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Shyon Baumann: Hollywood Highbrow

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Introduction: Drawing the Boundaries of Art

ALTHOUGH FILMS occupy a central place in American popular culture, that place is also, paradoxically, difficult to understand and characterize. Watching movies has been a major leisure and cultural activity for Americans for more than a hundred years. But for nearly the entire duration of their history, there has been an active debate about the movies and their merits. They have been criticized as dangerous, demeaning, dumb, and derivative, as regressive, blasphemous, sexist, racist, ageist, and ridiculous, among other things. But they have also been praised as enriching, enlightening, and enjoyable, as glorious, spectacular, ingenious, moving, and imaginative. Both the detractors and supporters of films have made their arguments well known.

The continuing disagreement concerning the place of films in American culture is a legacy of a number of monumental changes in the American film world over the last century. Some of these changes involve the methods of film production, while others involve the nature of the films themselves; still other changes involve the audiences for films. The primary subject of this book is the major historical change in the perception of films. By this I am not referring to revised opinions about particular films, though such revisions are also of interest. Instead, I mean *the creation of an understanding of the medium of film as a legitimate and serious artistic medium, and of a body of film works as being legitimate and serious works of art*. Moreover, in addition to this change in the perception of the medium of film, this book focuses more specifically on the changing perception of Hollywood films. Over time, a segment of the U.S. population developed and put forth a conventional (to them) understanding that many Hollywood films were serious works of art. This understanding stood in stark contrast to the prior conventional wisdom about the fundamental nature of Hollywood films, as a whole, as light entertainment.

It is thanks to this evolution in the perception of Hollywood films that we can now find among certain groups in society a willingness to intellectually engage with Hollywood films and to experience them as art. For example, the following paragraph led the review in the *New Yorker* for the film *Mystic River*:

Clint Eastwood has directed good movies in the past (“Unforgiven,” “A Perfect World”), but he has never directed anything that haunts

one's dreams the way "Mystic River" does. This extraordinary film, an outburst of tragic realism and grief, was shot in Catholic working-class Boston, a landscape of forlorn streets and brown shingle houses and battered cars. Yet there's nothing depressing about "Mystic River" as an experience of art. The movie has the bitter clarity and the heady exhilaration of new perceptions achieved after a long struggle, and one enjoys it not only for itself—it's fascinating from first shot to last—but as a breakthrough for Eastwood, who, at the age of seventy-three, may be just hitting his peak as a director. Based on a fine, scrupulous Dennis Lehane novel, "Mystic River" offers nothing less than a lucid detailing of malaise, a sense of fatality that slowly and stealthily expands its grasp throughout a community—a foul bloom taking over a garden. (Denby 2003:112)

Film critic David Denby was not alone in his praise for the film *Mystic River*, nor was he out of step with his approach to the film as a serious work of art. He was in agreement with many other film critics as well as with many audience members.

What makes this situation interesting historically, aesthetically, and sociologically is that there was a time when such a perspective would have been widely ridiculed by critics and public alike. Consider as examples the following passages. In a 1936 essay on the state of American films, William Allen White wrote about the place of movies in American society:

The best books, the best plays, the best music and the best poetry are written frankly for the discerning and the wise. The best in all other arts is conceived, produced, sold and lives or dies solely and with brutal frankness for the approval of the intelligent: in all the arts except in the movies. There, no artists, no directors, no writers, no theatres and no producers are set apart to please people of understanding. The Scarlet Muse of the silver screen sees only money, big money, quick money, the dirty money of her dupes. . . . [I]n all the movie world no place is provided where persons of wit or gumption may go to find screen entertainment that is directed at the discriminating. (White 1936:5–6)

In addition to its alleged lack of intelligence, the film industry was also condemned as the cause of American society's moral deterioration. "The movies today are the most important single destructive force in our civilization" (Freeman 1926:115, quoted in Beman 1931:86), claimed an author in the pages of *Educational Review*. It was the responsibility of art to ennoble. The movies, however, corrupted youth and molded society according to lascivious, shallow, vulgar, and materialistic standards and morals: "Socially pathological conditions are the result" (Young 1926:148), wrote one social scientist.

During the early decades of the twentieth century, there was a pervasive view of Hollywood resting near the bottom of a rigidly defined cultural hierarchy. Clearly, at some point the perception of Hollywood took a drastic turn. Understanding the reasons for this turn and its timing is the goal of this book.

THE CENTRAL ARGUMENT

The central argument of this book is that the legitimation of Hollywood film as art occurred mainly during the 1960s and was a process driven by three main factors. First, changes in American society over the course of the twentieth century opened up an opportunity space (DiMaggio 1992) in which an art world for film could develop. These changes occurred outside the field of film and include such social phenomena as the cultural consequences of the world wars and demographic, educational, and technological change within American society. The net effect of these developments was to create a social climate in which the cultural contradictions of film's claims to art were reduced and filmgoing could be practiced as an act of artistic appreciation.

Second, change from within the Hollywood film world brought that world more closely in line with other, established art worlds. Some of the most significant changes were the institutionalization of resources dedicated to film as art, such as the establishment of film festivals, the creation of the field of film studies, and the participation of directors in activities that advanced their standing as artists. Other crucial developments involved the evolution in film production and consumption practices such as a shift away from the studio system of production to a director-centered system, the growth of art house theaters, and the relaxation of film censorship. As a result of these changes, the production, distribution, teaching, and consumption of Hollywood film came to bear many important similarities to those of other legitimate art worlds.

Third, the art world for Hollywood film needed intellectual viability, and this requirement was met through the creation of a discourse of film as art and disseminated through film reviews, which were invented shortly after the invention of the cinema itself. But early film reviews employed a discourse of film in which reviewers evaluated films based on their entertainment value. During the 1960s, however, film reviewers began to employ a discourse of film as art that was characterized by a vocabulary and a set of critical devices that provided a way to talk about film as a sophisticated and powerful form of artistic communication.

This explanation fits squarely within the sociological perspective on art that emphasizes the social and collective nature of artistic production and

consumption. In this view, most strongly associated with the pioneering work of Howard Becker (1982), the place of cultural productions in society and their status as art are dependent on the development, to varying degrees of robustness, of an art world. That is not to say that the artistic content of cultural productions does not play a part—content does matter and not all cultural production can succeed as the basis for an art world. But it is also to say that the relative merits of cultural productions do not become the basis for assessing artistic status without the collective contribution of an art world. What this case study of Hollywood film adds to our understanding of art worlds is that their development is connected to the opportunities offered by the wider social context. Furthermore, although it is well understood that art worlds are organizational and institutional achievements, this case study demonstrates that they are also intellectual achievements. Because art is an intellectual field, there must be a set of ideas to explain and justify filmic productions as legitimate art. Film criticism, therefore, is a key to understanding how Hollywood films could be accepted as art.

HOW DO WE KNOW WHAT ART IS?

Before we can go any further in answering the question of how Hollywood film became art, we first need to discuss the definition of art. No one has yet found a way to settle every dispute over this question. In some cases there is widespread agreement—classical music, Impressionist paintings, Italian opera. In many other cases there is disagreement, as with handcrafted pottery, rap music, and Broadway musicals. In each case, however, there is an absence of clear and precise principles for making a judgment, and no amount of consensus can hide that fact. Art, by its very nature as an essentially aesthetic construct, is difficult to define. This difficulty is reflected in legal rulings in free-speech cases. Art is a form of communication, and so must be protected as a form of speech. But obscenity is harmful, and communities deserve protection from it. Some photographs, literature, sculptures, and films contain material or messages that some people think are obscene. Who is to say which of these cultural products are art and which are not? As a defining principle “I know it when I see it” is clearly inadequate because we all see it differently.

In fact, we often leave decisions about what is art to “cultural experts”—critics, academics, and other intellectuals, granting them a certain amount of authority. However, they do not always agree with one another. Each group of critics can try to convince the other to see the matter as it does, but in the end, from a logical standpoint, there is no foolproof way to decide who is right. To further complicate matters, even in cases

when critics do agree, there is no guarantee that the wider public will accept their judgment. Abstract art, for example, is clearly art in the minds of aestheticians and art critics. In the minds of many citizens, though, abstract art is fraudulent and worthless—it is painting, but it is not art. The question of how we decide what is art, then, becomes how cultural experts decide what is art, and why their judgments are accepted or resisted by the wider public.¹

Before we address this question for the case of Hollywood films, we need first to describe and understand exactly what film got transformed into. How do we understand the category of art? What makes art special and worthy of our admiration and of prestige? What is the definition of art?

This question has been debated by aestheticians for many centuries. The debate has generated a number of definitions, none of which, it turns out, has been free from devastating criticism. Nevertheless, we can gain some insight into the core concerns of art by reviewing the debate. An early definition was put forth by Leo Tolstoy (1995 [1898], p. 40) in one of his philosophical writings, *What Is Art?*: “Art is that human activity which consists in one man’s consciously conveying to others, by certain external signs, the feelings he has experienced, and in others being infected by those feelings and also experiencing them.” The communicative and emotional elements of art are clearly important, but they do not provide an airtight definition. For instance, Tolstoy’s definition seems to exclude those works that would inspire in audience members emotions unintended by the artist. It would also exclude works that were never exhibited to an audience—it appears that the potential for communication is not sufficient for Tolstoy. Such exclusions do not seem to square with intuitive notions of what art is.

More recently, philosopher Stephen Davies (1991:1) has distinguished between definitions that highlight what art does (“functionalist” definitions) and those that highlight the process by which art is created (“procedural” definitions). As he puts it succinctly, “The functionalist believes that, necessarily, an artwork performs a function or functions (usually, that of providing a rewarding aesthetic experience) distinctive to art. By contrast, the proceduralist believes that an artwork necessarily is created in accordance with certain rules and procedures.” To illustrate the difference, we can take the common reaction to the Sistine Chapel as the heart of the functionalist definition. The awe, admiration, and even reverence that it inspires in audiences are characteristic of art. Because it provides this function, it qualifies as art. The example par excellence of the proceduralist definition is Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain*. Submitting for exhibition a ready-made urinal as art in 1917, Duchamp upended artistic conventions about what art should be. The key to its status and the status of

other pieces like it as art is that they “are created by artists or others who have earned the authority to confer art status; they are discussed by critics; they are presented within the context of the Art world as objects for (aesthetic/artistic) appreciation; they are discussed by art historians; and so forth” (41).²

In addition to the philosophical approaches, the essence of art is variously claimed to be related to the biological aspects of its appreciation (see, e.g., Aiken 1998) and to psychological aspects of its appreciation (see, e.g., Arnheim 1986). The upshot of decades of work on nailing down a precise definition of art has been summarized by philosopher Nigel Warburton (2003:126): “We should probably stop wasting our time on the pursuit of some all-encompassing definition—there are better ways of spending a life, and the pursuit is almost certainly a futile one.”

Lucky for us, we are not seeking to make a definitive statement on art as a category, nor are we seeking to make an airtight case that Hollywood films are art. Our task is much different. We begin with the fact that a certain body of American film work is widely recognized as legitimate art. Therefore, our understanding of art for the purposes of this book is that very same understanding put forth by the intellectuals and supporters of Hollywood films. Despite the fact that most films are considered entertainment, there is a body of Hollywood output that is consecrated on account of a set of characteristics that sets it apart as genuine art. Different film scholars have valorized Hollywood films for myriad reasons. In my reading of the literature, the perspective of those who have supported the view of Hollywood films as art can be characterized in the following way. What makes these films art is their beauty (in a purely aesthetic, and largely visual, sense); their innovation with or perfection of filmic conventions (dealing with all aspects of creation, such as editing, cinematography, art direction, screenwriting, acting, etc.); their communication of messages (advocating political views or philosophies of life, or raising questions); and their status as the expressive products of specific artists (mostly directors). They are art, therefore, because they succeed on one or more levels, concerning their aesthetic characteristics, their relationship to other films, their communicative dimension, or their place within a recognized oeuvre.

The acknowledgement of some Hollywood films as art is an act that transforms them into a special form of culture deserving honor and prestige. This category has a twofold relationship to high status. On the one hand, high status is a characteristic that art possesses. On the other hand, high status is also something that art bestows on its creators and audiences. Knowledge of and appreciation for good art can generate high status for individuals. That is to say, art lends itself to function as cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984). It is this special and powerful categorization of

culture that Hollywood films can now aspire to, even if they often fail to achieve it.

The core question at this point is, *How* did a body of Hollywood films (though not all) gain this recognition as art? Depending on one's intellectual leanings, this question might be largely philosophical or sociological. From a philosophical standpoint, the question encourages a focus on the logical foundation for a categorization of Hollywood films as art. The quality of the films, therefore, is central to the explanation of their status as art. In contrast, a sociological standpoint encourages a focus on the social conditions of the production and consumption of Hollywood films. The social context, rather than the quality of the films, is privileged in the sociological explanation of their status as art.³

There is no denying that the changing characteristics of Hollywood films are relevant to understanding how an art world developed for them in the 1960s. Nevertheless, this book presents a sociological perspective, arguing that the coalescence of a novel perspective among a large group of people is a social process that lends itself more readily to sociological analysis than aesthetic analysis. To explain how an art world developed for Hollywood films, we need to consider the long-term evolution in the social conditions of film production and consumption. Rather than an examination of a snapshot in time, we are looking instead for the *story* of film's valorization as art, and that is a story that spans the full record of commercial cinema in the United States.

AMERICAN FILM HISTORY

In order to explain the recognition of art in Hollywood films, this book will draw on evidence from the entire historical period of American movies. Because of its youth relative to most other art forms, there are advantages to taking film as a case study to address the question of how we decide what is art. The information available for film is more complete (though certainly not entirely complete) than for other, older art forms. This brief description of film history will provide a time line of some of the most important events in the film world to give the reader an idea of the time period under review and the long-term nature of the development of artistic status.

Most sources trace the beginning of commercial cinema to 1896, the year when Thomas Edison first projected motion pictures for the paying public's consumption in New York City (for descriptions of the beginning of cinema see Mast 1981, Pearson 1996; Rhode 1976; Sklar 1994).⁴ The many devices necessary for motion pictures had slowly developed over the previous decades, with innovations coming from both sides of the

Atlantic. Yet it was Edison who secured the key patents that allowed him to profit from the use of this new technology for public exhibitions. Just as innovations were slow in coming before commercial cinema, the nature of commercial cinema, at both the levels of technology and film content, evolved incrementally over the next few decades.

One of the first major developments in the film world occurred in the realm of exhibition. There was an explosion in the number of places of exhibition as public demand increased in the first several years of the twentieth century. Many small stores and restaurants were converted by their owners into nickelodeons, whose name came from the nickel price of admission. For reasons that will be explained later, nickelodeons were most common in working-class and immigrant neighborhoods, as filmgoing started off as a primarily working-class leisure activity. Demand outstripped supply of the one-reel films that the hundreds of individual producers were making, often with just a handful of technical and creative workers.

By the second decade of the twentieth century, certain groups, such as religious organizations and women's associations, were concerned about the potential for films to corrupt public morals. The popularity of the industry had continued to increase, and the power of visual imagery lent a sense of urgency to the movement to regulate the kind of material the public consumed. The first calls for censorship came from these groups who demanded that all films be screened and approved before gaining license for exhibition. In the first legal challenge to film censorship in 1915, the Supreme Court determined that films did not merit First Amendment protection, classifying them with shows and spectacles and outside of the realm of free speech. In order to gain some measure of control over the inevitable censorship, the film industry, which had begun to coalesce into a smaller number of major studios, offered to self-regulate its content. By the early 1920s the industry created the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors Association, a semi-autonomous organization charged with ensuring that films would conform to a range of moral strictures.

Meanwhile, film content had evolved significantly. While the earliest films were short, often ten minutes or less, and had the purpose of showing images as a spectacle, films soon became lengthier and began to tell a story. David Wark Griffith is most often credited with having created a "film grammar," a set of technical innovations and dramatic techniques (e.g., the closeup shot and cross-cut editing) with his 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation*. By the 1920s the division of labor in filmmaking had become extensive. The technical expertise and financial capital required complex organizations to create efficiently and effectively the large number of films the market demanded. The studio system, which managed the large

amount of required technical and creative expertise while keeping costs down, developed as the dominant mode of film production.

During this same decade the idea that film was a legitimate artistic medium became popular among a large number of European intellectuals. This sentiment was most intensively and widely held in France, where it was disseminated to the wider public. The acceptance at that time of film, specifically European films, as art was facilitated by the conditions of production and consumption in Europe. These conditions bore many similarities to those governing other art forms there. Such was not the case in the United States, where conditions of film production and consumption were strikingly dissimilar to those of high culture. Film started out as the new entertainment for the masses—it was inexpensive and concentrated in urban areas, often in working-class and immigrant neighborhoods. While there was limited recognition among a small number of American intellectuals that European films could be understood as art, this favor was not extended to Hollywood productions. The dominant discourse of American film appreciation was unequivocal—films were fun, but not challenging.

The introduction of sound into theaters in 1928 only added to the popularity of the cinema. Average weekly attendance estimates for that time generally range from 70 to 90 million. Filmgoing had become more common among the middle class, but the audience was still mostly working class. Attendance dropped during the Depression, but by the end of the 1930s was back in the range of 90 million per week. This level was maintained until the end of World War II. During the 1930s small advances in the status of Hollywood films were made as the major studios attempted to “upgrade” their product—through opulent theaters and through prestige, epic productions—in order to appeal to more of the middle class. These efforts helped to reposition Hollywood film as sometimes eligible for middlebrow artistic status.

By the 1950s the American film industry was undergoing enormous changes. Partly because of the growing popularity of television, and partly because of changing lifestyles associated with the baby boom, the audience for film was quickly shrinking and would continue to do so, irreversibly, for the next twenty years. This economic crisis for the film industry was compounded by a significant legal development. In 1948 the Supreme Court had found that the vertical integration of the industry, whereby five major studios produced, distributed, and exhibited most of the country’s films, impeded competition. The studios were forced to divest themselves of their theater chains, a change that was to have far-reaching consequences for how films were made and financed over the following decades. In 1952 the Supreme Court decided a case in the film industry’s favor when it reversed its 1915 censorship decision and declared that film

was indeed a form of communication protected by the First Amendment. Over the next fifteen years, with help from a variety of court cases and from changing mores, the strict censorship governing American film production eroded, resulting in the basic labeling scheme that exists today.

Also in the 1950s, French intellectuals who were already comfortable with understanding film as art applied this aesthetic disposition to Hollywood films. They had developed a theory for explaining and evaluating film, auteur theory, and employed it to analyze Hollywood films. This theory holds that the director is the driving artistic force behind film production. In the early 1960s auteur theory and other elements of artistic analysis were imported into American film discourse.

The importation of auteur theory was one of a large number of radical changes in the American film world in the 1960s. It was a time of economic uncertainty, when attendance was decreasing dramatically and when the traditional production methods were being discarded as the film studios looked for ways to regain profitability. It was also a period during which the films being made changed, as they took on some European sensibilities and also reflected the social upheavals of American society. The 1960s were a crucial period of rapid and extensive growth of an art world for Hollywood films. Film scholarship is virtually unanimous in describing that decade as the time when the idea that Hollywood films could be art gained wide currency. This recognition meant that American films deserved to be approached with an open mind, not dismissed out of hand. Artists could work within the medium of film to create works of art that were due the respect and honor accorded to the fine arts. Writing for the National Association of Theatre Owners, Barbara Stones describes the transition in perceptions of film: “For most of the public, movies were pure entertainment, a chance to get out, relax and share in some on-screen excitement. Beginning in the 1960s a wholesale shift in attitude about American films occurred. Movies were somehow taken more seriously and elevated to the status of ‘film literature’ ” (1993:201). It is the “shift” or “change in attitude,” a growing agreement on whether film could be art, that needs to be explained, and it is the “somehow” that needs to be specified as factors that can be shown to have brought about the transformation.

The perception of European films as art had already taken hold, and I argue that they led the way for the intellectualization of Hollywood films. When the growth of television and other factors caused a dramatic decline in filmgoing, a “status vacuum” was created. The strong links to the working and middle classes were weakened, and films were available for cultural redefinition. The time was right for their consecration as art, and it was in the 1960s that an art world for Hollywood films developed in the United States. The perception that Hollywood films could be art gained

currency among certain segments of the public at that time. Moreover, the institutionalization of a fine-art view of film created a feedback effect whereby filmmakers—and the studios that underwrote films—were encouraged to make the kinds of films that would win appreciation within the art world for film. The incentive structure had become more favorable for the production of artistic films and was also self-reinforcing.

The size of the film audience stabilized by 1970 at approximately 17 to 20 million average weekly attendances. Although the art world for Hollywood film was still vibrant into the mid-1970s, it was also at that time that film production entered the “blockbuster” era, when the predominant strategy involved spending vast sums of money to make a smaller number of films in a gamble that one incredibly successful film could make enough profit to more than compensate for the unsuccessful films. Despite the uncertainty and change that the film industry has experienced in recent decades, and especially in recent years, the blockbuster strategy still serves film studios, if not film exhibitors, quite well.

Two factors that have helped the film industry are favorable market regulations and technological advancements. During the 1990s, media regulations in the United States were relaxed to allow for greater concentration of ownership. While studio ownership by conglomerates is not new—Gulf+Western (now defunct) bought Paramount Pictures (since sold) in 1966—the industrywide concentration of media production into a few enormous media corporations is a more recent phenomenon. Moreover, these media giants have global reach. As one of the most profitable and important American export industries, media producers have successfully lobbied the federal government to negotiate advantageous international trade agreements. The protectionist strategies of previous decades, designed both to bolster domestic film industries and to defend national cultures, are largely eroded and no longer impede Hollywood profits. Recent figures from the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) (Motion Picture Association Worldwide Market Research 2006) indicate that domestic box-office receipts were \$9.49 billion in 2006, and international box-office receipts were over \$25.82 billion. Globalization appears to be working well for the film studios.

There is considerable uncertainty about the future health of theatrical exhibition on account of the technological innovations that have increased home film viewing. The growth of VCR ownership in the 1980s initially provoked fear and suspicion among the major film studios. Although they had been afraid that watching of videocassettes at home would erode theatrical admissions, they eventually found that the home-video market added to, rather than detracted from, their profits. The market for DVDs has proved to be more profitable yet, and while theatrical admissions appear to be declining—probably for the long term—the reve-

nues from licensing films for the home-entertainment market now provide the majority of profits for the studios (Epstein 2005:19; Weinberg 2005:166) and have made studios more profitable than before (Manly 2005). So, while some *exhibitors* are encountering financial difficulties, likely due to consumers' increasing reliance on other modes of film viewing such as VHS, DVD, and cable television, the *film studios* appear to be benefiting from an increase in the ways that consumers can see films.

This beneficial relationship with technological advances does not hold, of course, for those technologies that allow viewers to break intellectual property laws. From counterfeit DVDs to theatrical camcorder piracy to illegal downloading over the Internet, there are many ways that viewers can see films without the studios receiving any revenue. These studios are naturally gravely concerned, and they are vigorously fighting piracy through copy protection technologies, successful lobbying for strong intellectual property laws, and aggressive prosecution of companies and individuals who test the boundaries of those laws. In addition, they are participating in new online business ventures to provide legal downloads of movies. If these ventures are successful, they will have taken a potentially threatening technology and turned it into a powerful tool to contribute to revenues.

Fighting piracy has risen to the top of the agenda of the Motion Picture Association of America. While the challenges presented by piracy are significant, the MPAA clearly believes that the movie business can remain viable for its member studios if they continue to protect their revenue streams.

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF ART

Social constructionism is a perspective that holds that the categories and definitions we use to perceive and to understand the world are molded by cultural forces. Rather than objectively representing enduring truths and realities, the concepts we routinely employ to organize our thoughts and to communicate are shaped through social processes.

This view is not tantamount to a denial of objective reality. To say that art—the concept that this book happens to be about—is socially constructed is not to question whether it truly exists. Art exists; there are things in the world that are art and things in the world that are not art. This distinction, however, between art and non-art is frequently understood as obvious and is taken for granted. The fact that Shakespeare's *Othello*, for example, is real art is a given for us, as is the given that the messages inside store-bought greeting cards are not art.

A social constructionist perspective throws into question the taken-for-granted status of *Othello* as art and greeting cards as non-art. It encourages us to question why we draw the line where we do. Is distinguishing between art and non-art as simple as recognizing *Othello*'s innate qualities as inherently superior? Few would dispute that *Othello* has many qualities that are superior to a greeting card. However, the judging of qualities as better or worse is a normative exercise, not a logical one. Something is better than something else only in reference to a set of standards, and the particular standards we employ to judge culture are arbitrary. And so we judge *Othello* to be art in part because it makes smart and sophisticated comments about human nature in language that shows a formidable mastery of poetic conventions. But *must* these be the standards for identifying art? Could we not just as easily insist on others? The accessibility of the greeting card and the precision of its mechanical production generate negative evaluations, but why could we not just as easily view these qualities as positive instead? There is no logical reason why not, but the fact is, our culture arbitrarily assigns a negative value to these qualities in order to distinguish art from non-art.

The merit of the social constructionist viewpoint is clear when we try to understand why art is different across space and time. The line between art and non-art is drawn in very different places in different societies, and at different times within a single society. These different understandings of art reflect different standards for distinguishing art from non-art. When European explorers first encountered tribal masks in Africa, they did not consider them art. Today there is a vibrant market for African art as a fine art genre (Rawlings 2001). The art did not change, but the standards did.

To take a social constructionist viewpoint at all times would be mentally exhausting. Everyday thinking would be unbearably inefficient because we would be caught up in examining the various possible alternative ways that we could be thinking about the world. For the sake of efficiency, then, the concepts we use every day assume the guise of objective reality. It then becomes very easy to forget that the ways we understand the world are not perfect reflections of an independent truth. When we employ a concept like "art," it is useful for how it distinguishes those relatively few things in the world that are art from the vastly larger number of things that are not. It is the difference we focus on, and we ignore the fuzziness of the boundary. With a social constructionist viewpoint it is relatively easy to put the focus back on the fuzziness. The average store-bought greeting card, for example, is not art, but what if the card quotes a rhyming couplet from Shakespeare? Or what if the front of the card reproduces one of Monet's paintings? What if the card is handmade rather than mechanically produced?

A corollary of a social constructionist view of art is that cultural hierarchy—or the divisions between highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow culture—is also socially constructed. Our concept of art is complex enough to allow for these rankings, but these distinctions are equally arbitrary. Their existence begs the question of how various cultural productions are ranked. Why is opera highbrow while comic books are lowbrow? To answer the question of how rankings are created and maintained, it is necessary to look past the content of cultural productions to the conditions under which art is created, distributed, evaluated, and consumed. This stance within the sociology of art is called the “production perspective” (Peterson 1994). Only by examining artistic production and reception as social processes can we understand the socially constructed nature of cultural hierarchy and of artistic status. DiMaggio puts it succinctly: “even though systems of cultural classification present themselves as based on natural and enduring judgments of value, they are products of human action, continually subject to accretion and erosion, selection and change” (1992:43).

THE CREATION OF ARTISTIC STATUS: OPPORTUNITY, INSTITUTIONS, AND IDEOLOGY

With the above intellectual orientation in mind, what is the explanation for how an art world for film developed? Previous research on cultural hierarchy and artistic status provides a starting point for explaining film’s redefinition as art, or what Peterson (1994:179) would call film’s “aesthetic mobility.” I propose a framework for explaining the creation of artistic status for film that is based on a synthesis of findings from an array of previous studies. Within this literature I identify three main factors that sociologists of culture rely on to explain the public acceptance of a cultural product as art—(1) an opportunity space, (2) institutionalized resources and activities, and (3) intellectualization through discourse.

The first factor is *the creation of an opportunity space through social change outside the art world in question*. DiMaggio (1992:44) contends that whether a cultural genre succeeds in earning recognition as art “has depended on the shape of the opportunity space (the existence of competitors, commercial substitutes, or publics and patrons of new wealth) and the point in time at which such projects take shape, which determines the preexisting discursive and organizational resources available for imitation.” He applies the concept of opportunity space to the case of theater, opera, and the dance. In the case of theater, DiMaggio claims that the advent of film altered the market conditions for dramatic entertainment. Film quickly grew into a popular form of drama, a role the theater had

served. With the increased competition at the lowbrow end of the spectrum, theater was encouraged to change its format and to serve as a higher form of drama, a change that was facilitated by the presence of the models established by operas, museums, and symphonies available for emulation. DiMaggio acknowledges that an explanation for aesthetic mobility must consider not only events within an art world, but also events that occur outside an art world, for the timing of these events helps to define what an art world can accomplish. Other authors have cited the importance of a favorable opportunity space, created by events outside of art worlds, in explaining the aesthetic mobility of opera and Shakespearean plays (Levine 1988), literature (Beisel 1992), and “serious” classical music in Vienna (De Nora 1991) and the United States (Mueller 1951).

In the case of Hollywood film, the opportunity space for an art world for film grew enormously during the 1960s. Just as the advent of film changed the opportunity space for dramatic theater, the advent of television did the same for film. Television took on the mantle of the entertainment for the masses that had previously been worn by film. Moreover, television siphoned off disproportionately high numbers of the working-class audience for film. Many audience members also abandoned film when the baby boom began in the 1940s and continued into the 1960s. Some audience members dropped out while they exploited other leisure options made available through rising national levels of prosperity. At the same time, the number of young people in college was growing rapidly, providing a pool of highly educated patrons who would become the “film generation.” Through these changes outside the film world, a new context for film appreciation emerged. By the 1960s, filmgoing was no longer just an easy way to pass the evening hours. Because society had evolved in certain ways, filmgoing had become a significant cultural activity.

The second of these factors is *the institutional arrangements underlying the production, exhibition, and appreciation of art, as well as the various activities and practices carried out in those institutional settings*. Perhaps the best illustration of such factors can be found in Becker’s (1982) thorough analysis of the importance of organizations and networks in art worlds. He views the creation of art as collective action. For art to succeed, a coordinated effort is necessary on the part of a large number of people performing different functions. While the artist is at the center of the art world, the participation of collaborators of many different kinds is essential for art to maintain its status as art. For example, a novelist’s work is edited by an editor, promoted by a publisher, reviewed by book reviewers, and taught by literature professors. In this light, he explains the creation of an art world as an instance of successful collective action. “The history of art deals with innovators and innovations that won organizational victories, succeeding in creating around themselves the appa-

tus of an art world, mobilizing enough people to cooperate in regular ways that sustained and furthered their idea” (Becker 1982:301).

A number of authors have found that creating institutions and mobilizing resources are integral to art world formation. Levine (1988) argues that the establishment of separate groups of performers and separate theaters and halls for drama, opera, and symphonic music was a necessary step in the elevation of these entertainments to the status of art. DiMaggio (1982) argues that a group of “cultural entrepreneurs” in nineteenth-century Boston acted on behalf of the upper and upper-middle classes to create a high culture of symphonic music, painting, and sculpture separate from popular culture. Through trustee-governed nonprofit enterprises, the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the Museum of Fine Arts, these well-placed “cultural capitalists” and artistic “experts” achieved the organizational separation of high from popular culture. DiMaggio also argues that the model established by classical music and the visual arts was adopted by practitioners and patrons of theater, opera, and aesthetic dance (1992). Each genre embraced the trustee-governed nonprofit organizational form. White and White (1965) argue that the development of a new system of artistic distribution and appreciation, that of dealers and critics in opposition to the existing “academic system,” enabled the ascendance of the Impressionist movement in France.

In a similar fashion, the art world for American film was founded on a complex arrangement of institutional supports, film production, and consumption practices. This arrangement organized the American film world into a field where film could be produced and exhibited as an art form in its own right. For example, the economic pressures that led to the creation of hundreds of small, independent art-house theaters helped to nurture avant-garde and controversial film production. The establishment of film festivals in the 1960s such as the New York Film Festival and the Chicago International Film Festival provided prestige and visibility for film as art. Likewise, the creation of academic programs of study at such places as New York University and UCLA provided status and resources for framing film as art. Moreover, the changing economics of film production in the 1960s shifted the mode of filmmaking away from the assembly line of big studio productions toward a director-centered model that resembles the production of other art forms.

While institution building is an activity common to a wide range of fields, the third and final main factor I identify is specific to cultural or symbol-producing fields. This factor is *the grounding of value and legitimacy in critical discourse*.⁵ Ferguson (1998) makes the case for the crucial role of the intellectualization of a cultural product in the development of a cultural field.⁶ The explanation for the role of intellectualization relies on Bourdieu’s (1993) concept of a “field” of cultural production, which

focuses on the relations between cultural producers and consumers, who are sometimes one and the same. A cultural field (also applicable to intellectual endeavors outside the boundaries of art) comes into being when cultural production begins to enjoy autonomy from other existing fields in terms of the type of capital available to cultural producers. In any given field, actors engage in competition for capital. To the extent that there is a distinct form of symbolic capital available to consecrate cultural products of a particular genre, the field is autonomous. For example, the literary field has achieved a high degree of autonomy; it offers prestigious prizes and critical success that constitute the symbolic capital that may serve as an alternative to economic capital for authors. Ferguson (1998:600) persuasively argues that it is through texts that the field of cultural production is extended “well beyond immediate producers and consumers” and is transformed into an “intellectual phenomenon.” The development of a field-specific aesthetic both provides a rationale for accepting the definition of a cultural product as art and offers analyses for particular products.

The ideological component of the creation of artistic status is cited by some of the same authors who recognize the institutional and organizational factors. Both Levine (1988) and DiMaggio (1982; 1992) argue that academics and aesthetes developed a sacralizing ideology to legitimate various forms of high culture. Peterson (1972) and Lopes (2002) both cite the development of a group of professional jazz critics and academic students of jazz as a driving factor behind the elevation of jazz. White and White (1965) argue that the development of a new system of artistic distribution and appreciation enabled the ascendance of the Impressionist movement in France. A system of dealers and critics arose to challenge the existing academic system. The critics provided a new ideology for evaluating the careers of Impressionist painters that legitimated claims of genius in their work. DeNora (1991) contends that an ideology of “serious” classical music was formulated by the Viennese aristocracy when the bourgeoisie became wealthy enough to threaten the aristocracy’s monopoly on classical music concerts.

In each of these studies, there is a compelling argument that intellectualization by cultural specialists helps to legitimate cultural products that entertain as art. However, there is very little systematic data evinced to support these arguments. Such evidence would take the form of a content analysis of the ideas and language that intellectuals and art experts employ to explain and interpret the cultural products under study. This evidence is available for film, and the analysis offered below will show how film critics in the 1960s adopted a discourse that treated film as art. The intellectualization of film involved referring to select directors as “masters” of film, interpreting the messages inherent in even the most popular

of films, and contextualizing the evaluation of films through genre or oeuvre comparisons, as well as other linguistic and critical devices.

Elements of the tripartite explanatory framework outlined above—opportunity space, institutionalized resources and activities, and intellectualizing discourse—can be found in previous case studies of transitions from entertainment to art. However, no author has previously articulated a general schema that can be widely applied to cases of the creation of artistic status. I call the above schema *the legitimation framework* and I argue that it can explain the artistic legitimation of not only Hollywood film but of other artistic media as well.

The aim of this book, however, is to explain how Hollywood films became widely viewed as art. The significance of the legitimation framework is to organize the historical forces at play so that we can understand their respective contributions to the art world for Hollywood film.

As a researchable phenomenon, the perceptions of film over the century, like many historical events and developments, are complex in origin and their changes involve reference to a wide array of developments, actions, and events. The legitimation of film as art involves not simply a shift from entertainment to art, but several related social processes. These include upward status mobility of the entire genre of film; the retrospective canonization of old Hollywood; the differentiation of various strains of production (European, serious Hollywood, experimental, blockbuster); and the creation of critical communities around restricted “cult” genres.

This book seeks to tell as complete as possible a story of the most important developments in the social history of film as found in film history scholarship. There is bound to be disagreement over which elements of American film history should be accorded the greatest significance in helping chart a course toward acceptance as art. Nonetheless, I hope readers find the plot of this story, to borrow the terms of the industry itself, original, compelling, and, most of all, convincing.

OUTLINE OF THE CHAPTERS

There are many ways to tell a story, chronologically being the most common because it corresponds to everyone’s personal experiences—we live chronologically. However, it is not always the best way to make a convincing argument, especially when the argument is complicated. Because I want to show how various factors were important to the legitimation of film in very different ways, this book tells the story of the art world for American film according to an analytical sequence, specifically a legitimation framework.

The first part of the analysis, presented in chapter 2, considers the historical events that contributed to the changing of the opportunity space for film. Drawing on the large body of film history scholarship, comparisons are drawn between the American context and several European contexts. Among the cases I review, there is covariation between the timing, on the one hand, of the acceptance of film as art, and, on the other hand, of key developments outside the field of film. The evidence suggests that these changes in opportunity space influenced the perception of film as art. The argument also relies on information gained from historical statistics. The focus in this chapter is on developments outside the film world, particularly the development of competitors to and substitutes for filmgoing, the growing pool of educated film viewers, and changing intellectual currents.

The study continues in the third chapter with a review of the changing institutional arrangements and practices through which film was created, exhibited, and evaluated. Drawing again on both film history scholarship and historical statistics, and also compiling statistics from electronic archives, chapter 3 focuses primarily on changes within the film world. The major changes examined are film production practices, exhibition venues, censorship restrictions, film festivals, ties to academia, and directors' self-promotion. This chapter also draws comparisons between the American case and several European cases and capitalizes on the differences between them to better understand the influence of specific changes within the film world.

The fourth chapter examines the role that intellectuals, primarily film critics, played in the redefinition of film as art. This issue encourages a different methodological strategy. Content analyses of film and book reviews and film and book advertisements provide systematic data for assessing the influence of critics on common understanding of film as well as for identifying and measuring the constitutive elements of an intellectualizing discourse. Comparisons between film and literature help us to see how discourse can influence artistic status by justifying aesthetic claims and conventions to the wider public. By providing the vocabulary and analytic techniques, film critics made an artistic approach to Hollywood films possible for the reading public.

The final chapter sets out the argument in an integrated fashion and then explores the implications of this study for several strands of research in the sociology of culture. First, it points to key concerns for the social construction of artistic status and offers an explanation for why film does not enjoy the same degree of legitimacy as highbrow genres such as opera or painting. Second, it discusses film consumption practices as a form of cultural capital, linking film appreciation and class politics. Third, it elaborates on the significance of an intellectualizing discourse in artistic

legitimation. Fourth, it draws together the causal factors, which were artificially disentangled for the sake of analysis, in Hollywood's legitimation. Fifth, it discusses the applicability of the lessons learned here for understanding processes of legitimation in other cultural realms, such as science and law. Last, it evaluates theories of cultural hierarchy and the dynamics of cultural fields in light of the findings for film. I argue that the redefinition of Hollywood films must be understood as a product of both the focused activities of particular actors and larger structural change. Part of the explanation for the changing status of Hollywood films lies with the concerted (and sincere) efforts to change people's minds about whether Hollywood films were art. But the explanation must also be found with a complex course of events that were unrelated to questions of the status of Hollywood films. In essence, historical accidents are key to understanding the story.

Through film history scholarship, much is known about the historical facts of American film production and reception. This book adds little to our knowledge of facts and so it is not a work of history per se. Rather, it is a work of analysis—the major goal is to uncover the significance of already known facts and to fashion an explanation for the question of how films became art. This book, then, explores the relationships between these facts and cultural hierarchy. Some historical work was required, however. The investigation of changes in film reviews and advertisements required archival work with primary sources. This data collection was necessitated by the need for systematic samples for quantitative analysis. All other parts of the analysis were accomplished through reference to the vast body of existing film history scholarship. Despite this robust and fascinating literature, the sociology of art in general has neglected the social history of American film and film criticism. This book is an effort to increase, from a sociological perspective, our understanding of the classification of film in the United States over the past century and hence to understand the ideological and organizational foundations of the valuation of art.