Blocking *Blockade*: Partisan Protest, Popular Debate, and Encapsulated Texts
by Greg M. Smith

A history of the preproduction, publicity, and partisan protest of Blockade (1938) reveals that popular culture institutions create “encapsulated texts,” selected portions of the text that enter into public debate.

In 1938 United Artists released *Blockade* (produced by Walter Wanger, directed by William Dieterle), considered by the press of that day to be “the first fiction film to deal at all seriously with the Spanish Civil War.” Hollywood generally avoided directly dealing with this struggle while it was ongoing (1936–1939), principally because of the potential to offend either the Loyalist or Franco supporters. But offend *Blockade* did. *Blockade* managed to outrage simultaneously both pro-Loyalist and pro-Franco camps, providing ammunition for those who favored American interventionism and those who opposed it. Twelve countries banned the film, and groups in many U.S. cities denounced, picketed, and censored it.

Hollywood war pictures usually confined themselves to earlier, safer wars (as in Lewis Milestone’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* in 1930), but a war in which the winning side was still uncertain was riskier to portray. *Blockade* was an influential early attempt to depict a controversial current war in a Hollywood sound film. *Blockade’s* handling and its subsequent treatment in the marketplace provided a test case for Hollywood and its financiers in how to deal with politically controversial contemporary issues.

Many industry figures watched *Blockade* for cues on how the box office would respond to political content. A front-page *Variety* article endorsed *Blockade* as “the key to the opening up of a vast source of screen material.” Upon its success financially revolves the plans of several of the major studios heretofore hesitant about tackling stories which treat subjects of international economic and political controversy. If *Blockade* could successfully negotiate domestic and foreign barriers, the article suggests, other studios would be encouraged to experiment with nontraditional Hollywood themes. In fact, *Blockade* screenwriter and Hollywood Ten member John Howard Lawson suggested that the furor over *Blockade* is no less than “the beginning of the drive against meaningful content in motion pictures which culminated in the Washington hearings before the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1947.” In light of the uproar over *Blockade’s* “controversial” and “meaningful” content, one would justifiably expect to see evidence of this political content in the film itself. Except for a couple of moments, however, *Blockade* is a fairly unremarkable film, telling a standard spy story. If one looks solely at this rather dull and ordinary film, it is difficult to see what all the uproar was about.

When one considers how vigilantly the Breen Office worked with Hollywood producers in the 1930s, it is not surprising that *Blockade* contains virtually no overt political content. Though the Production Code Administration focused on the overtly salacious and violent content specifically mentioned in the code, it also worked to assure that texts would not rouse political interest groups to protest Hollywood films. The Breen Office tried to insure that texts would not create exactly the kind of controversy and trade barriers that *Blockade* encountered.

If *Blockade* itself is a rather tame example of self-censored Hollywood product, what caused the furor? To understand the political controversy around *Blockade* and its influence on later Hollywood practices, we must look elsewhere besides the text itself. *Blockade’s* historical and political significance can only be seen by examining the extended text of the film, including preproduction and production materials, publicity, advertising, reviews, and political opposition.

It is almost a truism now in cinema studies to state that film texts are not interpreted solely on their own terms. Viewers call on a variety of other sources to make sense out of a film, including publicity, promotion, advertising, reviews, genre scripts, star images, personal histories, sociohistorical factors, and so on. In *Blockade’s* case I argue that these contextualizing discourses are vastly more important to the film’s significance than the text itself. The film text itself is one of the least important, least interesting, and least powerfully explanatory elements in the constellation comprising *Blockade’s* extended text. The significance of *Blockade* in film history relies less on the film itself than on the discursive blockade around the film.

By investigating this set of interrelated texts, I hope to recast the text-centered discussions of controversies in the Production Code era. Hollywood’s self-censoring efforts centered on the creation of unobjectionable film texts, and the industry spent relatively little effort considering potentially controversial material in its publicity and advertising. Academic studies of censorship in this era similarly maintain this text-centered focus, deemphasizing the importance of subsidiary texts. Such texts as publicity and reviews do not simply provide an interpretive framework for the central encounter of audience and text. They can function so powerfully within sociohistorical forces that they overpower the self-censored text. By emphasizing the text as the focal point of self-censorship, the film industry opened up other possibilities that political content could be carried by “secondary” texts.

In order to understand why such a dull text caused such controversy, we must examine several historically specific factors (e.g., the intellectual debate over the Spanish Civil War, the workings of the Breen Office). This case study also examines a broader issue: how do films enter into public debate? I argue that the processes which circulated *Blockade’s* meanings (advertising, reviews, protests, etc.) perform
characteristic functions of certain popular culture institutions. These institutions create what I call “encapsulated texts,” partial versions of the text which circulate in popular discussion in place of the text itself. Because popular culture works to encapsulate the constellation of meanings in a film, the text tends to be decentered from public debate.

Producing the Text. By 1938 the Spanish Civil War was moving toward its resolution. The Loyalists were split into quarreling factions, and the Soviet supplied weapons which had kept their war efforts alive began tapering off. While Blockade was being filmed, the outnumbered Republicans fought and lost the costly battle of Teruel, while Franco’s Nationalists gathered men and supplies to begin the offensive on Madrid, the final battle of the war. The war of words, however, was far from over. During the debate over the Spanish Civil War, writers and politicians drew battle lines which would remain important for decades.10

Contemporary writing on the Spanish Civil War attempted to sway popular support by portraying the war as a greatly simplified moral conflict. Anti-Republican sentiment framed the war as a battle between democracy and fascism, emphasizing the elections which created the Popular Front government and the menacing German and Italian powers behind the Nationalists. Given the advantage of hindsight, it seems obvious that fascism is the clear enemy here, yet in the 1930s American opinion of fascism was not quite so definite. Some saw fascism as a viable way to link modernization and industrialization within a framework of traditional social controls and values. The nationalism of fascist rhetoric could be seen as an appropriate motivator to spur developing countries toward economic progress.

For others, particularly intellectuals, fascism was simply the most recent and violent incarnation of an old enemy: capitalism. The mechanization and industrialization prized by fascists were the central causes of modern alienation. Reading Ernest Hemingway’s romanticized war reports of a dehumanizing technological power attempting to crush a more authentic, innocent, rural civilization (the Popular Front), these thinkers saw the Spanish Civil War as yet another example of the ravages of capitalism. To many, the Depression provided clear evidence that capitalism was on the verge of collapse, and fascism was seen as an attempt to shore up the dying system through force. Intellectuals such as screenwriter/playwright John Howard Lawson abandoned faith in American dreams of individualism and gradual progress and embraced another utopian belief in collectivism and radical upheavals.

This rhetoric of economic revolution posed a larger danger to many (particularly those deeply invested in capitalism) than national fascism did. For some the Spanish Civil War was a battle of traditional values (Nationalists) against Communism (Republicans, who received economic aid from the Soviet Union). The wealthy Catholic Church, strong ties to big business in Spain strengthened the link between traditional morality and the Nationalists by declaring its firm support of Franco, continuing a long Spanish tradition of violent disputes between Catholics and libertarians opposed to the Church’s strictures.

Such oversimplified debates ignored the complexity of the Spanish situation. For example, many Americans who backed the Republicans as the champions of democracy against fascism would certainly have been very uncomfortable with the anarchists in the Popular Front government. However, these rhetorical attempts to portray the Spanish Civil War as a conflict with clear moral ramifications dominated the debate about Western interventionism. The conflict was not just between Franco and the Popular Front but between democracy and Fascism, traditional values and Communism, rural innocence and dehumanizing mechanism.

This war of words had real consequences in the Spanish conflict. Though they were greatly outmaneuvered militarily, the Republican government continued to attack the superior Nationalist forces, pinning all their hopes on Western intervention. They believed that the debate would be resolved in their favor and that Western powers would eventually realize they must stop appeasing the fascists. However, the British, French, and Americans were reluctant to risk troops in a cause about which most citizens had no opinion. The U.S. government in particular feared that radical economic nationalism might spread in a “domino effect” from Spain to Latin America, jeopardizing American holdings in this region. In September 1938 the Munich pact was signed, quelling the Popular Front’s hopes of intervention. In the summer of 1938, when Blockade was released, however, the Western debate over interventionism was the sole source of Spanish Republicans’ hopes. Into this complex ideological debate, a lone Hollywood film entered.

Blockade begins with the accidental meeting between Marco (Henry Fonda), a young Spanish farmer devoted to the land, and Norma (Madeleine Carroll), the daughter of an international spy (unknown to her).11 They fall in love, but invading forces intervene, and Marco encourages his fellow farmers to fight for their land. He is rewarded for his heroism with a commission in the army. While investigating espionage in the area, he encounters and kills Norma’s father.

Norma is trapped by a double agent into delivering a secret message concerning the arrival of a supply ship into the blockaded port of Castelmare. During a walk through the town (where she sees the desperation of the people in stark close-ups), she realizes the plight of the starving populace and tries to reverse her actions by going to a suspicious Marco and the authorities for help.12 She discovers too late that the double agent has infiltrated his way into the upper echelons of the military, and she and Marco are set to be executed so that the agent can maintain his position. After the enemy forces sink a ship which they and the expectant, hungry people watching from shore assume is the supply ship, the real supply ship arrives, and Norma kills the enemy agent in order to allow the ship to land safely. The film ends with this impassioned speech from Marco delivered directly to the camera:

“Peace! Where can you find it? Our country has been turned into a battlefield. There’s no safety for old people and children. Women can’t keep their families safe in their houses—they can’t be safe in their own fields. Churches, schools, and hospitals are targets. It’s not war. It’s between soldiers. It’s murder. Murder of innocent people. There’s no sense to it. The world can stop it. Where’s the conscience of the world?”
As a product of the industrialized Hollywood studio system, *Blockade* has a long and varied production history with many participants. Critics disappointed with the tepid finished product would either charge Wanger and others involved with the film's production with cowardice or blame the censoring pressures of the studio system itself. However, close consideration of *Blockade*’s production history reveals that the filmmakers at certain times worked to depoliticize the material and at other times to politicize it. *Blockade* is not a simple case of either the filmmakers’ lack of political conviction or the Production Code Administration squelching all political appeals in the text. What strategies did these filmmakers use to create a commercial film dealing with a controversial contemporary political issue?

Their first decision on how to handle a potentially incendiary topic was to use a familiar genre form. From the instigation of the project, the melodramatic love story was the largest component of the plot. Lewis Milestone, director of the acclaimed war drama *All Quiet on the Western Front*, initiated the project, approaching producer Walter Wanger with the idea of adapting Ilya Ehrenburg's melodramatic novel of Russian émigrés in Paris, *The Love of Jeanne Ney*. *Jeanne Ney* had been adapted for the screen once before in 1927 by G. W. Pabst for Ufa. Milestone’s idea was to transform the Russian Revolution story into a story about the current civil war in Spain. Wanger asked playwright Clifford Odets (who had just finished *The General Died at Dawn* with Milestone) to adapt the property into a film script. The resulting script is close to the original melodrama.

Odets and Milestone dropped the project in 1937, and Harold Clurman, Wanger’s assistant and Group Theater veteran, suggested a new screenwriter: John Howard Lawson, another Group Theater associate. Lawson, the sole credited screenwriter, greatly reshaped the original material. He reorganized the Paris/Spain dichotomy of *Jeanne Ney* and set the entire diegesis in Spain. Lawson also introduced the spy story, perhaps through another lift from *The General Died at Dawn*, which also featured Madeleine Carroll as the center of intrigue.

Critics would later blame Lawson and Wanger for soft-pedaling the radical potential of their subject matter with such subterfuges, but late versions of the script reveal that Lawson and Wanger changed the project to make it more ideologically controversial by emphasizing innocent suffering. Lawson suggested the idea of centering the film on a scene in which the population of a blockaded port watches as a ship bearing food is endangered in the harbor. Gary Carr reports that Wanger was “enthusiastic” over the new emphasis on the suffering of innocent bystanders, particularly children. This contention seems to be borne out by penciled affirmations in the margins of Wanger’s personal copy of the final continuity script whenever “women and children” are mentioned.

Lawson and Wanger further politicized the project by making a more overt rhetorical appeal and adding a new emphasis on the female protagonist’s moral dilemma. In the second draft continuity script (dated January 12, 1938), the film (then entitled *The River Is Blue*) ends idyllically with Marco and Norma in a cottage with a flower garden: “I had a funny dream. The war was over and we were out there plowing the fields together. And there was nothing but peace and happiness in the world.” In this version an enemy spy attacks Norma and takes the secret message concerning the supply ship.

The final continuity script (dated February 28, 1938) makes Norma a much more active character with a more subtly nuanced morality. She delivers the message into enemy hands (instead of it being stolen from her), and only later realizes the moral implications of her act. Even more significantly, this version ends with the addition of the highly confrontational speech calling on the “conscience of the world.” Such overt rhetorical appeals added late in preproduction provided the primary appeal to the audience’s political sympathies.

The Breen Office, however, insisted that Wanger avoid explicit reference to Spain and the principals of the conflict. The opposing Loyalist and Nationalist forces could not be identified by name or by any distinguishing features that could be linked to actual fighting forces in Spain. The blockaded city (assumedly based on Bilbao, with the air raids modeled after Madrid or Barcelona) is spelled in an Italianate form (Castelmare) rather than Spanish (Castellon). The uniforms worn by both sides were chosen so that they would not resemble actual Spanish uniforms. Henry Fonda is cast as a native Spaniard, yet he makes no attempt to speak in a Spanish accent. Frank S. Nugent notes in his review of the film that *Blockade* takes place in “Zenda or Rutania or any place where a young patriot falls in love with a beautiful spy.”

Wanger and Lawson avoided specificity not only in their topical references but also in their themes. Instead of explicitly referring to present-day events, the filmmakers created a text that asserted a sentiment on which everyone could agree: war’s effects on innocent women and children are evil. This strategy of textual construction anticipates any potential protests by partisan interests and attempts to defuse them. It also removes the objections of the Production Code Administration. This generality is the filmmakers’ principal production strategy to ward off economically dangerous interventions by other groups.

However, this very lack of specificity enables the filmmakers to inject fiery rhetorical addresses to the audience. Since the text is taking an antiwar stance (and not an overtly pro-Loyalist stance), it can do so in strongly worded speeches without overtly “propagandizing.” Rarely seen techniques such as direct address can be used because the lack of specificity and the familiar genre form eliminate the openly partisan signifiers of *The Spanish Earth*. *Blockade* attempts to duplicate the rhetorical intensity that made *The Spanish Earth* powerful without also duplicating the textual markers that stimulated economic protest in such documentaries.

So the filmmakers did not simply compromise the radical potential of the subject matter, as would later be alleged. The possibility of political protest did weigh heavily on the filmmakers’ minds, and it shaped their textual strategies. Their production approach protects the film from specific charges of propagandizing while allowing rhetorical forcefulness. They chose strategies (familiar genre form, avoiding specificity, rhetorical address) which form a rational, viable approach for producers making a popular text on a controversial contemporary subject.
Promoting, Publicizing, and Advertising the Text. As an independent producer without access to the full advantages of the major studios, Wanger sometimes had to rely on controversy as a means of generating audience interest. The publicity strategy leading up to the release clearly attempted to build Blockade’s reputation as a distinctively different kind of Hollywood film, while the textual production strategies worked to reduce those differences. The producers tried to create a powerful but generalized antiwar statement, distancing the film from the topical particulars of the Spanish Civil War which might offend censoring groups. The film’s initial production publicity, on the other hand, played up its topicality and the potential for controversy in order to generate potential box office.

The popular press, relying on false rumors circulated by Wanger and United Artists publicity director Johnny Johnston, gave the circumstances around Blockade’s production much attention. A widely circulated rumor said that United Artists had to submit a print of the film to Franco’s agents because their interest was so keen. Other rumors alluded to mysterious strangers lurking around the production set. Wanger released faked telegrams from foreign offices documenting the international concern over Blockade. It was ballyhooed as a powerful preachment against ruthless modern warfare, one that would take sides and name names, Newsweek pronounced.

Clearly the circulation of such rumors is in keeping with a topical and controversial publicity strategy which would create audience interest in Blockade’s release. After such publicity, “the cinema industry justifiably anticipated a polemic sensation that would jolt other producers’ self-imposed silence on controversial subjects,” according to Time.

As protest against the film began to mount, however, Wanger’s public statements began to emphasize how the production had worked to avoid political controversy. He publicly maintained that Blockade was not created as partisan propaganda endorsing the Loyalists but as a much more universal and moral affirmation: “I will admit that there is a message in my picture... that ruthless bombing of noncombatants, no matter which government does it, is something that is horrible and should not be tolerated. I firmly state that my picture Blockade never intended nor does take sides in the present Spanish conflict.” From the public platform provided by the controversy, he addressed broader concerns such as peace and free speech. When the controversy began to hurt the film economically, Wanger’s publicity emphasized his strategic attempts to make the text universal, not topical.

The advertising created for exhibitors’ use offered two marketing strategies. One possible option for an exhibitor was a genre-centered campaign that gave little acknowledgment to the earlier sensationalistic publicity. These ads represented Blockade as if it had kept one of its earlier titles: The Adventuress.

Such a campaign makes sense in a community that might potentially protest an overtly political film. Providence, Rhode Island, a primarily Catholic city, is one such example. The advertising in the Providence Journal makes only minimal mention of any topicality, for example: “Thrill piles upon thrill until your nerves are shattered with excitement!... a drama out of today’s headlines... of heroes and their brave new world... you’ll live every moment of its mighty adventure!” Blockade’s first run in Providence using this campaign was moderately successful without arousing protests. Only when Blockade began a subsequent run in Providence after it had been attacked in the national press did local officials ban the film. New York’s Radio City Music Hall advertised Blockade’s high profile (and fiscally unsuccessful) one-week run using an amalgam of genre appeals: “Melo-drama... romance... espionage... intrigue... suspense... intense, moving drama of today... and of a possible tomorrow.”

Other exhibitors chose to advertise the film with a controversy-centered campaign. Chicago utilized such a strategy in the Daily Tribune advertisements: “WE WARN YOU: Bigots, scoffers, cynics, don’t see this picture! Because it is life and love, war and hate in the raw... unblemished by sugar-coated fear.” Chicago’s first run did solid business as well.

Most exhibitors used a combination of both marketing strategies. In San Francisco the exhibitor started with the controversy strategy: “Disregarding all the rules, management of the theater is selling picture from sensational angle, ‘censors be hanged,’ ‘unexpurgated,’ and that type of thing.” Later ads during Blockade’s five-week run generally emphasized standard romance-adventure fare: “Thrill Upon Thrill!” “Roaring Action!” “A Great Heart-Tale of Two in Love!” Indianapolis used a similar campaign to little avail.

A third marketing strategy was created by the exhibitors themselves. If the film had been censored in some way in their community, exhibitors could advertise it in a moral imperative campaign, one that took advantage of the publicity over the film’s censorship in a less overt fashion. By taking a high moral tone and selling the film based on a “freedom of speech” argument (such as the one being publicly advanced by Wanger himself), exhibitors could maintain a sense of decorum while still subtly invoking the controversy. In Omaha the Knights of Columbus passed a resolution protesting the Omaha Theatre’s plans to screen the film. After two weeks of delays the theater decided to run the film, using advertising without any pictures, only this solemn address to the Omaha Morning World-Herald reader:

The Omaha Theatre has always tried to avoid showing attractions which, by any laudable method of appraisal, might be considered objectionable by sincere groups or factions in our community. After careful consideration we have reached the conclusion that the controversial picture Blockade does not violate our neutral position, and that in fairness to the prominent organizations and interested individuals who have called or written us, we must show the picture.

In spite of the publicity surrounding the film’s opening in Omaha, it only managed a “so-so” box office.

The controversy-centered and the moral imperative campaigns both emphasize the film’s potential to provoke protest. In certain markets where the film was very likely to arouse partisans, some exhibitors used a genre-centered campaign to bypass controversy.

This apolitical advertising duplicates the production strategies to limit potential damage to the box office take, which implicitly acknowledges
the power of the protest groups. Even attempts to portray the film as a straightforward spy-love story often raised the spectre of political controversy. For example, Wanger ordered a foreword to be inserted before the film's titles which explicitly labeled the film as a genre picture but subtly raised the issue of Spain: "This story of love and adventure is not intended to treat with or take sides in the conflict of ideas involved in the present Spanish conflict." 40

Whether implicitly or explicitly, partisan protest figured in all the promotion, publicity, and advertising. By trying to take economic advantage of the political controversy while in other instances guarding against overt censorship, Blockade's publicity made a contradictory case that the film was both incendiary and escapist. Both frames of reference shaped the terms of the public debate over Blockade.

Criticizing the Text. Popular criticism of Blockade almost unanimously centered around three factors made salient in the textual production and the publicity. Many reviews (except for those in the overtly partisan press, as in Catholic publications) praised Wanger's and Lawson's bravery in addressing the Spanish Civil War at all; most criticized the standard genre components (the romance and spy stories); and almost all made note of the moments of rhetorical address in the film. The reviews differ in the emphasis they place on these three components.

Discussions of Wanger's bravery or cowardice acknowledge the difficulties of producing a Hollywood film about a controversial contemporary subject. Frank S. Nugent in his New York Times review says that Wanger displayed "rare courage" in "doing the most we can expect an American picture to do." 41 The Nation praised the filmmaker's effort even before it saw the film, encouraging its readers to support Wanger's courageous stand: "By going to see Blockade you can kill two ravens with one paid admission: support Mr. Wanger in his resistance to General Franco's 'resentment' and encourage the production of films dealing with important issues." 42

Even those reviews which recommended seeing the film to support Wanger's valuable intentions tempered their praise by lambasting the standard genre elements. The San Francisco Chronicle said: "certainly the plot itself is nothing but an expertly contrived spy melodrama which we have seen enacted in dozens of movies before." 43 Walter Whitworth's positive review in the Indianapolis News recommends that one should "neglect the plot and concentrate on the remainder of the production," hardly a forceful endorsement of a film. 44

Those portions Whitworth and others particularly recommend to the viewer's attention are the vivid depictions of the starving populace and the closing speech, the most openly rhetorical moments of address. Time notes that "Blockade's main innovation lies in the fact that it concentrates not on the fighting in the front lines but on the consequences behind them. Glimpses of peasants fleeing from their farms, townsfolk with pinched faces huddled beside ruined buildings or staring forlornly out to sea make up its most effective sequences." 45 The "conscience of the world" speech also received notice, as one might expect, considering how rare direct address is in the classical Hollywood cinema. 46 "These last lines and the in-
tent hunger-worn faces of the people as they watch for the ship . . . are what the whole thing should've been and wasn't," said Otis Ferguson.47

These reviews constantly emphasize the "compromises" that a political film must make, principally the reliance on the melodramatic form and the avoidance of naming names. No one makes the defensible case that these textual choices are aesthetically viable ones combining a personal storyline with a political emphasis. Norma Jenkins asserts that the difficulty of integrating the personal and the political is a central American concern which is particularly salient in Lawson's and Odet's works.48 Melodrama represents one viable option in linking the personal to broader political concerns, but melodrama in this period remained burdened by the stigma of unsophistication. Only later academic film criticism began to articulate the possibilities melodrama presents for bridging the personal and the political.

Nor do the critics of the day acknowledge the potential power of stopping the narrative progression in order to communicate in a radically different mode. Moments like the closing speech are almost Brechtian, their overt politics spotlighted by the fact that they cannot be recouped into the narrative.49 Exhibitors' reports in the Motion Picture Herald suggest that this closing speech figured strongly in audience reactions to the picture. Though Fruitt Simms (Dale Theatre, Ozark, Alabama) was understandably confused about the narrative's sympathies ("Who was who? What was what? And why was why?") he called Fonda's speech a "masterpiece" which "left everyone something to think about." After Fonda's speech each audience at the Paramount Theatre in Schroon Lake, New York "sat in their seats in sort of a daze for about a minute, and then started applauding the picture for all they were worth." When exhibitors reported a positive audience reaction to the film's ending speech, they indicated that the audience praised the film as a whole.50 This raises the possibility that such clear rhetorical statement at the end of a film can act in a radical manner, perhaps cueing the audience to assign political significance retroactively to the film's nebulous plot.

Critics instead considered Blockade's shifts of address to be displeasing violations of the norm of a unified narrative. Most critics liked these moments but desired more of them; in other words, they wanted the political freed from its tiring association with the personal. Variety noted these "occasional flashes of anger against the stupidity of war" and said that "Blockade's weakness is that it doesn't stay mad enough to arouse audience indignation." 51

Contemporary critical response to Blockade suggested that Hollywood filmmakers dealing with such subjects should be praised for their efforts. However, these efforts were considered to be doomed to failure by the necessity of burdening the political message with melodramatic personal storylines. Only in brief moments could the political message be heard. These critical trends reflected the tone the popular press would take toward many subsequent features dealing with controversial subjects. While any attempt to deal with the political was seen as potentially commendable, the press criticized filmmakers for using familiar popular forms to communicate these doses of serious political content. Simultaneously, the press
foregrounded the political controversy, often giving the film itself much less attention than the surrounding circumstances. The reviewers recognized the importance of political interests in shaping the film and often discussed the film that these interests should have produced as much as they discussed the actual film. When the press did discuss the film itself, it focused on those moments in the film that had bearing on the political controversy (the final direct address, for instance). By concentrating on the most overtly political moments in the film, reviewers constructed a text that was more incendiary than the film itself.

**Interest Groups vs. the Text?** Partisan groups protested *Blockade* with a vehemence unprecedented for a fiction film lacking salacious or violent content. Catholic groups ranging from mainstream (Knights of Columbus) to radical (the Catholic Worker) led the fight against the film. Catholic publications denounced the film, stating it would "stir up prejudice, bad feeling, and contention among many groups of people." Church figures pressured W. G. Van Schmus, managing director of the Radio City Music Hall and a Catholic, against showing the film. The New York State Council of the Knights of Columbus called *Blockade* a polemic "for the Marxist controlled cause in Spain... a red trial balloon... historically false and intellectually dishonest." A picket demonstration organized by the Catholic Worker in front of a Queens theater resulted in an angry confrontation that had to be halted by the police. The Boston League of Catholic Women influenced the mayor to ban the film, a decision he subsequently overturned after seeing the film. Kansas City officials refused permission to show the film unless the final speech was cut. Priests in Flint, Michigan, denounced the film sight unseen, and it was withdrawn from the local theater. Highly publicized efforts to censor the film were waged in a variety of communities, including Detroit, New Orleans, Rochester, and Somerville, Massachusetts.

*Blockade* made waves within the film community as well. The Legion of Decency had to establish a new rating category in order to classify the film, the first time the Legion had gone beyond its normal classifications (unobjectionable, objectionable, condemned). The Legion termed the film “Separately Classified,” with a warning that is almost as vague about naming names as the film itself: “Many people will regard this picture as containing foreign political propaganda in favor of one side in the present unfortunate struggle in Spain.”

“Propaganda” became the central term of the *Blockade* debate in Hollywood. After the *Motion Picture Herald* called the film “the initial experiment of the American entertainment film in international politics and propaganda,” Martin Quigley and Walter Wanger (and others) engaged in a highly publicized series of exchanges over the purpose of the motion picture industry. Quigley’s argument was the strongest possible one for his industry audience. Any motion picture which presents controversial political viewpoints will necessarily divide the audience and therefore reduce box office. Exhibitors in particular will be held personally accountable for the political views espoused on their screens, so they will receive the brunt of a community’s outrage over a political film. The popular film industry, in order to avoid controversies like those which brought about the Production Code, must be devoted to the sole purpose of “entertainment” and must not advocate any political “isms” (except Americanism). Wanger and other left wing intellectuals responded by joining Films for Democracy, an organization committed to creating films that presented progressive political perspectives and shifting the debate to “safeguarding democracy.”

However, Quigley’s frame for the debate (between “entertainment” and “propaganda”) quickly became the dominant one in the industry. Hollywood’s largest trade union, the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, adopted a resolution forbidding union projectionists to be responsible for handling propaganda films, citing *Blockade* as an example. The climactic blow of the industry trade battle occurred when the *Motion Picture Herald* published thirty-eight letters from film professionals, thirty-six decrying the use of the screen for propaganda and two supporting Wanger. Wanger, the leading film industry figure in Films for Democracy, left that organization.

Many interest groups outside the motion picture industry supported the film, however. The New York Board of Education and the National Education Association labeled *Blockade* a “milestone in film history.” Representatives from the National Council of Jewish Women, the Young Men’s Christian Association, the American Legion Auxiliary, the Associated Film Audiences, the National Council for Prevention of War, and the National Peace Conference endorsed the film as well.

The international market also responded strongly to the film. Spain, Germany, Italy, Peru, El Salvador, Yugoslavia, Guatemala, Singapore, Bulgaria, Portugal, Lithuania, Poland, and Czechoslovakia all banned the film, though it enjoyed a successful run in London, where it was endorsed by labor organizations and leftist interest groups. The crucial blow came when the Fox–West Coast film chain refused to book *Blockade* as a first feature, except in a few locations. In most of its theaters it would garner only “B” film rentals. Film’s chance of economic success was essentially dead.

However, circumstances might have happened differently had the partisan interest groups paid more attention to the text than to the publicity. Certainly the filmmakers attempted to create a text that would be an antitwar statement that everyone could agree with. Because the interest groups paid more attention to the publicity portraying *Blockade* as a sympathetic portrayal of the Loyalists than they did to the vague film itself, they argued over this popular construction of the film more than they discussed the actual film text. As Robert Morton Darrow points out, “Ironically, the Church, too, had been misled by the publicity. Had the Church simply accepted the portrayal of events in Spain as depicted by the Catholic press, it could well have claimed that the ‘enemy’ within the film was the Loyalist regime. Instead, the Church accepted the identification given by Loyalist sympathizers and acted accordingly.” The filmmakers focused their efforts on tailoring the film text to avoid such controversy, but their publicity efforts to create audience interest in the film created a text that would supersede the film in public discourse. *Blockade*
The extended text (film, publicity, and criticism) became a site of political and economic struggle that would influence much later film production. After Blockade’s economic failure (it lost $131,768 of the negative cost of $692,087), Wanger and Lawson called off another anti-fascist project entitled Personal History. Wanger himself was forced into a financial arrangement that transferred his artistic control over subsequent films to his distributor. Several other films in development during the Blockade crisis soft-pedaled their politics or were shelved indefinitely, including Idiot’s Delight, Paths of Glory, It Can’t Happen Here, and 40 Days at Musa Dagh. Only when the political lines (and the lines of economic distribution) were more clearly drawn did the tughy issue of interventionism become defused. Only when the Nazis were the clear American enemy did Hollywood begin to produce a cycle of films with overtly pro-interventionist content.

The Encapsulated Text in Popular Debate. The film text is only one of the important texts in the controversy around Blockade, and it is not the most important one. This film is at best a vague and contradictory set of meanings which are selectively called into play or ignored by other discourses. Blockade is so ambiguous that Lawson used it as an example in his favor during the HUAC hearings while the Committee cited it as an example of his Communist beliefs. Dorothy Jones in her content analysis of Blockade found no fully identifiable Communist material in the film. Many audiences of the day, alerted by the publicity to expect radical political rhetoric, must have wondered what the fuss was about. “This is the controversial picture that was supposed to reek Communism,” reported an Indiana exhibitor. “Naturally I watched it closely, and for the life of me I can’t see where the shots of Communism crept in.” An exhibitor in North Dakota noted, “We could find nothing about the picture that should offend any race or creed and neither did our patrons.”

In the political furor around Blockade the film text itself became less central than the surrounding texts. If anything can be said to be central in the Blockade extended text, it is the assumed reactions of partisan interest groups. The possible interpretations of these groups guided Wanger’s, Lawson’s, and Dieterle’s text-making strategies. The public opposition to the film was featured in advertising, promotional, and publicity materials as much as any purported qualities of the film itself. Reviewers spent little time defending or attacking the film. Instead they further circulated the political controversy by focusing on the conflict between producers and interest groups. Only a very small portion of the film, those parts which could generate political controversy (primarily the direct address and the scene depicting starvation), became activated in this debate. Blockade the film is almost lost in the whirlwind of other texts.

The filmmakers obviously shared the assumption that Blockade’s film text would be central and focused their efforts (however unsuccessfully) on making a forceful antiwar statement which was not specific enough about the Spanish Civil War to ignite protest groups. However, the view of Blockade as politically incendiary which circulated in publicity, political writings, and film reviews overpowered the film itself and became the primary text in the discussion.

The concept of the “extended text” keeps the text at the center, with publicity, reviews, and partisan political protests as “extensions” of that central text. The metaphor is a centrifugal one, with the primary text spinning out into society in many directions, spawning a variety of subsidiary texts which provide context for the primary encounter between text and viewer. The “extended text” concept does capture a sense of how texts are produced. After all, a text called Blockade must exist before there can be reviews or protests of the film, and in a purely temporal sense the film must necessarily be considered “primary” in terms of production. But when applied to popular debate and the circulation of meaning instead of production, this concept misleads by keeping the text pivotal.

It is virtually impossible for something as complex as a whole text to be inserted into existing popular discourses. What gets taken up in discussion is instead a capsule version of the text. Texts are contradictory, complicated, multifaceted objects which are far too complex to operate in the shorthand sphere of public discussion. They have to be “encapsulated” before they can enter into public discourse.

What does it mean for a text like Blockade to be encapsulated? Certain portions of the film are selected and placed into a capsule version of the text which is labeled “Blockade” in popular circulation. The rest of the text is set aside. Other components besides textual information may be included in this capsule version. Knowledge external to the film (for instance, an assumption that the Loyalists are the “good guys,” the innocent rural Everyman) may be crucial components of the encapsulated text. Once the components are selected, the capsule is surrounded with a “coating” of discourse which unifies the selected elements into a cohesive unit. For example, selecting the overtly rhetorical moments of Blockade (the direct address, the emphasis on starving innocents) in combination with some knowledge of the players in the Spanish Civil war produces an encapsulated version of Blockade as “politically incendiary propaganda.” Alternatively, emphasizing the melodramatic plot and an understanding of the political stakes of the war creates a version of Blockade as “tame Hollywood attempt to portray political content.” This helps explain why both pro-Nationalist and pro-Republican forces opposed Blockade. Each group opposed a particular encapsulated text which was currently in circulation.

It is possible to create an encapsulated text which contains little external knowledge except for a viewer’s familiarity with film conventions. This is what some exhibitors tried to do with a genre-centered campaign. Selecting only the melodramatic plot elements, an exhibitor can portray the film as an “exciting spy story.” Most attempts to construe a film as “mere entertainment” encapsulate a film without reference to external knowledge of political and social factors. When Martin Quigley argued that the screen’s proper function is entertainment and not propaganda, he essentially suggested that encapsulated texts which do not ostensibly involve political or social opinion are in the best economic interests of the industry. When partisan interest groups argue over encapsulated texts in high
production, confident that this emphasis was the best way to avoid controversy. At the heart of the industry's self-censorship structure was an assumption that audiences respond primarily to texts, and if the text does not contain objectionable material, censors and interest groups will be appeased.

Advertising and publicity materials were also examined by the Hays Office, which had to approve the materials as meeting the Advertising Code before studios released their pressbooks. Unlike the Production Code Administration, however, the Advertising Code Administration did not work closely with studio departments to avoid any controversies that might be caused by the advertising. There was no stringent process of advertising review and revision corresponding to the back-and-forth negotiations between the Breen Office and the studios over the details of film production. In fact, there was no large-scale advertising censorship crackdown until studio advertising began to emphasize "pin-up girls" as a central lure. Industry censors did not examine Blockade's advertising and publicity as minutely as they did the text itself because of the industry assumption that the film text was the locus of controversy.

The circumstances surrounding Blockade clearly show the importance of subsidiary texts in censorship controversies. In fact, it is the Breen Office strategy of avoiding textual specificity, of not naming names, that emphasizes publicity's potential to reshape audience perception of the text as a controversial political statement. Because the text is necessarily ambiguous, the surrounding materials become more important in providing interpretive cues for the film itself. Because almost all self-censorship effort was devoted to the text, this opened up publicity and promotional materials as a space for creating an incendiary political controversy. Where the censored text must remain mute, the less scrutinized surrounding materials can speak louder.

Conclusion. In order to understand the circumstances around Blockade, one has to understand the specific historical combination of self-censorship, exploitative marketing, and partisan interest which created the controversy. In particular, the fierce intellectual debate on the Spanish Civil War and the structure of independent Hollywood production in the early Production Code era were important factors shaping this historical moment. Many film controversies have erupted around much richer texts (Birth of a Nation, The Spanish Earth), but the disparity between Blockade's ordinarieness and the extraordinary public outcry gives us insight into how films function in popular debate. Whole texts do not circulate in popular discussion; instead, warring factions can battle over which encapsulated version of the text will be endorsed as the dominant one.

Just as the Breen Office centered its attention on Blockade's text, academia also frequently maintains the vestiges of a text-centered emphasis which is our intellectual heritage/baggage. In spite of efforts in reception studies and cultural studies, it is still easiest for us to keep the encounter between film and viewer at the center of what we do. Even the language we use perpetuates the centrality of texts (e.g., "extended texts"). The case of Blockade reminds us that this emphasis
is inadequate in the realm of public debate. The battle around Blockade points out the importance of encapsulated texts in the circulation of meanings.

**Notes**

2. Though Hollywood rarely depicted this conflict, the Spanish Civil War was the issue that attracted many American intellectuals (Hollywood figures included) toward Communist and Socialist organizations. This perceived climate of intellectual Communism formed the backdrop for much of the later HUAC rhetoric.
3. Last Train from Madrid (1937) dealt with the Spanish Civil War, though it only used the war as a backdrop.
4. The film provides a test case which is obviously not controversial because of sex or violence but because of ideological concerns that are not so clearly delineated in the Production Code.
7. If one conceives of film history as investigating the historical circumstances centered around aesthetically interesting or important texts, there is little place for a rather dull and ordinary film like Blockade. The film's mediocrity may explain why Blockade receives little attention in masterpiece-oriented synopses of film history such as those by Gerald Mast or David Cook. To date only two critical works have dealt with each of the two films: Blockade: Marjorie A. Vallez’s *The Spanish Civil War in American and European Films* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1982) and Gary Carr’s *The Lost Side of Paradise: The Screenwriting of John Howard Lawson* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984). Vallez gives a particularly textual and ideological reading of the film, privileging Wanger and Lawson as “liberal persons” who made a “courageous venture.” Carr places Blockade within the context of auteurist patterns in Lawson’s screenwriting career. Though Wanger and Lawson are significant agents in this historical moment, I do not emphasize any romantic concepts of individual artistic courage in this paper.


11. Allen Guttmann’s *The Wound in the Heart: America and the Spanish Civil War* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1962) notes that the way Norma meets Marco (her car dies when it runs into a pair of yoked oxen) calls upon a common pattern of Spanish Civil War imagery. The forces of modernized mechanization (Nationalists) are stopped by rural opposition more in touch with nature (Republicans).

12. Blockade is an unusual war film in that it contains almost no depiction of combat. We hear far-off explosions, but primarily the film concentrates on the effects of war on a mostly civilian population.

13. Interestingly, the Ufa version of *The Love of Jeanne Ney* is considered to have bowdler-  
ized the radical components of the original novel, a claim which later would be leveled at Blockade as well. The Ufa film changed the ending from the execution of the male revolutionary to a happier, more moral ending. Pabst was instructed to film the downbeat novel “in the American style,” according to David Battrick, “Melodrama, History, and Dickens: *The Love of Jeanne Ney* (1927),” in *The Films of G. W. Pabst: An Extraterrestrial Cinema*, ed. Eric Rentschler (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990).

14. Clifford Odets, "Castles in Spain," unproduced screenplay, Theatre Collection, New York Public Library, Public, New York. In this script, Marco shoots Norma’s father, just as in the novel. The script is clearly divided between the Paris sections (which almost exclusively concentrate on the love story between the bourgeois woman and the young activist) and the Spanish sections (which emphasize the political situation). Odets’s principal social commentary comes in the juxtaposition of the refugees’ plight with the love story. Gerald Weales discusses the Odets script in *Clifford Odets: Playwright* (New York: Pegasus, 1971).

15. Carr suggests that Odets and Milestone lost interest because their project used basically the same story as their earlier collaboration *The General Died at Dawn*. See *The Lost Side of Paradise*, 68.

16. This account of Lawson’s early contributions to the script relies on ibid., 68–69, and Weales, *Clifford Odets: Playwright*, 114.

17. Walter Wanger Papers, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, Box 64, folder 15. Papers used by permission of the Walter Wanger estate.

18. Ibid., folder 14.

19. Ibid., folder 15.


21. United Artists Manuscripts Collection 4G, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, Box 1.


27. Time, June 20, 1938, 37–38.


32. Chicago Daily Tribune, July 2, 1938, 8.


35. San Francisco Chronicle, June 19, 1938, 27, June 20, 1938, 12, June 23, 1938, 6. The combination of publicity strategies used at San Francisco’s United Artists theater won a prize in the Blockade exploitation campaign contest (“United Artists Announces Blockade Contest Winners,” Motion Picture Herald, September 3, 1938, 60).


37. Omaha Morning World-Herald, July 6, 1938, 8.


39. Predicting which markets would be most likely to arouse controversy was a tricky business for exhibitors. Such predictions were an imprecise science at best. Since the protests over the Spanish Civil War were closely tied to the Catholic Church, the most dependable rule for exhibitors would be to prepare for controversy in primarily Catholic communities. For instance, when Blockade showed in Providence (with a genre-centered campaign), almost half the Rhode Islanders were Catholic. The advertising in Omaha makes sense when one understands that Catholicism was by far the largest denomination in Nebraska, having almost twice as many members as the next largest religious group. This population information is taken from The Statesman’s Yearbook: Statistical and Historical Annual of the States of the World, ed. M. Epstein (New York: Macmillan, 1942).

40. “Disclaimer,” Motion Picture Herald, June 18, 1938, 8.


42. Nation, 689.


45. Time, June 20, 1938, 37–38.

46. Wanger had previously used direct address to “punch up” a film’s ending. For example, Shanghaied, a 1935 miscasting film, ends with a plea for tolerance delivered to the camera. Thanks to Matthew Bernstein for this observation.


49. One could make the argument that the direct address’s Brechtian potential is seriously mitigated because the speech is at the end of the film, where classical film narration is often more overtly communicative. See David Bordwell, Narrative in the Fiction Film (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 160. The point is that the critics did not even consider the possibility that combining direct address and classical narration might be an artistically viable choice.


57. Bernstein discusses the Quigley-Wanger debate and the rationale for Wanger leaving Films for Democracy in some detail in Walter Wanger, chap. 9.


60. Darrow, “Catholic Political Power,” 152.


63. The studios began producing strongly anti-Nazi films when it was clear that Hollywood could not avoid losing German revenue (when Germany banned American films in 1940). Warner Bros.’ 1936 Confessions of a Nazi Spy is an exception to this rule. Colin Schindler (Hollywood Goes to War, 9) suggests that Warners’ anti-Nazi stance had less to do with
political conviction than with more personal antipathies. Warners was consistently hostile to the Nazis after Warner Bros. salesman Joe Kauffman was murdered by Nazis in 1936.

64. Congress, House, Hearings of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, October 27, 1947, 293, 304.


66. A. E. Hancock (Columbia Theatre, Columbia City, Indiana), "What the Picture Did for Me," Motion Picture Herald, November 19, 1938, 76; Pearl C. Wisch (Grand Theatre, Mohall, North Dakota), "What the Picture Did for Me," Motion Picture Herald, October 22, 1938, 56.

67. Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott, Bond and Beyond: The Political Career of a Popular Hero (New York: Methuen, 1987), 64.

68. Not all popular culture institutions are necessarily centripetal, attempting to reduce meanings, though popular culture is frequently criticized because it is believed to always oversimplify complicated ideas. For example, Henry Jenkins has noted the tendency in some fan cultures to expand on the texts to create new, alternative texts. See Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture (New York: Routledge, 1992).


Dance, Flexibility, and the Renewal of Genre in Singin' in the Rain
by Peter N. Chumo II

In Singin' in the Rain (1952), dance and physical flexibility become metaphors for generic flexibility, the ability to move among different forms of entertainment and survive Hollywood's transition to talkies.

"If you've seen one, you've seen them all," Kathy Selden (Debbie Reynolds) tells silent-screen star Don Lockwood (Gene Kelly) as they discuss movies during their first meeting in Singin' in the Rain (Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen, 1952). This line is repeated later in the film when Don's best friend, Cosmo Brown (Donald O'Connor), mentions the way in which the movies they make are all alike: "Hey why bother to shoot this picture? Why don't you release the old one under a new title? If you've seen one, you've seen 'em all." The repetition of these words not only poses a challenge to Don's self-image as an actor but also challenges Hollywood moviemaking itself by acknowledging a potentially problematic feature of genre films, as defined by Rick Altman: "Both intratextually and intertextually, the genre film uses the same material over and over again. 'If you've seen one you've seen 'em all' is a common complaint leveled against the western or the musical. In fact it is a very good description, at least in a limited sense." If so, then Hollywood has reached a point of exhaustion. The silent films from Monumental Pictures recycle the same plot lines and generic conventions so that each new production is already old. The assembly line-like sets past which Don and Cosmo walk on their first day of work (generic jungle film, football movie, western) attest to the formulaic nature of such filmmaking. One question this film poses, then, is indeed, "Why bother to shoot this picture?" Can an original film be produced, and if so, how?

Scholars of the musical have analyzed the way in which Singin' in the Rain and other musicals of the early 1950s investigate the issue of genre itself. Jane Feuer, for example, points out, "Historically, the art musical has evolved toward increasingly greater degrees of self-reflectivity. By the late forties and into the early fifties, a series of musicals produced by the Freed Unit at MGM used the backstage format to present sustained reflections upon, and affirmations of, the musical genre itself." Singin' in the Rain takes part in this meditation by simultaneously pulling in two opposite directions. It looks back fondly on the musical tradition by setting itself at the time of the birth of the musical, and yet the recycling of old songs from

Peter N. Chumo II has an M.A. in English from the University of California at Berkeley. He is currently a free-lance writer on film.

© 1996 by the University of Texas Press, P.O. Box 7819, Austin, TX 78713–7819