

Paper presented at “Public Spheres and American Cultures” Conference
June 4-6, 2004
Brown University

The Image of Hollywood Moguls: the Missing Private Sphere

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The Hollywood “pioneers” who started up the American film industry were mainly Jews and first generation immigrants. The fascination these men still exert on cinema lovers today is certainly due to the power they had in constructing their own public image. Their achievements in the entertainment industry were accompanied by a projected image of their powerful *persona* and by a strict control of discourse about themselves. They put a great deal of effort into moulding their personalities and style of public appearance as a means of coping with their own divided identities. The example of Harry Cohn, co-founder, head of production and later president of Columbia Pictures, is emblematic. It demonstrates how, for these immigrants, heading a Studio and constructing one’s self-representation were very closely interconnected. It also shows how for this minority group identity politics concerned almost exclusively the public sphere.

Carl Laemmle, William Fox, Harry Cohn, Louis B. Mayer, Jack and Harry Warner, Adolph Zukor, the protagonists of the rise of the American film industry, were referred to as *moguls* and *tycoons*. These words were commonly used by the press and by those affiliated with the film milieu. With their strong connotation of power and dominion in their respective etymologies, these appellatives are associated with Eastern and Far-Eastern cultures. Their exotic flavor and the association with remote empires and dynasties are inherent in a jargon that took root from the birth of the industry. Later on, this jargon passed into the historiography and biographical works

related to Hollywood. Such narrative modes, whether academic or addressing a non-specialist readership, drew directly from a well-established imagery that the moguls themselves sanctioned. Around the end of the 1960s written texts, films and documentaries on the lives of these pioneers began to proliferate and develop into a genre. Such biographies are the product of Hollywood's myth-making about Hollywood. With their hyperbolic style, these works sometimes emulate, sometimes parody the narratives recounting the epic deeds of great men of the past.¹ They work as a legitimation of the Hollywood pioneers, and propagate the narratives that they more or less consciously promoted about themselves.

That the moguls' *self-representation* only addressed the public sphere is part of their specific history. What is enticing in the figure of the mogul is not the private sphere (which is an attraction specific to the *star*, the actor, the performer), but his pioneering work in American entertainment and his grandiose life. The mythical character of this public imaginary rests on the idea that what the moguls created was an actual empire. Their rise from the lowly status of immigrants to the rank of leaders of the mass communications industry, with its aura of glamour and myth, transformed them into the princes and kings of the American Dream. This idea still endures today, as shown by the recent documentary inspired by Neal Gabler's famous book, *An Empire of Their Own*. What the moguls created from the 1910s to the 1940s, Gabler specifies, was a successful alternative to the elitarian milieu of American society and industry, which excluded Jewish immigrants on the basis of class and race. This

¹ This is reflected by the titles of many of these works. See N.J. Zierold, *The Hollywood Tycoons* (London: Hamilton, 1969) and *The Moguls* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1969). Zierold is the author of many Hollywood biographies. In 1991 he published *The Moguls: Hollywood's Merchants of Myth* (Los Angeles: Silman-James Press, 1991; Hollywood: S. French Trade, 1991). See also P. French, *The Movie Moguls, an Informal History of the Hollywood Tycoons* (London: Weidenfield & Nicolson, 1969); K. Anger, *Hollywood Babylon* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1975); G. Kanin, *Hollywood, Stars and Starlets, Tycoons and Flesh-Peddlers, Moviemakers and Moneymakers, Frauds and Geniuses, Hopefuls and Has-beens, Great Lovers and Sex Symbols* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1984); N. Gabler, *An Empire of the Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1988).

emergent group constituted an alternative hierarchy to the elitarians, but was no less mythic or regal.

Self-representation not only uses verbal and written means, like literature or film. It also works through non-discursive means, such as the style of an actor or a singer,² and his/her behavior in public. In the case of the moguls, the effort to produce and control their own image was mediated through clothes, appearance, and entourage on public occasions. More important, these men fashioned themselves by creating products of mass entertainment and practicing specific entrepreneurial policies which placed them at the center of a system of exchange with the American public. Such actions functioned as mediators between the moguls' position as outsiders and the attainment of their American success.

Cinema gave these men the power to communicate with the American masses. Having access and control over the discursive means of influencing the community, they held a power bound to discourse. Michael Foucault maintains that discourse does not simply translate struggles or systems of domination, but is what people and systems fight for, as well as the means through which they fight: discourse is the power they struggle to attain.³ In other words, discourse is not only the expression of power, but also power itself. Obviously, for the moguls such power was subject to negotiation with the rules, myths and constraints of society, with dominant social structures and ideology. Entertainment allowed to these men a way out.

The "marriage" of Jews and entertainment was a key to the transformation of Jewish self-representation. Until the end of the 1940s, Hollywood represented the Jews, like other minorities, through stereotypes (in the silent era, Jewish characters were poor peddlers, crafty merchants or blood-thirsty Shylock-types) or through stories

² The performer's "style" refers to his/her movement on the stage and relation to the public, how he/she addresses the audience.

³ M. Foucault, *L'ordre du discours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970).

of the ghetto (folkloristic situations where the ghetto gave color to melodramas or comedies such as *The Cohens and the Kellys*⁴ or *Abie's Irish Rose* [V. Fleming, 1928]). The ghetto movies portrayed humorous or sentimental scenes of everyday life in the immigrant quarters, where minorities of different ethnic origin mingled and clashed. This mode of representation persisted until Jewish stories developed into full-fledged "American" stories, in which a Jewish character became an emblematic embodiment of American success by becoming a great entertainer, an actor, a singer, or a musician: a representative of popular national culture. This was the paradigm of the representation of Jewish subjects who were positive and acceptable to the general public.

In the first decades of the sound era, when Jewish subjects were still banned from the screens, Hollywood producers and studio heads opted for celebrating Jewish stories emblematic of show-business, but otherwise obscured themselves as Jews or avoided representing themselves through films. Apart from the films interpreted by Al Jolson, in the mid and late 1920s (of which *The Jazz Singer* [A. Crossland, 1927], was the most famous⁵), it was not until the mid 1940s that films on famous Jewish performers and musicians established a genre, with examples like *Rhapsody in Blue* (I. Rapper, 1945), a biopicture on George Gershwin; *The Jolson Story* (A.E. Green, 1946) and *Jolson Sings Again* (H. Levin, 1949); *The Eddie Cantor Story* (A.E. Green, 1953); and other biopics of non-Jewish artists, such as *Night and Day* (M. Curtiz, 1946) on Cole Porter. There are also sporadic examples of films representing the industry's

⁴ A series of films produced by Universal between 1926 and 1933: *The Cohens and Kellys* (H. Pollard, 1926), *The Cohens and Kellys in Paris* (W. Beaudine, 1928), *The Cohens and Kellys in Atlantic City* (W.J. Craft, 1929), *The Cohens and Kellys in Africa* (V. Moore, 1930), *The Cohens and Kellys in Scotland* (W.J. Craft, 1930), *The Cohens and Kellys in Hollywood* (J.F. Dillon, 1932), *The Cohens and Kellys in Trouble* (G. Stevens, 1933).

⁵ This film marked an epoch of transition (coinciding with the introduction of sound in moving pictures) together with two successors (*The Singing Fool* [L. Bacon, 1928] and *The Singing Kid* [W. Knightly, 1936]), but had no immediate follow-up in the 1930s.

magnates. These films are testimony of the moguls' policy of concealing all trace of their Jewishness from their public image, while at the same time presenting themselves as eccentric characters with a foreign accent, a paternal attitude and dreams of grandeur (e.g., *What Price Hollywood*, [G.Cukor, 1932], in which the character of the producer, Mr Saxie, is a resolute figure, with a strong personality).

Concealed Jewishness was both a strategy for averting anti-Semitism, and a means of advertising patriotism. In the first half of the 20th-century Hollywood was under constant attack from religious and non-religious critics, who deplored the immorality of Hollywood films and people. These attacks included anti-Semitic discourses, like the one propounded by Henry Ford in his *Dearborn Independent*.⁶ Ford argued that the "Jew-controlled" film industry was menacing Christian culture and poisoning the minds of the young. Henry Ford's position was not far from the historical fallacy of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.⁷ He saw Hollywood as part of an international plot to take control of America and the world. The moguls' concern to counter the accusations against Hollywood and their desire for social integration conditioned the image they chose to convey of themselves. To this end, the studio heads and producers maintained a distance from politics and from overt involvement in ideology. Also, they put great effort into discouraging opinions about their presumed use of films for Jewish interests. This they did "from behind the scenes." Rather than making direct statements on the subject, they preferred to celebrate cinema as a new

⁶ See H. Ford, "Jewish Supremacy in the Theatre and Cinema," *The International Jew, The World's Foremost Problem. Being a reprint of a series of articles appearing in The Dearborn Independent from May 22 to October 2, 1920* (Dearborn, Michigan: Dearborn Publishing, 1920), 145-161.

⁷ The speculations based upon the finding of the false historical documents known as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* maintained that the Jews had conceived a secret, century-old plan to dominate the world. The articles of the *Dearborn Independent* denounced the threat of a too high concentration of Jews in the film industry. According to the periodical, the primary scope of this well-organized group was that of protecting Jewish interests, and realizing a presumed political plot that also involved the United States.

universal language and a democratic medium, where ethnic and social divisions disappeared and the difference between Jew and non-Jew melted away.

Significantly, Hollywood was a sphere in which its own Jewish creators attempted to place themselves beyond the reach of any discourse concerning the Jews. Given their visibility, the image they created for themselves could not be a neutral one. On the contrary, it tended toward the evocation of a traditional, if not reactionary order, especially in its unmistakable allusions to the trappings of aristocratic status, including luxury mansions, spectacular limousines, the entourage of assistants, and the “monarchic” studio setup. Besides their general disregard for Judaic laws, the moguls chose to live according to a style that hyperbolically imitated the Christian aristocracy of Eastern Europe, which underpinned their imagination of class.

The moguls’ desire for respectability drew them toward a visibly and overly American image, which they mingled with their “old world” fantasies, and which again divested them of their Jewishness. The moguls enthusiastically embraced mainstream social models and willingly identified with the myth of the self-made liberal. The self-image they constructed was therefore that of men of character, able to seize the chances offered by the new country, individualists endowed also with a sense of community and a sincere love for their new motherland. In their constructed selves, ethnic specificity was almost irrelevant. They were so well assimilated that for decades being a Jew in Hollywood was not even any longer a private fact. Rather, it was something belonging to the past, perhaps reminiscent of European ghettos or of American immigrant slums.

Excluded from conventional forms of self-definition, but at the same time rejecting the ancient Judaic source of identity definition, and the immigrant status of *paria*, the moguls performed operations of self-fashioning using the media power

accorded to them by their own studios. The Studio System was created in order to concentrate the power of film production and distribution in the hands of a restricted group, and ultimately in the hands of one man. Thus, the moguls fashioned themselves according to an image very close to that of the absolute monarch, a figure endowed with total authority, capricious and eccentric, and whose disputes with his subalterns or peers regarded matters of territory. The moguls' exceptional creative command as industry leaders enabled them to shape the stars and control their lives (or at least claim to do so). According to their biographies, the people who inhabited the world of their creation were considered the moguls' properties, in much the same way as the films they fabricated.

Columbia is perhaps the clearest example of a "one-man" Studio. Every aspect of film production bore the mark of Harry Cohn's personality. His despotism and the proverbial arbitrariness of his behaviour explain the monarchic appellatives that abound in biographical renditions of his person (King Cohn, tyrant, prince).⁸ For Harry Cohn, the management strategies and the structures of the Studio were not only ways of conducting business: they were also means of self-representation. He would intervene in all aspects of film-making, or at least show that he could do so at any moment by way of control technologies (like hidden microphones, a hypothetical spy network).

According to Jesse Lasky Jr., contract writer at Columbia for a brief period in the 1950s,

Harry Cohn, as absolute a monarch as Hollywood ever knew, ran Columbia like a private police state. He was tough, feared, ruthless and courageous, unbearably crude, profane, quirky, a hammer-headed

⁸ B. Thomas, *King Cohn: The Life and Times of Harry Cohn* (Beverly Hills: New Millennium Press, 2000 [1967]).

power-machine who held total financial and physical control over his self-made empire. He chewed cigars and relatives. It was said that he would fire and blacklist a man for mentioning verboten subjects like death or disease in his private studio dining-room, where a coterie of privileged henchmen vied for his favors. It was said he had listening devices on all sound stages and could tune in any conversation on the set, then boom in over a loudspeaker if he heard anything that displeased him. It was said that every evening he personally toured his big studio, trying to catch anyone who might have left on a light.⁹

There are no written testimonies or interviews personally released by Harry Cohn. Therefore, it is not possible to investigate the life of this man from a personal and private point of view. This fact is not specific to Cohn.¹⁰ The first generation moguls did not consider it important to leave written trace of their private lives. Most probably, this was part of their identity policy, which was based upon strategies of self-screening and the construction of a personality that was exclusively public, and therefore ephemeral. As one film magazine asserted, Harry Cohn's daily life was "highly guarded." His interviews were scarce, and direct testimonies are practically non-existent, except for the coast-to-coast teletypes (which were intended for filing, and can hardly throw light on Cohn's life, other than the official one). The biographical and historical studies on this figure are based on the testimonies coming from a small milieu of actors and actresses, production assistants and writers, colleagues and journalists. Because these are sources belonging to a single

⁹ L.J. Lasky, *Whatever Happened to Hollywood?* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1973), 289.

¹⁰ Even in the case of S. Goldwyn, who wrote an auto-biography in 1923 (*Behind the Screen* [New York: George H. Doran Company, 1923]), insight into the personal sphere is missing. This work lacks basic biographic information and is mainly a survey of Hollywood personalities. See also A. Zukor with Dale Kramer, *The Public is Never Wrong; the Autobiography of Adolph Zukor*, (New York: Putnam, 1953); A. Zukor, *Reminiscences of Adolph Zukor*, interviewed by Ronald L. Davis on 29 July 1975 (Sanford, NC: Microfilming Corporation of America, 1978).

environment, they reproduce its specific mentality and clichés. They are influenced by the power relationship between Cohn and the witnesses, and by the impression he wanted to make on others.

Not only did Harry Cohn screen himself intentionally from journalists and official sources of information, but he preferred to allow rumors, gossip and antipathies to develop around him. In turn, these rumors generated a collection of anecdotes which were eventually channeled into the biographies and Hollywood historiography. His despotic character was also part of this constructed personality, as one of the witnesses maintained. In an interview, Evelyn Keyes declared that: “He had to be the boss [...] He had to play the tyrant, which gave him the image he has now: a vulgar, foul-mouthed mogul. But he had to do that because it was the only way to get the best out of us—and the only way he knew how to be the boss.”¹¹

His harsh character, his disrespect and outrageous behavior toward starlets, and his proverbial ignorance are part of the construction of the “character Cohn,” his own deliberate creation, which has endured up to the present. The arrangement of the space inside Columbia Studio is also part of this image. It was conceived so as to emphasize Cohn’s power. In Cohn’s office, for example, the organization of the furniture, the entrance, the corridor, and the objects on the shelves all aimed to intimidate the visitor. The long waiting imposed on employees before they could enter, the exhibition of trophies and the display of female luxury items are further examples. Cohn’s reputation of ignorance is also part of this character. While graduates of the best American colleges were employed as his writers, he enjoyed declaring that he never went to high school. He inflicted crass humiliations upon some writers, while

¹¹ B.F. Dick, *The Merchant Prince of Poverty Row: Harry Cohn of Columbia Pictures* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1993), 71.

displaying respect for others, giving rise to a series of anecdotes about his vocabulary, his spelling and, most of all, his temper.

In other words, the test of Cohn's power was its arbitrariness, and he exulted in his despotism. His public image was not meant to be that of the "star," because it was not based upon the visibility of a "deified" body. The mogul was not divine. Apart from his humble origins, his characteristics were outstanding will, audacity and freedom. The mogul is associated with a story of creation and success in American culture. What we learn of his personality is that it slowly assumed its final shape in response to the requirements of evolving American entertainment. Cohn started as a song-plugger, an activity that called for aggressiveness and seduction. The range of this action was literally "everywhere there was a crowd," a group of people, a potential audience. The characteristic of this kind of entertainer is his ability to spot and seduce a public. Later on, Cohn made himself visible through his control over films. He learned very early, while employed by Carl Laemmle at Universal, the importance of placing his name in the lead titles. He struggled with his brother Jack to have "A Harry Cohn Production" appear at the beginning of the film, together with the company's logo. Harry Cohn's public image identified itself completely with the success of Columbia Pictures.

Moguls are better explained in terms of myth and literature than in terms of psychology. As Cohn's biographer claims: "Harry—along with Mayer, the brothers Warner, Zanuck, Selznick, and Goldwyn—would be a case history of a man who, by living the Pygmalion myth, transformed not only mortals into stars but also himself into a god."¹²

¹² Ibid., 9.

The moguls, heroic in demonstrating will and audacity, seduced their public into accepting and applauding their supremacy and that of their studio. The power position of the moguls inside the industry was part of their identity-building policy. It was the main expression of the self-invention that had accompanied their foundation of the American film industry. Show business represented a fertile, unexplored territory of self-invention, a realm never penetrated by this minority in the previous centuries of the diaspora. The outcome was on the one hand assimilation, because it implied the concealment of Jewishness. On the other hand, however, these men engaged in a pioneering self-exposure in the public sphere, in front of an entire nation. For them, film audiences became America itself. The cinema milieu, the success or crisis of the industry, the public's response constituted a microcosm reflecting the macrocosm of America. That is, the entire realm of the film industry sublimated these immigrants' attitudes, desires and fears vis-à-vis their new motherland. The very idea of the public was pivotal to the process of their self-fashioning. Could it be that the private dimension was simply not contemplated?