Celluloid Saviours

Celluloid Saviours:
Angels and Reform Politics in Hollywood Film

By

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for Adrienne Haydée

The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.

First Inaugural Address
Abraham Lincoln.
4th March, 1861.

Each torpid turn of the world has such disinherited children,
to whom no longer what's been, and not yet what's coming, belongs.

The Seventh of ***The Duino Elegies***
Rainer Maria Rilke, 1923.
Translated from the German by J.B. Leishman and Stephen Spender, 1939.

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This is an analysis of Hollywood film, and I am very grateful to my old team in the LA office of Ridley Scott Associates, and my colleagues at the old Propaganda Films for enabling me to produce for directors such as Spike Jonze in the late 1990s and early 2000s. During this period of my life, which was spent mostly in LA and New York, I got a real flavour of the industry that was making the millennium film *blanc*.

Without the help of my mother and father, Ann and Robin Oakley, the book would never have materialised. Their help was not only practical, but intellectual, and the book has benefited from many late night comments and clarifications in conversation with them.

I also owe a deep gratitude to my grandmother and grandfather, Kay and Richard Titmuss. Kay Titmuss was one of Britain's early generation of social workers, one of the secular angels that I describe in this book. My grandfather, Richard, was a huge believer in the potential good of *all human beings.* In his highly influential book on blood donation in the UK and USA, Richard argued that the British blood donation system should not adopt the commercial model of the United States and that donors should donate for *altruistic* reasons. His writings informed the argument in latter chapters of this book.

It was Derek Jarman who stimulated my first awareness of angels in film. In the early 1990s I was working at TV production company commissioned by the British Channel 4 to make a series of drama films about philosophers. Derek was on board to direct the episode about Ludwig Wittgenstein. I had persuaded Derek to let me be his academic consultant in the little war that had started to rage between he and Terry Eagleton, the project's official scriptwriter. In exchange, Derek got to

wear my bright pink fur coat whenever he came into the office (usually he stayed in Dungeness to write).

"I think we should see the boy Wittgenstein as a an angel, Emily," he explained, "and hear a voice reading the *Duino Elegies* over the soundtrack." Derek was shocked and exhilarated by the fact that I had never read the *Elegies*: I heard a loud clang as it hit the table, and then footsteps disappearing into the distance, followed by silence, followed by footsteps getting closer. He picked up the phone and proceeded to read the Leishman and Spender translation to me: "Who, if I cried, would hear me among the angelic orders?" When the production of Wittgenstein was complete, I wrote out an outline and application to study angelic iconography in film at Cambridge.

The greatest debt that I owe is to my own guardian angel, Mark Collins. No words are sufficient to convey my gratitude to him, or to convey my amazement and respect for his exceptional dedication. The world is a better place because of him and all that he has done, and continues to do, for the wellbeing and happiness of others.

I dedicate this book to my darling daughter, Adrienne Haydée.

—Emily Caston, 3rd May 2010

CHAPTER ONE

HAPPINESS AND FILM *BLANC*

"How will it end?" are the words printed on Lauren's badge in *The Truman Show*. It is often said that, in Hollywood movies, the end determines the beginning. This could be said of all stories. Few, apart from the most seasoned or experimental storytellers have the courage to tell a tale without knowing how it will end. After he has been persuaded by Bobby to take part in a bank robbery, in David Lynch's *Wild at Heart*, Sailor returns home to his girlfriend, Lula, who tells him, "That Bobby Peruso's a black angel, Sailor. You hook up with him and you'll regret it. If you lived." A few moments later, she cries, "Oh, I wish there was somewhere over the rainbow. It's just shit. Shit, shit, shit." Hollywood's happy ending is what both Lauren and Lula want.

Wild at Heart (1990) and *The Truman Show* (1998) are just two examples of a substantial body of films that I term film *blanc*. Films *blanc* are films in which a saviour with extraordinary powers suspends the ordinary, known, laws of time and space in order to allow one or more ordinary human characters to reform themselves in life-changing ways. Almost always, these reforms result in a liberation to love and form *true relationships* within an *authentic community*. These films do not begin with the phrase "once upon a time," but the question *what if?* Film *blanc* has as strong a presence in Hollywood cinema as its alter ego, film *noir*. In *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), the saviour is played by the inventor of a memory-erasing machine. The basic operating principle of film *blanc* is *deus ex machina*, although it is frequently a secular character who effects the miraculous suspensions of the known laws of nature rather than a god.

This book is inspired by one particular raft of the huge corpus of film *blanc* which populated Hollywood release schedules of the thirties, forties and fifties. The raft begins with *Gabriel over the White House* in 1933 and ends with *Carousel* in 1956. The films imply that all people are protected by the parental arm of a invisible guardian angel. Many were remade in the 1990s, and the later film titles include *Michael* (1996), *A Life Less Ordinary* (1997), *Ghost* (1990), *Flatliners* (1990), and *All Dogs Go to Heaven*

(1989). Many of the end-of-millennium movies are often described as *second-chance movies*. Spielberg's *Always* (1989), a remake of the World War II classic, *A Guy Named Joe* (1943), is an example. In *Wild at Heart*, Sailor is given a second-chance when he speaks with the angel-fairy after being beaten to near death. I call these films *narratives of angelic-intervention*.

The publication of this book cuts against a tendency in US film studies to adhere to a canon based on *noir*, horror, science fiction, and comedy. This canon is not representative of Hollywood output and is therefore not accurate as an history of Hollywood as an industry in these decades. Films *blanc*, and, specifically, narratives of angelic intervention, represent an important part of American cultural history. The guardian angel films of 1933 to 1956 were more than a purely cinematic phenomenon. Many were derived from plays, novels and short stories. In the years 1935 to 1948 period, approximately one third of Hollywood films were adaptations (Handel 1950, 22). By contrast almost two thirds (sixty three per cent) of the angelic-intervention films were adaptations. Most of the titles are credited to previously published or performed fictional works. They were not only a product of the medium called film, or the industry known as cinema, but products of an American society evidently pre-occupied with the tutelary interventions of the supernatural. Back in 1979, having noticed the existence of a handful of the originals, the historian of American cinema, Andrew Sarris, commented that "an entire genre" had "been shunted aside" from the history of American film (1979, 2).

The concept of *intervention* that I discuss in this book was one element of the reform ideology that dominated public politics in the USA in the twenties and thirties. The optimistic belief that social engineering was both possible and desirable was widespread at that time. The guardian angels of the Catholic tradition in these films are spirits who protect and guide human beings through adversity into safety, from moral doubt or deviance into the correct path, and from uncertainty into revelation, and they fitted neatly into this reform philosophy. So, too, did the conception of purgatory. According to Western Christian theological tradition, *purgatory* was a place where *venial sins* might be expurgated. It lay "between the purity of the saved on the one hand and the unpardonable culpability of criminal sinners on the other" (LeGoff 1984, 5). This conception of sin as redeemable coincided with the Progressive and New Deal view that poorly socialized individuals and subcultures could be reformed by better education, Sunday school and widespread social welfare interventions. Social workers were the era's equivalent to angels.

The second-chance plot device, in which a character returns to life to

redeem his soul from sin, was a product of the first cycle of films and it was based on the American conception of the child as a *tabula rasa* ("written slate"). This was a component of the reform philosophy that took hold in the first decades of the twentieth century. A primary feature of the Progressives' perspective on reform (emblematised in such book titles as Croly's 1909 *The Promise of American Life*), was the view that poverty could be eradicated. In the early to mid nineteenth century, the optimistic opinion that anyone could be changed and reformed in the right environment grew in certain Progressive circles. The view took hold that all Americans could become good, neighbourly, hardworking, and successful citizens if they were exposed to the right social conditioning. The human character was a blank slate onto which the Progressives, with sufficient funding and support from federal or state government, could chalk those constituents required for realisation of the American Dream. The *tabula rasa* of reform ideology is the discursive field of these films.

Film narratives of angelic-intervention deliver happy endings, foreground forgiveness, love, charity, and demonstrate the best that human nature has to give by adopting a liberal sociological view of society in which reform is always possible. By contrast, films *noir* foreground the destructiveness of human nature with *femmes fatales* and the *tough-guy*, accentuate hate and individualism, tend to present human stories as pre-determined or fatalistic, and are inclined to finish with unhappy endings. Although *noir* is frequently defined primarily by its aberration from the mainstream, and although disagreements continue about the defining traits and canon of the genre, I will use the term to donate a specific body of films released in Hollywood between *The Maltese Falcon* in 1941 and *Touch of Evil* in 1958, which not only used low-key lighting, but which tended towards the narrative structure identified by Damico (1978).

In this book, I will argue that narratives of angelic-intervention are one type of film *blanc* that is found in Hollywood. Whilst many film *blanc* are fantasy films, some very significant examples are not. Many of the *what if?* questions asked in these narratives pre-empt the intervention of a saviour of some kind and result, not in suspensions, inversions, or subversions of Natural Law, but deliberate and radical disruptions of what the narrative deems Cultural Law. A classic example of this is *Trading Places* (1983).

The angelic-intervention films announced by the release of *Gabriel over the White House* in March 1933, were part of Hollywood's production of extremely formulaic films in the studio era.[1] The system has sometimes

[1] The studio era is generally regarded as the period between the mid 1920s to the late 1940s when Hollywood was dominated by eight companies. Of these five were vertically integrated majors owning institutions of production, distribution

been called a *factory system* engaged in the mass production of movies as consumer goods. Production was typified by cycles marketed to their audiences in terms of genre and stars. Most of the angelic-intervention films were produced by the majors and mini-majors; although only a small number attained any significant box office success, they were not B movies produced by the poorer independents.

The dominant style and structure was extremely standardized in this period and was structurally similar to nineteenth century melodrama. The formulaic dramatic conflict was structured around two opposing poles representing good and evil, with a readily identifiable hero and villain. The hero was typically played by the greater Hollywood star, and character traits of goodness typically conformed to the moral personality of the star created by the media and by his or her previous acting performances. Styles of editing, lighting, camerawork and narrative structure were designed to be invisible so that the viewer could concentrate solely on the story and on the characters.

In the studio era, a great many genres reliably delivered *happy endings*. The good versus evil moral conflict described above called for a clear-cut, gratifying plot resolution in which evil was destroyed and good rewarded. This would leave no doubt in the audience's mind that virtue was a positive force and that their fantasies could come true. Most of these ideas had been advanced many decades earlier by critics associated with the Frankfurt School in Germany. "As soon as the film begins, it is quite clear how it will end, and who will be rewarded, punished, or forgotten," wrote Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer in an essay first published in 1947 (1979, 125). But is often said that the happy ending became all the more important after 1933 when Roosevelt came to power, and the film industry entered into a pact with the administration, in some cases complicit, and in others – such as Warner Bros - explicit, to support the reforming policies of the New Deal. On Bergman's account of Depression cinema, the function of a great many films during the 1930s, was to convert social evil into personal evil which could be defeated and turn the agents of the New Deal into the forces of good (1971).

On the fringes of the school was Walter Benjamin whose ill-fated journey to Los Angeles to join these intellectual companions who were enjoying the glamorous companionship of Hollywood figures such as Charlie Chaplin and Greta Garbo, has been much documented elsewhere. In

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and exhibition: Loews-MGM, Paramount Publix, Fox Film Corporation (20th Century Fox after 1935), Warner Bros, and RKO. Three were mini-majors owning institutions of production and distribution but not exhibition: Universal Pictures, Columbia Pictures, and United Artists.

1939-1940, Benjamin had described an "angel of history" locked in futility with his back to the future. In 1939, the German cubist artist, Paul Klee had created twenty-nine sketches or paintings of angels inspired by human themes. It is well known that one of these, *Angelus Novus*, served as the inspiration for Walter Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1968, 253).

It is not possible to expand discussion of Benjamin's angel of history from the *Theses* without referring to theoretical and spiritual issues beyond the focus and scope of this particular book. Nevertheless, Benjamin's essay has served as the paradigm through which most interpretations of the significance of angels in twentieth century film, literature and photography have been articulated since the 1980s, and it is in no small way significant that Benjamin wrote his essay at the very time that Hollywood was beginning this cycle of films, a cycle which would become enduring fodder for Hollywood film-makers for a further sixty years and which would deliver films sometimes radical in their impulses, pushing for a demystification of reality, and at other times profoundly conservative and reactionary, urging for a repression of the self and ego of which Benjamin's sometimes colleagues, Adorno and Horkheimer had written so critically in the essays collected together in *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, most notably "Odysseus of Myth and Enlightenment" first published in 1944 (1979).

With the ban on importation of Hollywood films in France, where he spent much of the War, it is unlikely that Benjamin would have been aware of these films, let alone been able to view them. The first serious criticism of the films from a European writer was published in 1951 by Roger Caillois, a member of the Collège de Sociologie loosely associated with some of the Frankfurt School writers, in the context of the cultural fall-out of the Léon Blum-James Byrnes accord that brought American films into France in unprecedented numbers in the post-War years from 1946 to 1953 (Genesko 2003, 87). Caillois applied a theoretical framework from his 1950 *l'homme and le sacré*, influenced by Max Weber's writings on the rationalisation of culture, to an analysis of a handful of these angelic-intervention films (1964). Caillois interpreted the bureaucratic representations of heaven as indicative of the decline of the sacred in American society. Caillois's view was informed by the general opinion, derived from Nietzsche, that Western culture was being secularised, not by the demise of the power of the institutions of Christianity, but because Christianity itself was being secularised. His interpretation is compatible with Adorno's view that during the 1940s and 1950s, "the shell of Christine doctrine, above all its social authority and also a number of more

or less isolated elements of its content, is preserved and "consumed" in a haphazard way as a "cultural good" like patriotism or traditional art" (1975a, 434).

The first part of his argument appears to be supported by the statistics. The years 1900-1930 saw a decline in the power and influence of the churches and a concomitant fall in Church affiliation in many Western European nations. In the USA, however, religious institutions retained their powers and sought to retain the moral high-ground in the social and political arena. Between 1933 and 1955, contrary to the pattern in Europe, church affiliation in the USA actually increased (Wilson 1966, 109). Wilson's view is that, in these years, secularisation in North American drained the religious content, without too radically affecting the form of religious institutions (1966, 110). The second part of Adorno's argument appears to be supported by the films, a larger number of which are analysed here. Caillois was able to view only a handful. These films demonstrate the simultaneous exploitation and evacuation of the sacred in the name of a political and economic agenda which the denominationally heterogeneous Hollywood, intentionally or not, nursed.

The conservative morality that informed this formula and the angelic-intervention films produced within its framework, is enshrined in the 1934 Hays Code. The Hays Code was a document that the film industry issued under the jurisdiction of Will Hays and Joseph Breen to provide instructions on film content for studios and producers. Many of Hollywood's creative personnel objected to the moral tone of the code. Chaplin signposted the men's toilets in his studio "Will Hays" to indicate his disgust to all guests, visitors, and actors, for example. Nevertheless, virtually all studios were bound by its directives and it is important to note that the cycle of angelic-intervention films were born of the strictures of this code as much as they were created as a reply to the anti-social ethos of earlier film cycles. "The word "moral" or its derivatives appears in the code twenty-six times. Valuative terms like "sin," "evil," "bad," "right," and "good" appear frequently. Although divine law is mentioned only once, the language and reasoning of the Code belong to moral philosophy rather than social science" (Inglis 1976, 378). The Code states that entertainment is "either HELPFUL or HARMFUL to the human race". Because of this "the motion picture … has special MORAL OBLIGATIONS" to create only "correct entertainment" which "raises the whole standard of a nation" and "tends to improve the race, or at least to re-create or rebuild human beings exhausted with the realities of life" (Roffman and Purdy 1981, 6).

Robert Alter has written an extremely interesting book on tradition and

modernity in the writings of Franz Kafka, Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem (1991). Alter argues that each writer uses the symbol of the angel to communicate thoughts about tradition. Although each author uses the symbol very differently, all three seem to dislocate the angel from tradition or, more accurately, to find the angel a sole, meaningless, and *powerless* survivor of tradition. Scholem writes of the angel from a first-person perspective, "I am an unsymbolic thing;" Benjamin describes the angel of history as locked in futility with his back to the future; Kafka writes of an angelic epiphany which transpires to be no more than a vision of "a painted wooden figurehead off the prow of some ship." Alter interprets Kafka's story as a relic from the past.

> This angel, like Benjamin's might perhaps be a refugee from paradise, but without the capacity to look back: it stands in precisely the sad relation to the realm of divine origins as that in which a wooden figurehead nailed to the ceiling of a tavern stands to the sea. The angel, with its fleeting promise of revelation, is associated with cultural memory but is discovered to be only a relic from the past, an accoutrement of vanished seafaring put to decorative use in the age of Edison. (Alter 1991, 118)

Alter argues that the "dumbfounded refugee of religion" still carries the promise(s) of Judaic religion. "Kafka's silent angel speaks neither Hebrew nor German, but it is made, through a willed act of human intervention, to hold a candle for the man to whom it has appeared … something that may endure still glimmers forth from the realm of transcendence that tradition so urgently addressed" (1991, 119). I will argue that to understand whether something "still glimmers" from the angel in popular North American culture, one has to analyse the context in which religious institutions themselves have been put at the service of political ends.

Chapters 2 to 6 consist of essays on the first cycle of films released before 1956. Chapters 7 to 9 centre on films released after 1978. Between 1956 and 1978, Hollywood produced very few happy ending fantasies featuring angels. Roger Vadim's *Barbarella* (1968) and Heck Harvey's *Carnival of Souls* (1962) come close to the model of narration, but do not have the hallmark features of the "happy ending" and feel-good ethos of the earlier run. *Feel-good* fantasies, of which the angelic-intervention film is a variety, and which were so typical during World War II, did not feature in Hollywood's mainstream product between 1956 and 1978 when Warren Beatty's *Heaven Can Wait* (1978) was released. In the 1970s and 1980s, religious topics and biblical stories were rare in the release schedules of the large studios. Most of the exceptions were satirical films

(such as Monty Python's *Life of Brian* 1979) or unorthodox interpretations (such as *The Last Temptation of Christ* 1988).

In the chapter titled "An American Tradition" I bring together the key themes and arguments of the social and textual criticism of the earlier essays. I argue that there is a clear line from narratives of intervention in mid nineteenth century children's fiction through to twenty-first century narratives of Hollywood film evident in conceptions of the need for welfare intervention to redeem the corrupted *tabula rasa*.

This study is offered as complimentary to Lawrence and Jewett's study of *The Myth of the American Superhero* (2002), and three commendable works on Hollywood film in the early period: Buhle and Wagner's *Radical Hollywood: The Untold Story Behind America's Favourite Movies* (2002), *J.R. Parish's Ghosts and Angels in Hollywood Films* (1994), and Peter Roffman and Jim Purdy's *Hollywood Social Problem Film: Madness, Despair and Politics from the Depression to the Fifties* (1981). The latter three were consulted in the search for films that should be considered in this cycle, along with the archives at the Library of Congress and the British Film Institute. It is hoped that this book contributes to a more sophisticated, less canon-based understanding of Hollywood culture and industrial practice, as urged by Stephen Neale in his commendable work on genre in Hollywood film (2000).

CHAPTER TWO

THE RADICAL SPIRIT

In 1933 MGM, then one of the largest studios in Hollywood, and certainly the most conservative, shocked the industry and critics alike by releasing a film in which the angel Gabriel came down from heaven to teach the American President how to run his country. America was in the midst of Depression. It was three and a half years since the great stock market crashes of October twenty-fourth and twenty-ninth 1929, but unemployment was standing at thirteen million, there was pressing concern about the levels of crime and poverty in America's cities, and there was a widespread anger and hostility towards big business reminiscent of the anti-monopoly politics of the Progressive Era of the 1910s and 1920s (Garraty 1997, 44, Bolt 1974, DuBoff 1989).

The film was called *Gabriel over the White House.* It was directed by Gregory LaCava, and the film's uncredited producer was William Randolph Hearst, the legendary media magnate around whom Orson Welles is said to have fashioned *Citizen Kane* (1940). Hearst had begun his career in publishing. In 1922, he moved his company, Cosmopolitan Productions, from New York to Hollywood and struck a deal with MGM so that Cosmopolitan could operate as an independent production unit benefiting from MGM's larger distribution structure. *Gabriel* was not a huge commercial success but neither was it a flop, and it was, perhaps surprisingly given the film's political content, welcomed by the trade press.

In the film, a recently inaugurated President of the United States undergoes a dramatic and fundamental change in political ideology and economic policy following severe concussion suffered in a driving accident. Judson Hammond (Walter Houston) is transformed from a President who makes nominal statements about resolving the recession resulting from the 1929 Crash, into a President who takes drastic action: he fires his conservative government, suspends Congress, forms an Army of Construction and other Government labour projects, opens up state liquor stores to put the bootleggers out of business, and uses tanks and firing squads against the gangsters. He insists that not only the USA but all

the allied nations pay off their national debts, and then unites them and other nations in signing a Covenant for World Peace. In an aside to the President's Secretary of State, Miss Molloy (the President's Confidential Secretary) says she believes that President Hammond has been inspired to take these actions by the intervention of the angel Gabriel immediately after the car crash, "I became aware tonight of a third being. I know that sounds impossible. I'm not a very religious person, Beek, but does it seem too fanciful to believe that God might have sent the angel Gabriel to do for Jud Hammond what he did for Daniel?"

A gust of wind in an earlier scene suggests that the speech to Congress was written by the spirit of Abe Lincoln, Republican President of the United States during the Civil War (1861-8165). Lincoln was famous for defending the preservation of the Union of states against Southern secession and was somewhat of an icon of US national identity. The hailing of Lincoln's legendary speeches on the defence of the union was a timely one, given that America was facing great division and economic conflict. With the Depression, national identity and unity were, once again, under threat. With the angel of the spirit of Lincoln, *Gabriel over the White House* ushered in a new type of *hero-redeemer* figure for mainstream Hollywood fiction in search of a happy ending. The new redeemer fitted the temper of the Hays Code. It was a character who intervened in the lives of other human characters in order to help them realise the pioneer values and social aspirations of the American nation. The redeemer was an angel, soul or ghost and in the 1930s he became a leading man in films that *always* had a happy ending and were pre-occupied with urban problems of crime (particularly juvenile delinquency), gambling, alcoholism and unemployment.

Three weeks after *Gabriel over the White House* was premiered, F.D. Roosevelt assumed the office of President of the United States on a programme of widespread welfare and taxation reform. This was no coincidence. Hearst had been an outspoken supporter of Roosevelt and had helped to nominate him in 1932. The film articulated his radical opinions on war-debts, unemployment, and war veterans. Although Hearst became increasingly conservative after Roosevelt took office, there is little doubt that the film was intended to further his views and garner support for Roosevelt's forthcoming one hundred days of reform. According to McConnell, Louis Mayer, the head of MGM, was "gravely concerned" about the film that had been rushed through the production schedule in his absence (1976). Mayer was a staunch supporter of Hoover, and was concerned, like other executives at the studio, that the film was insidious propaganda for the incoming Roosevelt Administration (ibid, 9).

In times of political crisis, American has tended to turn to religion as a legitimation or affirmation of political decisions and political action where, since the Enlightenment, European countries have tended to use so-called de-mythologized secular moralities to mobilize support for programmes of political action. Despite being, in myths of origins, a nation born of the Reformation, and despite early Puritan declarations of the illegitimacy of petitionary prayer, American political leaders and media figures have not deterred from calling upon God's services to intervene in difficult times.

In his impressive book, *Protestants, Prayer and American Culture*, Rick Ostrander relates several instances of America's use of petitionary prayer to recover from crisis (2000). The first occurred in 1881 after President James A. Garfield was shot. Americans from all denominations united to offer prayers for his recovery, and Sunday August twenty-eighth was declared a day for earnest prayer to speed his progress. Twenty years later, another American President, William McKinley, was also shot, and prayers were held by a wide variety of worshipping assemblies across the country for the president's recovery. In 1914, when war had been declared in Europe, President Woodrow Wilson named Sunday October fourth "as a national day of prayer and supplication for peace in Europe," and "instructed citizens to pray that God would 'vouchsafe His children healing peace again and restore once more concord among men and nations'" (ibid, 3). Prayers for peace appeared in daily newspapers across the land.

For Ostrander, the most significant feature of these three episodes in US history is that the prayers failed to work. President Garfield died within a few weeks. President McKinley died one week after his doctors had predicted he would survive. Peace did not reign over Europe, and the Great War raged on for a further four years bringing the death of an estimated eight-ten million people. The prayers of millions of Americans were not answered. Americans, at the end of the nineteenth and dawn of the twentieth century, had a notably frustrated relationship to petitionary prayer.

Although *Gabriel* ushered in a new type of redeemer, angels were not new to Hollywood. They had a history in cautionary reform or temperance tales. An examination of angelic-intervention and angelic iconography within pictorially secular narratives in early film is beyond the scope and focus of this particular book. However, an examination of all those titles featuring "angel" entered on the *Internet Movie Database* (*IMDb*) for films originating in the USA and released between 1896 and 1920 suggests not only that angels were comparatively popular characters in the

one and two reelers, but that they were being used regularly to explore childhood innocence in the poverty of the slums: *The Angel of the Slums* (1911), *The Guardian Angel* (1912), *The Angel of the Slums* (1912), *The Angel of the Slums* (1913), *At the Sign of the Lost Angel* (1913), *The Fallen Angel* (1913), *His Guardian Angel* (1915), *His Guardian Angel* (1916), *Man and His Angel* (1916), *The Angel of Piety Flat* (1916), *The Angel Factory* (1917), *The Angel of Poverty Row* (1917), *The Rescuing Angel* (1919) and *Angel Child* (1919).

A total of thirty-nine films were found using the advanced search mechanism and it seems fairly certain that a larger number of film titles featured the term "angel" given that the *IMDb* is not a comprehensive database, but one which is dependent on the voluntary contributions of private users. Very little information was available on any of these titles and no plot summaries were available on *IMDb*. Copies were not available at the British Film Institute, but might be available from the Library of Congress, or, less likely, from the original studios. It may be that the prints never come to light, but that film summaries could be compiled from alternative sources (such as release schedules), and this may be a useful, albeit substantial, avenue for future research.

During the 1910s, socially conscious films were common. The rich, both aristocrats and wealthy businessmen, were subject to scoffing critiques in these films, partly because the audience for two- and three-reelers was chiefly working class (the gentrification of cinema exhibition did not occur until after World War II). Many of these two- and three-reelers were characterised by a Victorian morality and were presented in the form of late nineteenth century melodramas. The Dickensian novel served as somewhat of a prototype for such films. The "temperance film" was a Dickensian type moral melodrama containing an implicit sermon on reform behaviour. An example is D.W. Griffith's *A Drunkard's Reformation* (1909), which warned of the dangers of alcohol. Pro-prohibition forces and campaigners used the film to attempt to influence and education working class men and immigrants.

In the same year that MGM released *Gabriel over the White House*, Warner Bros released *The Mayor of Hell* (1933) starring James Cagney. This was the first major and successful feature length drama exploring the impact of welfare intervention on delinquent inner-city children. From the colonial period to the nineteenth century, children had been viewed as miniature adults who were inherently aggressive and sinful, and therefore prone to all kinds of vices including idleness. In the mid-nineteenth century this view began to change, and, in 1914, Dr Montessori's *Own Handbook* was published, declaring that "children are human beings to

whom respect is due, superior to us by reason of their innocence and of the greater possibilities of the future" (1965, 133). In the early nineteenth century, charity organisations and reformers believed that children would benefit from "constructive altruism" (Trattner 1999). A broad child welfare movement swept through America and took many forms. It involved the removal of neglected children from almshouses and placing them in private homes, the creation of juvenile courts and probation systems, the provision of mothers and widows pensions, and crusades against child labour.

The Mayor of Hell attacks the old style of reformatory in which children had been kept, and advances a Progressive style view of the political conditions necessary for children – and their carers – to improve their conduct, the kind of which Maria Montessori might have approved. In the film, James Cagney plays a gangster politically appointed to run an oppressive children's reformatory as part of a deal with the authorities. He successfully institutes a radical new system of self-government for the kids. The message is that humane treatment and democratic government can benefit everyone, including Cagney himself who falls in love with one of the reformatory nurses. Cagney's character is essentially a social worker; he performs the same story-function as the guardian angels, and functions as a secular, reforming, saviour. As a result of his charitable and populist intervention, everyone lives happily ever after.

Underlying *The Mayor of Hell* is a social environmentalist view of human nature. In the Progressive Era between the 1890s and World War 1, this social environmentalist view of human nature was advanced by many reform groups. It is important to note that not all of those figures and groups involved in Progressivism subscribed to social environmentalism. Nevertheless, many of those working in the cities with juvenile delinquents, or for prison reform, the temperance movement, and others involved with advancing women's rights, minimum wages, welfare and the regulation of employment *did* subscribe to a version of it. As a result of the view that human behaviour could be dramatically improved by social intervention to alter the social and economic conditions in which Americans lived, a huge number of progressive reforms were pushed through Congress, and virtually the only major piece of legislation not enacted was compulsory health insurance.

This social environmentalist view of human nature is very prominent in the child reform cycle of films featuring secular tutelary interventions of which *The Mayor Of Hell* is the beginning. In the strong version of social environmentalism present in this film, human nature is a *tabula rasa*, a Latin phrase translated as a "written slate" to denote that a child is born a

blank slate without morals or knowledge. From this philosophical perspective, a child only becomes a moral knowing person when culture writes itself on her; for example as she receives guidance from her parents and her schooling. This idea is worked out by John Locke in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, and is commonly cited as a feature of much European Enlightenment thought (2008, first published 1690).

The *tabula rasa* idea is a fundamental precondition for the idea of social work and social intervention that we see in *The Mayor of Hell*. If children are not born evil, but are born blank slates, their bad behaviours are caused by bad conditions such as poverty, overcrowding, ill health, poor parenting, and an absence of schooling. If this is true, social leaders can intervene to remove these conditions. As a result children will change, and an entire nation of perfect honest, loving, responsible, socially minded, hard-working Americans will result. Likewise, if prisoners are given the right kinds of support, and the negative conditions which led them to a life of crime are removed, then prisoners can also be reformed and given the chance to become honest, hardworking Americans.

It is generally held that the Progressive Movement fell apart in the 1920s as business leaders took objection to the silly idealism of the more optimistic reform groups, and as ordinary Americans lost their zeal for reform because they were benefiting from the buoyancy of the labour market and from the myriad reforms. In some circles, this conception of the *tabula rasa* endured, however, and, after the 1929 Crash, it was rekindled in the two reform programmes of the Roosevelt administrations.

The *tabula rasa* perspective held very significant parallels with the Catholic conception of angels and saints as mediators. In the secular reform philosophy, because humans are *tabula rasa*, social workers can intervene to cleanse them of their sins, teach them new behaviours, and ensure that they live happily ever after. In the Pauline tradition of Catholic theology, because God loves *all* His people, *everyone* is assigned a guardian angel at birth to protect her and direct her to do good in the face of temptation and evil. *All* human beings have the capacity to reform themselves, and live happily ever after. This Pauline tradition conflicts with the conception evident in some Protestant writings, that angels minister *only to the elect* (those who have already been predestined by God for salvation). Social workers, psychiatrists, counsellors, therapists, and psychologists have been the twentieth century equivalent to Catholic mediators to whom one would make a confession and receive instruction on how to redeem oneself from one's sins.

Chaplin's *The Kid* (1921) also attacks the late nineteenth century institutions for caretaking orphaned or delinquent children, and was no

doubt fuelled by time he spent in an orphanage in London as a child. The film opens with a wide shot of a large dominating Victorian building with the words "CHARITY HOSPITAL" written below the cornice. An inter-title introduces the Edna Purvience character "her only sin – motherhood;" Edna walks down the path away from the hospital and looks around her for somewhere to leave her child. Another cut takes the viewer to a shot of Jesus Christ nailed to the cross on top of a hill. In subsequent scenes, the viewer is told that the little boy (played by Jackie Coogan) is found and adopted by the Tramp. Chaplin's Tramp loves the little child and protects him. When the welfare services arrive to compulsory remove the kid from Chaplin's care, the kid weeps desperately for the man who has unofficially adopted him. Bereft and exhausted, the Tramp falls asleep on the doorstep outside his apartment and dreams of a heaven in which he and the kid are re-united and then fly freely around the City.

In the Dreamland sequence, the inter-title "Sin Creeps in" occurs, followed by a shot of an arch leading out of the street above which is a sign with the words "WELCOME TO OUR CITY." "Sin" is located in "the city," and the viewer is directed to believe that the Tramp's street, his natural location and home, is not the city. Several demons prance about and one of them enters the Tramp's street. The angel belongs to the safe street which is "outside" society. The demon belongs to the city which is "within" society and which the Tramp cannot tolerate. The city caused the little boy to be abandoned in the first instance, and the city, and its representative institutions – the police and social workers - have now taken the little boy away from the Tramp again. With the next intertitle, "the trouble begins," the chief demon attempts to influence the female angel. "Vamp him" says the demon. She begins to seduce him. Another title states "innocence," presumably intended to label the Tramp's position. The Tramp's passions get the better of him and he follows the angel through the arch into the sinful city. There, another man enters and is presented on another inter-title as her lover. He grows jealous of the Tramp and starts a fight. All three return to the street for a big slapstick fight scene involving an excessive amount of feathers and a policeman. The Tramp manages to escape by flying away, but is shot down by a bullet from the policeman and falls crumpled back onto the doorstep where the sequence began. A slow dissolve around the policeman's shaking actions brings him back into reality.

The Kid is a far more stubborn film than others of this period, finding in the child not a *tabula rasa*, but pure goodness. Its attitude towards public and charitable institutions is that goodness can be maintained only outside any of the institutions associated with a capitalist society, all of

which are represented as repressive and intolerant.

Those public and charitable welfare agencies established in the Progressive Era proved incapable of providing the magnitude of relief that was needed in the Depression. So too did the private institutions of the family, the neighbour, the landlord and the employer so beloved of Hoover. Just as Randolph Hearst and Gregory La Cava had predicted it would happen if the angel Gabriel came to the White House, the New Deal brought a new version of welfare to the United States which involved far greater Federal intervention than the Progressives had ever imagined. In 1933, Roosevelt established the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) to deal with the immediate effects of the crisis. It was headed by a *social worker*, Harry Hopkins. FERA provided funds and a number of work programmes to provide assistance to unemployed workers in the 1930s. In January 1935, the Social Security Act became law. This established a federal social insurance system for old age, unemployment and disability, and a state-federal public assistance system of federal grants to states. The system was not national, as it was in many European countries. Nor was it as comprehensive in its provision for basic needs. It had a small state-based system of public aid providing benefits on the basis of need. Most of the benefits were made available through social insurance for only those who had “earned” them by virtue of work. Nevertheless, it was a start.

Films produced in the first six months of Roosevelt’s presidency were buoyant. They were optimistic films in which characters achieved their dreams within America’s traditional institutions. From the mid 1930s onward, Hollywood produced a cycle of *social drama films* which espoused New Deal themes. Many are attributed to the relatively laissez faire management style of Jack Warner and his team at Warner Bros. The concept of the *social problem film* is used to describe narrative films that integrate a larger and politicised social conflict between the characters than was conventional. Hollywood produced and marketed a number of such films in the 1930s, and by the 1940s, the box-office heyday, the term "social problem-" or "message-" film was conventional in its usage with the industry and the public. Warner Brothers, largely under the direction of Darryl F. Zanuck, started taking their film subjects from the news headlines. These "headliner" movies were generally cheaply made, gritty in their realist aesthetic, and foregrounded a working class attitude and New Deal political sympathies. Mervyn LeRoy’s *I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932) was the most notable of the cycle, and its success led Warner Brothers and other studios to copy the formula. At Columbia Pictures, Frank Capra made a reputation by developing his signature blend

of social problem film and comedy into three populist features, *Mr Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), *Mr Smith Goes to Washington*(1939) and *Meet John Doe* (1941).

These social problem films were not necessarily the most subversive of all those produced in the 1930s and 1940s. Many were produced by writers and directors from the left, and can be seen as a product of to the politicisation of Hollywood in response to economic crisis in the film industry (Roffman and Purdy 1981), but they were not the most radical. 1933 was the year in which Hollywood was worst hit by the Depression. In the first two years of the 1930s, the Big Five Studios had escaped severe financial crisis because the novelty of synchronised sound had continued to attract large audiences. During the period 1928 to 1932, Hollywood film-makers adjusted their styles and techniques for telling stories in order to incorporate synchronized dialogue and sound effects. Initially this produced some odd results, such as Dupont's experiments in multi-lingual recording, and had generated some staid dialogue, camera positions, and editing. A number of silent Hollywood stars lost their premiere position amongst studio executives after performing badly in sound-tests. However by 1933, synchronised sound-films were the norm and were being produced with a stable, standardized style of production. As the novelty of sync sound wore off, by March 1933, three of the Big Five studios - Fox, Paramount and RKO - were in receivership (Shindler 1996, 28). Most of the studios could not meet their payrolls. Massive wage reductions were imposed, in some cases up to fifty per cent.

A relative politicization of technical and creative personnel followed. In addition, an increasing number of studio heads such as Jack Warner became sympathetic to Roosevelt's New Deal or, at the very least, more liberal in the messages they permitted their writers, producers, and directors to send out. This may account for the increase in reform issues in the angelic-intervention films from 1933 onwards, and suggests that media mogul Hearst's direct involvement in the production of *Gabriel over the White House* in order to influence public opinion on political matters was by no means the exception at this time. It was, on the contrary, the norm for producers and executives to view their product as part of a political, if not ideological, campaign to bring America out of recession.

Interestingly, the fantasy genre seems to have held a particular appeal for left-wing writers. In their analysis of B horror films, Buhle and Wagner argue that, "precisely because the attention of censors and conservative political critics focused elsewhere, artists on the bottom rungs of the genres often had a freer hand than their more exalted counterparts. For another, they were more likely to be in touch with working-class audiences

than were the artists whose work was reviewed in the literary press" (2002, 111-2). Some of the key characters on the left were involved in the production of the angelic-intervention films, notably Robert Sherwood, Irving Pichel, Sidney Buchman, and Dalton Trumbo.

But some writers still preferred to conduct their radical social experiments in serious social realist drama. In the originally contraversial but highly acclaimed melodrama, *Imitation of Life (1934)*, the hero-redeemer is a secular character. Because this film presented radical views on the rights of women and Blacks, it demands note. In this film, Bea Pullman falls on hard times after her husband dies, and his maple syrup business begins to fail. Help comes in the form of Delilah Johnson. Delilah is a Black housekeeper who turns up looking for work one day at Bea's house. She has a daughter named Peola, who is so light-skinned that she can pass as white. Bea takes the mother and daughter in to help to run the house and the business. Delilah makes fantastic pancakes, and Bea comes up with the idea of selling the pancakes through a new coffee shop, Aunt Delilah's Pancake House. In exchange for Delilah's recipe, Bea gives Delilah twenty percent of profits and both mothers become millionaires when they box and sell the secret recipe. Delilah's daughter Peola has been passing as White at every opportunity. When she drops out of the Black Southern college, Delilah and Bea set out to find her. They discover that Peola is working at a restaurant from which Blacks are barred. When Delilah walks through the door, Peola pretends she has never met Delilah before in her life. Devastated, Delilah returns home and dies of a broken heart. At her funeral, Peola is overcome with remorse, and throws herself on Delilah's casket.

Delilah is the social worker style of secular tutelar who lives and acts entirely for the good of other people. She arrives like an angel, an uninvited mysterious stranger, at Bea's door. Her appearance seems destined, because Bea had not advertised for a housekeeper. Bea is a perfect candidate for an angelic intervention. She is a "good" woman who works hard and good mother who looks after her daughter despite great adversity (having lost her husband). Delilah takes on the role of the *angel in the house* (nurturer, cook, masseur, cleaner, listener, supporter), leaving Bea free to concentrate on her role as the *patriarch* (breadwinner, adventurer, inventor, decision-maker). Delilah protects Bea until the end, not in the new 1930s manner of Esquire type angels such as Cary Grant, or old-fashioned Victorian angels, but as a *female angel*. Her recipe for pancakes is what saves Bea, and she protects Bea from within the domestic sphere. When Delilah dies, the story ends not with Bea getting married to Stephen and living happily ever after, but reminiscing with her

daughter about that wonderful day on which Delilah first arrived.

Imitation of Life was out of sync with its time in dealing with racial segregation and working women. It was ahead of its time in presenting single women as successful entrepreneurs in a business traditionally run by men. It was adapted from the 1933 novel of the same title by Fanny Hurst. Fanny had apparently been inspired to write the story after taking a road trip to Canada with the acclaimed Black short-story writer Zora Neale Hurston who wrote *Mules and Men* (1935). When it was first released in 1934, it was attacked by both liberals who argued that Delilah's character was an outdated domestic stereotype ("the jolly Black cook" or "Mammy"). Indeed the Delilah character does seem oddly regressive as a meek "Negro" who *knows her place* in society. Conservatives also objected to the film. Until two weeks' into principle photography, the Hays office refused to approve the script for a number of reasons, including the suggestion that a "mixed race" sexual relationship had taken place in order for Peola to be "light skinned." The Hays code forbad the representation of miscegenation. Breen insisted "it is our conviction that any picture which raises and elaborates such an inflammable racial question as that raised by this picture, is fraught with grave danger to the industry, and hence is one which we, in the dispensation of our responsibilities under the Resolution for Uniform Interpretation of the Production Code, may be obliged to reject." Fredi Washington, who played Peola, devoted most of her working life after making this film to civil rights struggles for Blacks.

"The destiny of American youth is the destiny of America," said Roosevelt in 1934 (Trattner 1999, 94). By the 1930s, it was widely believed that humans were neither good nor bad, but plastic creatures who could, and would, be shaped by their environment. A new welfare state, its institutions and workers, could mould these plastic creatures into the nation's new ideal men and women with, as Lincoln had famously said, with charity for all and malice towards none. *The Mayor of Hell* was one of the first films to attempt a realistic portrayal of the brutal treatment of children in state reformatories in the 1920s and 1930s, but others followed. A more successful release was *Peck's Bad Boy* (1934), starring Jackie Coogan. The screenplay was written by left-wing writer, Marguerite Roberts, and had been adapted from a popular nineteenth-century children's book series. Following these, Warners released a cycle of films about kids from the slums.

The box office success, *Dead End* (1937), is the most significant of the child reform cycle for our purposes. It focuses on a single dead end street facing the East River and tries to dramatize how this environment shapes

all the people living there. Bogart plays a killer named Babyface who returns to the street. Dave is the hero redeemer who tries to stop a new generation of slum kids of becoming killers and meeting the same fate as Babyface. It was directed by William Wyler, produced at Samuel Goldwyn's company, and distributed by United Artists. Babyface, the gangster, is presented as a frightened and lonely creature full of false bravado. Dave, the redeemer, seems to be impotent and unable to realize his idealistic goals. His ambition to tear down the slums and build a decent world where people can "live decent and be decent" is not achieved. Thus, *Dead End* illustrates the impotency of the non-angelic intervener; the failure of realistic characters to improve the lot of the slum kids in the future and avert their sorry fate.

The city priest appears as a recurrent Catholic hero-redeemer in a number of the Warners' child reform cycle. One of the most successful was Michael Curtiz's *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938) which was produced at First National. Pat O'Brien stars as the Priest who was once a vagabond hooligan of the streets with his old childhood pal, Rocky Sullivan. Rocky Sullivan (played by James Cagney) returns to the New York slum after serving fifteen years in jail. His goal is to get the one hundred thousand dollars owed him by corrupt lawyer Frazier (played by Humphrey Bogart), and fifty per cent of everything that Frazer makes by working for mafia boss Mac Keefer, as per a deal that he cut with Frazier before he went to jail. Frazier refuses to co-operate, however, and Rocky ends up engaging the services of the teenage boy-gang (the Dead End Kids), in order to get his due.

Father Connolly feels morally compelled to betray his childhood friendship with Rocky in order to protect the kids from involvement in Rocky's criminal world. He runs a special recreation centre for the kids at the local church in order to keep them off the streets and show them an alternative and better way to build a future. Whilst at first, Rocky helps Father Connolly to involve the kids in the centre and get them to "play by the rules" (in the baseball sequence at the gym), he soon lapses into his old ways, and, under his influence, the kids fail to turn up at the gym one day. Laury, Rocky's love-interest tracks them down: "I finally located our precious angels," she tells Connolly. The Priest and Rocky follow her to a casino where the kids are drinking and gambling. "What makes you think hanging around here spending this kind of money is going to get you anywhere but jail?" says Connolly to Soapy. "There ain't no future in playing basket ball," and, "it's a waste of time," are the answers he gets.

After reading a newspaper cartoon showing Rocky telling a cop what to do, Connolly decides that the only way to save the kids is to stop them