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Luxurious Cinemites and the Great Depression: Labour, Stardom and Stand-In (1937)
Frank Krutnik

Abstract: Unlike more celebrated Hollywood-on-Hollywood films, Walter Wanger’s neglected screwball comedy Stand-In (1937) emphasizes the centrality of labour to studio-era production. Besides climaxing with a highly unusual, if carefully negotiated spectacle of industrial action by Hollywood’s rank and file workers, the film departs further from other self-reflexive movies by defining stardom in relation to labour and gender and by focusing on the topical and contentious issues of star salaries and child stardom (via a highly topical parody of Shirley Temple). With the aid of a wide array of primary and secondary materials – including newspapers and magazines, the entertainment trade press, and documents of the Production Code Administration – as well as detailed textual scrutiny, this essay examines Stand-In’s depiction of Hollywood and labour in relation to the economic, industrial and social challenges the Great Depression posed to studio production. The essay proposes that the film’s comic framework allows it to deliver an uncommonly upfront, if conflicted critique of the contemporary motion picture business.

Keywords:
Hollywood; Great Depression; screwball comedy; film industry; labour; stardom; child stardom; gender and stardom; star salaries; Shirley Temple.

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Perhaps... the public would appreciate its stars more if it did not visualize them as lolling in wealth. Hollywood’s smart people say that one reason people don’t flock to the theatres as they once did is because they resent the millions paid Sally Snootygal and Charlie Camerahog. It’s not such a cheering experience when your $25-a-week salary has been cut 30 per cent, or your job is gone altogether, to view luxurious cinemites whose wage has just been raised to umpty-ump hundreds of thousands annually, and who give indifferent performances in pictures that can best be described as punk (Edwin Schallert, 1933).¹

As veteran film journalist Edwin Schallert observed in a 1933 article for *Picture Play* magazine, the Great Depression inspired many Americans to question whether Hollywood stars merited their fabulous lifestyles – and, as a consequence, whether the motion picture industry was sufficiently in tune with the audience it served. Stars had been integral to the Hollywood film’s production and marketing since the 1910s, as well as being responsible for many of its pleasures. As Schallert suggests, however, the gulf between the silver screen’s luxurious cinemites and the straitened circumstances of Depression-hit audiences provoked considerable unease both within and outside the cinema industry. When the economic downtown struck cinema from 1931, Wall Street financial backers exerted pressure on the major Hollywood studios to rein in spending and rationalize production. The opulent lifestyles and extravagant salaries of elite movie talent were key targets of the studios’ austerity drive as they sought to distance themselves from the boom years of the 1920s - when, as Reginald Taviner commented in a 1933 *Photoplay* article, ‘Hollywood suffered from a delusion of aggrandizement, dreaming that it had all the money in the world’.² Well aware of public resentment at indulgence and extravagance, commentators in fan magazines and the popular press were more than willing to join the crusade. While it was relatively easy to scapegoat pampered and overpaid movie stars for the industry’s financial predicament, the studios faced a more difficult public relations challenge when new federal
legislation encouraged workers, including star performers, to demand improved labour rights and compensation terms by joining unions.

It is against this turbulent backdrop that Walter Wanger choose to produce *Stand-In* (1937), a satire of the contemporary film industry. On its release in October 1937 several reviewers identified the film as part of a cycle of Hollywood-on-Hollywood movies inspired by the success of David O. Selznick’s *A Star is Born* (1937).³ Wanger actually purchased screen rights to the *Stand-In* story before *A Star is Born* appeared in April 1937, but he may well have been influenced by positive media buzz inspired by its production and by the fact that several other Hollywood-on-Hollywood films were awaiting release.⁴ As Steven Cohan points out, cycles of ‘backstudio pictures’ often emerge at times of ‘significant crises in and transformations of the political economy of US film production’.⁵ From this perspective, the concentrated manufacture of such films in the 1930s seems like an attempt by the studios to redefine the meaning of ‘Hollywood’ - as industry, as cultural institution, as entertainment brand - in the face of the disruptions wrought by the Great Depression.⁶ While it revels in the eccentricity and frivolity that characterizes screwball comedy, *Stand-In* nonetheless reveals a serious concern with the value of filmmaking and movie entertainment at a time when Hollywood and the country as a whole were experiencing substantial problems. Its very rootedness in the cultural dynamics of this era may explain the film’s comparative neglect, but this is precisely what makes it fascinating. As Terry Donovan Smith proposed in a 1996 article, *Stand-In* offers a ‘microcosm of the political and economic forces at work in and on society in the 1930s’.⁷

Drawing on an array of secondary and primary materials – including newspapers and magazines, the entertainment trade press, and documents of the Production Code Administration – this essay explores *Stand-In's* engagement with key economic, industrial and social challenges that confronted Hollywood during this turbulent period. I focus, in particular, on an issue that distinguishes the film from other Hollywood-on-Hollywood movies: its emphasis on the centrality of labour to motion picture production. From the 1920s to the 1950s the
Hollywood studio relied on an extensive and diversified workforce, ranging from blue collar manual labourers, to skilled technicians, to craftspeople, to office staff, and to creative talent such as actors, writers, directors and musicians. Hollywood-on-Hollywood films frequently celebrate creative individuals (e.g. *Sullivan’s Travels* (1941), *The Errand Boy* (1961)) or creative team work (e.g. *Singin’ in the Rain* (1952), *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952)), but they rarely acknowledge the importance of the studio workforce to film production. Besides addressing the contribution of rank and file workers to Hollywood filmmaking, *Stand-In* also evaluates the star’s significance as a labourer, albeit a highly privileged one. Stardom is an inescapable feature of Hollywood movies about the motion picture industry, but such films mostly focus on the trials and tribulations of the star performer as they pursue or seek to regain success, or as they strive to reconcile public image and private pain. With *Stand-In*, however, the upfront treatment of questions of labour and labour value resonates with the difficulties Hollywood itself was facing in relation to disputes about unemployment, union representation, and the responsibilities of employers and elite employees to the broader community.

**In a glass darkly**

Like *A Star is Born*, *Stand-In* emanated from a quasi-independent production outfit with close ties to the major studios: it was Walter Wanger’s fourth film for United Artists after quitting Paramount as a unit producer in 1936. Gene Towne and C. Graham Baker, former newshounds and Wanger’s regular screenwriting team, adapted a serialized *Saturday Evening Post* novella by Clarence Budington Kelland, author of ‘Opera Hat’, the short story that was the basis for Frank Capra’s hit 1935 comedy-drama *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*. Towne and Baker reworked Kelland’s plot and added many details drawn from their extensive familiarity with contemporary Hollywood. From the outset, the project rang alarm bells with the Production Code Administration (PCA), which tried to rein in what *Daily Variety* described as its ‘penetrating, engaging and provocative screen play’. One concern was the depiction of Hollywood’s moral
laxity. PCA reviewers routinely objected to excessive alcohol consumption, vulgar language and sexual suggestiveness, but these were more than usually troublesome in this context owing to the Hollywood setting.\textsuperscript{13} The PCA was especially bothered by the implied affair between Hollywood star Thelma Cheri (Marla Shelton) and producer Doug Quintain (Humphrey Bogart). After reading a partial script in June 1937, the PCA’s chief administrator Joseph Breen cautioned Wanger that ‘Care should be taken, throughout, to avoid the suggestion of an illicit relationship between Quintain and Cheri, a married woman. It would be well to establish clearly that such an unaccept\textsuperscript{able} relationship does not exist’ (italics in original).\textsuperscript{14} After repeated requests to tackle this problem, Wanger and the film’s director Tay Garnett, who had revised Towne and Baker’s initial script, eventually conceded by eliminating Cheri’s marital status.\textsuperscript{15}

Such attempts to protect the Hollywood brand from moral blemish were commonplace in the PCA review process, but Breen also had more specific concerns. In an early consideration of Kelland’s story, in March 1937, he warned that the ‘specific and general treatment of the characters and situations, which reflect unfavourably upon the motion picture industry and its personnel, is objectionable from the point of view of general industry policy’.\textsuperscript{16} One of Breen’s main priorities was to limit the film’s potential for reputational damage in its depiction of Hollywood’s industrial and business practices. Thomas Doherty points out that, while the major companies had a vested interest in cooperating with the PCA, independent producers like Wanger, Selznick, Samuel Goldwyn and Howard Hughes often ‘resented the violation of their property rights… [and] wrote angry memos protesting that the film was their business, not Breen’s’.\textsuperscript{17} Both as a studio executive and as an independent producer, Wanger had numerous altercations with the PCA and Breen was understandably wary of his attempt to turn the spotlight on the motion picture industry.\textsuperscript{18}

Anxiety about the approach Wanger’s film would take to the industry was exacerbated by an item published in the \textit{New York Morning Telegraph} on May 23, which teasingly hinted that it would expose the studios’ innermost secrets:
Every lot in town has two taboos: no stuff about how tricks are done, no stuff about doubles for stars in stunt shots... But Tay Garnett will smash the taboo on exposing tricks by making a picture which will show ALL of them... It's called Stand-In, it is about exactly what the title says and Gene Towne and Graham Baker have put in all they know about how pictures are really made.... 19

Maurice McKenzie, vice president of the PCA’s parent organization, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) was sufficiently concerned that he sent a copy of the item to a PCA official, accompanied by a note reading ‘Lester Thompson [head of the MPPDA’s Advertising Advisory Council] calls this to my attention, expressing his worry. Isn’t there anything you can or should do about it?’ 20

With Federal regulators and the media intensely scrutinizing the movie business, Breen urged Wanger to remove material that could reflect badly on it. His memo of June 29 regarding amended script pages included the following recommendations:

Quintain’s speech about Nassau’s purpose in stifling competition is inadvisable from the standpoint of policy. This speech should be deleted or changed...

The suggestion that the motion picture industry be submitted to an investigation by a Senatorial committee is not considered advisable, as a matter of policy. Therefore, dialogue referring to this should be deleted. 21

Breen persuaded Wanger and Garnett to delete contentious speeches about the major studios’ anti-competitive tactics and ‘the crushing out of independents’, but contemporary reviews make it clear that several of the film’s criticisms of the industry still hit home. 22

Many reviewers praised Stand-In’s fresh outlook on the movie business, and discerned sinister undercurrents swirling beneath the comedy. 23 In the socialite magazine The Spur, for example, Carlyle Ellis noted that this ‘swell piece of sophisticated clowning’ delivers a ‘devastating satire on studio manners
and customs’. Mae Tinee, pseudonymous reviewer for the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, went further in suggesting that *Stand-In* presents

the unusual sight of Hollywood looking at itself in a glass darkly, and, frankly, not liking what it sees. That beautiful face is marred by blotches of extravagance; the eyes have a slight cast of treachery and there is a disconcertingly vapid expression caused by constant and often useless activity.

Similarly, the reviewer for Britain’s *The Sunday Referee* newspaper regarded it as a film that characterises the Hollywood studio as a ‘swamp of corruption, oozing with every kind of moral and commercial turpitude’ and ‘exposes cruelty, humbug, graft and worse, masquerading as art’. Six decades later, Terry Donovan Smith was even more effusive about *Stand-In*’s critical perspective on 1930s Hollywood, asserting that it presents a ‘clear call to revolution’ and ‘a remarkably direct presentation of leftist ideology’ comparable to the ‘living newspapers’ of the Soviet Union and Federal Theatre. These are extravagant claims for a product of Hollywood’s commercial cinema, but the film does build to an unorthodox scenario of industrial action that encourages Smith to read the film in this way. A more considered contextual approach to *Stand-In*’s depiction of industry and labour casts the film’s politics in a different light. Even so, as Ames argues, this is a ‘rich and provocative film’ that focuses on ‘the relations between Hollywood studios and New York financial control, on the struggles between management and labour, and on financial conspiracies to bankrupt studios for essentially hostile takeovers’.

‘That’s the Picture Business!’

In its depiction of the Hollywood studio *Stand-In* combines together problems that confronted the motion picture industry at different junctures in the Depression era. Its central plotline was inspired by events of the early 1930s, when New York finance houses sent representatives to Hollywood to rationalize film production. As I will suggest later, however, the film’s treatment of relations between management and labour tapped into ongoing tensions within the movie
capital. When production of the film commenced in 1937 the Depression appeared to be nearing its end, with Hollywood seemingly set to regain its former glories. Cinema admissions started to increase from 1934, and the major companies began to reap the benefits of rising profits and enhanced stock value. Many movie houses that had closed during the worst years of the crisis were able to reopen and studios could gamble once more on high-budget prestige pictures such as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1935), *Romeo and Juliet* (1936), *San Francisco* (1936), *Lost Horizon* (1937) and *The Good Earth* (1937). Despite the uptick in business, prospects for the film industry were far from secure: profits were modest by comparison with the pre-1931 era and cinema also remained vulnerable to external economic pressures. As *Stand-In* was being shot, for example, the USA was hit by a rapid and severe recession that derailed the nation’s recovery. From July 1937 to May 1938 industrial production contracted by 30%, the stock market fell by 40%, and unemployment jumped from 15% to 19%. The motion picture industry suffered once more from the tightening of consumer expenditure, experiencing a 42% drop in earnings in 1938. The recession shook the industry’s confidence, with MGM the only studio to enjoy good business.

*Stand-In* starts out by evoking the precarious situation of the Hollywood studios after the Depression finally caught up with them in the early years of the 1930s. The severe economic downturn saw cinema admissions dropping sharply, revenues from overseas markets dwindling, production costs more than doubling, and most of the major film companies facing financial meltdown. Many industry employees lost their jobs in the fallout from the crisis, or faced brutal salary cuts, with relations between the workforce and studio management deteriorating further as the latter tenaciously fought attempts to unionize. Panic set in among the Wall Street investment banks that had funded large-scale theatre acquisitions and the conversion to sound. When their agents visited Hollywood, they encountered a business culture that was, to their eyes, extravagant, wasteful and corrupt. Through 1930 and 1931 the entertainment industry trade press reported frequently on the austerity measures bankers...
threatened to impose on the Hollywood companies, including across-the-board salary cuts and the slashing of production budgets. In response, many commentators protested that Wall Street officials failed to recognize the unique character of the cinema industry. Any attempt to bring motion pictures into line with orthodox business culture, they claimed, would jeopardize its all-important showmanship values. In an October 1930 editorial in *Motion Picture News*, for example, Maurice Kann argued that ‘the bankers have yet to learn that there is something in the celluloid make-up that doesn’t respond to too scientific methods... Show business which is the film business is unlike any other’.

In a bid to counter what one trade journalist described as the ‘Wall Street-ization of the picture industry’, industry insiders went into overdrive to explicate cinema’s distinctive character as a show-business. Sam Bischoff, a former accountant and producer at Columbia, Universal and Warner Brothers, suggested that pressure from Wall Street to save money at all costs could potentially damage the production values that were a key factor in the pleasurability, and hence success, of Hollywood filmmaking. Instead of an indiscriminate retrenchment policy, Bischoff recommended more finely-tuned efforts at preplanning and production management. Resentment against the tactics of Wall Street efficiency experts was exemplified by stories that highlighted the pettiness of some budgetary cuts, such as removing the ice from water coolers on the hottest day of the year. Moreover, Don Gillette asserted in a July 1931 item for *Film Daily* that the bankers' ‘uncompromising retrenchment orders’ were impairing the quality of films: ‘In ordering drastic economies and curtailments... the kings of finance have at the same time slashed away a good portion of the spirit and enthusiasm that play such a big part in the creation of box-office product’. Bennie Berger, head of the Northwest Theatre Owners’ Association recommended that the ‘best way of meeting the situation is to kick Wall St. dictatorship and all the mathematicians out of the business and allow showman brains to again produce pictures’.

*Stand-In* casts Leslie Howard as a Wall Street efficiency expert who is modelled on the bankers who ‘invaded’ Hollywood in the early 1930s. The math-
obsessed Atterbury Dodd, vice president of the venerable New York finance house Pettypacker & Sons, journeys from Wall Street to Hollywood to ascertain the financial viability of Colossal Studios, one of his firm’s assets. When Dodd arrives in Los Angeles, the film details his inability to fathom Hollywood’s modus operandi as a business and as a social universe. Moving from the rational verticality of Manhattan’s financial district, he is flummoxed by the kitsch excesses of Los Angeles’ architectural mélange. Even more shocking is his discovery that seduction, gambling and extravagance are rife in the movie studio, its disorderly proceedings persistently excused by the catchphrase ‘That’s the picture business’.

Dodd soon finds himself battling a conspiracy to bankrupt Colossal by stock juggler Ivor Nassau (C. Henry Gordon) and his pampered and venal cronies: narcissistic movie star Thelma Cheri, profligate European director Koslofski (Alan Mowbray), and corrupt publicist Tom Potts (Jack Carson). Nassau’s accountancy scheme seeks to drive down the price of the studio so he can purchase it for half its value and sell off its assets. Like the Wall Street bankers of the early 1930s, Dodd initially aims to impose financial discipline on this wayward business. After recognizing the value of the ordinary workers who service the film industry, however, he seeks instead to replace the self-serving elite with a more democratic, flexible and creative economic order. In the climactic scenes of the film Dodd abandons his credo that ‘in matters of business, one is forced to ignore human factors’, to take direct action that will safeguard the livelihoods of the studio’s 3000 workers. Inspired by news coverage of a sit-down strike in a steel plant, Dodd locks the studio gates and persuades an initially hostile workforce to occupy the studio so they can complete Sex and Satan, the film that will save Colossal from ruin. Jeered when he addresses his ‘fellow workers’ (‘Get out of the way, white collar’, one retorts), Dodd wins over the studio employees with an impassioned speech that renegotiates conventional political affiliations:

‘You regard me as your enemy, don’t you? I’m capital and you’re labour, that’s the way you see it, isn’t it? Well it isn’t as simple as all
that. Let me tell you who our stockholders are... Is there anyone here who owns any Colossal stock? [a worker who owns a few shares steps forward]. Here we are men, there’s your capitalist. And there’s a streetcar conductor in Denver, a bricklayer in Chicago, a soldier’s widow in Memphis - 30,000 of ‘em. Their savings built this plant. And what’s happening now? A small group of financial tricksters, headed by Ivor Nassau is trying to close it. Well, the stockholders can’t afford to see it closed, any more than we can. There’s no trouble here that a good picture won’t cure.... ‘

Pleading with the workers to volunteer their labour for 48 hours, Dodd vows: ‘Do as I ask and I pledge you my word that I will convince the stockholders that we are entitled to an interest in this business that we have saved. Let’s not sit down, let’s stand up and fight.’ [FIGURE 1] Dodd leads the workers back to the heart of the studio, pausing only to eject Nassau from his office. The workers then toss the corporate raider over the studio wall and recommence production of Sex and Satan.

It is easy to see why Smith could misrecognize the film’s remarkable climax as a revolutionary gesture. As the labour force banishes Nassau from the studio, the film hints at the radical prospect of replacing his asset-stripping enterprise with a workers’ cooperative. However, it is a progressive agent of capital who initiates and legitimates the occupation of the studio. Dodd emerges as an enlightened financial manager who has learned to respect the humanity of the workers rather than viewing them as units servicing the machinery of production and profit. He facilitates economic recovery by striking a new compact with the workers, offering a mildly Rooseveltian ideal of cross-class solidarity as an antidote to the corrupt business culture that provoked financial collapse in the 1920s. Dodd’s ‘new deal’ proposes to outlaw capitalist malfeasance and allow a (limited) measure of profit participation for the labourers – at least, for those who purchase stock in the company. As Ames points out, Dodd ‘falsifies the situation’ by characterizing stockholders as ‘humble individuals’, downplaying the corporate capitalization of Hollywood studios by Wall Street finance houses and their trustees. Moreover, Ames suggests, through this conclusion ‘the imagery of worker rebellion (a mob of milling and angry labourers) is transformed into a
comic resolution that preserves the studio and enshrines the banker as hero’. Cohan agrees with Ames’ reading, noting that although Dodd supports the right of the studio’s employees both to work and to profit from their work, they remain workers for hire rather than financial partners who can reap the full benefits of their labour.

In reviewing the film for the Marxist journal *New Masses* Robert Stebbins (aka. filmmaker Sidney Meyers) was initially excited by Dodd’s speech in defence of ‘the significance of workers’ lives in the scheme of things’, but he dismissed it as a cynical *coup de théâtre*. Towne and Baker, he argues, were seeking to dazzle audiences with the paradoxical spectacle of a ‘top efficiency man in a Wall Street holding-company [aiming] to pull a sit-down strike himself. You get it. What a twist! We’ll even dignify the working class if it’ll work’. But it is hardly surprising that the film treads carefully in its treatment of Hollywood’s labour force. The Supreme Court’s ratification of the Wagner Act (National Labour Relations Act) in April 1937 triggered a wave of union organizing across the country, with the Act guaranteeing the right of private sector workers to join unions and seek improved employment conditions via collective bargaining and industrial action. Union membership in the USA surged from just under 4 million in 1936 to over 7 million by the end of 1937. In Hollywood itself, 6,000 artisanal workers – painters, plasterers, plumbers, cooks, hairstylists, set decorators, etc. – walked out of the studios on 30 April, demanding union recognition. As David F. Prindle puts it, Hollywood was experiencing ‘labour warfare, with the companies and other unions caught in the crossfire’.

From March to July 1937 the script for *Stand-In* was being developed in a climate of heightened industrial agitation in the movie capital. The production team clearly aimed to address the highly topical issue of labour relations, which does not feature at all in Kelland’s original story, while working within the regulatory constraints of the PCA. Depicting conflicts between capital and labour was a high-risk strategy for films at this time, especially if they critiqued the motives and actions of employers. For example, Warner Brothers’ 1935 release *Black Fury*, a social problem melodrama that dealt with labour problems
in the coal industry, faced the threat of boycotts in several states, even though PCA intervention substantially toned down the most controversial features of its script. Given Breen’s concerns about ‘industry policy’, a film about contemporary Hollywood was unlikely to get away with portraying industrial unrest in the motion picture studios, whatever the filmmakers’ political sympathies. Stebbins, Ames and Cohan are certainly right to point out the compromises that beset Stand-In’s perspective on labour, management and capital, but even so, as Ames acknowledges, the film ‘comes as close to dealing directly with union issues within the movie industry as any contemporary Hollywood film’. Even if the film sidesteps the union battles currently being fought within the studio gates, its climactic scenes function as a stand-in for this troubled context.

When it comes to tackling questions of politics or labour rights, Stand-In, like most Hollywood films, communicates through multiple evasions and displacements - which nonetheless circle tantalizingly around real-world problems. Its comic framework allows Stand-In to set in play a teasing game of assertion and disavowal. A telling instance of this process can be found in a minor yet illuminating gag. After a disastrous preview of the original cut of Sex and Satan, producer Doug Quintain is held to blame, accused of drinking excessively during the shoot. Dodd has no option but to fire him, and Quintain goes on a two-day bender to obliterate the pain of losing both his job and Thelma Cheri, the woman he adores. When Quintain is refused entry to the Café Trocadero, one of his favourite haunts, the film cuts outside to show the drunken producer and his ever-present Scotch terrier picketing the establishment. [FIGURE 2] They parade outside the entrance carrying placards that protest the Trocadero’s unfair treatment of them. Through this gag the film acknowledges industrial action while rendering it disarmingly humorous – but it is, all the same, a gag that evokes the emotive and potentially explosive topic of picketing, and thus symbolizes the broader industrial troubles faced both within and outside Hollywood. The film’s climactic scenes work in a similar fashion, suggesting the
upheavals of the time while simultaneously disavowing their seriousness, yet raising them as latent possibilities all the same.

The occupation of the studio by Dodd and Colossal’s rank-and-file workers is the film’s most daring and spectacular sequence. Critical commentaries on Stand-In focus extensively on these scenes as they are so unusual in Hollywood films, and especially in films about Hollywood. However, labour recurs as an issue throughout the film, especially in relation to stardom. As the public face of Hollywood, stardom, especially female stardom, emerged in the Depression era as a high-profile battleground for competing definitions of how the cinema industry should be run. Stand-In responds to this context by interrogating assumptions about the glamorous exceptionalism of movie stars, framing high-priced screen talent in relation to the low-paid employees who comprise the bulk of the studio workforce. It offers a further perspective on contemporary female stardom by critiquing the abuses of the contemporary child-star phenomenon, as exemplified by Shirley Temple.

Raspberry or Vanilla? - the Child Star

As soon as Dodd arrives in Los Angeles, Potts, the studio publicist, seeks to ply him with liquor, luxurious accommodation, and pliant starlets. Dodd is affronted by such venality and takes Potts’ behaviour as a sign of Hollywood’s general profligacy. Soon afterwards, he is confronted with a further ‘pimping’ scenario when a mother (Anne O’Neal) foists her precocious young daughter upon him as a contender for screen stardom. The skimpily clad Elvira, played by seven year-old Our Gang veteran Marianne Edwards, launches into a euphoric rendition of ‘Is it True What They Say About Dixie?’ with the jauntily hyperbolic mannerisms associated with Shirley Temple. [FIGURE 3] Dodd, who knows nothing about films and film culture, looks on in queasy astonishment as Elvira delivers a series of bump-and-grind moves in her miniscule frilly satin dress. When the performance concludes, Elvira’s mother asks for his opinion. Shocked by this ‘revolting exhibition’, Dodd accuses the mother of ‘robbing [her] daughter of her childhood’. 
Shirley Temple was then at the height of her remarkable 4-year run as a box-office champion, so 1937 audiences would clearly be in on the joke. But it is quite a complicated joke to decipher. From today’s perspective, hypersensitivity about paedophilia and childhood sexuality make it difficult to come to terms with both Temple’s extraordinary fame and her onscreen relations with adult men. For example, Gaylyn Studlar charges that contemporary (feminist) scholarship is obsessed with reading Temple as a perversely eroticized object of the male gaze. This tendency, she argues, greatly limits and simplifies how Temple functioned for 1930s audiences as a ‘symbolically loaded figure’ who simultaneously ‘supports traditional ‘family-centred’ values but also excites through her unsettling of age, gender, and sexual boundaries’.

Kristen Hatch similarly cautions against viewing Temple’s star configuration through a contemporary lens: what might seem to us like paedophilic spectacle, she insists, would have been accepted in the 1930s as a more complex mode of ‘child loving’ that encompassed ‘a broader, more amorphous range of pleasures, erotic and otherwise, produced by the child and celebrated in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries’. In her films, Hatch argues, Temple’s priceless child solicits men’s nurturing devotion in order to heal generational divides and the dislocating impact of the economic crisis on the family and masculinity.

Although (Twentieth-Century) Fox pitched Temple’s screen vehicles as ‘love stories between the girl and middle-aged men’, Hatch posits that the male character’s ‘adoration of the child demonstrates that he is not ruled by sexual passion but instead is willing to exercise sexual restraint’. By facilitating the bachelor male’s social reintegration and guiding him towards adult heterosexual union, Temple’s characters play a central role in the films’ circuitry of desire. Her movies thus seek to achieve a delicate balancing act, in which the child mediates adult sexuality while remaining untarnished by the economy of erotic exchange. But, as Lori Merish insists, sexual implication is not absent from Temple’s movies, as they ‘are in fact replete with sexual references. In particular, these films flirt with illicit sexuality, especially paedophilia and (father-daughter) incest’.
What is most crucial, however, is ‘the structure of sexual disavowal’ through which the films consistently reclaim the Temple figure as ‘innocent’ and ‘cute’.63

The Elvira scene from Stand-In evokes Temple’s pervasive familiarity to 1930s audiences, and thus her complex cultural resonance, while liberating the ‘child star’ performance from the framework of narrative disavowal bound up within the ‘Shirley Temple formula’.64 By so doing, the sequence presents a flagrantly eroticized spectacle of pre-pubescent girlhood. The audience can laugh at Dodd’s discomfort because this ‘human comptometer’ lacks awareness of who Shirley Temple is and what she means – which is a running gag in the film.65 At the same time, his very ignorance allows Stand-In to scrutinize the Temple phenomenon from an outsider’s perspective, exposing the subterranean currents that familiarity with the child star can mask. Via the stand-in of Elvira, then, the film strips away disavowal and normalization to lay bare the paedophilic implications of Temple’s stardom. By curtailing the audition just as Elvira is about to launch into her impersonation of Mae West, Dodd unwittingly confirms the inherent perversity of this child-star configuration.66 Unsurprisingly, Joseph Breen was especially concerned about the handling of the Elvira scene. Commenting on an early script, he advised Wanger that ‘The child should not sing “Frankie and Johnny”. “Bumps”, or other suggestive gestures, should not be used’.67 ‘Frankie and Johnny’ was an extremely popular song from the 1920s and mid-1930s, and featured in many films, but its association with violence, race and sexual corruption proved increasingly troublesome for Hollywood’s censors.68

Stand-In further nods towards Temple’s career, and the broader child stardom craze, by including Elvira’s mother in the scene. Temple’s huge success - she reputedly earned three times as much as the US President - inspired what journalist Eunice Fuller Barnard identified as ‘a new American get-rich-quick vision’ as ‘[m]asses of able-bodied Americans are plotting to make the youngest and weakest member of the family the chief breadwinner’.69 This new Californian gold rush, Barnard reports, led 10,000 parents to besiege the Central Casting Bureau in 1935, aiming to register their children as screen extras for work at the larger Hollywood studios. Many other parents enrolled their offspring in beauty
contests, dancing schools and the like, to equip them with the skills necessary to emulate the fabulously talented Temple. The Elvira sequence taps into this unsavoury scenario of Depression-fuelled desperation. In sharp contrast to her daughter’s eye-catching showgirl garb, the mother’s drab and shapeless black polka-dot dress implies she is investing everything in the bid for surrogate stardom. Despite boasting that ‘There’s not a child in Hollywood who can do the things my Elvira can do’, the mother’s abject self-delusion is all too evidently exposed by the derivative nature of her daughter’s performance. Elvira is clearly a stand-in not just for Shirley Temple but also for her mother’s desire, and the willingness of this archetypal stage mother to sexualize Elvira suggests an unwholesome readiness to sacrifice maternal nurturing for fame and profit.

By such means, Stand-In articulates a recurring anxiety that haunts the phenomenon of child stardom, and one that is often manifested through overcompensatory mechanisms of denial. 1930s fan magazines continually assured readers of Gertude Temple’s conscientious handling of her daughter’s career and well-being, outlining the measures she took to safeguard Shirley against overwork, excessive exploitation and indulgence. For example, several articles detail how Gertrude and George Temple relinquished even greater wealth by rejecting sponsorship offers and personal appearances to keep Shirley healthy, playful, natural and unspoiled. Despite such pledges, it is hard to imagine how the parents of Shirley Temple, or any other hugely successful young performer, could possibly strike a healthy balance between the responsibilities of child-rearing and financial dependency. As Barnard proposed in a 1936 article for the New York Times Magazine:

the movie child has little of the freedom and chance for self-expression recommended by some modern educators. Underneath all the gilding and glamour he [sic] is in strict fact a child labourer, with an uncompromising schedule of working hours. Upon his 6-year old wits and efforts depend in most cases the fortunes of his family.

John F. Kasson explores this dilemma in a 2008 discussion of Temple’s career, describing the work conducted by actors in general, but especially by
child performers, as emotional labour. Arlie Russell Hochschild used this term in her 1983 book *The Managed Heart* to describe adults in the service economy, such as flight attendants and bill collectors, whose jobs rely on their deployment of emotions normally considered private and discretionary, and on the suppression of emotions that do not fit the bill. This is precisely the business of actors, who must fabricate and inhabit fictional identities, equipping them with a mise-en-scène of believable emotional responses. The crucial difference between adult and child actors, of course, is that the latter can in no way be considered as fully self-possessed agents in the process of either delivering the performance or of negotiating for, and benefiting from, the economic value of their labour. As Kasson suggests, contemporary accounts insistently dodged this issue by codifying Shirley Temple’s work as a natural expression of childhood play rather than as exploitative child labour. By stressing the mother’s beneficent stewardship, and the close intimate bonds she shared with her daughter, such rhetoric sought to conceal the degree to which Shirley herself lacked ownership of her labour.

For Kasson, Temple’s emotional labour only partially comprised the work she conducted in delivering her screen performances, and thus in servicing the sentimental economy of Depression-era America. Another key strand of her emotional labour consisted of the work she performed to please the adults who benefited financially from her services, including her family, film directors, and studio executives. Gertrude Temple herself may not have been as horrendously pushy as some legendary stage mothers but, as Kasson puts it, Shirley nonetheless ‘found that fulfilling her mother’s ambitions was the source of her most intense emotional work’. Allan Dwan, who directed the young Temple in *Heidi* (1937) and *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* (1938), once remarked that ‘Shirley was the product of her mother, the instrument on which she played’. *Stand-In’s* Elvira sequence thus exposes unpalatable aspects of the maternal commodification of childhood that were ordinarily masked by the generally favourable public discourse on the relationship between Gertrude and Shirley Temple.
A later scene extends the satirical exposé of Hollywood’s obsession with child stardom, developing this in relation to questions of labour value. Lester Plum (Joan Blondell), Dodd’s assistant and eventual love interest, tells him that under the name ‘Sugar Plum’ she had been the Shirley Temple of her day.80

**[FIGURE 4]** This leads to a discussion about the exorbitant salaries Hollywood pays its child performers. As Sugar Plum, Lester confides, she earned $4,000 a week whereas as an adult worker, when she can find employment, she draws a mere $40 weekly. In customarily rational terms, Dodd protests the unfairness of this drop in the market value of her labour:

‘An inventory taken today would show that you have the same assets that you had as a child. Your mind’s mature – above average, if I may say so... Physically, you are stronger. Potentially, if you were worth 4,000 a week then, you should be worth 8,000 a week now. It’s simple mathematics’.

To counter this line of reasoning, Lester resorts to a parodic rendition of Shirley Temple’s signature song ‘On the Good Ship Lollipop’, from *Bright Eyes* (1934). **[FIGURE 5]** Her adult body delivers the dance moves familiar from such child performers as Temple, Baby Peggy and Baby Rose Marie – channelled earlier by Elvira – while her childlike vocalizing burlesques their studied cutesiness. She thus reverses the polarity of Elvira’s performance, rendering grotesque the juxtaposition of adult and child. The effect is to underscore the robotic otherness of this imagining of childhood, laying bare an exploitative commodification that strips the performer of agency. As Sugar Plum, Lester was but one of a long production-line of machine-tooled ‘cute’ child performers, who were summarily dropped when they outgrew their usefulness. To challenge Dodd’s faith in the overarching logic of ‘simple mathematics’ as a means of explaining the labour payment differential, Lester informs him, in her characteristically wisecracking manner, ‘The point is, sonny boy, that I’m now dishing raspberry and John Public still likes vanilla’. Besides its catamenial implication, Lester’s comment suggests that what counts is not the skillset of the performer but how they can be packaged and merchandized as a generic
product – in this case, the cute Temple-esque child. By offering her idiosyncratic lesson in Hollywood economics, Lester punctures Dodd’s condescending expertise and demonstrates his limited understanding of the highly particular, seemingly irrational yet merciless operations of the picture business.

**Luxurious Cinemites?**

While the Elvira sequence allows the film to scrutinize the contemporary child stardom craze, *Stand-In* uses Thelma Cheri to explore another topical concern in 1930s Hollywood – the question of whether stars merited their high salaries and lavish lifestyles. The film characterizes this ‘fading feminine super-sex star’ as a talentless and narcissistic performer who manipulates her star power and her overly generous contract to pack *Sex and Satan* with languorous and costly close-ups. By depicting Cheri as a greedy and wasteful opportunist, the film draws on a recurring ambivalence about the exceptionalism and market value of the star, which was inflamed by the troubled economic climate. Given that the top grossing stars of the 1930s were female, such ambivalence was explicitly gendered.  

They may not have been as outlandish in the 1930s as in the previous decade, but star salaries still vastly outstripped ordinary earnings. Emily Carman points out, for example, that working women averaged a mere $20 per week in 1930 (equivalent to $303 in 2021), while Constance Bennett captured the headlines in 1931 with a weekly $30,000 pay check (equivalent to $454,200 in 2021) from Warner Brothers and Carole Lombard received $16,000 a week (equivalent to $298,000 in 2021) from Selznick International in 1937.

In 1938, when average earnings for a worker in the manufacturing industries averaged $23.95 weekly, or $1,245.40 per annum (equivalent to $22,529.28 in 2021), 54 of the top Hollywood stars received annual salaries of $100,000 or more (equivalent to $1,809,000 in 2021). Available records indicate that the highest paid star that year was Claudette Colbert, who received a salary of $426,944 (equivalent to $7,723,417 in 2021), followed by Bing Crosby at $410,000 (equivalent to $7,416,900 in 2021), Irene Dunne at $405,222 (equivalent to $7,330,466 in 2021), Charles Boyer at $375,277 (equivalent to
$6,788,761 in 2021), and Wallace Beery at $355,000 (equivalent to $6,421,950 in 2021). Stars continued to function as idols of consumption, as Leo Lowenthal puts it, but the Depression made such salaries, and the right of stars to enjoy them, much harder to swallow. Stand-In’s exploration of economic and human paradigms of value intersects with a discourse on stardom that was shaped by an often rancorous off-screen debate about the salaries paid to Hollywood talent, with producers, performers, government regulators and various journalistic interests battling over the very identity of the motion picture business. Stand-In’s portrayal of Thelma Cheri clearly responds to the process of critical self-examination this debate inspired within the Hollywood community.

During the economic crisis of the early 1930s the major studios sought to curtail star salaries, blaming them for the industry’s economic woes. Media commentators also stirred up public resentment at overpaid screen talent, missing few opportunities to castigate Hollywood stars for their lavish lifestyles and their seeming indifference to the economic hardship suffered by many Americans. Faced with such sentiments, movie stars had little option but to consent to financial cutbacks imposed by management as the film industry plunged further into the red. As Laura Benham observed in September 1932, ‘a salary-slashing epidemic is raging in the film factories’. Besides cutting pay the studios also reduced payments for contract renewal, by signing actors on a picture-by-picture basis, rather than long-term option contracts, and by recruiting newcomers (such as Joan Blondell, Clark Gable and Johnny Weissmuller) instead of higher-paid actors. The process of retrenchment came to a head in March 1933 when, amidst bitter wrangling, the major studios introduced across-the-board salary cuts for an 8-week period to keep production centres operating. Like other film industry workers Hollywood performers grudgingly accepted these emergency strictures but they were less amenable when, in June 1933, long-term salary rationalization was proposed after the implementation of the National Industry Recovery Act (NIRA). The National Recovery Administration (NRA) required cinema, like other industries, to draft a code of fair competition to help stimulate and stabilize business. Across the
next few months star salaries were a hotly debated issue within negotiations over the Code of Fair Competition for the Motion Picture Industry.\textsuperscript{92} Believing that producers were lobbying for the inclusion of a salary-fixing clause in the Code, along with other unfavourable measures, more than 500 screen performers banded together to form the Screen Actors’ Guild (SAG), with Broadway and Hollywood entertainer Eddie Cantor as their president.\textsuperscript{93}

The major film producers continued to blame talent costs for damaging the industry’s recovery, arguing that the Code should limit star salaries and star raiding.\textsuperscript{94} NRA officials agreed that excessively high salaries, for executives as well as creative workers, impeded the industry’s stability. Deputy Recovery Administrator Sol A. Rosenblatt sought to levy fines of up to $10,000 (equivalent to $198,835 in 2021) for producers who paid salaries ‘in excess of the fair value of personal services’, arguing that this ‘results in unfair and destructive competition’.\textsuperscript{95} The NRA’s chief administrator, General Hugh S. Johnson, also declared that there was ‘considerable feeling in the country that with all but one of the major companies in receivership, many of the salaries are grotesque’.\textsuperscript{96} With the energetic and charismatic Cantor as spokesperson, SAG launched a vigorous campaign against the demonization of Hollywood stars, threatening strike action if contentious clauses were not removed from the Code.\textsuperscript{97} Cantor insisted that very few actors received the extravagant ‘headline’ salaries of $3,000-10,000 per week (equivalent to $59,000-$198,000 per week in 2021), and that those who did only received such sums for a small fraction of the year. He argued, too, that the peak popularity of most movie stars was short-lived, largely because producers used them in too many pictures. \textsuperscript{98} Citing how Mae West’s phenomenal success had allegedly saved Paramount from bankruptcy, Cantor also claimed that stars merited high salaries because of their crucial importance to the industry’s fortunes.\textsuperscript{99}

In November 1933 Cantor persuaded Franklin D. Roosevelt, a personal friend, to veto proposed clauses against star raiding and salary curtailment in the motion picture Code.\textsuperscript{100} Cantor’s provocative op-ed in the January 1934 issue of \textit{The New Movie Magazine} accused film producers and their Washington
representatives of using salary control as a smokescreen to block investigation of their own shady business practices and poor financial management. ‘The producers who squawked the loudest recently in Washington,’ he charged, ‘are the very ones who voted themselves large salaries and fat bonuses and gave their stockholders such a raw deal that it makes Wall Street and its methods a Sunday school picnic’. As SAG president, he vowed to ‘fight these unscrupulous individuals with everything at my command’. The actors may have won a significant victory against the film majors but the battle was far from over.

Subsequent years saw fierce struggles between SAG and producers over the question of union recognition, with star salaries continuing to face intensive scrutiny. For entertainment journalist Mark Dowling and other commentators, movie star salaries indicated deep-rooted problems within the business culture of the film industry, which the actors accused of being run by ‘financial buccaneers’.

Rosenblatt’s final report on the motion picture Code, in July 1934, confirmed that the film industry required substantial reform. Lamenting the lack of uniformity in its business procedures, he argued that rationalization of production costs was essential to the industry’s financial rehabilitation. Although the report vetoed curbing star salaries, Rosenblatt recommended the creation of a salary commission to establish clearer standards. As currently configured, he suggested, the star system ‘tends to create an artificial scarcity of talent’. A small group of in-demand artists and executives benefited excessively, Rosenblatt claimed, because ‘inflated values… have created a vicious circle of bidding for their services’. As well as upholding several accusations SAG activists had levelled at the producers’ handling of the salaries issue, his report further noted that while the studios had released salary figures for highly paid stars, seemingly to inflame public outrage, they were reluctant to disseminate information about executive pay.

As an alternative to existing salary arrangements, Rosenblatt proposed some form of profit participation for star performers. Although several stars and other creative workers had already consented to percentage deals, many
feared they would lose out financially or found it hard to agree on appropriate terms.\textsuperscript{109} Some producers, however, saw advantages in such a system. As it was impossible to work out fair salaries for hugely popular stars, Adolph Zukor argued, percentage deals could prove the fairest way of rewarding them in line with box-office performance.\textsuperscript{110} Besides the discrepancy between a star’s salary and their marquee value, a further problem with existing financial terms was the substantial variation in salaries achieved by stars with roughly equivalent popularity.\textsuperscript{111} Picture Play’s Helen Pade reported that Irene Dunne secured $8,500 a week (equivalent to $165,240 weekly in 2021) for the first 10 weeks of shooting Universal’s Magnificent Obsession (1935), and $10,000 a week (equivalent to $194,400 in 2021) thereafter, while Bette Davis, a star of equal stature, received only $1,600 a week (equivalent to $31,104 in 2021) for her work on Warner Brothers’ Dangerous (1935).\textsuperscript{112} Such discrepancies were exacerbated by the producers’ strategy of recruiting new performers, often from the stage, to replace established actors ‘whose popularity has failed to keep pace with the upward salary tilts provided for in their contracts’.\textsuperscript{113} Thus, Irene Dunne was passed over for the lead role in the Paramount drama Valiant is the Word for Carrie (Wesley Ruggles, 1936) in favour of the much cheaper Gladys George, who earned $400 a week (equivalent to $7,548 in 2021) for the role.\textsuperscript{114} Tay Garnett, the director of Stand-In, joined in the debate about film industry salaries, and his views on the subject may well have influenced the film’s critique of Thelma Cheri. Along with fellow directors Gregory La Cava and Leo McCarey, Garnett advocated some kind of profit-participation plan to replace salaries, not just for stars but also for directors, cameramen, producers and other personnel.\textsuperscript{115} He outlined the benefits of such a scheme in a 1938 New York Times article, ‘There’s Profit in Sharing Profits’. Writing at a time when the studios were investing in capital-intensive prestige pictures, Garnett argued that Hollywood artistry was hampered by ‘the curse of too much money’. In such a high-risk financial environment, he reasoned, profit-sharing deals for artists could prove a more efficient and more equitable alternative to the current salary system. By encouraging stars to see themselves as part-owners of the film, a
profit participation strategy could boost creativity, commitment and quality, even if they ultimately received the same financial compensation for their services.\textsuperscript{116}

Thelma Cheri emblematizes the flaws in the current system. A key sequence foregrounds her abuse of the privileges of stardom, which is contrasted explicitly with the conscientious labour of Colossal’s rank and file workers. On his first visit to the studio, Dodd is shown round the facilities by Quintain. Challenging Dodd’s description of the workers as ‘units’ and ‘cogs in the machine’, Quintain insists they are human beings whose livelihoods are threatened by Ivor Nassau’s financial manipulations. He then takes Dodd onto the shooting stage to witness the filming of a scene from *Sex and Satan*. Besides exposing the indulgences of director and star, the sequence that follows illustrates the communal promise of collaborative labour. On a set simulating an alpine slope, Lester Plum, Cheri’s stand-in, walks upwards on a tilted treadmill. Sweltering in winter apparel under the studio lights, and facing the onslaught of an artificial blizzard, Lester grafts while the star relaxes in her dressing room. As Lester informs Dodd early in the film, ‘Thelma Cheri’s a star, and like most stars she’s a pretty fragile cut of steak. She mustn’t be fatigued or mussed – and, above all, she mustn’t be so vulgar as to perspire. Hence the stand-in does her sweating for her’. Unlike the sparse winter scene being filmed, the studio itself is packed with a bustling retinue of workers who labour to fabricate illusions for the industry of make-believe. [FIGURE 6] These include: an army of camera, lighting, sound and electrical technicians; two men in charge of a huge electrical fan and artificial snow; a labourer who manually operates the treadmill; a small team responsible for manipulating scenery during the shot; a script girl; and attendants who silently and efficiently step in to dust fake snow from Dodd and fix his hair.

Amid this ceaseless activity Potts dallies with the starlets he tried to foist on Dodd, while the capricious Koslofski disrupts proceedings by insisting that the use of fake rather than real edelweiss jeopardizes his creative integrity. Compared to the unselfconscious labour of the studio workers, Cheri and Koslofski come across as indulged and recalcitrant prima donas. [FIGURE 7] While Lester toils on the treadmill, Quintain takes Dodd to meet Cheri in her
dressing room. When the two are alone, Cheri treats Dodd to a lament about the burdens of stardom:

‘But of course you’re in a position to do as you please, while I… [turns her head to one side and stretches out her arms, intoning melodramatically] I’m a slave really. To the millions of people who depend on me to bring cheer into their drab lives.’

[FIGURE 8] Through her exaggerated gestures and speech inflexions, Marla Shelton underscores the performative insincerity of a woman who is addled by stardom. Writhing in studied affect as she entertains the patently embarrassed banker, Cheri is content to let Lester ‘fry’ on the treadmill. Lester is only liberated when shooting commences, and the star replaces her to deliver a simulation of effort to the camera. The sequence suggests that Cheri rather than Lester really qualifies as the ‘stand-in’, as the latter sweats it out while the former reaps the glory.

An earlier sequence amplifies this concern with Hollywood’s unpretentious, underprivileged yet dignified workers. To escape from Potts’ seductive wiles, Dodd forsakes the gaudy hotel room supplied by the studio in favour of Mrs. Mack’s humble boarding house, where Lester resides. The occupants of the boarding house may be, as she puts it, an eccentric collection of ‘hams, failures and has-beens’ – together with a trained seal and a penguin - but they offer a positive countercurrent to the venal powers that run the studio. As Christopher Ames notes, the boarding house offers a supportive community of Hollywood outsiders who have not been corrupted by success. Dodd’s encounter with the stunt-man Tommy (Emmerson Treacy) makes this especially clear. A disconsolate Tommy returns to the boarding house from a movie shoot, having failed to land a job. ‘It was a tough stunt,’ he explains to Lester, before demonstrating a perfectly realized tumble down the stairs. As he rises from the floor, he complains: ‘And they wanted me to do that for seven and a half bucks. Can you imagine that?’ Lester is sympathetic, claiming the producers should pay him at least $15, but Dodd exclaims in astonishment: ‘But he just did it for nothing!’ To which Tommy replies: ‘I got my pride, haven’t I? Besides, that’s the
picture business’. At this early stage in his learning process, Dodd is unable to fathom Tommy’s objection to selling his labour for less than what he considers a reasonable rate. Even though he owes Mrs. Mack for rent, Tommy would rather execute the fall for nothing than volunteer his services for exploitation. Unlike Cheri, who expects to be paid handsomely for what little work she does, this is an artisanal labourer who takes pride in his craft and is determined to demand fair recompense for it.

Tommy’s story also highlights the fact that most workers in Hollywood studios during the 1930s earned far less than the movie stars and executives, and that their employment was more precarious. The Code of Fair Competition for the Motion Picture Industry attempted some measure of protection by specifying minimum wage rates for designated craftspeople and labourers in Hollywood production, while the strengthening of union representation later in the decade resulted in several pay increases. By 1939, for example, gaffers could earn (2021 equivalents in brackets) $1.41 per hour ($26.23) or $82.90 ($1,542.38) for a 60-hour 7-day week, with a weekly rate of $98.92 ($1,840.43) for working on distant locations; a 1st prop man could earn $1.21 ($22.51) per hour or $72.60 ($1,350.74) for a 60-hour 7-day week, with a weekly rate of $85.80 ($1,596.33) for working on distant locations; a first cameraman could earn $272.25 ($5,065.29) for a 48-hour 6-day week; and a carpenter-foreman could earn $1.61 ($29.95) per hour or $84.75 ($1,576.80) for a week of unlimited studio work, with a weekly rate of $111.02 ($2,065.56) for working on distant locations. In reporting these figures, the Motion Picture Herald noted that the wages of craftspeople in film production may have been higher than in other industries but the labour force did not enjoy comparable security:

the fact remains that employment in Hollywood production is casual, never steady except in cases of ‘key’ men and department heads. With the rise and ebb of production, men are hired and laid off. Few can tell in any given month how many pictures will be on the stages and how many will be nearing final stages of preparation – necessitating the building of sets, stages, props and the like.
As a result, there can be no average wage scale determined for an individual craft. When there is work, craftsmen are busy – even to the extent of getting time and a half and double time for overtime. When there is no work, they sit by telephones or in the union hiring halls, earning nothing.\textsuperscript{120}

**Good Woman, Bad Actress**

‘Women today may be able to support themselves, and earn big salaries and hold high positions. But they are paid the salaries by men, and given the positions by men... I have heard it said that this is a woman’s town, but it isn’t! Men own the picture business, men produce the pictures, men give out the contracts. It is a man who hires even the biggest woman star and a man who directs her work.’ (Miriam Hopkins, 1935).\textsuperscript{121}

By having a female performer embody its critique of star excess, *Stand-In’s* gender agenda inevitably skews its perspective on the politics of labour. Like *Singin’ in the Rain*, the film resolves its plot by overthrowing an uppity female star who jeopardizes the common good by manipulating an overly generous contract for selfish ends. After a disastrous preview of *Sex and Satan*, Cheri prevent Quintain and Dodd from re-editing the film by insisting that ‘My contract gives me approval of cast, direction, cutting...’. This is an unlikely scenario, as option contracts were generally rigged in favour of the studio, which regarded stars as expensive assets over which they exerted full managerial rights. Contracts also restricted the ability of most performers to choose roles or working conditions, or to have substantial input into the determination of their careers.\textsuperscript{122} Like *Singin’ in the Rain*’s Lina Lamont (Jean Hagen), Thelma Cheri is a misogynist caricature of female ambition. In the first two versions of *A Star is Born* Norman Maine (Fredric March, James Mason) is emasculated by his commodification as image, but Lamont and Cheri flourish in the spotlight and seize every opportunity to parade their misperceived splendour. This gendered demarcation posits screen stardom, and the desire to identify oneself as image, as inherently more ‘feminine’, while simultaneously attacking women for choosing such a career path. This is
certainly the case with the way *Stand-In* castigates Thelma Cheri for her patent narcissism, even though this is a key criterion for, and biproduct of, star glamour.

*Stand-In’s* treatment of Thelma Cheri was part of a backlash against the dominance of female stars in 1930s Hollywood. With women assumed to constitute the bulk of the cinema audience, female stars were vitally important as box-office attractions. Laura Benham noted in a 1934 *Picture Play* article that they earned the largest salaries, received the most fan mail, and had the greatest influence over fashion trends.¹²³ Very few male stars, she suggests, had sufficient stature or marquee value to rival stellar screen performers like Greta Garbo, Katherine Hepburn, Marlene Dietrich, Joan Crawford, Janet Gaynor, Norma Shearer or Constance Bennett.¹²⁴ Indeed, Benham argues, the success of Hollywood’s top male actors often depended on their being teamed with influential female stars.¹²⁵ Apart from anything else, these were hugely dedicated and successful career women: as Benham puts it, ‘never have so many women accumulated so much wealth by their own efforts as they have in the cinema to-day’.¹²⁶ Emily Carman considers how several ambitious and business-savvy female stars of the 1930s leveraged their popularity to free themselves from standard option-contract arrangements and secure substantial creative and financial control over their films and their careers.¹²⁷ Such success, however, destabilized the traditional gender hierarchy at a time when many men were suffering privation and unemployment. By exemplifying and embodying star glamour, moreover, major female performers were key ambassadors for Hollywood, and could thus serve as ready scapegoats for its excesses and miscalculations.

The gender prejudice underlying the depiction of Thelma Cheri is emphasized in the film’s romantic subplots. To distract Dodd from investigating Colossal’s finances, Nassau and his cronies encourage Thelma to seduce him, a ploy that succeeds until Lester Plum shows the lovestruck executive the error of his ways. Cheri is also responsible for the downfall of Doug Quintain, the gifted and principled producer who made her a success – and who plunges into alcoholic despair when she spurns and then betrays him. The film clearly
endorses Quintain’s patriarchal critique of Cheri, when he declares that stardom has turned her into an applause addict who is content to let her hips do the acting. The end of the film resolutely puts Cheri in her place, when Quintain and Dodd join forces to combat her sexual tyranny. They cook up a scheme to break Cheri’s contract on grounds of moral turpitude, with Dodd squirting her around Hollywood’s nightspots on a debauched crawl that provokes scandalous headlines. Overturning her authority, they are able to re-edit Sex and Satan to transform the star-driven vanity project into a comedy that renders Cheri a supporting player to their new star, Kongo the gorilla.128 The implication is that her career will be ruined and Cheri will retreat into domestic servitude with Quintain. As he puts it, destroying her career is ‘the only way to make a good woman out of a very bad actress’.

As the ‘amused and amazed’ reviewer for Britain’s Sunday Referee noted, Stand-In is a ‘curious extravaganza’ that takes pot-shots at a range of Hollywood targets.129 The satirical critique of Thelma Cheri may conform to contemporary studio and media propaganda about spoiled and overpaid star talent, as well as to patriarchal prejudices against female ambition and independence, but this is only one aspect of the film’s multi-faceted probing of the flaws of Depression-era Hollywood. Cheri is certainly a ‘luxurious cinemite’ but Stand-In counterbalances the negative depiction of her excesses, and of Elvira’s grotesque ‘nursery wiles’, with a celebration of the unpretentious workforce that labours conscientiously in the shadows of the silver screen.130 Although its sympathetic representation of rank and file employees is ultimately tempered by sentimentalizing a beneficent capitalism that is steered by an enlightened member of the managerial elite, Stand-In nonetheless offers a highly unusual perspective on the ethics of motion-picture production. As Time magazine commented, unlike the ‘acrid satire’ of Hollywood dished out by Once in a Lifetime (1932) or Boy Meets Girl (1938), both derived from Broadway plays, the laughter of Stand-In ‘is large, warming and contagious’. By virtue of its insider knowledge and its emphasis on ‘the vast
army of skilled film technicians’, the review notes, *Stand-In* emerges as ‘the most human as well as the most biting comedy yet written about Hollywood’.¹³¹

**Captions for figures**

Figure 1: Capital and labour, united: Atterbury Dodd joins the studio workers

Figure 2: Picketing the Café Trocadero

Figure 3: Elvira and her mother

Figure 4: Sugar Plum, “idolized by millions”

Figure 5: Lester Plum performs “On the Good Ship Lollipop”

Figure 6a-6f: Studio production as collaborative enterprise

Figure 7: Lester Plum toils on the treadmill

Figure 8: Thelma Cheri’s emotive affectation

**Notes on contributor**

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NOTES

1 Edwin Schallert, ‘Going, Going, Gone’, Picture Play (July 1933), 17.
2 Reginald Taviner, ‘Can Hollywood ‘Take It’?’; Photoplay (June 1933), 39.
3 See, for example: Nelson B. Bell, ‘Hollywood Drops its Shyness and Poses for the Cameraman’, Washington Post, 11 July 1937, A5; Douglas W. Churchill, ‘Hollywood Peers into its Magic Looking Glass’, New York Times, 25 July 1937, 133; ‘Movie of the Week. Stand-In: Hollywood Makes a Movie About Itself and a Banker’, Life, 1 November 1937; 96-99; Edwin Schallert, ‘Stand-In: Depiction of Life in Movie Town’, Los Angeles Times, 26 November 1937, 6.
4 In an article written three weeks before the release of Stand-In, Frank Nugent considered several 1937 ‘backstudio’ films as part of the cycle that followed in the wake of A Star is Born, including Talent Scout (Warner Brothers), Hollywood Cowboy (George A. Hirliman/RKO), Super Sleuth (RKO), Something to Sing About (Zion Meyers/Grand National), Sophie Lang Goes West (Paramount) and It Happened in Hollywood (Columbia) (Frank S. Nugent, ‘Another Dance of the Seven Veils: The Screen Reveals its Mysteries to the Public, Yet Manages to Hide Behind the Cloak of Illusion’, New York Times, 10 October 1937, 177). These are all low-budget B-film comedies or musical-comedies.
5 Steve Cohan, Hollywood by Hollywood: The Backstudio Picture and the Mystique of Making Movies (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 11. Cohan’s conception of film cycles seems motivated more by critical convenience than industrial logic: for example, one of his cycles of backstudio films runs from 1928 to the present day (ibid., 11-17).
6 ibid., 12. Cohan lists over 30 such films produced from 1929 to 1941 (ibid., 259-60).
7 Terry Donovan Smith, ‘Mixing It Up in the Depression: A Hidden Representation of Class Struggle – not so – Stand-In, 1937 screwball comedy film’, Journal of Popular Film and Television 24, no.3 (Fall 1996), 124.
8 Allen John Scott, On Hollywood: The Place, The Industry (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 117. See also: Murray Ross, Stars and Strikes: Unionization of Hollywood (New York: Columbia University Press, 1941), 4. Leo C. Rosten reports that in 1937 from 27,000-33,000 persons were employed in Hollywood film production, approximately 54% of whom were skilled and unskilled workers rather than salaried staff (Hollywood: The Movie Colony, The Movie Makers (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1941), 373). The studios maintained a large roster of permanent staff but many other workers, especially the less skilled, were hired on a more short-term basis, moving from studio to studio in accordance with demand. Production companies also relied on a substantial body of casually employed extras (Scott, On Hollywood, 119).
9 Matthew Bernstein, Walter Wanger: Hollywood Independent (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 114-128. Wanger’s notional budget ceiling at United Artists was $750,000, with the cost of individual stars pegged at $150,000 – although several of his films for the company exceeded these targets (ibid., 117). Stand-In’s final budget was $523,869 and the film made a modest net profit of $9,274 (ibid. 438).
10 Clarence Budington Kelland, Stand-In, Saturday Evening Post, 13 February-20 March, 1937 (6 issues).
11 See: Churchill, ‘Hollywood Peers’. 133; C.A. Lejeune ‘Films of the Week’, The Observer, 28 November 1937, 12; ‘Stand-In a Standout at Radio City Music Hall’,
Hollywood: The Movie Colony, The Movie Makers
then dropped to $21,577,000 in 1938 and $13,866,000 in 1935 to $29,716,000 in 1936 and Philip

the US recession of 1937
32
31
30
(Edinburgh: Edinburgh
University Press, 2003), 38.

Scott Urban and Tobias Straumann, ‘Still tied by golden fetters: the global response to the US recession of 1937-1938’, Financial History Review 19, no.2 (2012), 21.

Iwan Morgan, ‘Introduction: Hollywood and the Great Depression’, Iwan Morgan and Philip John Davies, eds., Hollywood and the Great Depression (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 7. The net earnings of seven major film companies rose from $13,866,000 in 1935 to $29,716,000 in 1936 and to $36,926,000 in 1937; however, they then dropped to $21,577,000 in 1938 and then to $19,110,000 in 1939 (Leo C. Rosten, Hollywood: The Movie Colony, The Movie Makers (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1941), 377).
34 Balio, *Grand Design*, 13. See also: ‘What’s Putting the Skids on Grosses? Bankers are Preparing to ask Leaders’, *Motion Picture News*, 5 July 1930, 15; ‘Bankers Plan to Set Off Fireworks as Negative Costs Keep on Skyrocketing’, *Motion Picture News*, 1 November 1930, 19, 26; ‘If You Can’t Trim, We’ll Show You How’, Bankers Tell Industry Leaders’, *Motion Picture News*, 22 November 1930, 23, 28. The latter article claims that gross box-office receipts were down 10-30%.

35 See, for example, ‘Sticky Fingers of Greedy Executives to Get Wall Street Bath, is Report’, *Motion Picture News*, 26 April 1930, 9, 32; ‘Bankers, Aroused Over Yarns of Graft, Order Sweeping, Secret Investigation’, *Motion Picture News*, 9 August 1930, 19.

36 See, for example, ‘Bankers Gunning for Big Salaries in Industry; Production Main Target’, *Motion Picture News*, 19 April 1930, 21; ‘Salaries to be Slashed by Wall Street – Rumoured’, *Hollywood Filmograph*, 3 May 1930, 21; John Scott, ‘Wall Street Wails Heeded in Films’, *Los Angeles Times*, 5 July 1931, 11; ‘It’s ‘Morning After’ in Hollywood Now with Dr. Wall Street on Job’, *Los Angeles Times*, 12 July 1931, A1-2.

37 Maurice Kann, ‘Produced by Wall Street; Directed by Dough’, *Motion Picture News*, 18 October 1930, 16.

38 A.H. Frederick, ‘Wall Street Closes Down on Film Biz’, *Inside Facts of Stage and Screen*, 10 May 1930, 2.

39 John Scott, ‘Wall Street Wails’, 11.

40 ‘It’s “Morning After” in Hollywood Now with Dr. Wall Street on Job’, *Los Angeles Times*, 12 July 1931, A1-2.

41 Don Gillette: ‘Penny Wise Bankers – and ‘depression’ films’, *Film Daily*, 9 July 1931, 4.

42 Quoted in ‘Wall St. Killing Production Brains’, *Film Daily*, 17 August 1931, 2.

43 Ames, *Movies About the Movies*, 41.

44 Shortly before *Stand-In’s* production, violent conflict raged in steel plants across several states. For an account of the Little Steel strike, see Walter Galenson, *The CIO Challenge to the AFL: A History of the American Labour Movement, 1935-1941* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), 96-109.

45 Ames, *Movies About the Movies*, 146.

46 ibid., 147.

47 Cohan, *Hollywood by Hollywood*, 71.

48 Robert Stebbins, ‘Sights and Sounds,’ *New Masses*, 30 November 1937, 27.

49 Michael Goldfield, ‘Worker Insurgency, Radical Organization, and New Deal Legislation’, *American Political Science Review* 83, no. 4 (December 1989), 1267.

50 See David Prindle, *The Politics of Glamour: Ideology and Democracy in the Screen Actors Guild* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 27-8; and Murray Ross, ‘Labour Relations in Hollywood,’ *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, 254 (November 1947), 63.

51 Prindle, *Politics of Glamour*, 28. See also: Ross, ‘Labour Relations in Hollywood,’ 61, and Danae Clark, *Negotiating Hollywood: The Cultural Politics of Actors’ Labour* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 39.

52 Breen commented on the Kelland story on 16 March and received a ‘fairly final’ script, edited by Tay Garnett, on 10 June. Breen requested further amendments to a ‘final’ continuity script on 28 June. He commented further on a print of the film on 27 September, asking Wanger and Garnett to cut some sexually suggestive lines of dialogue. This information is derived from memos from Breen to Wanger in the PCA file on *Stand-In* on 16 March 1937, 11 June 1937, 28 June 1937, 29 June 1937, and 27 September 1937.
Kelland was a diehard Republican who opposed the New Deal. Instead of this scenario of industrial action, his story uses a more conventional murder mystery to engineer its climax.

54 Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Censored: Morality Codes, Catholics, and the Movies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 252-60. Francis R. Walsh suggests that the original script, based on a true story, was highly critical of the coal industry (‘The films we never saw: American movies view organized labour, 1934-1954’, *Labour History* 27, no. 4 (1986), 566-70).

55 Ames, *Movies About the Movies*, 148.

56 For consideration of the battles over unionization in 1930s Hollywood, see: Ross, *Stars and Strikes*; Hugh Lovell and Tasile Carter, *Collective Bargaining in the Motion Picture Industry* (Berkeley: Institute of Industrial Relations/ University of California, 1955); Mike Nielsen and Gene Maille, *Hollywood’s Other Blacklist: Union Struggles in the Studio System* (London: British Film Institute, 1995), vii-70; and Gerald Horne, *Class Struggle in Hollywood, 1930-1950: Mobsters, Moguls, Stars, and the Trade Unionists* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001).

57 Temple topped the *Motion Picture Herald* list of box-office stars from 1935 to 1938 (Cobbett Steinberg, *Reel Facts: The Movie Book of Records* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1981, 477)). See also Kathryn Fuller-Seeley, ‘Shirley Temple: Making Dreams Come True’, in Adrienne L. McLean, ed., *Glamour in a Golden Age: Movie Stars of the 1930s* (Metuchen: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 45.

58 Gaylyn Studlar, *Precocious Charms: Stars Performing Girlhood in Classical Hollywood Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 64-5. *Stand-In* went on general release in the USA the day after Graham Greene published his notorious review of *Wee Willie Winkie* (1937) in *Night and Day* magazine, which accused Temple of ‘dimpled depravity’ and ‘dubious coquetry’, inspiring a much publicized lawsuit for libel. See: David Parkinson, ed., *The Graham Greene Film Reader: Reviews, Essays, Interviews & Film Stories* (New York: Applause Books, 1995), 234; and David Finkelstein, “The Dangerous Third Martini”: Graham Greene, Libel and Literary Journalism in 1930s Britain’, in Richard Keeble and Sharon Wheeler, eds.), *The Journalistic Imagination: Literary Journalists from Defoe to Capote and Carter* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 98-9.

59 Studlar, *Precocious Charms*, 54. On the sexualization of Shirley Temple, see Ara Osterwell, ‘Reconstructing Shirley: Paedophilia and Interracial Romance in Hollywood’s Age of Innocence’, *Camera Obscura* 72 (2009), 1-39; and Kristen Hatch, ‘Discipline and Pleasure: Shirley Temple and the Spectacle of Child Loving’, *Camera Obscura*, 97 (2012), 126-55.

60 Hatch, ‘Discipline and Pleasure,’ 151.

61 Studlar, *Precocious Charms*, 63-75.

62 Hatch, ‘Discipline and Pleasure,’ 133.

63 Lori Merish, ‘Cuteness and Commodity Aesthetics: Tom Thumb and Shirley Temple’, in Rosemarie Garland Thomson, ed., *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 195.

64 Hatch uses this term to describe the narrative framework through which ‘child loving produces a transformation that results in the resolution of social problems’ (Hatch, ‘Discipline and Pleasure,’ 139).

65 The term ‘human comptometer’ comes from ‘Stand-In’ (review), *Motion Picture Daily*, 4 October 1937, 6.

66 Gilbert Seldes compared Temple to West in a 1935 article (‘Two Great Women: Intimations of the Mae West of tomorrow on seeing the Shirley Temple of today’, *Esquire*, July 1 1935, 86, 143). Most journalists, however, proposed Temple as an
antidote to the blonde sex symbols of the early 1930s, especially the bawdiness associated with West. (See: Fuller-Seeley, ‘Shirley Temple’, 53, and Hatch, ‘Discipline and Pleasure,’ 133-4). A 1934 Motion Picture article, for example, identified Temple and Janet Gaynor as wholesome screen stars who could displace ‘Mae West, Garbo, Dietrich, Jean Harlow and others of the ‘sexy’, glamorous school’ (Mark Dowling, ‘The Movies Clean Up…’, Motion Picture (October 1934), 84-5).

67 Memo from Breen to Wanger, 11 June 1937 (Stand-In file, PCA).

68 Peter Stanfield, Body and Soul: Jazz and Blues in American Film, 1927-63 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 44-77.

69 Eunice Fuller Barnard, ‘Children of Hollywood’s Gold Rush’, New York Times Magazine, 4 October 1936, 10.

70 ibid. For further discussion of the child stardom craze, see: Jane Hampton, ‘Robbing the Cradle for Stars’, Photoplay (November 1934), 34; Cecil Morrison, ‘Just a Bunch of Babies’, Photoplay (March 1935), 50-51; Eunice Fuller Barnard, ‘What Price Glory for Screen Starlets?’, New York Times Magazine, 11 October 1936, 12-13, 22; and Douglas W. Churchill, ‘Life of the Child Star: A Hollywood Fairy Tale’, New York Times, 22 May 1938, 18-19, 23.

71 See, for example: Barbara Shawn, ‘Shirley Take a Bow,’ Photoplay (August 1934), 69, 115; ‘Shirley Health’, Movie Classic (October 1935), 32; and Helen Harrison, ‘Tiny Girl, What Now’, Motion Picture (October 1934), 39, 80-81.

72 See, for example: Shawn, ‘Shirley, Take a Bow’, 69; ‘Shirley Health’, 32; Harry Lang, ‘Fortune for Shirley’, Movie Classic (December 1935), 25, 60; Jack Smalley, ‘Shirley: A $1,000,000 industry’, Picture Play (August 1937), 40-41, 92; and Harrison, ‘Tiny Girl’, 39, 80-81; and Gertrude Temple, ‘Shirley Temple’s Mother Replies to J. Eugene Chrisman’, Hollywood (January 1935), 29.

73 Barnard, ‘What Price Glory’, 12.

74 John F. Kasson, ‘Behind Shirley Temple’s Smile: Children, Emotional Labour, and the Great Depression’, in James W. Cook, Lawrence B. Glickman and Michael O’Malley, eds., The Cultural Turn in U.S. History: Past, Present and Future (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 204. seldes

75 Arlie Russell Hochschild, The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012 [1983]).

76 Kasson, ‘Behind Shirley Temple’s Smile’, 204

77 ibid.

78 ibid.

79 Shirley Temple Black, Child Star: An Autobiography (London: Headline Books, 1988), 205.

80 Joan Blondell herself started out as a child performer at the age of 3, spending several years working the vaudeville circuit in her family act. See: Matthew Kennedy, Joan Blondell: A Life Between Takes (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 3-4, 14-20.

81 Emily Carman, Independent Stardom: Freelance Women in the Hollywood Studio System (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016), 132.

82 Ibid., 104, 97. See also: Balio, Grand Design, 156-7. Bennett received her salary for only five weeks’ work on one film, for which she received $150,000 in total (equivalent to $2,271,000 in 2021) (‘Rumbles of Thunder on the Left’, New York Times, 29 March 1936, X4). For contemporary accounts of the controversy provoked by Bennett’s salary, see Audrey Rivers, ‘Connie Bennett’s Huge Salary Starts Trouble’, Movie Classic (December 1931), 43; and Rosalind Shaffer, ‘The End of the Rainbow’, New Movie Magazine (October 1931), 108.
Information about average weekly earnings in 1938 derives from Witt Bowden, ‘Wages and Hours in 1938’, *Monthly Labor Review* 48, no.3 (March 1939), 513-514. See also US Department of Labor, *Employment and Earnings including The Monthly Report on the Labor Force* 7, no. 2 (August 1960), 29. Such figures provide only a broad indication: ‘average’ earnings are difficult to ascertain, as compensation rates vary greatly according to factors such as number of hours worked, region, state, gender, age, race, skill level, and employer. Information about salaries of Hollywood stars derives from Rosten, *Hollywood*, 342.

Once more, such figures are indicative only. As Rosten points out, some performers received further compensation from non-movie work (for example, Crosby, Jack Benny and Bob Hope had additional revenues from their popular programs), while some freelance actors (such as Irene Dunne) also benefitted from profit participation deals on top of their salaried earnings (see Carman, *Independent Stardom*). As Rosten cautions, such salary figures threaten to distort the broader picture, as many actors in Hollywood received much lower payment for their screen appearances. He notes that in 1939 half of Hollywood’s ‘class A actors’ earned less than $4,700 (equivalent to $87,467 in 2021), while some reported annual earnings of less than $50 (equivalent to $904.5 in 2021) (ibid. 344-45). A further caveat is that highly paid movie stars were also liable for hefty income tax bills. As the result of new tax legislation introduced in 1932, for example, Constance Bennett was expected to pay 50% of that year’s annual salary of over $450,000 (equivalent to $8,028,308 in 2021) in taxes (Jack Grant, ‘How the Income Tax Hits Movie Stars’, *Movie Classic* (October 1932), 16). Later in the decade the tax bills of the top Hollywood stars could amount to 66% of their salary: in 1937, for example, the highest paid star was Gary Cooper, who received a gross salary of $370,000 (equivalent to $6,883,956 in 2021), from which he paid approximately $213,093.80 in Federal tax and $29,367.12 in state tax (equivalent, respectively, to $3,964,671 and $546,383.66 in 2021) (‘Federal and State Taxes Reduce Star Pay as Much as 66 per cent’, *Motion Picture Herald*, 29 January 1938, 68). See also: ‘46 Per Cent of Hollywood’s High Bracket Salaries Go To Taxes’, *Motion Picture Herald*, 16 January 1937, 19, 20, 22.

Leo Lowenthal, ‘The Triumph of Mass idols,’ *Literature, Popular Culture and Society* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1961), 115.

See, for example: ‘Warners Cut Coast Wages’, *New York Times*, 25 July 1931, 15; ‘Movie Producers Plan to Reduce Salaries of Actors and Directors 20 to 50 Per Cent’, *New York Times*, 29 November 1931, 30; ‘Union and Star Salaries Impede Readjustment’, *Film Daily*, 8 July 1932, 1, 24; Laura Benham, ‘Pay-Day Blues’, *Picture Play* (September 1932), 24; ‘Stars’ Pay Cut 35% By Metro-Goldwyn’, *New York Times*, 16 July 1932, 5; ‘Pay Cuts for Film Stars’, *New York Times*, 6 August 1932, 14; ‘Movie Industry Slashes All Pay’, *New York Times*, 9 March 1933, 19; ‘Majority of Players Accept Film Pay Cut’, *New York Times*, 10 March 1933, 18; and ‘Hollywood Goes Back to Work’, *New York Times*, 19 March 1933, X3.

For example, a 1936 article by Jeannette Meehan complained about the inordinate privileges included in movie star contracts (‘Film Freshmen Obey Hollywood Rules, But Stars Write a New Set’, *Washington Post*, 9 August 1936, AA3).

Benham, ‘Pay-Day Blues’, 24. See also: ‘Stars’ Pay Cut 35% by Metro-Goldwyn’, *New York Times*, July 16, 1932, 5; and ‘Pay Cuts for Film Stars’, *New York Times*, 6 August 1932, 14.

See: Benham, ‘Pay-Day Blues’, 25, 64; and Schallert, ‘Going, Going, Gone’, 16-17, 67.
See the following *New York Times* items: ‘Movie Industry Slashes All Pay’, 19; ‘Majority of Players Accept Film Pay Cut’, 18; and ‘Hollywood Goes Back to Work’, X3.

For consideration of the motion picture industry code, see Balio, *Grand Design*, 18-21, Clark, *Negotiating Hollywood*, 47-63 and the following series of articles in the *Motion Picture Herald* by James P. Cunningham: ‘De-Coding the Film Code’, 23 December 1933, 23-26, 30-31, 34-35, 38; ‘De-Coding the Film Code’, 6 January 1934, 55-61; ‘De-Coding the Film Code’, 20 January 1934, 37-38, 42-43, 46-47, 50-52, 54; ‘De-Coding the Film Code’, 3 February 1934, 54, 56-58, 60-66; ‘De-Coding the Film Code’, 17 February 1934, 48, 50, 52, 54-56, 58-60; and ‘De-Coding the Film Code’, 3 March 1934, 43, 46, 48, 50, 52-53.

See: ‘Summary of Code Submitted by Movie Industry’, *New York Times*, 24 August 1933, 6; William Silberberg, ‘High Salaries Untouched by Code, Says Johnson’, *Film Daily*, 28 August 1933, 1, 5; ‘Movie Actors Fight Ban on “Star Raiding”’, *New York Times*, 2 September 1933, 14; and ‘Movie Code Ready, Greatly Revised’, *New York Times*, 5 October 1933, 24.

‘Hollywood Stars Bolt Groups Here’, *New York Times*, 10 October 1933, 24.

The Depression years saw substantial reduction in star earnings by comparison with the previous decade. Salaries had been adjusted downwards over several years, with many stars being paid on a per picture basis rather than by the week (See the *New York Times* items ‘Hollywood Clings to Huge Salaries’, 15, and ‘Rumbles of Thunder on the Left’, X4). A 1937 *New York Times* article claimed that lower salaries and increased federal and state tax bills were responsible for leading stars ‘receiving the lowest pay in the history of films’, with headline stars achieving 10-25% less income than stars of 20 years earlier. ‘Film Salaries Cut to a Third By Taxes’, *New York Times*, 11 January 1937, 16).

‘High Salary Curb Put in Film Code’, *New York Times*, 14 October 1933, 18. See also: ‘NRA Prepared to Exact Penalty for Excessive Salaries’, *Film Daily*, 14 October 1933, 1, 4.

Quoted in Mark Dowling, ‘Movie Salaries – Will They Be Cut’, *Movie Classic* (January 1934), 45.

See: ‘Actors Threaten Strike in Movies’, *New York Times*, 13 October 1933, 24; and ‘Movie Guild Opens Doors to Extras’, *New York Times*, 27 October 1933, 22.

‘Actors Threaten Strike in Movies’, 24; and ‘Cantor to Confer with Roosevelt’, *New York Times*, 14 November 1933, 22.

‘Eddie Cantor Suggests Cure for Production Ills’, *Film Daily*, 14 November 1933, 1, 3.

‘Roosevelt Alters Code for Movies’, *New York Times*, 30 November 1933, 39.

Eddie Cantor, ‘I Challenge the Producers!’, *The New Movie Magazine* (January 1934), 24.

It took a 4-year battle for studio management to officially recognize SAG as the bargaining agent for performers, which happened shortly before the production of *Stand-In* in May 1937 - and only after the Guild threatened strike action. The Code document can be accessed via the Internet Archive, at https://archive.org/stream/codeoffaircompet5440unit#page/n0/mode/2up.

Dowling ‘Movie Salaries,’ 45. For more sympathetic accounts of Hollywood star salaries, see: Reginald Taviner, ‘I$ It Ea$y Money?’, *Photoplay*, (March 1931), 52-3, 123-5; Eric L. Ergenbright, ‘How Much Money Does a Star Have Left’, *The New Movie Magazine* (July 1933), 36-37, 98; Helen Pade, ‘Why Stars Go Broke on $1,000 a week’, *Picture Play* (October 1934), 14-15, 53; Henry Winters, ‘This Will Startle You’, *The New Movie Magazine* (December 1934), 62, 79, 80; Edwin Schallert, ‘Paid at Face Value’, *Picture Play* (December 1934), *Picture Play* (December 1934), 14-15, 74; Helen Pade,
Dowling ‘Movie Salaries,’ 45.

Quoted in Leslie F. Stone, ‘Guarantee and Percentage Pay System Advocated for Hollywood’, Film Daily, 20 July 1934, 24.

ibid.

Rosenblatt confirmed that salary payment levels in the motion picture industry were out of step with those in other industries. In 1933, he suggested, payment to all individuals represented 41.3% of the gross receipts of the producing-distributing companies, while the average in other industries was 25%. Performers (excluding extras) ranked first, representing 8.6% of gross receipts. In the production companies, total compensation to all individuals during 1933 accounted for 52.8%, with actors and actresses coming top (with 10.8%) and executives coming second (with 7.2%) (Stone, ‘Guarantee and Percentage Pay System’, 24).

Drawing on data released by the US Treasury, Leo C. Rosten noted that in 1938 the annual salaries of Hollywood’s top production executives ranged from $106,000 (paid to Hal Roach, William Goetz and Joseph M. Schenk) to $688,369 (paid to Louis B. Mayer) (equivalent, respectively, to $1,917,540 and $12,452,595 in 2021) (Rosten, Hollywood, 263, 273). He further notes that in 1937 executive renumeration in the motion picture industry amounted to 19% of net profits, the second largest proportion in the US economy, after department stores (ibid., 380). Some directors also came in the top bracket for salary earnings: in 1938, for example, 45 directors earned over $75,000 and 34 earned $100,000 or more (equivalent, respectively, to $1,356,635 and $1,808,847 in 2021). These ranged from Frank Capra’s salary of $294,000 to Gregory La Cava’s $100,000 more (equivalent, respectively, to $1,356,635 and $5,318,011 in 2021) (ibid. 292). Once more, such headline salaries skew the general picture: a survey conducted by Rosten found that in 1938 30% of the directors working in Hollywood earned less than $10,000 (equivalent to $180,885 in 2021) (ibid. 293).

‘Hollywood Thinks NRA Idea Will Fail’, New York Times, 21 July 1934, 14.

‘Hollywood Clings to Huge Salaries’, 15.

‘Zukor Urges Actors Share Film Profits’, New York Times, 8 February 1934, 15.

Schallert, ‘The Truth About $tar $alaries’, 22-3, 77.

Pade, ‘Who Fixes Star Salaries’, 36.

ibid.

Garnett notes that producers Myron Selznick and Samuel Goldwyn had already implemented such deals – respectively, for stars and writers. Tay Garnett, ‘There’s Profit in Sharing Profits’, New York Times, 11 September 1938, 187.

ibid. This kind of profit-sharing arrangement would not gain widespread currency until after World War 2, following the dismantling of the vertically integrated structure that sustained the studio system.

Cheri’s speech anticipates an egocentric outburst by Lina Lamont in Singin’ in the Rain: “People’? I ain’t “people”. I am a – “a shimmering, glowing star in the cinema firmament”… If we bring a little joy into your humdrum lives, it makes us feel as though our hard work ain’t been in vain for nothin”.

Ames, Movies About the Movies, 142.

‘Hollywood’s Labor Bill Under New Wage Scales’, Motion Picture Herald, 9 December 1939, 40, 42, 44, 46.
Quoted in Desire Davis, ‘Becky Sharp Says It’s Still a Man’s World’, Motion Picture (April 1935), 66. See also Carman, Independent Stardom, 111-12.

For a useful discussion of Hollywood star contracts in the 1930s, see Balio, Grand Design, 145-6.

Laura Benham, ‘The Battle of the Sexes’, Picture Play (October 1934), 34-5, 52. See also: Helen Pade, ‘It’s a Woman’s Racket’, Picture Play (December 1932), 18-19, 59.

In a 1938 advertisement in The Hollywood Reporter Harry Brandt of the New York Independent Theatre Owners Association (ITOA) slammed several of these stars as ‘box office poison’, claiming their films had negligible public appeal and were also unpopular with studios, stockholders and exhibitors. See: ‘Drop Non-Drawing Stars, Urges ITOA’, Film Daily, April 28 1938, 1, 7; and Llewellyn Miller, ‘How One Man Shocked Hollywood’, Hollywood (August 1938), 22-3, 55-7. Frank Nugent countered that the weak box-office performance of these screen vehicles derived more from the poor quality of the scripts they were offered than the stars themselves (‘Revival of the Fittest’, New York Times, 8 May 1938, 159).

Benham, ‘Battle of the Sexes’, 35, 52.

ibid., 52.

Carman, Independent Stardom, 3-14. Such stars included Bennett, Hepburn, Carole Lombard, Claudette Colbert, Janet Gaynor, Miriam Hopkins and Barbara Stanwyck, who all managed to achieve a considerable degree of independence.

In its original version, Sex and Satan seems to be a jungle romance, with a pouting Cheri dressed in a similar manner to Dorothy Lamour in her exotic star vehicles The Jungle Princess (1936) and The Hurricane (1937).

‘Stand-In (London Tivoli)’, Sunday Referee, 13.

ibid.

‘Cinema: The New Pictures’, Time, November 8, 1937, 49.
Figure 1: Capital and labour, united: Atterbury Dodd joins the studio workers

Figure 2: Picketing the Café Trocadero
Figure 3: Elvira and her mother

Figure 4: Sugar Plum, “idolized by millions”
Figure 5: Lester Plum performs “On the Good Ship Lollipop”
Figure 6: Studio production as collaborative enterprise
Figure 7: Lester Plum toils on the treadmill

Figure 8: Thelma Cheri’s emotive affectation