film industry companies and personnel that it deserved their advertising dollars.

Variety took an important step in its pursuit of the film industry in 1925 when it opened a Los Angeles office. Although the paper's New York office was located in proximity to the film industry's chief executives and distribution heads, this decision created stronger ties to the Hollywood production community. This move also proved important because of the staffer selected for the job. "VARIETY'S LOS ANGELES OFFICE. ARTHUR UNGAR in Charge," announced the heading of the LA section edited by Ungar throughout the mid to late 1920s.⁵⁸ Arthur Ungar (or "Ung," as he would sign his reviews) spent the first decade of his career as a journeyman through various forms of entertainment, conflict, and reporting. He had studied law and practiced briefly as an attorney. He had worked as a house manager, both at a movie theater and a burlesque show. He fought in the infantry and rode motorcycles during World War I, nearly getting killed in the process. But the job he kept coming back to was as a New York theatrical reporter—working stints at both the *Clipper* and *Variety*, then just *Variety* after Sime Silverman acquired and finally eliminated the rival paper. Jerry Hoffman, who was on staff at the *Clipper* and *Variety* at the same time as Ungar, shared in an oral history interview that Sime Silverman dispatched Ungar to LA in 1925 with a specific mandate. "Ungar had orders to either make the office pay within a year or close it up," remembered Hoffman. "Well, Ungar, as those who've been around know, was a tough, tough guy, who used not a mailed fist but a bare fist. And he made that office pay; he made that office pay."⁵⁹

One of the ways Ungar made it pay was by offering in-depth coverage of LA's vaudeville and theatrical scene. From his LA office, Ungar competed with Jack Joseph's *Inside Facts of Stage and Screen* for West Coast theatrical news and advertisements. Yet Ungar and his bosses remained mindful that the "inside facts of stage"

were less lucrative than those of screen. Vaudeville was in decline nationwide, and the movies represented *Variety's* most promising area for growth.

With both its New York and Los Angeles offices devoting more energy to covering the movies, *Variety* took a symbolically significant step on May 5, 1926, moving the “Pictures” section to the front of the paper. This meant pushing back the “Vaudeville” section, which had been at the front since the paper’s inception, to third position—behind “Pictures” and “Legit” theater. *Variety* explained that the move was due to the decline of “straight vaudeville.”⁶⁰ Film-related news appeared prominently on most of the front pages the paper published in 1926, too. The typical issue that year contained 11.3 pages of news and editorial coverage related to film and 4.5 pages of film advertising. These marked substantial increases compared to their median numbers in issues of *Variety* in 1922 (which contained 6.25 pages of news and editorial coverage related to film and published a mere half page in film advertising) and 1924 (7.4 pages of film coverage and 1.625 pages of film advertising). When Hugh Kent’s essay celebrating *Variety's* independence, language, and sensibility appeared in *American Mercury* in December 1926, *Variety* still saw itself as a newspaper for the entire show world—but a version of the show world in which movies were now the preeminent business.

Much like a Hollywood studio that would quote a rave review from *Variety* in a film’s advertisement, *Variety* immediately put the *American Mercury* essay into service for its own self-promotional purposes. In self-deprecating yet endearing fashion, *Variety* mentioned Hugh Kent’s celebration of its “barbarous grammar” with a news story headlined “‘American Mercury’ Gives Space on Why ‘Variety’ Is So Terrible.”⁶¹ Later in the same issue, *Variety* published a full-page self-advertisement titled, “Why Should You Advertise in *Variety*?” Here, the quote *Variety* opted to pull from Kent was related not to slang but to global circulation: “No one knows the circulation of *Variety*, not even the people on its staff, but it’s sold all over America and all over Europe,” Kent had written. The paper proudly emphasized that “it goes all over the world. *Variety* has the most influential list of foreign subscribers (prepaid) ever gathered.”⁶² Yet part of the paper’s mystique was that you had to take its word for it. By neither disclosing its circulation nor allowing the Audit Bureau of Circulation to check its records, *Variety* was choosing a path that clearly violated the best practices of industrial journalism (as detailed in chapter 1). But in a magic trick that its reviewers would have applauded as an “outstander,” *Variety* turned this potential negative into gold—a competitive advantage, in fact. Keeping the circulation numbers secret became part of *Variety's* brand. Some potential advertisers were scared away by this practice, but a growing number were willing to take part in the card trick. As advertising in *Variety* became increasingly important to the ways in which film companies branded themselves, the paper’s secretive approach to circulation proved highly lucrative. *Variety* charged its advertisers a huge premium—an amount that Martin Quigley

later speculated was five times *Motion Picture Herald's* rates when calculated on the basis of cost per thousand target readers.⁶³

In different variations, *Variety* would play this magic trick over and over again. No paper was better at having it both ways—of simultaneously being in and out, of caring deeply and not giving a damn, of having its cake and eating it too. *Variety* would claim not to be a film industry trade paper while simultaneously calling attention to what it perceived as the shortcomings of *Moving Picture World*, *Motion Picture News*, and the industry's other national trade papers. From the standpoint of those established film industry trade papers, *Variety* did not play by the rules, and it was siphoning away advertising dollars that rightfully belonged to its competitors. But there was little they could do to effectively fight back. When *Moving Picture World* and *Exhibitors Herald* complained to film companies and individuals that advertised in *Variety* instead of their papers, the news immediately got back to *Variety*, which was only too happy to publish it as evidence of those trade papers' dubious ethics, desperation, and strong-arm tactics.⁶⁴

Variety also promoted itself—and antagonized its rivals—by claiming that it offered the best film reviews and the most discriminating taste of all the trade papers. In 1927, *Variety* published a "Film Critics' Box Score" that evaluated the film reviewers of the major trade papers for their thoroughness, ability to predict hits and flops, and comparative number of positive and negative reviews.⁶⁵ Drawing its inspiration from baseball box scores that offered statistical snapshots of games, *Variety* tabulated the reviews across its own and five other papers and, not surprisingly, found that it was the game's winner. Based on the results (boxes 1 and 2), *Variety* claimed it panned more films than any other paper and was also the best at predicting failure or success. *Variety* was telling the industry that it was the most independent paper, best understood the marketplace, and possessed unparalleled taste.

The box scores were the most blatant expression yet of a role that *Variety* had come to play within the film industry and has never ceased to occupy ever since: scorekeeper. Sime Silverman, Arthur Ungar, and the paper's other leaders understood that show business attracted people who yearned not simply for success but for highly visible success. Most never achieved it. But, along the way, they could feel entertained, jealous, and consoled by reading about the successes and failures (which could be equally if not more visible) of others within the industry. *Variety's* scorekeeping function also allowed it to dig, with relish, into conflicts within the industry without having to pick a side or attempt to solve the problem. To be sure, there were times when *Variety* picked a side and times when it attempted to solve the film industry's problems. But the default reporting style was to seek out and tell the news—with verve, slang, color, and attention to the winners and losers—in a way that informed, entertained, and made readers feel they were part of a special show business community.

BOX 1. FILM CRITICS' BOX SCORE

Score as of Sept. 5

(including pictures reviewed since June 4, 1927)

Key to abbreviations: PC. (pictures caught); R. (right); W. (wrong); O. (no opinion expressed); Pc. (percentage)

TRADE PAPERS					
	PC.	R.	W.	O.	Pc.
Variety	66	55	11	..	.833
"Daily Review"	38	28	10	..	.742
"M.P. World"	31	22	7	2	.710
"Film Daily"	46	30	10	6	.652
Reid ("News")	37	24	10	3	.645
"M.P. News" (total)	47	27	16	4	.572

SOURCE: Detail recreated from "Film Critics' Box Score," *Variety*, Sept. 14, 1927, 10, https://lantern.mediahist.org/catalog/variety87-1927-09_0064.

BOX 2. TRADE PAPERS' OPINIONS

(Indicating opinions as expressed without percentages)

	Total.	Good.	Bad.	No Opinion.
Variety	66	45	21	...
"M.P. News"	47	40	3	4
"Film Daily"	46	34	6	6
"Daily Review"	38	31	7	...
"M.P. World"	41	41	4	2

SOURCE: Recreated from "Film Critic's [sic] Box Score," *Variety*, Sept. 14, 1927, 10, https://lantern.mediahist.org/catalog/variety87-1927-09_0073.

Variety's timing for its pivot toward film proved prescient. As we will see in the next chapter, the transition to sound in the late 1920s was a period of convergence of different media industries, including music, theater, radio, and film.⁶⁶ This convergence worked to the advantage of *Variety's* titular emphasis. Motion pictures could bring stars, stories, numbers, and songs from across the different fields of American entertainment into a single medium for dissemination to the widest

possible audience. *Variety* also benefited from an enlarged marketplace of film rentals. In 1929, film distributors rented sound features, sound shorts, silent features, and silent shorts to exhibitors. More films in the marketplace required more advertising to sell them. During the film industry's transition to sound in 1928 and 1929, *Variety's* median quantity of film advertising skyrocketed from 1.625 pages per issue in 1924 to 15.5 pages in 1929. Put otherwise, *Variety's* advertising went from being 12.5 percent film-related in 1924, to 55 percent film-related in 1929, to 75 percent film-related in 1930.

But if *Variety* used the movie industry in the mid to late 1920s for its financial gain, then it's equally true that individuals within the movie industry found ways to use *Variety* for theirs. Since its inception, *Variety*, like the LA trade papers discussed earlier in this chapter, had benefited from the advertising dollars and publicity efforts of actors, who used the paper to promote their careers. Corporations had also attempted to use the trade press to legitimize and promote themselves, but this practice became especially significant during the late 1920s era of Wall Street-financed mergers and acquisitions and sound conversion. No one was more savvy in this regard than Joseph P. Kennedy, who used advertisements and positive news coverage in *Variety* to help him rebrand the companies he controlled (Film Booking Office and, later, Pathé) and then sell them for considerably more than the value of their physical assets.⁶⁷ Kennedy used *Variety* to sell himself and his companies, not simply the movies he had a hand in. Sime Silverman would later ask Kennedy to repay the favor when, in 1931, his paper was confronted by the Great Depression and a studio-backed plan to divert advertising away from *Variety*.

CONCLUSION

While the Hollywood studios were engaged in the production of *The Covered Wagon* (1923), *The Big Parade* (1927), and other silent features, the LA trade papers that chronicled those films and studios were participating in the production of Hollywood's cultures and communities. The plural—*cultures* and *communities*—is important here. In the late 1910s and early 1920s, *Camera!* distinguished between LA's community of movie people and the city's elites. But, within only a few years, *Film Mercury* and *Film Spectator* had found new fault lines to conceive of Hollywood—between artists and hokum merchants, between creatives and producers. And all of these trade papers, including *Camera!*, depended on a community of actors, writers, and directors seeking upward mobility within the industry as their advertising base. This was a community premised on aspiration—buying space for their faces and names to appear in front of the influential community that they desperately wanted to join.

The gossip, flair, and bold film criticism in the 1920s LA trade papers and *Variety* make them a pleasure to read today. But these same qualities—along with the

sheer number of publications competing for advertising dollars—made them a problem for the major film companies. The next several years would play out in ways that no one at the time could have anticipated. *Exhibitors Herald's* Martin J. Quigley would conspire with the major Hollywood studios to try to take over the LA business paper marketplace. And an upstart daily publication, *Hollywood Reporter*, would outmaneuver Quigley and all the existing LA publications at their own game.