

## CHAPTER I

**ETHNICS AND ROUGHNECKS:  
THE MAKING OF THE  
HOLLYWOOD RENAISSANCE**

From our distant perspective at the end of the twentieth century, the outcome of events from the Great Depression through the Second World War to the origins of the Cold War all seems inevitable and predestined: the midcentury triumph over fascism and totalitarianism in Europe and Asia; the dissolution of extremist parties of hatred and animosity on the left and right within our own country during and after the depression; the emergence in America of a liberal state blending welfare paternalism with corporate and entrepreneurial capitalism; the unprecedented growth of a prosperous and comfortable middle class; the strengthening of individual and group rights after a tumultuous if exhilarating civil rights movement; and the eruption of marginalized groups and minorities into the mainstream of American democracy.

To F. O. Matthiessen in the late 1930s, however, the times seemed precarious indeed. Democracy appeared to be more endangered from forces both within and without than at any period since the Civil War. Matthiessen saw before him American values and institutions challenged by an ever-widening array of enemies and forces. Overseas the threat of totalitarianism grew ever closer and increasingly menacing, while at home the continuing depredations of unemployment, inequality, and injustice cultivated movements and causes of incipient fascism and communism. To Matthiessen, therefore, the future seemed filled with uncertainty.

In response to these times of trouble, Matthiessen turned to a strange place, a place that at first would seem to be without much relevance to such economic, social, and political turmoil: He turned to the past and to American literature to define his times and structure a vision for the future. Specifically, he examined a five-year period of our national and literary history that he called a renaissance because it marked America's "coming to its first maturity and affirming its rightful heritage in the whole expanse of art and culture."<sup>1</sup> He noted that "the half-decade of 1850–55 saw the appearance" of Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Representative Men*, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of the Seven Gables*, Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*, Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, and Walt Whitman's

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*Leaves of Grass*. Matthiessen says, “You might search all the rest of American literature without being able to collect a group of books equal to these in imaginative vitality” (vii).

Our own study will focus on another American Renaissance – a renaissance in film that began even while Matthiessen, in his prime, was still at work on his classic study. The later renaissance relates to the first as part of a process within history of the continuing renewal of American culture. The leaders of the second renaissance were also great artists but in the relatively new world of film. In contrast to the writers of the nineteenth century, the directors who led and defined what I call the Hollywood Renaissance, as well as the directors who were related to it, tended not to be of Anglo-Saxon origin. The Hollywood directors were instead ethnics or roughnecks – or both. Not only did John Ford, Frank Capra, Elia Kazan, Fred Zinnemann, William Wyler, and Billy Wilder have ethnic roots, most of this group also were immigrants to America. Others – like John Huston, Howard Hawks, George Stevens, and William Wellman – were vagabonds and roughnecks. While Matthiessen discerned a renewal of the culture of democracy in the American writers of the mid-nineteenth century, the Hollywood directors of Matthiessen’s time were creating in their art their own renaissance of the values and institutions of democracy. The cultural and ideological continuities and differences between these two movements of renewal are significant. Therefore, before examining the importance of the Hollywood Renaissance, it will be useful to consider why and how Matthiessen saw those nineteenth-century writers to be of such special relevance to America during his lifetime. Matthiessen’s analysis and interpretation of these authors provide a model for understanding the significance of the Hollywood directors. Moreover, his articulation of the relationship between literature and culture informs our understanding of the connection between film and culture in the mid-twentieth century.

According to Matthiessen, “The one common denominator of my five writers, uniting even Hawthorne and Whitman, was their devotion to the possibilities of democracy” (ix). Of these authors, Matthiessen continues:

Emerson, Hawthorne, Thoreau, Whitman, and Melville all wrote for democracy in a double sense. They felt that it was incumbent upon their generation to give fulfilment to the potentialities freed by the Revolution, to provide a culture commensurate with America’s political opportunity. Their tones were somewhat optimistic, sometimes blatantly, even dangerously expansive, sometimes disillusioned, even despairing, but what emerges from the total pattern of their achievement – if we will make the effort to repossess it – is literature for our democracy. (xv)

Matthiessen, of course, speaks here of democracy in the broadest terms. He suggests a healing of the fissure between the individual and society, the real

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and the ideal – an ideal that would by today’s standards of equality and justice no doubt seem less than totally inclusive.

Nevertheless, for Matthiessen the authors of the American Renaissance address questions of literature and culture, politics and society, that are trans-historical and relevant to all periods and peoples in the American experience, including the marginalized and disadvantaged in his era and in our own. The American Renaissance authors articulated their response to these tensions of democracy in a way that structured the thought and consciousness of their own and succeeding generations. In shaping a “literature for democracy” and envisioning “the possibilities of democracy,” the five writers established a frame, according to Matthiessen, based on the past but designed to anticipate future change and innovation. In a sense, Matthiessen fulfills the sensibility and work of the American Renaissance authors through his process and method of analysis. In his scholarly and critical project, he synthesizes the symbolism and autonomy of literature, as espoused by the New Critics, with the historical and social consciousness of what became the interdisciplinary American studies movement.<sup>2</sup>

The search by Matthiessen for a source for a renaissance of democratic values in his own times relates to developments generally outside of his critical purview – in Hollywood. The ideology nurtured in *American Renaissance* as Matthiessen deliberated over his book from the perspective of places like Cambridge, Massachusetts, Kittery, Maine, and Santa Fe, New Mexico, occurred also in Hollywood, California. As Matthiessen labored on *American Renaissance*, a cinema for democracy was emerging both to represent and to transform American culture. This new renaissance in film matches the vigor, imagination, and creativity of the American Renaissance writers in focusing on “the possibilities of democracy.” Indeed, the simultaneity of this movement in Hollywood and of Matthiessen’s scholarly enterprise attests to the validity of his vision. This parallel movement occurring in Harvard and Hollywood meets a key test suggested by one of the century’s greatest philosophers of democracy, John Dewey. Working in the same historic moment and cultural context as Matthiessen, Dewey says: “The struggle for democracy has to be maintained on as many fronts as culture has aspects: political, economic, international, educational, scientific and artistic, religious.”<sup>3</sup> Significantly, Dewey’s words appear in *Freedom and Culture* in 1939, the year of the release of several major films by directors at the heart of Hollywood’s own renaissance of American democratic values: Frank Capra’s *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* and John Ford’s *Stagecoach*, *Young Mr. Lincoln*, and *Drums along the Mohawk*.

Along with Capra and Ford, other directors in this historic Hollywood Renaissance to be considered in this study include Howard Hawks, Elia Kazan, Fred Zinnemann, and George Stevens. They led and helped define the

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Hollywood Renaissance because their films so immediately and directly concern vital continuities and transformations of American culture. In the work of these directors, artistic excellence matches cultural consciousness. As in the case of the writers of the American Renaissance, for these directors questions of aesthetics inexorably connect to the ever-expanding discourse about the meaning of America. Their best films achieve the depth and breadth, intensity, and complexity of serious art; at the same time, these films engage and interrogate the values and beliefs of the American idea and sustain and transform the narrative heart of the myth of America.

These directors do more than simply reflect American life and society in their films. Rather, the major films of Capra, Ford, Hawks, Kazan, Stevens, and Zinnemann become part of the drama of the ideology and myth of America. In their classic films, the renaissance directors transform the very terms of belief itself. Jefferson Smith, Bedford Falls and George Bailey, the Ringo Kid, Liberty Valance and the “searchers,” Marshal Kane and *High Noon*, the “male war bride,” *The Big Sky* and *Red River*, Terry Malloy, *Gentleman’s Agreement*, *Shane*, *Giant*, and *A Place in the Sun* – these are not just titles of films or names of characters but ideas, issues, and images that are now themselves symbols and problems to be discussed and analyzed as part of our historical national consciousness. Through their films, these directors contribute to the continuing construction of the American ideology of sanctuary as well as the American myth of rebirth. They promulgate the idea of America as an unprecedented experience in human history, a land of unlimited opportunity and a culture of freedom for all peoples throughout the world.

Moreover, the artistry of the classic works of these directors functions to support their ideological position of democratic debate and dialogue. The directors establish an ideology of aesthetic form that entails structured innovation and coherent invention. This aesthetic ideology works with the elaboration in the classic films of the American idea and myth. As Matthiessen writes: “An artist’s use of language is the most sensitive index to cultural history, since a man can articulate only what he is, and what he has been made by the society of which he is a willing or an unwilling part” (xv). Today, it would no doubt be said, Matthiessen’s argument is qualified by the “sexism” inherent in his choice of words.

Nevertheless, Matthiessen’s emphasis upon the relationship between language and culture applies to the work of the Hollywood Renaissance directors. Through their individual cinematic languages, these filmmakers create an aesthetic field and force to deepen, expand, and intensify democratic discourse. In fact, in recent years several film scholars and critics have come to question the received conventional view that all classic Hollywood films purposely make the camera and director invisible so as to create an illusion of to-

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tal realism. According to the conventional position, such effacement of camera and director suggests a transparent presentation of reality that seduces and mesmerizes the spectator into passively accepting the hegemonic ideological position of ruling elites. Even radical scholars no longer accept this conventional critical wisdom. As Stephen Heath observes,

It is too readily assumed that the operation – the determination, the effect, the pleasure – of classical cinema lies in the attempt at an invisibility of process, the intended transparency of a kind of absolute “realism” from which all signs of production have been effaced. The actual case is much more complex and subtle, and much more telling. Classical cinema does not efface the signs of production, it contains them . . . .<sup>4</sup>

The aesthetic ideology and practice of the renaissance directors confirm this case for the complexity of classic Hollywood cinema.

Still, comparing the iconic writers of the American Renaissance to Hollywood directors may seem odd. How can writers celebrated – even during our age of political correctness – for extraordinary depth, complexity, and ambiguity be compared to a generation of directors who helped institute classic Hollywood cinema, a medium repeatedly accused of conceding to the lowest common denominator in public taste and intelligence in order to attract the widest possible audience?

To begin, we probably should note that the significance of these filmmakers to American culture as a whole, let alone to the history of international and American film, probably still deserves greater recognition. Some of these directors were not only taken for granted during their years of unprecedented production, but were also often subsequently forgotten or denigrated as tastes and styles changed. They produced so much so quickly, and are so strongly identified with both the positive and the negative aspects of Hollywood, that we can better appreciate their significance as artists through a perspective that considers their overall achievements in the context of their times and surroundings.

In addition, as already suggested, we have learned much about film since the pioneering work of classic Hollywood directors. Several decades of critical theory and the serious study of film have transformed both the understanding of film as an art form and medium as well as the awareness of just how much this Hollywood generation accomplished. Interestingly, French critics, directors, and writers in *Cahiers du cinéma* were among the first to revolutionize the understanding of film as a unique art to be distinguished from other art forms. Thus, in the 1950s and 1960s such *cinéphiles* as Jean Cocteau, François Truffaut, and Jean-Luc Godard promulgated a critical theory of film as a thoroughly new and original artistic medium entailing multiple channels of expression, a heterogeneous or hybrid art of diverse elements

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– visual image, speech, sound, music, writing. These semiotic channels or modes of expression often contradict as well as complement each other. The insights of these *cinéphiles* dramatically advanced critical awareness of the complex nature of film.

Moreover, the most influential criticism of the *Cahiers* writers tended to focus on the classic Hollywood tradition. While the *cinéphiles* judged the Hollywood of their own time as fading, they often celebrated and extolled the virtues of the earlier generation of American directors. They challenged the familiar characterizations, as already noted, of Hollywood as fostering an artistically demeaning and mindless popular culture. To these partisans of cinema, such attacks against classic Hollywood cinema belie the complexity of the cinematic form the classic directors helped to invent and construct. As Jim Hillier notes:

The general tone of despondency at much of the output of Hollywood had already marked the 1963 *Cahiers* editorial discussion “Questions about American Cinema.” The tone here is symptomatic, as the former critical “young Turks” of the 1950s, most of them now *nouvelle vague* film-makers and perhaps somewhat “old guard” critics . . . recognize that American cinema is no longer what it was. . . . The crisis in attitudes toward American cinema was exacerbated, and partly caused, by the situation of American cinema at this time. In the late 1950s and early 1960s a number of major Hollywood directors, and ones much admired by *Cahiers*, were reaching or maintaining a certain peak. . . .<sup>5</sup>

These Hollywood directors in their renaissance circumvent a dichotomy that concerned Matthiessen from the beginning of his critical conception of the *American Renaissance* – namely, the split he so presciently appreciates between the special value of complex art versus the sociology of popular and mass culture. Although advocating a literature for the entire society and all the people, Matthiessen steadfastly maintains that the best literature speaks for the whole age and encompasses the entire culture in ways beyond the means of the popular and mediocre. Noting the extraordinary success and popularity of such works as T. S. Arthur’s *Ten Nights in a Barroom and What I Saw There*, Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World*, and Maria Cummins’s *The Lamplighter*, Matthiessen realizes that “[s]uch material still offers a fertile field for the sociologist and for the historian of our taste” (xi). With all of their artistic genius and their passion for the subject of America, Emerson and Thoreau, Hawthorne and Melville, and Whitman could only dream of reaching the vast numbers of readers of these best-selling authors. Appreciating the importance of these popular writers in helping to create and then to capture the culture’s first modern mass audience of readers, Matthiessen nevertheless remains recalcitrant in distinguishing between such popular works as barometers or indexes of moods and trends as opposed to serious art that deeply engages the full complexity of experience and culture:



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But I agree with Thoreau, “Read the best books first, or you may not have a chance to read them at all.” And during the century that has ensued, the successive generations of common readers, who make the decisions, would seem finally to have agreed that the authors of the pre-Civil War era who bulk largest in stature are the five who are my subject. (xi)

However, the very nature of Hollywood film both as an art form and as a corporate industry tempers Matthiessen’s elitist impulse, an aesthetic and cultural standard that remains controversial today. Though the *auteur* Hollywood directors compare to Matthiessen’s authors in their individualistic impulse toward artistic excellence, film necessarily becomes a collective endeavor involving the participation of innumerable experts in distinct fields of production ranging from cinematography to sound, music, design, and costuming. Also, as Hollywood directors, they by definition create movies with popular appeal. They integrate the elitism of serious art with the interests of mass audiences, thereby accomplishing in film what so many innovative artists achieve in music, literature, and the other visual arts.

In *American Renaissance*, Matthiessen identifies “recurrent themes” and “types of interrelation” (xiv) that organize his writers into a collective flowering. This pattern of connections helps to structure his book. Many of Matthiessen’s themes and interrelations – the individual and society, the nature of good and evil, the unity of art and the people – resonate in a modern guise in the Hollywood Renaissance, such as reconsidering the role of gender and sexuality in constructing selfhood and rethinking the relationship of culture and society to values and beliefs.

The Hollywood Renaissance can be marked from 1939, the year of *Gone with the Wind*, a film that represents the triumph of the classic Hollywood studio system during its period of greatest power and influence. However, as already noted, 1939 also includes classics of Capra and Ford that are key to the dialogue and debate over the meaning of America. The films of these directors can readily be placed in the context of the writings and arguments of some of our most influential democratic thinkers. The renaissance extends to 1966, also a convenient year, reflecting the view of the *Cahiers* critics of the decline of Hollywood cinema as well as the deepening mire of Vietnam and the steadily accelerating revolutions involving women, sexuality, race, and youth. The differences between the major films of 1966, the last year of the renaissance, and those of 1967 indicate the depth and extent of the break from the cultural and cinematic traditions of classic Hollywood film.<sup>6</sup> The films of 1966 include *A Man for All Seasons* and *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, two movies based on tightly structured and well-conceived plays. The next year offered *The Graduate* and *Bonnie and Clyde*, films that radically challenged many Hollywood conventions of casting, theme, and presentation to reconsider sexuality, violence, and family in America. *In the Heat of the Night* and *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* also appeared in

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1967, reflecting extreme changes in attitudes toward race relations in the country.

The directors of the Hollywood Renaissance were, like their predecessors in the American Renaissance, all white men; yet this apparent continuity of male domination deflects attention from crucial differences between the men of these different artistic movements and historic periods.

The diverse origins of the Hollywood directors, as already noted, stand in sharp contrast to the Anglo-Saxon heritage of the American Renaissance writers. Ford was the thirteenth and youngest child of Irish immigrants surnamed Feeney; his lifelong fascination with the Irish in so many of his movies, as well as in his personal relationships and interests, contradicts Gary Wills's recent assertion that "much of John Ford's Irishness was sham."<sup>7</sup> Capra was born Francesco Capra in Palermo, Sicily; the Greek Kazan was born Elia Kazanjoglou in Turkish Constantinople; Fred Zinnemann was born in Vienna. As directors with ethnic origins, their lives and backgrounds were consistent with the immigrant and ethnic foundations of Hollywood itself. The industry, of course, was built by people with names like Goldwyn, Skouras, Lasky, Cohn, Mayer.<sup>8</sup> Other directors with similar backgrounds whose work reflects the Hollywood Renaissance include William Wyler of Mulhouse, Alsace, and Billy Wilder of Vienna.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast, George Stevens was born into an acting family in Oakland, California. The vagaries of theatrical life were part of his earliest childhood days. Howard Hawks, born in Indiana, studied at Philips–Exeter Academy and went on to Cornell University, where he studied mechanical engineering. A professional car and airplane racer from the age of sixteen, he served as a pilot in the First World War and subsequently worked in a factory designing and flying airplanes before deciding to go into films in Hollywood. Other directors who relate to the Hollywood Renaissance and had similar roughneck backgrounds include John Huston, who came from a theatrical family and lived a dramatic life filled with boxing, horse racing, and many marriages and relationships. Also, William Wellman, a World War I hero with the French Lafayette Escadrille, achieved fame as a brawling director of extraordinary independence and integrity.

The heterogeneous backgrounds and unconventional beginnings of these renaissance-era directors reflect some of the country's major transformations since the days of the American Renaissance. In addition to differences based on ethnicity and social origins, others regarding gender and masculinity also dramatically distinguish these Hollywood directors from Matthiessen's authors. Indeed, Matthiessen uses the masculine gender in a borrowed quotation from Whitman to characterize and define the ideal American during the American Renaissance. Whitman proclaims the originality of the American hero as the "man in the open air" (626), and envisions the American male as



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an autonomous Adamic hero on the fringe of history and society. Living on the boundaries of civilization, this mythic hero functions as an example of individual behavior and collective belief. All of the white Anglo-Saxon males in Matthiessen's study help develop the myth of this hero. The dangers such superindividualism present to democracy – especially in an age of rampant totalitarianism – did not escape Matthiessen's notice. He recognized an incipient connection between Emerson and Whitman's belief in "the individual as his own Messiah" and the abuse of Nietzsche's "doctrine of the Superman" when vented by "Hitler's megalomania" (546).

The profound male tendentiousness of the American Renaissance authors manifests itself in the knowledge that, with some notable exceptions, including Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Melville's neurotic *Pierre*, these writers proffer a world devoid of women. In stark contrast, women pervade the films of the Hollywood Renaissance directors. Indeed, women often define and structure masculinity in these films. Moreover, the varieties of masculinity in these films consistently challenge ideological stereotypes of male hegemony. Often, these representations of masculinity actually refreshingly reconsider gender relations in America. In many of these films, the melding of masculinity and American character suggests a multiplicity of masculinities and ideologies as opposed to a unitary and monolithic model of masculinity, gender, and culture.

The revision of masculinity in the Hollywood Renaissance transforms Matthiessen's concept of the individual in the American Renaissance. The representations of masculinity in these films often suggest the emergence of a pattern of fluid subjectivities in which gender constitutes a problem for investigation and a category of negotiation and discussion rather than an absolute imperative. In Matthiessen's day, discussion focused on classic individualism in a political context of modernism. The recent interest in subjectivity as the construction of gender in a cultural and linguistic context reflects the work in the past several decades of various schools of literary and film criticism – feminist, psychoanalytic, and semiotic. Examples of such fluid subjectivities in the films of the Hollywood Renaissance abound: the complexity of the Jimmy Stewart characters in both *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* and *It's a Wonderful Life*; the multiplicities of masculinity and the various roles of women in *From Here to Eternity*; the complexity of gender positions and roles in *I Was a Male War Bride* or *Red River*; the blending of questions of democratic ideology, sexuality, and gender in *A Place in the Sun* and *Giant*; the conflicted relationship between masculinity and American identity and character in *On the Waterfront* and *High Noon*.

As in the case of their attitudes toward gender and sexuality, the Hollywood directors also differ to a degree with the American Renaissance writers in their understanding of the relationship of art and reality. Matthiessen

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emphasizes the faith placed by his writers in Coleridge's romantic notion of the unity of the word and thing. However, the directors' diverse cultural experiences and the heterogeneity of the cinematic form tend to attenuate the directors' belief in the unity of symbolism. As part of the modernistic movement and sensibility, these filmmakers see reality as somewhat fragmented and divergent. Their use of the multiple dimensions and channels of film feeds this impulse for diversity.

Significantly, the appreciation of the Hollywood directors for diversity and multiplicity in culture and art does not immunize them from the same kind of charges of privilege and exclusion that have been mounted against Matthiessen and the American Renaissance writers during the past two decades. For many years now, Matthiessen has been attacked by leading scholars in literary and culture studies for privileging a small elite of white men in his theory of the American Renaissance. Many careers and reputations have been developed by defining positions of opposition to Matthiessen based on gender, race, and ideology. He has been challenged for failing to appreciate the power of women and sentimentality in shaping nineteenth-century American culture, for undervaluing the centrality of slavery and racism in American consciousness, for allowing his liberal sensibilities to vitiate his more radical proclivities in assessing the destructiveness to the American character and psyche of capitalistic exploitation and imperialism.<sup>10</sup> In essence, such critics emphasize the "Other Renaissance" of women writers, of slave narratives and experiences, of Native American accounts of white genocide, and of working-class resistance and responses to economic inequality and control.

Also important has been a challenge to the continuity and coherence of American culture and history that Matthiessen envisioned from the Puritans and the revolutionary generation to his own times. To scholars and critics who see themselves as giving voice and new life to the multiple versions of the "Other Renaissance," American history and culture should be studied from the perspectives of the marginalized and oppressed. This diversity of perspectives renders American history and culture more discontinuous and fragmented than so-called consensus critics and historians appreciated. To advocates of the "Other Renaissance" approach, Matthiessen's portrayal constitutes a critical and historical justification of mainstream domination. As Sacvan Bercovitch explains, "the reason for the current ferment in American literary studies" concerns the belief that the "assumptions behind that vision" of continuity, inclusion, and identity "no longer account for the evidence":

We have come to feel that the context they provide conceals as much as it reveals. To use an old-fashioned phrase, the paradigm has become inoperative. What we have instead is a Babel of contending approaches, argued with a ferocity reminiscent of the sectarian polemics that erupted in the early days of the Reformation. . . .<sup>11</sup>