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Far From Simple:
Nostalgia for America's Turn-of-the-Century Small Town in
Film and Television 1940 - 1963

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ABSTRACT

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Until the late twentieth century, the American small town at the turn of the century was popularly conceived as the quintessential nostalgic object: an “ideal” moment of lost “innocence,” albeit one never existing in reality. This conception is belied, however, by my study of its representation in film and television from 1940 to 1963. In fact, I argue that the turn-of-the-century small town served different functions at different times; moreover, these texts vary widely in the way they produced “nostalgia” for their common setting. In the immediate post-war period, Hollywood represented the past as anticipating the present and in fact as its inferior; in *The Spiral Staircase*, *The Sainted Sisters*, *Summer Holiday*, and *Excuse My Dust*, the turn-of-the-century small town valorizes twentieth-century technology, particularly the automobile, while the 1895 town in *Wait Til the Sun Shines*, *Nellie* is eager to become a mid-century city. Similarly, I demonstrate that in *On Moonlight Bay* and *By the Light of the Silvery Moon*, the past is modernized via Doris Day’s presentation in costuming, performance, and singing style as an entirely contemporary figure. I contend that by 1960, however, the past is set off as *pleasurably different from* the present; this valorized turn-of-the-century small town was marketed as a site of

play and consumption in Walt Disney's *Pollyanna* and *Main Street, U.S.A.*, while it became an unattainable lost utopia in Rod Serling's time-travel fantasies in *The Twilight Zone*, such as "A Stop at Willoughby." My examination culminates in an extended analysis of *The Music Man* and the multiple nostalgias it contains and provokes. I then trace the rarity of the turn-of-the-century small town in American film and television since the mid-1960s and the effect of British "heritage cinema" on its configuration when it reappeared in the mid-1980s television production of Horton Foote's *Story of a Marriage*. I conclude by addressing questions of the aesthetics of nostalgia in popular cultural representation and propose an approach to further nostalgia studies that recognizes the distinct categories of nostalgic production illustrated in the screen fictions examined here: *expressed nostalgia*; *idealized "inauthentic" past*; and *meticulously re-created past*.

PREFACE

In recent years, watching various reality home-decorating television programs on cable networks such as The Learning Channel (TLC) and Home and Garden Television (HGTV), I've been struck by how often twenty-something participants want to decorate their homes in the "retro" or "mid-century" style of 1950s and 1960s America, complete with liberal use of turquoise (combined with either brown or chartreuse), formica-topped dinette sets, and blond wood coffee tables purchased at thrift shops. Why this affection for – and desire to inhabit – the environment in which their parents or grandparents grew up? On one hand, it is a question I find particularly puzzling because, as a child in the 1960s, sitting on our turquoise living room sofa and eating breakfast at our yellow dinette table, I didn't like this mid-century style at all, and I've grown no fonder of it in the years since. For me, it was – and is – too bland, too plain, too ordinary, and above all, with all its clean lines and simple geometrical shapes, too *dull*; everything so streamlined and efficient in that 1960s sort of way, providing nothing interesting to *look at*. Rather, your eye seems to slide effortlessly across the surface of everything and take it in much too easily; there are no intriguing curves or designs for the eye to follow and explore, no curious surprises tucked here and there, no pleasing little curlicues that delight precisely because doing so is their sole purpose for being there.

On the other hand, I of all people should relate to the impulse in today's twenty-somethings to surround themselves with the look of a prior time, as I did grow up bored and dissatisfied with 1960s suburbia, dreaming of living instead in a two- or three-story Queen Anne Victorian with a wide front porch and yards of gingerbread. Indeed, for as long as I can remember, I have been enamored with a romanticized notion of life in a small town at the turn of

the last century, a part of me remaining convinced, despite all my knowledge to the contrary, that *there* was a moment to be envied and desired, a *pretty* time in which life was more leisurely, people more neighborly, and experience, as something neither mediated nor commodified, more “genuine.” Whether 1960s America offers similar illusions of a desirable simplicity to young adults today is not my inquiry here; rather, this study started with the question: *Why* did small-town life at the turn of the twentieth century hold so much appeal for me from such a young age? I have never lived in a small town, and I developed this affection while living in a suburb of Cincinnati, Ohio. While Cincinnati does indeed have older neighborhoods featuring Victorian architecture, these were brick homes rather than the frame house (painted yellow with white and dark-green trim) that was enshrined in my imagination; moreover, I rarely saw those neighborhoods while I was growing up, the circuit of my life being limited primarily to our late-1950s suburb, my 1950s-era elementary school, and the suburban outdoor shopping center where my mother did her shopping, punctuated with occasional trips downtown, where the streets felt like canyons amidst the seemingly endless rows of tall buildings jammed up next to each other.

As I’ve mentioned, my home environment was anything but Victorian or Edwardian in style. My mother was a child of the Depression who grew up in extreme poverty, and consequently, although we were a family of modest means, she was motivated in her decorating in large part by a desire for ease and convenience. At the same time, her visual taste was simply in sync with the times; in college, she minored in art, where her taste was influenced by twentieth-century painting and architecture. To this day, her favorite residential style is the low, sleek ranch home of the 1950s. Hence the Danish modern chair, the clean lines of the blond end tables, the abstract painting of blue-and-turquoise birds she painted and hung on our living room wall. My

sister never shared my attraction to old things and certainly never understood my love of dressing up in long skirts; my father's stories were all of his boyhood and college years in the 1930s and '40s. My mother's mother lived in rural Indiana and, except for a brief stint working in Cincinnati decades before I knew her, had never known anything but country and farm life. My father's mother did live in the same narrow, brick, turn-of-the-century home in which she'd grown up, and she had photographs of herself as a girl in the 1910s and '20s that I remember seeing once or twice. Her home, located in a small Kentucky community considered part of the Cincinnati metropolitan area, had all the modern conveniences, however, and, except for the smell of the ancient varnish on the dark wood of the staircase and some of the furniture, it seemed little different on the inside from most other homes I visited. Further, I have few memories of my grandmother talking about what life was like when she was young. Widowed as a young woman, she worked outside the home the rest of her adult life until she retired when I was a teenager, and during my childhood, she seemed to me both old (although then only in her fifties and sixties) and a creature very much of her current time, busy with her work, her church, and her social life among lifelong friends and neighbors.

So if not my family or my actual physical environment, whence this fascination with the turn-of-the-century small town which I don't remember ever *not* having? Ultimately, I concluded that it must be traced to a trio of films: *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944), *Pollyanna* (1960), and *The Music Man* (1962), all of which I would have seen by the time I was nine years old. A diehard *Wizard of Oz* fan since the age of five, I would have been entranced with *Meet Me in St. Louis* simply because Judy Garland was in it, even if it hadn't been such a Valentine of a film, all wide streets and pretty carriages and flounces and ruffles and hair bows, portraying a life full of dance

and song. In truth, I don't even remember the first time I saw *Meet Me in St. Louis*, although I don't remember ever *not* knowing it; I would have watched it on television, in black-and-white, at some point in the early 1960s.

The same was true of *Pollyanna*, which I didn't see in the theater when it was released in 1960 but on Disney's *Wonderful World of Color* when it was broadcast in three parts, on three successive Sundays, in 1963 – again, in black-and-white, as my family didn't buy a color television until I was in high school. That same year, I read Eleanor Porter's book, and as part of some sort of school project, the particulars of which I don't remember, I presented an oral book report to the class while dressed as Pollyanna, which in my case consisted of donning the one and only Polly Flinders dress of my life (yellow with black trim and black-and-white smocking across the bodice), the closest thing to an "old-fashioned"- looking dress that I owned, and wearing my hair long and loose, as Hayley Mills did in Disney's film, instead of in my usual braids. The Polly Flinders dress was my Sunday dress, and so this was the only occasion on which I wore it to school, and as terrified as I was in those days of public speaking, I remember clearly how special I felt in the beautiful dress, with its built-in crinoline petticoat and long puffed sleeves, with my hair flowing so freely down my back (and, as fine as it was, becoming impossibly tangled in the process) instead of being confined to the mundane braids. The specialness I felt, however, was not simply because we were doing something out-of-the-ordinary at school, although that certainly contributed to the festiveness of the occasion; nor did it stem solely from my being allowed, just this once, to wear my favorite and all-time prettiest dress to school, although doing so did make me feel special as well. Rather, the dominant feeling of specialness was the sense of kinship with Pollyanna herself; the sense that for that one afternoon, I was actually somehow in

reach of living Pollyanna's life, of joining her in her little New England town in the early years of the century, of actually living in the house covered with gingerbread and of being able to wear laces and ruffles and sashes and high-topped shoes every day, as Pollyanna did.

Of these three films, the only one I did see in the theater was *The Music Man*, which my parents took my siblings and me to see when it was released during the summer of 1962. And here indeed was magic to bond me emotionally to its diegetic setting; this was magic, due, as Richard Dyer would argue, to the use of music, dance, and color to create of 1912 River City, Iowa, a utopia, a "nowhere" manufactured of the *affect* that the film's aesthetic elements generated in its audience. Certainly, in my case, *The Music Man* instantly became my favorite film and remained so for years afterwards, and a part of my love for the film was the same desire I had had for Pollyanna's turn-of-the-century New England town: the desire to be able to *live in* 1912 River City. This being long before the advent of cable television or the VCR, however, this was a desire kept alive primarily through my imagination and play with friends. Although my father bought the movie soundtrack LP album and played it incessantly, as was his wont, for some time thereafter (much to *my* delight, anyway), I didn't see the movie again for decades. As it was a popular film, however, all my friends had seen it, and as part of our play, we sang its songs; I remember that on occasion, my sister and I entertained ourselves by drawing pictures of scenes from the film. Indeed, it may well be that, the film itself being unavailable for viewing, the imaginative work of keeping it alive in my memory contributed to the resilient appeal its subject matter had for me.

In any event, the fascination and the affinity have remained with me, through high school and college in Columbia, South Carolina, and thereafter through several careers, through marriage

and divorce, through an adulthood spent living never in a small town but rather in the metropolises of Atlanta, Los Angeles, and Chicago. Further, the fascination and affinity have remained with me despite my knowledge that if through some magical access to time-travel, I were to actually experience life at this time and place, whatever charms I perceive in it would be more than outweighed by the discomforts, inequities, and stultifying limitations; in short, as Joni Mitchell would say, as far as America's turn-of-the-century small town is concerned, it's clouds' illusions I recall. And this persistent and arguably irrational attachment, then, was the seed of the work I do here.

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CHAPTER ONE
A MOMENT OF AMERICAN “INNOCENCE”:
THE SMALL TOWN AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The Nature of Nostalgia

This project is an examination of the role Hollywood’s and television’s representation of the turn-of-the-century small town played in its popular construction, as of the early 1960s, as America’s moment of purity and lost innocence. Was I correct in perceiving that this was a time and place that had been concocted and served up to me – and to American audiences in general – as a delightful confection in which were located, tantalizingly out of reach, a charm and grace and simplicity nowhere to be found in mid-century American suburbia? And if so, what precisely was the nature of the nostalgia so constructed; what sort of pleasure did it appear designed to offer audiences and, insofar as can be determined, for what purpose and to what effect? In pursuit of answers, I examine here a number of Hollywood films released between 1944 and 1963, as well several early 1960s episodes of the television program *The Twilight Zone*, whose diegetic setting is an American small town in the decades immediately before and after the turn of the last century; that is, between approximately 1880 and the United States’ entry into World War I.

In nearly every case, the films and television programs I examine here were called “nostalgic” by critics of the time and were often marketed as such, despite their spanning the genres of melodrama, fantasy, comedy, children’s film, and musical, and thus differing in tone from each other. Moreover, as will be more fully developed below, they differed as well in the attitude communicated toward their common diegetic setting. Nonetheless, the very existence within films of certain temporal and geographic markers, such as bustles and high-button shoes,

barber shop harmony, Model T Fords and tandem bicycles, magic lantern shows and Victrolas, ice cream parlors and “home made” or communal entertainment such as sing-alongs and town picnics, served to label these films as nostalgic *per se*. Indeed, the quaintness of clothing styles, the primitive stage of modern technology, the ostensibly unselfconscious simplicity of interpersonal interactions, and particularly the purported naïveté surrounding heterosexual coupling, as portrayed in these films, seem in and of themselves to constitute the very definition of cinematic nostalgia in popular post-war discourse; they are read as invariably coding their represented time and place as amusingly or charmingly innocent, which innocence, in turn, is perceived as entertaining in and of itself.¹ This sort of automatic equation of the films’ diegetic setting with the term “nostalgic,” however, bespeaks, even in popular usage, a variety of meanings of the word, including, at the very least, not only the common understanding of nostalgia as the individual experience of reminiscing about or longing for the past but also this prettified representation of a past moment which itself lacks any historical significance to justify its being represented at all – that is, a mediated return to the past just for the fun such a return is presumed to offer.

In academic analyses of the concept of nostalgia generated since such scholars as Fred Davis and Fredric Jameson first directed their attention to a perceived “turn to nostalgia” in 1970s American popular culture, confusion over a basic definition of the term has only multiplied. As

¹ Hedda Hopper, for instance, referred to the small-town 1910s setting of *By the Light of the Silvery Moon* (1953) as “one of our most nostalgic and favorite eras.” “Hedda Hopper’s Best Movie Bets,” unknown publication, July 1953, The University of Southern California Warner Bros. Collection (“USC-WB Collection”).

has been well-documented,² the term *nostalgia* was originally coined in the late seventeenth century to describe what was perceived as a physical disease, specifically the homesickness suffered by Swiss soldiers engaged in combat in other countries. Hence the term *nostalgia*, from *nostos* (return home) and *algia* (longing or yearning). Eventually, the term evolved from denoting a physical malady to a psychological stance or condition, and as it did so, the yearned-for object simultaneously evolved from a distant place (home) to a distant time (the past).³ By the middle of the twentieth century, *nostalgia*'s current meaning of a longing for a lost time was well-entrenched in professional psychology; it did not become a term of popular usage, however, until the 1940s.

² E.g., Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (New York: The Free Press, 1979), 1; Ann Colley, *Nostalgia and Recollection in Victorian Culture*, (London: MacMillan Press Ltd., 1998), 2; Stephanie Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 3-5.

³ Philip Rosen points out that, in western civilization, such an evolution was dependent on a fundamental shift in historicity from a perception of time as a constant and undifferentiated present, made up of a series of repeating patterns and heading toward a known and preordained end (the Second Coming of Christ), to a perception in which the future was unknown and destabilized, and which thus allowed for the possibility that the future might offer something new and unexpected. He notes that by the middle of the eighteenth century, this switch in perception had occurred, whereby the past, present, and future had become distinct concepts. Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, History, Theory* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001). Stephanie Boym argues that nostalgia's development into a *historical* emotion was tied to the birth of mass culture; as illustration, she points to a "memory boom" of the early nineteenth century. She argues that by the mid-nineteenth century, the past had become "heritage" and that by the late nineteenth century, personal nostalgia had found a public sphere and space in the now-fixed locus of the archive and museum. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 15-16. Similarly, Michael Wallace argues that in the 1880s, American elite and bourgeois classes, discomfited by the increasing immigration and growth of the working class spawned by industrialization, laid claim to being both the embodiment and custodian of America's "heritage" as a means of establishing a collective identity; this claim marked a shift from America's previous perception of the past (and its artifacts) as disposable to something worthy of preservation. Michael Wallace, "Visiting the Past: History Museums in the United States," in *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* (Temple University Press, 1996), 3-32.

From this origin, then, commentators generally agree that nostalgia consists of an opposition between what is perceived to be a “good” past and a “bad” present.⁴ Thus, for instance, Stuart Tannock envisions the structure of nostalgia as having three parts: (1) a pre-lapsarian world; (2) a definite break (a fall, a cut, a separation); and (3) a post-lapsarian present.⁵ There is similar agreement that this “good” past is not the past as it really happened, but a past enhanced by imagination.⁶ In addition, nostalgia is universally understood as a *present*

⁴ E.g., Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, 13 (the bad present/good past construction is nostalgia’s distinctive “rhetorical signature”); Linda Hutcheon, “Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern,” <http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/criticism/hutchinp.html> (nostalgia consists of a projection of *all that is missing* in the present onto the past); Stuart Tannock, “Nostalgia Critique,” *Cultural Studies* 9 (1995): 454 (nostalgia is a positively evaluated past contrasted with a negatively evaluated or diminished present); Susan Bennett, *Performing Nostalgia: Shifting Shakespeare and the Contemporary Past* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 5 (nostalgia contrasts an imaginary, mythical past with a defective present).

⁵ Tannock, “Nostalgia Critique,” 456-57. Tannock contends that the analyst’s task is to determine (1) the nature of the pre-lapsarian world; (2) the continuity posited; and (3) the discontinuity claimed. *Ibid.*, 457.

⁶ E.g., Bennett, *Performing Nostalgia*, 5 (nostalgia’s past is infused with “imaginary, mythical qualities”); Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xiii (nostalgia refers back to a past that no longer exists or that never existed); Ralph Harper, *Nostalgia: An Existential Exploration of Longing and Fulfillment in the Modern Age* (Cleveland: The Press of Western Reserve, 1966), 26 (nostalgia is a return to what we have never had); Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham & London: Duke University Press 1993), 23 (nostalgia is a longing for a past that never existed except in our memories and narratives); Elizabeth Wilson, *The Contradictions of Culture: Cities: Culture: Women* (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001), 98-99 (nostalgia can give the past a charm it didn’t actually have and can shape it into what we would have liked it to have been); Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, 16 (nostalgia works because it allows us to *make* the past better than the present); Paul Monaco, *Ribbons in Time: Movies and Society Since 1945* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), 114 (nostalgia invariably enhances the past’s record). As a type of memory, of course, nostalgia will invariably alter the past; as Bennett points out, memory is socially constructed (and thus likely to differ from what “really” happened) Bennett, *Performing Nostalgia*, 8; further, Maurice Halbachs explains that the past (both historical and autobiographical) is socially constructed as well. Maurice Halbachs, *On Collective Memory* (London and Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

experience, reflecting and shaped by *present* anxieties and concerns, and having little if anything to do with the past. As such, its opposition between a “good” past and “bad” present often operates as a defense mechanism, as an effort to cope with one’s present situation.⁷

Further, commentators also seem in accord in recognizing that this defense mechanism very often serves the function of identity-formation or identity-preservation. Certainly, as David Lowenthal notes, the past is crucial for identity-formation.⁸ The particular defensive role that nostalgia serves is very often couched in terms of preserving or seeking *continuity* in the face of *change*, and most often, the threatened or sought-for continuity is that of *identity*. This search can entail a sense of loss; for instance, Maurice Halbachs notes the nostalgic tendency of many to believe that they left their “best selves” in the difficulties they surmounted as children or young

⁷ E.g., Bennett, *Performing Nostalgia*, 5 (nostalgia’s imaginary, mythical past is posited as a corrective to the present); Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xiv (nostalgia is a response to the accelerated rhythms of the present); Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, 43-35 (nostalgia is situated not in any particular object but in the disruptions and anxieties that threaten the present; it is called into existence to address and alleviate those concerns); Henry Jenkins, “Her Suffering Aristocratic Majesty” in *Kids’ Media Culture*, ed. Marsha Kinder (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 72, 95 (the myths of childhood innocence and canine loyalty serve to assuage adult anxieties about change); David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, London, New York, New Rochelle, Melbourne, Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 395 (disaffection with the present and pessimism about the future impel us to seek comfort in the past in the form of antiques, souvenirs, or museums; rapid technological change in particular has rendered the 1980s an “ever unfamiliar” place); Tannock, “Nostalgia Critique,” 454 (nostalgia is a response to the present’s blocking or subverting the means to achieve identity, agency, or community); Monaco, *Ribbons of Time*, 107 (nostalgia is a response to the stress of change); Tana Wollen, “Over Our Shoulders: Nostalgic Screen Fictions for the 1980s,” in *Enterprise and Heritage: Crosscurrents of National Culture*, ed. John Corner and Sylvia Harvey (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 182 (British turn to the past in the 1980s was spurred by the nation’s embattled present).

⁸ Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, 40-41.

adults,⁹ and in her ethnography of women fans of 1930s/40s Hollywood films, Jackie Stacey describes her respondents' "treasured memories" as expressing a longing for prior selves, whose future was still open to all possibilities.¹⁰

According to Pat Gill, however, in its compensatory role, nostalgia can also work as a reassuring construct that provides a means for *current* self-definition in times of disruption or dislocation. Indeed, nostalgia as the reinforcement of individual identity is central to Davis's work. He argues first that nostalgia tends to crop up at life's transitions (school graduations, marriage, the birth of children) in part to provide a sense of self-continuity during a period of change. Moreover, the muting of negative memories and nostalgia's association with "benchmarks" generate the self-appreciative stance which is part of the nostalgic consciousness and which provides the nostalgic subject an appreciation of "how far I've come." Alternatively, nostalgia provides connection to the subject's "secret" self – e.g., the teenage garage rocker who, outgrown, lies dormant inside the middle-aged bank manager.¹¹ Similarly, Ann Colley perceives nostalgia as being a longing not only for the past but for the prior self who once dwelt there; in her analysis of the role of nostalgia in the lives and work of a number of nineteenth-century figures (such as Charles Darwin and Robert Louis Stevenson), she argues that nostalgia provided these men a means of recovering what they once were.¹² Elizabeth Wilson describes her visit to Leicester, England, decades after she lived there as a discontented social worker, as a nostalgic,

⁹ Halbachs, *On Collective Memory*, 55.

¹⁰ Jackie Stacey, "Hollywood Memories," *Screen* 35 (Winter 1994): 332.

¹¹ Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, 32-51.

¹² Colley, *Nostalgia and Recollection in Victorian Culture*, 3-4.

pleasurable reunion with a long-lost self.¹³

This relationship between nostalgia and identity exists not only on the individual level but on the collective and national levels as well. For instance, Paul Monaco attributes the popular turn to nostalgia in the late 1960s and the 1970s in part to society's collective sense of disorientation resulting from the upheavals and transitions generated by the Vietnam War, student protests, the Civil Rights Movement, Watergate, and the Women's Liberation Movement.¹⁴ Although for the most part, Davis analyzes nostalgia as an individual experience, he notes that increasingly, the objects of nostalgia are the products of mass media, meaning that nostalgia can be experienced by millions simultaneously.¹⁵ Of particular relevance here, and a point to which I will return, Jennifer Green-Lewis argues that it is the collective belief in what we believe we once were that resulted in Celebration, Florida, which she characterizes as a willed re-creation of the American small town.¹⁶

It is perhaps axiomatic that memory, and particularly nostalgia, are instrumental in the construction of national identity. In particular, Tana Wollen notes the construction of a particular type of "Englishness" – limited to a particular time, geographical region, and class – in British period films of the 1980s, which offered a comforting contrast to the turbulence the nation was in

¹³ Wilson, *The Contradictions of Culture*, 101-02.

¹⁴ Monaco, *Ribbons in Time*, 107.

¹⁵ Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, 19-122.

¹⁶ Jennifer Green-Lewis, "At Home in the Nineteenth Century," in *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century*, eds. John Kucich and Diane F. Sadoff (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 44.

fact experiencing at the time.¹⁷ Svetlana Boym deems the technofantasy or technofairytale of 1990s Hollywood cinema – in what she calls the Jurassic Park syndrome – as articulating America’s nationalistic, colonizing dream.¹⁸ In her essay “Remembering D-Day,” Jean Pickering considers the distinct positions taken by and imposed on World War II veterans, their wives, Pickering herself (a child during the war), and today’s children in relation to the recently opened D-Day Museum in France, to argue that, in fact, nostalgia cannot be separated from gender or nation: all three are dynamic, social constructs, and each is both cause and effect of the other two.¹⁹

For the origins of this body of work examining the phenomenon of nostalgia, we must turn again to the late 1970s and to the two scholars mentioned at the beginning of this discussion: Fred Davis and Fredric Jameson. Nearly simultaneously, they launched what are in effect the two major threads of nostalgia scholarship. A sociologist, Davis launched what might be termed the “private” or “experience” thread, which, particularly with the growing importance of cultural studies, has proved to be the weaker and less influential of the two. In his 1979 work, *Yearning for Yesterday*, he engages in what he calls an “essayistic” examination of nostalgia; as has been noted, for the most part he employs the term in its original modern sense, as the individual experience of reflecting longingly or fondly upon one’s own past. He perceives nostalgia as a *form of consciousness*, consisting of a musing, contemplative state in which an individual accords

¹⁷ Wollen, “Over Our Shoulders,” p. 182.

¹⁸ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 33-37.

¹⁹ Jean Pickering, “Remembering D-Day: A Case History in Nostalgia,” in *Narratives of Nostalgia, Gender, and Nationalism*, ed. Jean Pickering and Suzanne Kehde (Washington Square, New York: New York University Press, 1997).

the past enhanced value, maintains an appreciative stance towards him- or herself, and is thereby somewhat – and productively – detached from the “we-ness” of ordinary social interaction.²⁰

Jameson, on the other hand, is the founder of the “public” or “product” thread of nostalgia scholarship which has dominated academic analysis of the phenomenon. In his seminal “The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,”²¹ his focus was on commodified popular culture and what he perceived as its random and mindless cannibalization of the dead styles of past times. He deplors the resulting *pastiche*, or blank parody, which he attributes to postmodernity’s loss of depth models (such as Freud’s conscious/unconscious) and waning of affect, which have culminated (with other factors) in the death of the subject and an unavailability of personal style. In the *pastiche*, he claims that the history of *aesthetics* replaces “real” history, meaning that history has become nothing but *images*. Thus, a “nostalgia” film such as *American Graffiti* (1973) presents only a surface “pastness” (such as in the gleaming 1950s and ‘60s automobiles used in the film) and not a “genuinely” historical representation of small-town America in 1962.

Much of subsequent scholarship on the phenomenon of nostalgia has similarly been concerned with “nostalgia” as a component of commodified popular culture, such as movies, television shows, theme parks, or of commodified “acquisition” of the past (antique-collecting) or experience (souvenir-hunting). Thus, for instance, Wollen examines British period films of the 1980s, Boym explores, among other things, “theme park” films such as *Jurassic Park*, and Janice Doanne and Devon Hodges analyze the television program, *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*. In the

²⁰ Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, 79.

²¹ Fredric Jameson, “The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” in *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press 1991) 1-54.

process, these scholars have come up with various definitions for such commodified nostalgia. In her analysis of the souvenir in *On Longing*, Susan Stewart characterizes nostalgia as a *social disease*.²² In her work on television adaptations, Sarah Caldwell concludes that rather than an emotion or a feeling, nostalgia is a *mood*;²³ in contrast, Doane and Hodges argue that rather than a sentiment, nostalgia is a *rhetorical strategy* put to use in *Dr. Quinn*, for instance, to imbue “traditional” women’s roles with an authentic “truth” by presenting them as an essential component of an idealized, “pre-lapsarian” (i.e., pre-modernity) American past.²⁴ Relying on Raymond Williams, Colley similarly perceives nostalgia as a *structure of feeling*, constructed by rhetoric. That widespread popularity of commodified nostalgia might constitute or reflect a certain societal malaise, or that certain aesthetic techniques in representing the past, such as in television adaptations of Jane Austin’s novels, might be designed to evoke a particular mood, or that certain allusions to the past might serve a specific rhetorical function, are all conclusions that largely sidestep the question of what these scholars, by their choice of subject matter, in fact define as “nostalgia” in works of popular culture. Thus, for instance, films as widespread in content and tone as *Jurassic Park*²⁵ (in which scientists recreate a past that *no* human being

²² Stewart, *On Longing*, 23.

²³ Sarah Caldwell, *Adaptation Revisited: Television and The Classic Novel* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), 144-47.

²⁴ Janice Doane and Devon Hodges, *Nostalgia and Sexual Difference: The Resistance to Contemporary Feminism* (New York: Methuen, 1987).

²⁵ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 33-37.

experienced) and *Last Exit to Brooklyn*²⁶ (in which is depicted a milieu of unremitting, nihilistic despair) are deemed “nostalgic” or, at a minimum, to have employed “nostalgic” images. In short, much academic analysis might be accused of the same over-generality in its conception of what nostalgia is as that practiced by Hollywood’s marketers and critics in their popular use of the term in the post-war era. That is, *any* representation of the past for entertainment purposes appears fair game for the “nostalgic” label, turning the pop culture phenomenon of “nostalgia” into the blind men’s elephant, capable of fitting as many characterizations as there are representations of the past available for public consumption. In short, when it is somehow part of a commercial exchange, the past – any past, represented in any manner, or put another way, any image of the past – has become a sort of universal signifier for a certain attitude toward the past, that is, for the *nostalgic*, which attitude, especially among early scholars of nostalgia, was largely disparaged.

For instance, Susan Bennett argues that nostalgia is inherently conservative in two senses: in its use by political conservatives and in its goal of preserving or freezing the past.²⁷ Similarly, Stewart’s conclusion that nostalgia is a social disease is based on her Lacanian conclusion that nostalgia, by definition, is an unsatisfiable desire; it is a pathological use of the past to create a false “lack” that can never be filled because what is perceived as lost is something never possessed in the first place. In short, nostalgia is a desire whose psychic purpose is to be unfulfilled; by

²⁶ Vera Dika, *Recycled Culture in Contemporary Art and Film: The Uses of Nostalgia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 145-55.

²⁷ Bennett, *Performing Nostalgia*, 5.

definition, then, it is unhealthy.²⁸

At the same time, however, historians such as Jackson Lears and David Lowenthal argue that nostalgia can serve beneficial purposes.²⁹ Raymond Williams points out that the Left as well as the Right relies on nostalgia, and Tannock argues that it is a mistake to conflate a longing for a simpler, more stable life with a longing for a simpler, patriarchal, hierarchical social structure;³⁰ thus, we must not conflate the *structure of nostalgia* with the uses to which nostalgia may be put. Further, Lears argues that nostalgia may serve as a positive energy for the historian – perhaps even a form of knowledge – in its use of the past as potential model for the future and its refusal to succumb to pessimistic foreclosing of future change.³¹ In *Recycled Culture*, Vera Dika argues that use of past images in ways that shake or rupture their context constitutes a progressive use of nostalgia, as in an anti-smoking print ad which replicates a “Marlboro Man” cigarette ad.³² Lowenthal’s project in *The Past is a Foreign Country* is to discuss the *past* rather than *nostalgia*; in fact, he characterizes nostalgia – defined as too deep or intense an investment in the past – as unhealthy and counterproductive.³³ Nonetheless, when listing the benefits the past has to offer, he includes *escape* from troubling or difficult conditions in the present. (He argues as well that

²⁸ Stewart, *On Longing*, 23, 145.

²⁹ Jackson Lears, “Looking Backwards: In Defense of Nostalgia,” *Lingua Franca* (December/January 1998): 59-65; Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, 36-52.

³⁰ Tannock, “Nostalgia Critique,” 456.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Dika, *Recycled Culture in Contemporary Art and Film*, 46-49.

³³ Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, 64.

even when things are going well in the present, an escape to the past – such as a trip to Colonial Williamsburg – can be stress-reducing.)³⁴ Evidently, he envisions such an escape as a temporary break or diversion, however; otherwise, it cannot be distinguished from the debilitating nostalgia he condemns.

Presumably in acknowledgment of such observations, a number of commentators then began to argue that nostalgia is not a single phenomenon but two, one clearly painted “good” and the other “bad.” Boym, for instance, differentiates between *restorative nostalgia* (in which the emphasis is on *nostos* (home) and which consists of a yearning for a mythical “original state” representing absolute truth) and *reflective nostalgia* (a meditative, potentially creative consideration of the relationship or space between national and social nostalgia, in which there is room for doubt about truth claims).³⁵ Similarly, Tannock distinguishes between *continuity of retreat* (which situates the means of achieving identity and continuity in the irretrievable past and whose objects of nostalgia offer relief from confronting the threats and disruptions of the present) and *continuity of retrieval* (which integrates the means to identity and incorporate continuity from the past into the present and whose objects of nostalgia offer resources for confronting the threats and disruptions of the present).³⁶ Wilson concludes that the past can be improved by memory for both bad and good reasons: in the first instance, the past can be turned into a lie, and one can become insincerely tied to a “touched-up” version of the past; in the second, the past can be

³⁴ Ibid., 49.

³⁵ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xvii, 41-55.

³⁶ Tannock, “Nostalgia Critique,” 457-59.

integrated into one's present self, serving as a means of accommodating oneself to change.³⁷

Wollen characterizes the use of nostalgia in 1980s British cinema as either "respite in the burrow" (a hiding away in the past to escape the present) or a looking back in which examination of the past helps explain the present (and in which hauling the past into the present illuminates the past as well).³⁸ Colley condemns a nostalgia that attempts to freeze a particular moment of the past, while lauding the nostalgia that opens its longing to a "wider orbit," opening a space for critique of both the past and present and ultimately allowing a re-integration of one's past and present selves in productive synthesis.³⁹

The consistent theme in this "splitting" of nostalgia is that when nostalgia serves to erase the "real" past or displace the present, it is "bad"; when it integrates past and present, or when the past is put to positive use in the present, nostalgia is "good." Not surprisingly, then, the commodification of nostalgia is nearly always perceived as an example of "bad" nostalgia. Generally speaking, the commodification of nostalgia might be perceived as consisting of two (albeit related) strands: the souvenirization of the past (in Boym's terms) and time travel. The genesis of both strands, however, has been theorized as a truncated past, a disconnect between past and present, or a rupture of the "proper" relationship between the present, the past, and/or the memory of the past. Thus, relying on Stewart, Colley characterizes her "bad" nostalgia as "nostalgia without an object" or "nostalgia without memory" – that is, nostalgia for something

³⁷ Wilson, *The Contradictions of Culture*, 101-02.

³⁸ Wollen, "Over Our Shoulders," 180.

³⁹ Colley, *Nostalgia and Recollection in Victorian Culture*, 6.

one has not experienced.⁴⁰ Boym characterizes the commodification of nostalgia as industry's creating a desire for things we haven't lost.⁴¹ Wallace condemns the past's being separated from the present and culture's being separated from the political as a politically regressive act.

Hence we return to Jameson's condemnation of postmodern history's degeneration into the history of images, of the past's being reduced to *style*, *aesthetics*, the purely *visual*: Boym argues that participating in Civil War re-enactments is more like being a movie extra than being in combat, and that in their insistence on period accuracy in details of clothing and gear, re-enactors have redefined historical authenticity as *what history looked like*.⁴² Similarly, Deborah Root defines (and condemns) nostalgia as a longing for the *aesthetics* of the past, divorced from its social or political concerns.⁴³ It is precisely this unanchored, ahistorical, random mixing-and-matching of temporal architectural styles that Jameson condemns in postmodern architecture.⁴⁴ Similarly, Stewart argues that the activities of the antiquarian – e.g., collecting antiques – also necessarily erase history so as to make the past available for commodification.⁴⁵

It may be the antiquarian who allows us to perceive the desire to consume the past – to own pieces of it – as the flip side of what Green-Lewis identifies as the commodified desire to

⁴⁰ Ibid., 4.

⁴¹ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 38.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Deborah Root, *Cannibal Culture: Art, Appropriation, and the Commodification of Difference* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 33.

⁴⁴ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 38-54.

⁴⁵ Stewart, *On Longing*, 143.

visit the past.⁴⁶ Phillip Rosen dates this time-traveling impulse to H. G. Wells's publication in 1888 of *The Time Machine*, the first fiction among the newly created time-travel genre in which characters traveled to the *past* as well as the future.⁴⁷ Museum villages such as Old Sturbridge, Colonial Williamsburg, and Henry Ford's Deerfield Village began offering the past as a destination in the 1930s⁴⁸; the ultimate commodification of the past as pleasure trip, however, is arguably the theme amusement park, such as Disneyland, which opened in the 1950s. Rosen argues that the experience of time-travel is even more central to Disney's Epcot Center, which opened in 1982, because nearly all the rides consist of trips from the past through the present to the future. He notes that these rides espouse an ideology of progress but that the past remains a source of authenticity and authority: the mechanical MC s narrating the rides are such figures as Mark Twain and Benjamin Franklin.⁴⁹ In her analysis of the miniature as incorporated into such theme parks, Stewart argues that this converting of the past into a "lived" experience in the present separates it from history and, paradoxically, renders it lifeless.⁵⁰

In equating the museum and museum village to the fetish object, however, Rosen argues that visitors tour such institutions with simultaneous knowledge (of their falsity) and belief (in

⁴⁶ Green-Lewis, "At Home in the Nineteenth Century," 29-47.

⁴⁷ According to Rosen, time-travel fiction was emerged as a new genre and was prevalent between the 1880s and World War I; one of the first of these novels was Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, published a few years before Wells's novel. Rosen, *Change Mummified*, 79-80.

⁴⁸ Wallace notes, however, that the conjunction of Deerfield Village and the adjacent Industrial Museum results in the contradictory message that *life was better in the past and has been getting better ever since*. Wallace, "Visiting the Past," 28.

⁴⁹ Rosen, *Change Mummified*, 82.

⁵⁰ Stewart, *On Longing*, 60.

their truth), just as the disavowal that the fetish accomplishes necessarily includes knowledge of the underlying trauma being disavowed.⁵¹ It is only relatively recently that certain scholars have begun to argue that nostalgia is, in fact, an inherently ambivalent experience. For instance, Henry Jenkins acknowledges that he is both – and simultaneously – fascinated by the *Lassie* dog myth and disgusted by real dogs; he sees the TV program *Lassie* as depicting a stable, conservative sort of life whose values he does not entirely share but which he longs for at times nonetheless.⁵² Similarly, in returning to Leicester, Wilson found herself able to perceive and appreciate the charm of the town's architecture even as she had no desire to “return” to the stifling, snobbish social milieu of its original construction.⁵³ In their “Introduction” to *Victorian Afterlife*, John Kucich and Diane Sadoff posit that in the reconstructed Victoriana that is the book's subject matter, one can simultaneously take pleasure in one's modernity and enjoy the fantasy of sloughing it off.⁵⁴

In nearly every instance, however, this construction of nostalgia in “both-and” rather than “either-or” terms has occurred in analyses of the individual experience of nostalgia rather than of “nostalgic” commercial representations or reproductions of the past, as is evident from the examples just given: Jenkins' current ambivalence toward a television program he watched as a child decades ago; Wilson's simultaneous appreciation and rejection of Leicester's past and her re-discovery and re-configuration of the former self who had lived there as a young woman; and

⁵¹ Rosen, *Change Mummified*, 73.

⁵² Jenkins, ““Her Suffering Aristocratic Majesty,”” 96.

⁵³ Wilson, *The Contradictions of Culture*, 101.

⁵⁴ John Kucich and Diane Sadoff, “Introduction,” in *Victorian Afterlife*, xii-xiii.

Kucich's and Sadoff's positing of the individual's capacity to simultaneously embrace and imaginatively reject modernity.⁵⁵ Only rarely have commentators recognized the possibility of a similar duality *within* a "nostalgic" cultural product.

One reason for such "one-sidedness" could simply be definitional, as certain scholars define nostalgia solely as an idealized remembrance of or reflection upon one's own lived experience. In arguing that nostalgia plays an important role in preserving identity at key transitional moments in life, Davis explicitly limits the phenomenon of "nostalgia" to an individual's reflections on his or her own lived past, arguing that a longing for an earlier time is *antiquarianism*, a different phenomenon altogether.⁵⁶ Similarly, Monaco argues that nostalgia must be for the "actually experienced" and that a person cannot be nostalgic for a time he or she did not live through.⁵⁷ This narrow view of the term "nostalgia" has been largely ignored in scholarship on the subject, however, and in fact it is belied by the direction Davis' own analysis takes within *Yearning for Yesterday*. Ultimately, Davis himself concludes that exposure to the products of mass media may be part of an individual's lived past – meaning that the "individual" experience of nostalgia for a particular object can be shared simultaneously by millions – and that frequent representations in mass media may give rise to the individual's experiencing a

⁵⁵ In like manner, several of those scholars who perceive a positive value in nostalgia are, in fact, referring to or analyzing the individual experience of nostalgia. For example, as has been noted, Colley concludes that nostalgia served a palliative function in the lives of Darwin and Stevenson.

⁵⁶ Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, 8.

⁵⁷ Monaco, *Ribbons in Time*, 116.

“secondary” nostalgia for events predating his or her own lifetime.⁵⁸

Rather, nearly all nostalgic scholarship implicitly acknowledges the existence of the two types of nostalgia that Pickering has identified explicitly: (1) imaginary nostalgia for events not personally experienced and (2) nostalgia for lived events, imaginatively reconfigured.⁵⁹ Moreover, as analysts of popular culture, most of these scholars understandably choose the former – that is, the type of nostalgia to be represented in and offered by popular culture – as the appropriate object of study. In so doing, however, scholars such as Colley and Stewart condemn this first type of nostalgia as pathological *per se*; as has been noted, others sub-divide it into mutually exclusive categories of “good” and “bad” nostalgia (with only “bad” nostalgia now pathological *per se*) and almost invariably cast mainstream cultural products into the “bad” category. This analytical history largely precludes the possibility of recognizing ambivalence within the nostalgia offered by the products of commercial popular culture; one of the few instances is Gill’s analysis of the television program *Happy Days*, which she notes performed the “double function” of nostalgia perfectly: it explicitly shared with its audience the knowledge of the fictitiousness of its models (e.g., *Leave It to Beaver*) even as it celebrated the appeal of their underlying values of family and stability. Indeed, Boym implies that pop culture nostalgia can escape its automatic characterization as monolithically regressive only by becoming something else altogether. In response to Jameson, she argues that postmodernism has recuperated nostalgia, albeit in quotation

⁵⁸ Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, 121.

⁵⁹ Pickering, “Remembering D-Day: A Case History in Nostalgia,” 189.

marks, as a self-conscious aesthetic rather than a longing for an earlier time.⁶⁰ This legacy from Jameson, this equation of “nostalgia” with a self-conscious aesthetic, is certainly what is primarily responsible for the phenomenal growth of attention devoted to it in academic circles, so that, as has been noted, it has become a term properly applied to any image invoking – and not necessarily evoking – any past image; it is this equation, for example, that enables Dika to perceive “nostalgia” in *Last Exit to Brooklyn* because Jennifer Jason Leigh’s bleached blond hair calls to mind Marilyn Monroe.

At the same time, limiting the definition of cultural “nostalgia” to an ironically employed aesthetic or condemning its ahistoricism when employed in a non-ironic form forecloses as well any consideration of the pleasure to be derived from the infusion of the past into the present, even in forms that under earlier definitions might be deemed nostalgic. As a disciplinary matter, historians seem more inclined than scholars in other fields to view imaginative engagement with the past – including its aesthetics – as valuable and productive, and as offering “guilt-free” pleasure. Lowenthal, for instance, concludes that in any given instance, disdain toward or celebration of the past often contains traces of its opposite, meaning that retrospective memory and impatient modernism often co-exist.⁶¹ In fact, he points to recent architecture that offers up-to-date versions of the past as an example of what, in sharp contrast to Jameson, he perceives as

⁶⁰ Lowenthal attributes postmodern architecture’s witty and ironic use of the past to modernism’s repudiation of the past and the past’s consequent absence from modernist art and architecture. According to Lowenthal, the artists and architects who followed this long absence find the past unfamiliar and slightly uncomfortable, something incapable of being taken at face value or on its own terms. Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, 379-81.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

an *unproblematic* conversion of the past into sensate pleasure in the present.⁶² Indeed, in addition to suggesting a trip to Williamsburg to reduce stress, he argues that even a Disneyfied exposure to the past is better than none at all.⁶³

Finally, very little scholarship on nostalgia has addressed the question of *how* a purportedly nostalgic object produces or conveys its nostalgia, although the variety of images and pop culture products examined as nostalgic objects, reflecting a striking variety in structure and tone, would suggest that nostalgia is “produced” in a variety of ways. That is, while the construction of nostalgia in particular objects has been explored, there has been little recognition that different scholars are in fact discussing texts that seem designed to have very different effects on their audiences and that are themselves often constructed quite differently from each other. Caldwell has examined the difference between *Brideshead Revisited* as a diegetically nostalgic narrative and the BBC’s 1995 production of *Pride and Prejudice* as a narrative simply set in the past that is perceived to be nostalgic,⁶⁴ but otherwise little attention has been paid to the aesthetic, cinematic, or narrative practices that might distinguish one type of nostalgic film from another, or the possible ramifications of, for instance, the difference between a “nostalgic” film which presents an untroubled celebration of the past and one which tells the story of a character’s longing for an irretrievable past. To some degree, this particular inquiry is related to the history of pop culture nostalgia. To a large degree, for example, the turn-of-the-century small-town films analyzed here “produce” their nostalgia differently from the way in which 1980s and ‘90s “heritage cinema”

⁶² Ibid., 51.

⁶³ Ibid., 408.

⁶⁴ Caldwell, *Adaptation Revisited*, 123-25, 150-52.

does so, a reflection, among other things, of broader industrial practices and concerns affecting mid-century Hollywood film-making. Putting historical causes and considerations aside, however, approaching the object of nostalgic study with more precision can only enhance the value of the study of its role in American pop culture.

The American Small Town

Certainly, in the 1950s and '60s, a period predating postmodernity's purported reconfiguration of pop culture nostalgia from an affectionate revisiting of the past to an ironic use of the past's images, the turn-of-the-century small town seems the quintessentially nostalgic object. It exists, in Tannock's three-part conception of nostalgia, in a pre-lapsarian past separated from the postlapsarian present by the definite break of World War I. The War to End All Wars, followed as it was by the 1920s' Lost Generation and Jazz Age, serves as a convenient and obvious dividing line between the predominantly rural life that had characterized America since its inception⁶⁵ and the modernity of the twentieth century. Moreover, it is inflected with nostalgia's original meaning – homesickness – in that the American small town in and of itself, of any time, has often been equated with *home* in popular representations. Further, like the experience of nostalgia itself, the American small town, at least as it was constructed in the American popular memory of the mid-twentieth century, is inextricably entwined with the notion of national *identity*, for the United States had long perceived itself as a nation of small towns.

It is true, of course, that the United States has a number of archetypal identities, such as

⁶⁵ The 1920 census recorded that, for the first time in the nation's history, the majority of Americans lived in urban rather than rural areas.

the West, both in the sense of the pioneer (covered wagons, prairies, “Indians”) and of the western town of the second half of the nineteenth century (wooden sidewalks, saloons, outlaws and sheriffs), and the South, in the form, for instance, of the antebellum plantation (and its degraded post-bellum twin), or the exotica of southern Louisiana Cajun country. In these archetypes, however, a pronounced regionalism is at war with – or at the very least undermines – their claim to representing a *national* identity, for in each case, while they may be perceived as embodying something truly “American,” they are simultaneously perceived as presenting only *part* of America. The distinct characteristics of their regional identity mark them off as unique and distinct from other American archetypes and thus, by definition, incapable of embodying the *entire* American “identity.”

Rather, America’s “nation of small towns” is one in which regional characteristics must be bleached away so all that is left is “American-ness” – an “invisible” construction very closely aligned, if not identical to, Richard Dyer’s *whiteness*.⁶⁶ Through the first two centuries of the nation’s existence, that invisible American-ness was to be “found” first in the New England small town and then increasingly, as certain “New England” idiosyncrasies remained stubbornly “visible,” in the Midwestern small town, the one location in the United States whose distinctiveness, at least in popular imagination, is its complete lack of distinction. This equation is suggested, for instance, in Meredith Nicholson’s claim in 1918 that the inhabitants of the rural and small town Midwest were the “mainstay of democracy.”⁶⁷ More recently, Edward Recchia has

⁶⁶ Richard Dyer, “White,” *Screen 29* (Autumn 1988): 44-65.

⁶⁷ Meredith Nicholson, *The Valley of Democracy* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons 1918), 60, quoted in Richard R. Lingeman, *Small Town America: A Narrative History, 1620 - The Present* (New York: Putnam, 1980), 346.

noted that

Midwestern dullness has represented for the nation a kind of reassuring steadiness of human virtue and human values

[T]he image of the Midwest [is] as a sanctuary for the human spirit. It is an image that has reassured Americans of the moral and social strength not only of this one region of the U.S. but also of the country as a whole.⁶⁸

Further, Lewis Atherton contends that the history of the Midwest “has been largely the history of its towns, ”⁶⁹ and the centrality of the small Midwestern town to America’s self-image is reflected in the work of geographer D. W. Meinig. One of D. W. Meinig’s three symbolic landscapes for the United States – “part of the iconography of nationhood, part of the shared set of ideas and memories and feelings which bind a people together”⁷⁰ – is “Main Street of Middle America,” whose “middleness” exists in its location in the nation’s mid-section, its economy as a “commercial center surrounded by agriculture and augmented by local industry to form a balanced diversity,” its social class and structure, consisting of mild social gradations and a genuine but not repressive community, and its size, “not so small as to be stultifying nor so large as to forfeit friendship and familiarity.”⁷¹ The “generalized image” of Main Street of Middle America is as “the seat of a business culture of property-minded, law-abiding citizens devoted to ‘free

⁶⁸ Edward Recchia, “There’s No Place Like Home: The Midwest in American Film Musicals,” *The Midwest Quarterly* 39 (Winter 1998): 202.

⁶⁹ Lewis Atherton, *Main Street on the Middle Border* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books 1954), 3. The “Middle Border” consists of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, Michigan, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, and “the eastern farming fringe of Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas.” *Ibid.*, xiv.

⁷⁰ D. W. Meinig, “Symbolic Landscapes: Some Idealizations of American Communities,” in *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes*, ed. D. W. Meinig (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 164.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 167.

enterprise' and 'social morality,' a community of sober, sensible, practical people."⁷²

This centrality of first the New England and then more dominantly the Midwestern small town to American national identity has a certain basis in fact. A large segment of the United States was settled in a series of small towns (in contrast, for instance, to the European feudal system),⁷³ although, significantly, the American South was settled on the large land estate/county seat model. In particular, New England was settled small town by small town, and as New Englanders moved west into what is now the Midwest, they repeated this settlement practice. At the same time, when Southerners migrated to the Midwest, they replicated the settlement model of the American South, so that in certain areas of the Midwest, both models developed simultaneously.

Nonetheless, the popular perception of both New England and the Midwest is of a land made up of small towns, all on a common model consisting of a central town square or "Main Street," shady residential avenues, an abundance of churches, and a "right" and "wrong" side of the tracks, representing in its entirety a strong sense of community born of the implication that, in such a town, "everybody knows everybody." In fact, in New England this model was often utopian in conception and intent, in what Page Smith calls "covenanted communities."⁷⁴ These were towns founded by religious groups, seeking to establish ideal communities of brotherhood

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Page Smith argues that "it has hardly been understood: in the absence of true communities, in America we would have had the re-creation of a system of European peasants and landlords. Every previous frontier had been subdued by some form of social organization that was a variation of the Roman." Page Smith, *As a City Upon a Hill: The Town in American History* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1966), 11.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 5-13.

which knew no want. As Smith recounts, however, this model was successful only if its population was homogeneous and small. If such a town grew too big or too diverse, members dissatisfied with the resultant loss of its original harmony left to start again, eventually populating the Midwest with towns founded with these utopian aspirations. Just as small-town settlement of the Midwest existed side-by-side with large estate/county seat settlement imported from the South, however, Smith's covenanted communities were not the only small towns founded in the Midwest during the nineteenth century. As Smith himself recognizes, other Midwestern towns developed as commercial centers along transportation routes or in geographical spots offering settings amenable to mills and other enterprises requiring particular natural resources.

It is impossible to know if the aspirations of Smith's covenanted communities somehow permeated the popular conception of the American small town; what is evident, however, is that despite the variety of settlement practices practiced particularly in the Midwest, one tradition in popular American fiction became the tale of the small town as the ideal community. A number of New England writers, such as Sarah Orne Jewett (*The Country of Pointed Firs* (1896)), Zona Gale (*Friendship Village* (1908), *Friendship Village Love Stories* (1909), *Neighborhood Stories* (1914)), and Dorothy Canfield (*The Brimming Cup* (1919)), wrote stories or novels idealizing the New England small town. In the Midwest, this tradition was taken up most famously by Booth Tarkington, who similarly valorized small Indiana towns in his serious novels (*The Gentleman from Indiana* (1899)), comic novels (*Seventeen* (1916)), and immensely popular children's books (*Penrod* (1914), *Penrod and Sam* (1916), and *Penrod Jashbar* (1929)). The result of this body of works, in Richard Lingeman's observation, is a portrait of the small town "as the embodiment of friendliness and neighborliness [that was] . . . a refuge from [the] hostile world . . . [of] urban,

industrialized America.”⁷⁵ This view of the small town was perpetuated as well by Hollywood in such 1930s and ‘40s films as the Andy Hardy, Dr. Kildaire, Dr. Christian, Blondie, and – with arguably a slightly more satiric effect – Henry Aldrich series; in the Frank Capra films, such as *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), that espoused the genuine American-ness of small town values; and in such World War II films as *The Human Comedy* (1943), *The Happy Land* (1943), *Since You Went Away* (1944), *The Fighting Sullivans* (1944), and *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), which situated the typical American family coping with the effects of the war in a small town.

At the same time, however, an alternate, dystopian view of the American small town existed alongside this idealized version. A number of agrarian realists, such as Hamlin Garland, Joseph Kirkland, Harold Frederic, and Ed Howe, had written grim accounts of rural life in the late nineteenth century, such as Howe’s *The Story of a Country Town* (1882). In the late 1910s and 1920s, a number of writers who had moved to urban areas from small Midwestern towns began to react to what they perceived as the falsity of the sentimental view of small-town life. Strongly influenced by Theodore Dreiser’s new realism, these writers produced a number of works that critic Carl Van Doren christened, collectively, as “The Revolt from the Village.”⁷⁶ They include Willa Cather’s 1910 short story, “The Sculptor’s Funeral” and her novel, *My Antonia* (1918); Edgar Lee Masters’s *Spoon River Anthology* (1915); and Sinclair Lewis’s *Main Street* (1920) and *Babbitt* (1922). Perhaps influenced by such works, Gale produced a more critical account of small-town life in *Miss Lulu Bett* (1920); these accounts condemned small towns for their provincialism and repressive Puritanism, for their deadening boredom, and for the mean-

⁷⁵ Lingeman, *Small Town America*, 342.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 366-67.

spiritedness they fostered.⁷⁷ Similarly, Edith Wharton's *Summer* (1917) is an indictment of a small New England town's rigid and punitive class divisions, and later novels such as Henry Bellamann's *King's Row* (1942) and Grace Metalious' *Peyton Place* (1956) present the Midwestern and New England small town, respectively, as diseased, cloaked in an unhealthy secrecy that hid perversion and rape, and ultimately led to murder. Further, in contrast to Capra, Preston Sturges directed a number of films presenting a cynical view of the American small town as a place of repression and small-mindedness, such as *The Miracle of Morgan Creek* (1944) and *Hail the Conquering Hero* (1944).

In fact, both views of the American small town recognized the same qualities in the American small town but gave those qualities opposing characterizations. Thus, the same qualities are either the small town's virtues or its faults, depending on one's viewpoint:

Community	Everybody knows everybody's business; gossip; mean-spiritedness
Quiet; peaceful; unhurried	Boring; lacking excitement/entertainment; slow
Conventional, "solid" values; emphasis on home and family	Provincialism; Puritanism; repression; hypocrisy; bigotry
Tradition	Hokey; behind-the-times
"Simple, honest folk"	Dull; stupid; yokels
Quaint	Inconvenient; backward

It is perhaps its perceived position on the far side of modernity that caused the small town at the turn of the last century in particular to fall so often into the left-hand column; its

⁷⁷ At approximately the same time, Grant Wood, living in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, was painting his caustic portraits of rural types such as *American Gothic* and *Daughters of the Revolution*.

insurmountable separation from the conveniences and excitement of modern life by *time* rather than geography perhaps makes that separation more forgivable than that of a present-day small town whose residents presumably affirmatively reject or lack the ability to recognize the appeal of urbanity. Another factor certainly, however, is simply the appeal of the turn of the century itself, a time period whose perceived picturesque qualities often made it the object of imaginative appropriation and reconfiguring during the first half of the twentieth century through the 1970s, and, in some manifestations, even still today.

The Turn of the Twentieth Century

Just as the (usually Midwestern) small town exists in American mythology as, in effect, America's "true" self, the "good old days" of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries for many years held a place in American mythology as the nation's childhood, its time of "innocence" and "purity." Much of that idealization is based on a view of the turn-of-the-century as a time as yet untouched by modernity, and hence a time offering a stability and serenity lacking in modern times. For instance, in his 1933 memoir of growing up in Wilmington, Delaware, *The Age of Confidence*, Henry Seidel Canby referred to the turn of the century as "the last era in the United States when there was a pause, and everyone, at least in my town, knew what it meant to be an American."⁷⁸ The town of his boyhood was "a unity, indissoluble and unchangeable," a culture "in which one quickly knew one's place" and grew up "in a set of circumstances which one could not and did not really wish to alter . . . You belonged – and it was up to your own self to find out

⁷⁸ Henry Seidel Canby, *The Age of Confidence* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart 1934), 24, quoted in Lingeman, *Small Town America*, 258.

how and where. There has been no such certainty in American life since.”⁷⁹

The distance between the ideal and the reality of small-town life in the decades before and after 1900 seems self-evident, however, as measured in such terms as infant mortality and life expectancy,⁸⁰ harsh living conditions (particularly for the poor),⁸¹ and the social and economic standing of women (who did not receive the vote, after all, until 1919) and racial or ethnic minorities. For both the middle and working classes, life was a matter of dawn-to-dusk labor, six days a week.⁸² Neither was the 1890s small town necessarily the unsullied exemplar of virtue and middle-class morality implicit in its mythic form. Nearly all small towns had their share of saloons, gambling, and prostitution; in 1890, for example, Muncie, Indiana had twenty to twenty-

⁷⁹ Canby, *The Age of Confidence*, 31, quoted in Lingeman, *Small Town America*, 314.

⁸⁰ In 1900, life expectancy at birth was fifty years, and in a community of 2000, thirty-four people would die each year. Lingeman, *Small Town America*, 316. Specifically in Indiana, during the years 1910-14, ninety-six out of each 1000 babies died before reaching their first birthday. By 1922, the number had been reduced to sixty-eight. Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in American Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1929), 453. In 1890, recurrent epidemics of contagious diseases were common; in Muncie, Indiana, for instance, at times factories had 25% of their workforce ill with the grippe. In 1893, the town's schools, churches, and businesses were closed for two months because of smallpox. *Ibid.*, 447.

⁸¹ Lingeman, *Small Town America*, 285.

⁸² For the housewife, Monday was wash day; Tuesday, ironing; Wednesday, mending and sewing; Thursday, relatively free for reading and embroidering; Friday, cleaning; Saturday, baking; and Sunday, household shopping and preparation of Sunday dinner for friends and relatives. *Ibid.*, 270. In addition to her regular weekly chores, the middle-class housewife spent a week or longer each year in spring cleaning and spent the summer canning fruits and vegetables for consumption during the winter. Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown*, 171; Lingeman, *Small Town America*, 270-71. Moreover, in 1890, Muncie's industrial workers put in a standard work week of sixty hours, six ten-hour days. Although the work week gradually shortened in the years to follow, 73% of industrial workers still worked sixty hours a week or longer in 1914, and in 1919, 33% worked sixty hours or longer, and another 35% worked fifty-five to sixty hours per week. Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown*, 54.

five houses of prostitution.⁸³ Similarly, Stephanie Coontz demonstrates the falsity of such myths as the ideal, multigenerational family of the nineteenth century (which has never been the norm in the United States, its prevalence peaking at 20% of American families in the years between 1850 and 1885 and adopted predominantly by working-class families – rather than real-life counterparts to the Smiths of St. Louis – driven by economic need).⁸⁴

In addition, rather than a time of great stability, the years from 1880 to 1918 were a time of enormous transition in American life. The introduction of new technologies into every-day life (the most obvious examples being the telephone, electric lights, and the automobile), both in the number of such new technologies and the relative speed by which they became commonplace, was unprecedented in history. As a general proposition, these innovations and technologies, many first introduced in the 1890s, had become the norm or were well on the way to doing so by the end of the 1910s.⁸⁵ Thus, in the space of a single generation, multiple aspects of day-to-day living

⁸³ Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown*, 113; Lingeman, *Small Town America*, 266-67.

⁸⁴ Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Perseus Books Group 1992), 12. In addition, Coontz debunks other family-based myths commonly held about the late nineteenth century. For instance, she establishes that people born in the twentieth century were much *more* likely to spend their lives near their birthplace than people born in the nineteenth century, who were in fact *more* mobile than subsequent generations, and that “family” holidays such as Thanksgiving and Christmas did not develop as the primary, emotion-laden, and family-oriented occasions they are now perceived to be until after the turn of the century. *Ibid.*, 14, 17.

⁸⁵ Examples of the speed by which these innovations were adopted are available from Lynd and Lynd’s 1925 sociological study of Muncie, Indiana (christened Middletown when the study was published in book form in 1929). The first real automobile appeared in Muncie in 1900. Six years later, it is estimated that there were 200 cars in Muncie and its surrounding county, but by 1923, this number had increased to 6221, one car for every 6.1 people or roughly two for every three families. Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown*, 253. In national terms, the authors report that in 1910, fewer than 500,000 passenger cars were registered in the United States, while in 1918, the number of registered cars had increased to 5,500,000 and by 1924, to 15,500,000.

(and working) conditions had been profoundly and irreversibly changed, with ramifications that eventually recast the nation's entire sociodemographic structure.

Another transition occurring during this time period was the nation's transformation from a predominantly agrarian culture to an urban one. In 1880, nearly 70% of the American population lived in rural areas or villages of fewer than 2500 people, and 42.5% of the labor force was engaged in full-time farming. Because of successive years of droughts, followed by financial panic and plummeting agriculture prices, the 1880s were a decade of growing agrarian discontent, and a general emigration from the country to the city began – also fueled to a lesser degree, at least initially, by new farming technologies that made the work less labor-intensive and thus reduced the need for farm workers.⁸⁶ At the same time, small towns themselves grew larger. With industrialization came a belief that growth equaled progress; therefore, many small Midwestern towns began to woo factories for the economic benefits and growth potential they offered. As a result, a town such as Kalamazoo, Michigan doubled its population between 1870 and 1881, and tripled it by 1900.⁸⁷ Similarly, Muncie in 1885 was an agricultural county seat with a population of 6000. By 1890, fueled by the discovery of natural gas deposits and the resulting gas boom of the 1880s, the town's population had grown to more than 11,000; by 1920 (despite the abrupt depletion of the gas deposits by 1900), Muncie's population surpassed 35,000.⁸⁸

Ibid. Similarly, in 1895, fewer than 5% of Muncie homes had electricity. By 1916, 60% of Muncie homes used electricity for lighting, and by 1925, 99%. Ibid., 98.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 321, citing Arthur Meier Schlesinger, *The Rise of the City: 1878-1898* (New York: Macmillan Co. 1933).

⁸⁷ Lingeman, *Small Town America*, 362.

⁸⁸ Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown*, 9.

The net result was that between 1880 and 1900, the number of Americans living in towns of 8000 or more grew from one in four to one in three, half of whom lived in towns of over 25,000. By 1900, six out of ten people in the North Atlantic states and three out of ten in the Midwest lived in cities. The 1920 census revealed that for the first time in United States history, more Americans lived in towns of 2500 or more than in rural areas.⁸⁹

Not only did progressively fewer people live in rural areas and small towns, but the technological innovations and industrialization of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century had the effect of changing small towns themselves, gradually eroding the distinction between small town life and city life. Movies cut into saloon business, even before Prohibition, eroding the saloon's function as a traditional gathering place for men. The telephone discouraged visiting. Chain stores began proliferating after 1910, displacing the local merchant or, at the least, altering the local nature of his business practices and much of his merchandise.⁹⁰ Once it obtained a car, the typical family was more likely to go on a Sunday drive than to have a large Sunday dinner at home with neighbors and relatives, as had been the practice in the 1890s.⁹¹

Garth Jowett notes that the changes brought about by urbanization, industrialism, and the communication revolution generated tensions in turn-of-the-century America, societal response to which various historians have labeled "the status revolution," "the search for order," "the

⁸⁹ Lingeman, *Small Town America*, 327-28.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 333. For instance, A&P had 1726 stores in 1915 but more than 10,000 by 1923. Ibid.

⁹¹ Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown*, 133.

response to industrialism,” and “the end of innocence.”⁹² He summarizes the problems and responses caused by these “forces for change” as first, threats to existing sources of power and authority from the new possibilities for the centralization of power; second, widespread uncertainty about social and cultural norms generated by the deep and rapid changes these forces made in traditional society; and third, the belief that these forces were the cause of “all harmful, antisocial influences that threatened to destroy the basis of traditional American society,” and that consequently the city by its very nature symbolized evil.⁹³ As Carolyn Marvin has written, the new technologies of the electric light and the telephone spawned anxiety about the impact they would have on social structures and relationships.⁹⁴ In examining the technologies of the telegraph, the wireless, commercial radio, and television, Jeffrey Sconce argues that, in the popular imagination of the time of their introduction into daily life, these technologies have been infused with a supernatural presence and effect that reflects societal anxieties about their entry into and role in society.⁹⁵

Thus, even as physical ease and comfort introduced by modern technology, unprecedented in human history, was surely welcomed, certain writers expressed reservation at what was being simultaneously lost. Part of Lewis’s critique in *Main Street* and *Babbitt* was of the increasing

⁹² Garth Jowett, *Film: The Democratic Art* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Co., 1976), 7.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking about Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

⁹⁵ Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000).

boosterism and materialism of America's small town, characteristics of the new, increasingly industrial small town rather than of its nineteenth century, pre-industrial counterpart. Similarly, Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) condemned its fictional Midwestern town for the new ethic of consumption and mass entertainment that had accompanied the arrival of the machine age. In both this book and *Poor White* (1920), Anderson lamented the loss of such old values as closeness to the land, craftsman's pride, and community ties that he felt had disappeared with the coming of industrialization.⁹⁶ As is described more fully below, Tarkington's *Magnificent Ambersons*, and the Orson Welles film, explicitly address the positive and negative effects of the coming of the automobile. Decades later, in the late 1950s and 1960s, a series of memoirs of small-town life at the turn of the century similarly recall, with varying degrees of regret, a lost way of life, in such works as R. L. Duffus' *Williamstown Branch: Impersonal Memories of a Vermont Boyhood* (1958), Roderick Turnbull's *Maple Hill Stories* (1961), Burns Fuller's *Burns Fuller Remembers: Fenton – My Home Town* (1966), and Willis Frederick Dunbar's *How It Was in Hartford* (1968). These latter works in particular bespeak the persistence in the popular imagination of the notion of the idealized turn-of-the-century small town, a notion so widely held that it crowded out all others and rendered any representation of the turn-of-the-century small town automatically "nostalgic."

Thornton Wilder's Our Town

A potent illustration of the power of this equation is Thornton Wilder's stage play, *Our Town*, and its 1940 film adaptation. The stage play itself is so determinedly modernist, in fact,

⁹⁶ Lingeman, *Small Town America*, 379-81.

with its bare stage and Brechtian direct audience address, that at least in its formal elements, it is the very antithesis of nostalgia. In the 1940 film, conventional Hollywood film-making practices – such as period costuming, fully appointed sets, and continuity editing – replaced many of the stage play’s formal modernist elements, resulting in a visual presentation for the most part entirely consistent with the standard Hollywood small-town film. At the same time, however, certain modernist aspects of the play are retained, such as the “interactive” relationship between the audience/camera and the narrator (the Stage Manager from the play, recast as the town druggist in the film), while Aaron Copland’s score is distinctly contemporary, the cinematography often dark and even foreboding, and most of the play’s disturbing narrative elements translated directly to the screen. In short, the film is far from a comforting or comfortable viewing experience, while the play was audaciously unconventional when it premiered. *Even so*, both the play and the film have always been consistently labeled as “nostalgic,” a characterization that must be attributable to their turn-of-the-century small-town setting, as no other element in either text can account for it; further, in the popular imagination, *Our Town* is arguably the quintessential embodiment of the turn-of-the-century small-town myth of communal solidarity and good-heartedness – the meaning assigned to it, for instance, in Josh Lyman’s reference to it in an episode of *The West Wing* (1999-2006) – despite the formal, aesthetic, and narrative elements which undermine that meaning, particularly as fixed in the 1940 film. In this, *Our Town*, better than any other Hollywood representation of the turn-of-the-century small town, illustrates the strength of this idealizing myth, even as *Our Town*’s reception helped to solidify that myth as the reading approach to be taken with the films that would come after.

Set in the fictional small town of Grovers Corners, New Hampshire, in the years 1901 to

1913, *Our Town* does not, in fact, reflect Wilder's personal nostalgia for a childhood in a turn-of-the-century New England town. Wilder was born in 1897 in Madison, Wisconsin; in 1906, when he was nine years old, he moved with his mother and siblings to Berkeley, California, while his father accepted the governmental appointment of consul general in Hong Kong. Thereafter, Wilder spent his childhood in boarding schools located in China and the Ojai Valley in California, eventually being reunited with his mother and siblings in Berkeley and ultimately graduating from Berkeley High School in 1915. He attended Oberlin College in Oberlin, Ohio for two years, during which time his parents moved to Mount Carmel, Connecticut, six miles from New Haven, and he then transferred to Yale University. In the fall of 1921, after graduation, military service, and two years spent in Europe writing, Wilder took a position as a schoolteacher at Lawrenceville, a Princeton-oriented prep school located in New Jersey.

By the spring of 1924, he had completed a good portion of his first novel, *The Cabala*, and arranged for a two-year leave of absence from Lawrenceville to pursue his writing. That summer was the first he spent at the MacDowell Colony, a writer's colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire, where he summered frequently in the years to come. After Wilder spent one last year teaching at Lawrenceville, 1927-28, the success of his writing – particularly the publication of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* in late 1927 – enabled him to begin the nomadic life he would pursue thereafter. Thus, although Grover's Corners is based on a number of New England towns Wilder knew,⁹⁷ they were towns he did not encounter until at least 1916, as a young man of nineteen,

⁹⁷ As Wilder's biographer Gilbert A. Harrison notes, Grover's Corners was no particular town. "For several summers . . . I taught at a tutoring camp on Lake Sunapee. I did a great deal of walking in those days – New London (New Hampshire) is not far away. That went into it. Lots of observations in Peterborough which has no cemetery on a hill (that I saw once in Vermont) and has no 'Polish Town across the tracks' – I forget now where I picked that up –

when he spent a week's vacation on the island of Monhegan in Maine; the first time he actually lived in New England was his arrival in New Haven to attend Yale in the fall of 1917. The years in which he truly came to know the region were the late 1910s through the 1920s; not his boyhood but the decade of his twenties, during which he was a schoolteacher and an aspiring playwright and novelist.

Wilder was forty years old when he began writing *Our Town* in the summer of 1937; it was an immediate success when it opened on Broadway on February 4, 1938, and won the 1938 Pulitzer Prize. *Our Town* was far from conventional in form; believing that in much of contemporary theater, plays were shut up in a "museum showcase" and that the "box-set stifles the life in drama,"⁹⁸ Wilder wrote *Our Town* to be performed on a bare stage, with no sets or props except for a few chairs. Moreover, a number of characters, in addition to the Stage Manager who serves as guide, Greek chorus, and narrator, address the audience directly; others momentarily step outside the play's action to speak their thoughts out loud. These staging techniques, with which Wilder had been experimenting for a number of years,⁹⁹ were intended to enable *Our Town* to capture "not verisimilitude but reality."¹⁰⁰ Wilder's goal in this play, rather

maybe Keene or one of those mill towns on the way to Keene." Gilbert A. Harrison, *The Enthusiast: A Life of Thornton Wilder* (New York: Fromm International Publishing Co., 1986), 187.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 180.

⁹⁹ *The Long Christmas Dinner*, *The Happy Journey*, and *Pullman Car Hiawatha*, all one-act plays published and first performed in 1931, employ imaginary sets and props, and both *The Happy Journey* and *Pullman Car Hiawatha* have a character named the Stage Manager who serves the same function as the Stage Manager in *Our Town*.

¹⁰⁰ Harrison, *The Enthusiast*, 180.

than nostalgia or sentimentality, was *universality*. He described *Our Town* to Gertrude Stein as “the most beautiful little play you can imagine It’s a little play with all the big subjects in it; and it’s a big play with all the little things of life lovingly impressed into it.”¹⁰¹ Rather than its being sad or sentimental, Wilder saw the play as an attempt “to find a value above all price for the smallest events of our daily life,”¹⁰² “a celebration of daily life in the knowledge of death’s inevitability.”¹⁰³

Producer Sol Lesser purchased the screen rights in 1939. In his six-month correspondence with Lesser about the writing of the screenplay, Wilder returned a number of times to his view of the play as representing universality. For instance, an early idea for the film’s opening was a shot of the United States as a picture puzzle; when Lesser abandoned this idea, Wilder responded that the substituted opening of Grovers Corners’ druggist appearing in the door of his drugstore seemed “far less persuasive and useful than the opening over the jig-saw puzzle [which had the advantages of] setting the background against the whole United States, that constant allusion to larger dimensions of time and place, which is one of the principal elements of the play”¹⁰⁴ Ultimately, Wilder approved “[t]he titles [being] superimposed during Frank’s stroll at the opening,” but added that “I still have a confused regret that we lost a chance to establish some largeness there at the beginning and to make an accent – something about ‘all the

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 177.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 180.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 186.

¹⁰⁴ “‘Our Town’ From Stage to Screen: A Correspondence Between Thornton Wilder and Sol Lesser,” *Theatre Arts* (Nov. 1940): 815.

world,' etc. which could frame the picture in universality."¹⁰⁵ He later reminded Lesser that "[o]n the stage, though the whole U.S.A. was not mentioned, the largeness of the design was conveyed by the bareness of the stage and the surprise of the direct address to the audience."¹⁰⁶

It is unsurprising, though, that in 1939, the "bareness of the stage" was abandoned when the film was adapted for the screen. After the film's release, *The New Yorker* mused as to how the film of *Our Town* might have replicated the unique staging of the play:

We might have been asked to visualize a New Hampshire town while our eyes looked actually upon the machinery that [is used] to make a movie . . . [There was the] bare chance that the whole affair might be enacted with casual camera shots of cameras, with views of the sets and the lots, of the naked studio itself.¹⁰⁷

As the reviewer concludes, however, "[n]othing so odd or experimental has been attempted,"¹⁰⁸ and indeed, it does not appear anything along these lines was ever contemplated. Rather, from the outset, it seems to have been understood that the film would be staged with complete and realistic sets. Characterizing the film's "completely appointed settings" as one of the two chief differences between the play and the film, *Life Magazine* published "some of the 1,000 sketches which [William Cameron] Menzies executed for scenes, characters, costumes, lighting and camera

¹⁰⁵ Thornton Wilder to Sol Lesser, April 1, 1940, Sol Lesser Collection, The University of Southern California Archives ("Lesser Collection, USC Archives").

¹⁰⁶ "'Our Town' From Stage to Screen," 821.

¹⁰⁷ "The Current Cinema: Thornton Wilder's Town," *The New Yorker*, June 18, 1940.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

angles”¹⁰⁹ in its May 27, 1940 issue, in which it named *Our Town* its movie of the week.¹¹⁰ Lesser explained to Wilder that, rather than in bare sets, the stage play’s unique quality would be conveyed through cinematic means:

The picture itself will be treated in an unconventional manner with regard to camera set-ups

For instance, in the Simon Stimson episodes, with the scenes played in moonlight, the photography will accentuate the black and white shadows. The little white New England houses, which look so lovely in other shots, will look naked and almost ghostly in relation to Simon Stimson, to whom they did not offer nice lovely homes but a cold world which ruined him.¹¹¹

Most of the conversational scenes will be played in very close shots, eliminating scenic proportions, in order to capture the original purpose of the play – the non-use of scenery – but at the same time we will have a beautifully scenic production in the places where scenery will serve its purpose¹¹²

Knowing that the film would be staged realistically, however, heightened Wilder’s concern that the film risked becoming *conventional* because the story was “so generalized.”¹¹³

The play interested because every few minutes there was a new bold effect in presentation-methods.

¹⁰⁹ “Movie of the Week: *Our Town*: An Artist Clothes a Strange Play for the Screen,” *Life*, May 27, 1940.

¹¹⁰ Similarly, the program for the film’s May 1940 press premiere in Los Angeles states that “[b]efore a foot of film was shot by Director Sam Wood . . . 1200 sketches of camera setups were sketched by William Cameron Menzies, the production designer, who had a similar assignment on ‘Gone With the Wind,’ and his associate, Harry Horner.” Program, Press Preview of “Our Town,” May 9, 1940.

¹¹¹ “‘Our Town’ From Stage to Screen,” 821.

¹¹² *Ibid.* Similarly, the program for the film’s Los Angeles press premiere quotes Lesser as saying, “Just as the play was a departure in stage technique, as have we approached its screening with an equivalent departure in our own medium. We have attempted to escape the formal barrier of the modern motion picture and to produce an unconventional picture with straightforward simplicity.” Program, Press Preview of “Our Town,” May 9, 1940.

¹¹³ “‘Our Town’ From Stage to Screen,” 818.

For the movie it may be an audience-risk to be bold (thinking of the 40 millions) but I think with this story it's still a greater risk to be conventional. This movie is bold enough in the last sequence, but apart from the three characters who talk straight into the audience's face, there's less and less of that novelty and freedom and diversion during the first forty minutes.

I know you'll realize that I don't mean boldness or oddity for their own sakes, but merely as the almost indispensable reinforcement and refreshment of a play that was *never intended to be interesting for its story alone, or even for its background . . .*¹¹⁴

Most vehemently, Wilder resisted and rejected inclusion in the screenplay of instances of what he considered "sweet and condescending" touches, which he found hackneyed and, ultimately, false. For instance, he resisted what he called Old Jokes, such as the best man's losing the wedding ring or a country hick shaking his fist at a horseless carriage,¹¹⁵ determined that the film not lapse into what he considered cliché: "A few more stealing-doughnuts; dish-towel-errors; four-spoonfuls-of-sugar; drinking-coffee-out-of-saucers; mothers-looking-behind-sons'-ears – and the audience would be justified in believing they're in one of those pictures [of] Quaint Hayseed Family Life."¹¹⁶

For despite his protestations that he had not intended it as such, and despite its formal presentation, which was innovative at the time of its premiere, the stage play was often characterized as sentimental and nostalgic. Thus, when at one point Lesser suggested expanding the time frame of the screenplay to 1923 rather than 1913, the year in which the stage play ended, Wilder agreed. With this change, he noted, the film would "close[] out [those] horse-and-buggy pre-automobile days which may have been a part of the much-discussed 'nostalgia' which people

¹¹⁴ Ibid (emphasis added).

¹¹⁵ Thornton Wilder to Sol Lesser, December 26, 1939, Lesser Collection, USC Archives.

¹¹⁶ "'Our Town' From Stage to Screen," 822.

found in the play . . .”¹¹⁷ In the final execution, however, the film retained the play’s time frame of 1901 to 1913.

And in the finished film, *Grovers Corners* becomes something concrete, replete with such turn-of-the-century small-town tropes of leafy streets and front porches, the drug store soda fountain and horse-drawn milk truck. Moreover, in the whole, the presentation of *Grovers Corners* and of the characters is conventionalized. Despite Lesser’s intentions, the use of tight close-ups on actors does not erase the impression that the audience is watching a complete diegetic world, its details entirely provided within the film itself. Costumes, as well as the sets, seem realistically authentic, or at least realistically “Hollywood authentic”; for the most part, the conventions of Hollywood narrative cinema are followed. Thus, in these respects, *Grovers Corners* does in fact become a Hollywood small town.

At the same time, however, in the early part of the film, certain of Wilder’s original staging was retained, most notably the Stage Manager’s direct address to the camera, his calling upon a regional professor to provide the audience some key statistics about the town, Editor Gibbs’ direct address to the camera, and his being asked questions by members of the “audience.” In this, at least some of the unconventional quality of the stage play is replicated; as *The New York Times* stated at the time of the film’s release:

This is a picture which utilizes the fullest prerogatives of the camera to participate as a recognized witness to a simple dramatic account of people’s lives, not just to spy on someone’s fictitious emotions. On the stage . . . the stage manager . . . conducted the action of the play; on the screen, a small-town druggist acts as a guide and narrator . . . He introduces characters who speak directly to the camera – or to the audience – and he [makes] . . . incidental remarks himself. Once he places his hand before the lens to stop a sequence and introduce another. The

¹¹⁷ Thornton Wilder to Sol Lesser, October 7, 1939, Lesser Collection, USC Archives.

camera thus becomes animate, not just a recording machine. It is an exciting technique . . . [that] enhances the scope of the screen tremendously.¹¹⁸

In addition, Aaron Copland's score, composed specifically for the film by a composer whom Wilder admitted to Lesser was "generally associated with extremely modern dissonant work," is not traditional-sounding or of the period represented. Indeed, Wilder's suggestions of George Antheil or Aaron Copland to compose the film's score stem from his belief that "on the whole the non-sentimental tartness they inject would be on the safer side. The thing to guard against is the extreme emotionalism of, say, Alf Newman's . . . where the music surges up, loud and sob-ful between the episodes."¹¹⁹ The result, however, is a curious blend of the old and the new, but not in a manner by which the injected present-day elements make the past either comforting or comfortable. Rather, the opposite is true: to the extent the "authentic" period visuals help make or reinforce comfortable stereotypes about the past and about this time and place in particular, the injection of this element from the 1940 present cause *discomfort*, a certain dissonance that is at odds with conventional expectations for the idealized turn-of-the-century small town.

Further, at least on DVD editions of *Our Town* available today, the film is visually very dark throughout, especially in its interiors. At the same time, the recurring visual motif of tree-lined streets results in the characters' faces often appearing mottled in daytime exterior scenes as the shadows of the leafy trees fall across them, images that come across more as foreboding than bucolic. Moreover, the narrative contains a number of dark elements: Mrs. Webb demonstrates a lack of affection for her daughter, Emily, whose intellectual talents are unrecognized and,

¹¹⁸ "Our Town," *New York Times*, date unknown. Motion Picture Academy Library Production Code Administration ("PCA") file.

¹¹⁹ Thornton Wilder to Sol Lesser, February 29, 1940, Lesser Collection, USC Archives.

ultimately, unused; the Stage Manager relates, in matter-of-fact tones, the fate of a boy shown on screen delivering newspapers who, after earning a scholarship to study engineering, will die in World War I, “a waste of a good education”; by 1913, Emily’s younger brother will have died, as will have Mrs. Gibbs, whose dream of taking a trip to Paris, dismissed as nonsense by her husband, is never fulfilled. The film’s third act – Emily’s childbirth delirium in which she joins the dead in the town cemetery – similarly appears on the current DVD to be staged in darkness, and the emotionless performances of the various dead characters, in true Brechtian fashion, are remote and alienating. Finally, the film explicitly recognizes the malaise to be found in the turn-of-the-century small town in the character of the choir master, Mr. Stimson, the tormented town drunk. The Stage Manager describes him as one of those people “who aren’t meant for small-town life,” and eventually he commits suicide. The choir practice scene is the film’s only truly comedic moment, as Stimson chastises the choir that “loud” doesn’t mean “better” and admonishes them to leave loudness to the Methodists; at the same time, however, the scene is dark, with Stimson’s pained face shown in close-up and, behind him, large, ominous shadows cast upon the white wall above the choir. These elements, as well as Copland’s non-traditional score and the Brechtian touches in film’s formal presentation, cut against both a sense of “pastness” and an idealization of the time and place represented.

Nonetheless, as was the case with the stage play, an insistence on perceiving the film as “nostalgic” soon appeared in the response it received. As the play had been, the film was a great critical and box office success. It was, in fact, heralded in terms of which Wilder surely approved. For instance, the *New York Times* enthused

that [*Our Town*] captures on film the *simple beauties and truths of humble folks* as

very few films ever do; it is rich and ennobling in its *plain philosophy* – and it gives one a passionate desire to enjoy the fullness of life even in these good old days of today.¹²⁰

Variety as well opined that the film “retains all the sincerity and wholesomeness of the play”¹²¹ and “is . . . a simple, straightforward, very genuinely beautiful drama of the commonplace”¹²²

Even so, the reference to “these good old days of today” in the *New York Times* review is an obvious reference to the appeal of its period setting, and in fact some of these reviews seem to unavoidably slide into nostalgia, as if either the film’s setting (the turn-of-the-century small town) or its “simple” story made it nostalgic *per se*. *Variety*’s review goes on:

[*Our Town*] will provoke a pleasantly sad homesickness in all the emigres from the small town, or from wherever the home was. [Its craftsmanship and artistry capture] the trials and the raptures in the quiet reflections upon the life which has been most common in America for generations – symbolized by Grover’s Corners.¹²³

Movie Story, giving *Our Town* its “Best Films Award” for 1940, begins its synopsis of the film this way:

The little picture, up there behind Mr. Morgan’s head, is an impression of *Our Town* – Grovers Corners, New Hampshire, just across the line from Massachusetts. Does it make you think, wistfully perhaps, of a little town you once knew? A little town with a Main Street, a railway station, churches where folks went every Sunday? A row of stores, a school with a yard full of kids yelling and screaming around a quarter of nine, mornings, noon-times and at three in the afternoons? A paper that came out once or twice a week, a big white house on a hill, where the richest citizen lived? The sort of town that nobody very remarkable ever came out of but a nice town – with lots of human interest?

¹²⁰ “Our Town,” *New York Times* (emphasis added).

¹²¹ “Our Town,” *Variety (W)*, May 15, 1940.

¹²² “Our Town,” *Variety (D)*, May 10, 1940 (emphasis added).

¹²³ *Ibid.*

Grovers Corners was like that, too. Mr. Morgan will tell you that. . . . He is remembering *Our Town* as it was in 1901. One day, especially, he is remembering because it was so typical in its quietness and uneventfulness, and also perhaps because it gave some hint of the joys and tragedies that were to follow.¹²⁴

By the time the Toronto Film Society scheduled its first screening of *Our Town* in 1969, it introduced the film with a write-up that began,

OUR TOWN is an affectionate (perhaps indulgent) view of “Daily Life”, “Love and Marriage” and “Death” in a little American town around the turn of the century. It may be “*the way we like to think it was*” or “*the way it should have been*”, as they say; but human weaknesses are by no means overlooked, there is knowing humour as well as sentiment, and Wilder’s approach can be crisp as well as warm.¹²⁵

Indeed, for historian Richard Lingeman, *Our Town* was the “peak” of the Depression-era turn toward nostalgia for the turn-of-the-century American small town. Lingeman notes that Wilder’s intent was to portray the everyday life of a small town on “certain specific, seemingly randomly selected days” unaffected by broad, disruptive social problems, but that “*the year Wilder ‘randomly’ chose, 1901, was a year that surely carried overtones of turn-of-the-century tranquility and nostalgia for audiences of the time.* Wilder’s conceit was that war, politics and depressions were irrelevant, and so he artfully chose a year *when the audience thought this was so.*”¹²⁶ Thus, Lingeman argues that the play’s nostalgia resided within its audience:

For the play’s truth lies in the residuum of memory, in its evocation of a common dream that, if it never really existed in quite that form, in fact certainly did in the ideals of Americans. The gap between what we were and what we dreamed was all the more poignant, because it was located in the plausible, real-life hopes of a

¹²⁴ “Synopsis,” *Our Town, Movie Story*, May 1940.

¹²⁵ *Our Town*, Toronto Film Society program, February 11, 1990 (emphasis added).

¹²⁶ Lingeman, *Small Town America*, 259 (emphasis added).

large number of Americans.¹²⁷

Further, as Lingeman notes, Thornton's claim to "universality" in *Our Town* bespeaks a belief, at a minimum, in a certain transparency in the small town of 1901, as if it were a time and place in which "pure" life were lived, unsullied and uncomplicated by social, economic, or political concerns that would mask or divert attention from the fundamentals of birth, love, and death. Both these characterizations – "universal" and "nostalgic" – suggest that the turn-of-the-century small town was perceived as emblematic of some "pure" or "innocent" moment, a perception that overrode any contrary formal or narrative particulars of a given vehicle such as the film *Our Town*.

Conclusion

It is certainly the case that, consistently throughout the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, Hollywood films set in turn-of-the-century small towns were perceived as *nostalgic* films – at least insofar as they were characterized by reviewers – no matter how that setting was portrayed. Only two of these films depict their settings negatively,¹²⁸ but the ones which present it positively vary widely in the degree to which they can be read to approve of or champion life in the American small town at the turn of the last century. In fact, much to my surprise, I found very little nostalgia for the

¹²⁷ Ibid., 260.

¹²⁸ *Kings Row* (1942); *The Spiral Staircase* (1946). In *Kings Row*, based on Henry Bellaman's 1940 novel, the primary metaphor for the small 1900s town of its setting is *disease*; among the town's inhabitants are a sadistic doctor who performs amputations without anesthetic and threatens to have his daughter committed to prevent her from marrying an "unsuitable" young man, and a second doctor who keeps his mentally ill wife and daughter prisoners, before eventually killing the daughter and committing suicide. *The Spiral Staircase* is discussed below.

turn-of-the-century small town in 1950s films with that setting; instead, these films appear to celebrate the *present* over the past, rather than the other way around. This elevation of the present over the past is reflected not only in the content of the films themselves but in how the studios sold them to the public. Thus, while at times the films' presumed nostalgia is the basis of studios' marketing efforts, at other times the studios actually downplay the period setting in promoting the films. This present-day orientation is in part the result of the films' genres – mostly comedies and musicals – which were of a type in which anachronism is easily tolerated and perhaps even expected; it reflects as well a studio belief that nostalgia, while perhaps a draw for older audiences whose actual memories would be triggered by the films' content, held no appeal for younger audiences. Thus a period film required an infusion of modernity or a tilt toward modernity so as to align younger audiences' empathy with the films' characters.

More broadly, however, the way in which these films implicitly valorize the present indicates that what appears to be thinly disguised boosterism for post-war America seems designed to serve as well as a sort of reassurance about how to live in the United States at mid-century. For instance, significant in many of these films is the attitude conveyed about technology. The 1942 film *The Magnificent Ambersons* is an overtly nostalgic film in which the coming of the automobile symbolizes the loss of the pre-modern way of life; 1944's *Meet Me in St. Louis*, in the complete absence of the automobile and the ambivalence expressed toward other technology, presents a moment frozen in time before modernity's takeover of American life. By the late 1940s and '50s, however, Hollywood presents technology as the savior and exciting future of the turn-of-the-century small town, as in *Excuse My Dust* (1951), where the film's hero is an inventor of automobiles. The post-war ethos of opportunity and growth is reflected in *Wait*

Til the Sun Shines, Nellie (1952), in which the turn-of-the-century is heralded not for what it is but for what it *will become*: a modern-day city. Finally, Warner Bros.' marketing of turn-of-the-century and Tin Pan Alley songs from its catalog via the Doris Day vehicles *On Moonlight Bay* (1951) and *By the Light of the Silvery Moon* (1953) results in Day's appearing and performing as an entirely mid-twentieth-century girl, despite the films' 1910s setting. This strategy, while obviously intended to attract young audiences to the films, as well as to sell them the songs through Day's modernization of them, also promotes a general attitude of superiority in the present-day over the frumpy, old-fashioned, presumably alienating past. Thus, these films tended to merge the past into the present, to present the turn-of-the-century small town as either something not so different from present-day America or as an entity striving to eliminate what difference there was. Nonetheless, despite the strikingly modern sensibility of all these films, critical reaction to these films was consistently couched in terms of the turn-of-the-century small-town myth, so that they were *read* as nostalgic returns to an idyllic setting recognizable and known to all. The persistence presence of this myth in the films' reception suggests that, independent of what appeared onscreen, the myth was part of the experience of watching these films for mid-century audiences and that whatever nostalgic effect they had on viewers at the time was the result of the *interplay* between the two.

The late 1950s appears to have seen an adjustment in the popular attitude toward the turn-of-the-century small town. This was a moment at which the appeal of the turn-of-the-century small town seems to have outstripped the need for boosterism for post-war America; or perhaps it is more accurate to say that by the end of the decade, anxiety pervading the national psyche had spurred an overriding desire for escape, so that the turn-of-the-century small town could better

serve its reassuring function by offering a sunny alternative to modern-day America rather than by presenting itself as modern-day America in disguise. This was a period in which a flurry of memoirs of turn-of-the-century small-town childhoods were published; this was also the moment at which Walt Disney's attempts to re-create his idealized childhood experience of the turn-of-the-century small town reached their apogee: first in Disneyland's Main Street, U.S.A., the roots of which lay in his 1948 film, *So Dear to My Heart*, and second in *Pollyanna* (1960), the film which most completely and effectively translates Main Street, U.S.A. to the screen. At the same time, the late 1950s and 1960s saw the publication of a number of time-travel fantasies in which characters are transported back in time to the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries, written by authors too young to have experienced themselves these time periods firsthand. Among these writers was Rod Serling, whose general fascination with time travel in general took the form in several early 1960s *Twilight Zone* episodes of fantasy returns to small towns in the 1880s and '90s. These time-travel fantasies were the first instances in pop culture representation of the turn-of-the-century small town reflecting Pickering's imaginary nostalgia for events not personally experienced, and the recognition that the turn-of-the-century small town might have a broader appeal than previously acknowledged is evident in the fact that Hollywood no longer felt the need to mediate the turn-of-the-century small-town myth with the trappings of the modern-day. Warner Bros.' *The Music Man*, for instance, was hawked for its period authenticity, and, within the conventions of the Hollywood musical, presents 1912 River City with a consistently realized – if idealized – illusion of its time and place.

On one hand, in the late 1950s/early 1960s, both the cultural production based on actual reminiscences of the turn-of-the-century small town and time-travel fantasies written by a younger

generation suggest, in their common offering of an escape into the past, anxieties about current conditions; distress with present-day America is communicated explicitly in dialogue in *Twilight Zone* episodes in which characters decry the twentieth century for its materialism and pollution, and for the Cold War's specter of mass destruction. Moreover, the turn-of-the-century small town myth as it resonated in *The Music Man* positioned the film to trigger additional nostalgias for a former "wholesome America" and for Classic Hollywood itself, suggesting other ways in which the early 1960s was perceived as an unsettled and unsettling time, where certain long-established standards were being changed or lost. On the other hand, these late 1950s and early 1960s screen fictions conceptualize escape to the turn-of-the-century small town in very different ways. Both *The Music Man* and *Pollyanna* invite audiences to a playful romp in an attractive but blatantly artificial past. Even so, River City, Iowa, begins *The Music Man* in a decidedly dystopic state; ironically, it becomes the idyllic myth only through the intervention of a character representing modernity – the cynical, city slicker con-man, Harold Hill – while Disney constructs the turn-of-the-century small town as a site of pleasurable consumption. Both, however, like the Hollywood films of the early 1950s, were received as *nostalgic* representations of the 1900s small town. In contrast to the celebration to be found in *The Music Man* and *Pollyanna*, Serling's nostalgia for the late-eighteenth-century small town is a longing for a genuinely lost object, as his characters are thwarted in their efforts to return to what they perceive as a halcyon world promising the ease and emotional sustenance missing from twentieth century urban life.

This variety in the manner in which these Hollywood films and television programs present their common "nostalgic" object – the turn-of-the-century small town – indicates that they produce nostalgia in different ways. At a minimum, the *expressed nostalgia* of *The Magnificent*

Ambersons and Serling's *Twilight Zone* episodes – and the particular means by which nostalgia is constructed in these screen fictions – should be differentiated from the *idealized, inauthentic past* model of nostalgia exhibited in *Excuse My Dust*, *On Moonlight Bay*, *The Music Man*, and *Pollyanna*, which themselves differ in the degree to which the films faithfully reproduce their period setting. The blatant artificiality of all these films' representation of their diegetic setting means that to the extent they produce nostalgia, that nostalgia is the result of the interaction of the previously circulating cultural small-town myth and what appears on screen. Both of these methods of producing nostalgia, however, must be distinguished in turn from the *meticulously re-created past* introduced with 1980s "heritage cinema" – and now the standard for all American period films today – by which nostalgia results from the unbroken illusion that one has returned to a prior time and place.

Finally, cultural nostalgia for the turn-of-the-century small town, based as it was predominantly on actual memory of lived experience and not on memory of its mediated representation in potentially perpetual circulation (such as 1940s films or 1950s television shows), began to wane after the mid-1960s. Thus, in the wake of the social upheavals of the mid- to late 1960s and early 1970s, the turn-of-the-century small town lost its place in the nation's autobiography as its lost moment of "innocence," a position now occupied most often by 1950s and early 1960s suburbia. After 1965, the turn-of-the-century small town – indeed, the turn of the century itself – largely disappeared from the Hollywood screen. The body of films examined here, therefore, demonstrate an example of *nostalgic range* for a represented past, where it has not otherwise been immortalized via television syndication in the manner in which constant reruns of "classic" TV programs from the 1950s and '60s have done for those decades, or at least for

mediated representations of those decades. Rather, the past represented in this body of films, however distorted it was in the process, is that of actual American life in small towns at the turn of the last century, which could remain part of the nation's collective identity only so long as it was kept alive in cultural circulation. Thus, Hollywood's "nostalgia" for the turn-of-the-century small town is not only a demonstration of the evolving nature of such a nostalgia – as well as of distinct ways in which pop culture can be produced – but of its status as a historical phenomenon, dependent on particular cultural conditions for its perpetuation which, in this case, limited it to a finite "lifespan."

Thus, in Chapter Two, I examine Hollywood's representation of the turn-of-the-century small town in the immediate post-war period of the late 1940s and early 1950s; here I trace the manner in which these films *elevate* the modern-day over the past. Specifically, I explore these films' embrace of twentieth-century technology and in particular, the transition of the representation of the automobile from lamented harbinger of encroaching urbanization in *The Magnificent Ambersons* to heroic triumph of American ingenuity in *Excuse My Dust*. I also examine the way in which the Twentieth Century Fox melodrama, *Wait Til the Sun Shines*, *Nellie*, champions municipal growth in its representation of the fictional Seville, Illinois, depicting the turn-of-the-century small town as a place eager to leave itself behind to become its urban, mid-century counterpart. Finally, I analyze Warner Bros.' use of Doris Day in *On Moonlight Bay* and *By the Light of the Silvery Moon* as a *contemporary* figure, despite the films' 1910s setting, to sell both the films and the films' Tin Pan Alley songs to young audiences; the resulting anachronism in Day's presentation in these films touts the superiority of mid-century styles of dress and performance over that of the films' diegetic setting.

In Chapter Three, I examine the late 1950s and early 1960s turn toward valorization of the turn-of-the-century small town for its *difference from* modern-day America. Specifically, I look at the work of Walt Disney in *So Dear to My Heart*, *Pollyanna*, *Summer Magic*, and in Disneyland's Main Street U.S.A., as well as several time-travel episodes of Rod Serling's *The Twilight Zone* in which characters try to travel back in time to late-nineteenth-century small towns but ultimately fail in the attempt. Here, I explore the manner in which Disney used the turn-of-the-century small town to further his commercial interests, ultimately converting it into a marketable site of play and consumption; in contrast, Serling's representation of the turn-of-the-century small town is of a tantalizing but ultimately lost utopia, one for which the American experiencing the pressures and uncertainties of contemporary life hungers but can never attain. In Chapter Four, I examine several different nostalgias spawned by Meredith Willson's *The Music Man*, as reflected in the discourse generated by and about the 1962 film: nostalgia for the film's 1912 small-town setting, for American "wholesomeness," and for the "happy" and "tasteful" filmmaking of the Hollywood studio era. Exploration of the twenty-first-century efforts of Mason City, Iowa to promote itself by taking on the identity of its fictional counterpart, *The Music Man*'s River City, however, highlights a certain exhaustion of *The Music Man*'s nostalgic range, as well as that of its 1910s small-town setting in general, as neither is sufficiently present in contemporary pop culture to make Mason City's efforts as successful as they would have been if this project had been undertaken in the mid-1960s.

In Chapter Five, I trace the diminishing presence of the turn-of-the-century small town in popular culture from the mid-1960s forward, identifying the mid-1980s television production of Horton Foote's *Story of a Marriage* as the only new such onscreen representation since 1963.

Heavily influenced by 1980s heritage cinema, however, *Story of a Marriage* presents the turn-of-the-century small town in painstakingly “realistic” period detail, in a manner unlike any of the cinematic or televisual presentations of earlier decades. I conclude with two observations about film and television’s “nostalgia” for the turn-of-the-century small town that have broader application to nostalgia studies in general. All the texts examined here have been labeled “nostalgic,” despite the variety in their attitudes toward the turn-of-the-century small town; thus, my first observation is that *nostalgia*, at least in this instance, does not exist solely within the examined text but is produced by the interplay between the text and surrounding cultural discourses, such as the turn-of-the-century small-town myth in circulation throughout most of the twentieth century. Second, the variety in presentational style of the same nostalgic object indicates that, even taking this interplay into account, these texts “produce” nostalgia in different ways, suggesting the need for the development of a typology of commercial nostalgia consisting, at a minimum, of *expressed nostalgia* (e.g., *The Magnificent Ambersons*); *idealized “inauthentic” past* (e.g., *On Moonlight Bay*, *The Music Man*); and *meticulously re-created past* (e.g., *Story of a Marriage*). Such a typology will allow the study of pop culture nostalgia to proceed with more precision than has been achieved to date.

CHAPTER TWO
LOOKING BACKWARD TO LOOK FORWARD TO TODAY:
HOLLYWOOD'S POST-WAR TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY SMALL TOWN

The common characterization of Hollywood's post-war films set in turn-of-the-century small towns as "nostalgic" is a misnomer insofar as "nostalgic" is interpreted as a longing for a lost time and place. Rather, this post-war representation of the turn-of-the-century small town offered the mid-century audience a celebration of the *present* even as it cast an affectionate eye toward the past; in fact, it often uses pre-existing idealized views of turn-of-the-century America to reassure audiences about the value of their present and their future. The effect of many of these films then is less a nostalgic longing for the past than a reassuring celebration of the present, born as a marketing necessity but positioned as if designed to acclimate audiences to societal, economic, and cultural changes being effected in post-war America. This reassurance was achieved through three avenues: the films' representation of technology, the films' representation of "progress," and the films' presentation of the female. In all three instances, the effect was to *elevate* the present (post-war America) over the past represented in the films, producing an effect which appears designed to reassure mid-century audiences about current circumstances rather than to cause them to long for a prior, "superior" moment.

A number of factors contributed to these films' deviation from the "good past/bad present" opposition that lies at the root of common understanding of nostalgia. Certainly, the turn-of-the-century small town was an appropriate candidate for the role of "good past," assuming that one version of a nostalgia's "good" past would be a time and place of relative stability, peace, and prosperity, unmarred by such traumas as war or domestic strife.

Architectural scholar Richard Francaviglia notes that "Main Street," the central business district of

the American small town, “seems to flower in the later nineteenth century. With the exception of an occasional economic panic (e.g., 1873) that might slow growth, the years following the Civil War were indeed relatively prosperous for the American small town.”¹²⁹ Similarly, except for the five-month Spanish-American War in 1898, the United States was at peace for the half century from 1865 to 1917. The perception of the small town as offering a relaxed, slow-paced life, particularly in the years after a town had advanced beyond the pioneer stage but before it experienced the changes wrought by the automobile, is evidently so strong that historian Lingeman lapses into idealized imagery in describing that life, even when acknowledging his debt to nostalgic sources for that description. For instance, he notes that the late nineteenth-century small town was a place where

in the nostalgic memories of some at least . . . life was lived out in the soft light of a tree-shaded street on a summer afternoon, to the soft clip-clop of horses, the drone of the bees and cicadas, the clink of ice in the lemonade pitcher, the creak of the porch swing – a time of pause and prosperity.¹³⁰

Similarly, he states that in 1890, life in America’s small towns was good,

and its promise seemed as benign as a hot summer afternoon along a quiet street, with the little girls in their white dresses, the mothers in their long skirts and shirtwaists, the men coming home in dark suits and high, stiff collars, the little boys in knickers rushing out to greet them.¹³¹

As much as it apparently believed in its validity, however, Hollywood did not perceive this bucolic stereotype as universally beloved. Rather, as a production and marketing practice in

¹²⁹ Richard Francaviglia, *Main Street Revisited; Time, Space, and Image Building in Small-Town America* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press 1996), 35.

¹³⁰ Lingeman, *Small Town America*, 258.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 263.

the studio era and post-war years, the presumptive “nostalgia” of films set at the turn of the century, and particularly in the turn-of-the-century small town, was consistently viewed as having a *two-pronged* appeal. On one hand, studio publicity, trade paper reviews, and even some independent press reviews predicted that for older audiences, these films would stimulate fond reminiscences of their youth. On the other hand, in direct opposition to older audiences, younger audiences were expected to find enjoyment in their *unfamiliarity with* the turn-of-the-century setting. That is, the appeal was predicted to be the films’ novelty, generating one of two possible responses: humor or curiosity. Thus, it was anticipated that younger audiences would enjoy either laughing at or learning about the life their parents or grandparents once led.

Such a production and marketing strategy was consistent, of course, with the Classical Hollywood practice of gearing films to the widest possible – or “mass” – audience, a practice that was not immediately abandoned in the post-war era. Notably, in its production of these “nostalgic” films, however, Hollywood restricted the term “nostalgia” to Davis’ concept of the recall of past personally experienced. There was no expectation that younger audiences would necessarily find this diegetic time and place appealing in its own right; thus, there was no expectation of Pickering’s second type of nostalgia for a time period experienced only in one’s imagination. Rather, studios believed that “true” period authenticity would alienate a proportion of the movie-going public. Consequently, period authenticity in these films could go only so far, and appeal to a “modern” sensibility had to be created and maintained alongside the films’ appeal to the “older” sensibility of those with actual memory of the depicted time and place. The ultimate effect on these films then was that their “nostalgia” is often shot through with “modern” elements or attitudes designed to counteract or undercut the alienating effect of their period

setting.¹³²

To some degree this mixing of a mid-century sensibility with a turn-of-the-century setting is generic in origin. Admittedly, Hollywood itself never developed a “nostalgic” genre, but “nostalgia” itself, as a film subject or a source of viewing pleasure, was often characterized in studio publicity, trade papers, and press reviews as an insubstantial type of entertainment, a characterization perhaps stemming from the implicit recognition that the “nostalgic” film offers an inherently false pleasure whose enjoyment depends on viewers’ deliberately and collectively closing their eyes to that falseness in a sort of shared, knowing “playing hooky” from the truth. Certainly, these films’ idealized presentation of their diegetic setting effectively announces itself as false, a sort of masquerade in which audiences are consciously invited to participate and which they are not expected to take seriously. Further, insofar as “nostalgia” was perceived as an experience available to everyone and its focus an affectionately remembered “everyday” life, as was the case in these particular films, such a “nostalgic” film by definition was one with little heft – neither a tale of historically significant people or events nor one based on works popularly perceived to have literary merit, such as those of Charles Dickens or Jane Austin.

Moreover, or perhaps consequently, most late-1940s and 1950s turn-of-the-century small-town films – as well as turn-of-the-century films with an urban setting – were either musicals or comedies, “lightweight” genres which, by definition, are inherently fantastic. In these genres, the

¹³² For example, one reviewer of MGM’s 1951 release, *Excuse My Dust*, noted that “[a] horse-drawn fire brigade [,] picnics and hayrides lend nostalgic touches to *an amusing struggle between the old and the new*, with lilting songs and an excellent dance routine supplying modern appeal.” *Hollywood Citizen News*, July 18, 1951. This “something-for-everything” approach to a “nostalgic” commodified product obviously predates the turn to authenticity of 1980s “heritage” films and BBC television adaptations, in which the meticulous attention to ostensibly authentic period detail in costuming and set design constitutes an unalloyed appeal to the antiquarian.

audiences' attention is focused on the musical numbers or the comedic (and often outlandish) situations; the appeal of these genres lies there and in the recognition throughout the film that the audience is being presented an openly and explicitly "unreal" world. In short, these are genres which by their very nature do not promise any sort of "realism" – including period "authenticity" – and in which anachronisms are easily tolerated and perhaps even expected.

Finally, it is axiomatic that any Hollywood period film consists of a layering of at least two moments in time: the film's diegetic time period and the time of the film's production. As historians have long recognized,¹³³ the past can be viewed and presented – that is, literally "pictured" – only through the eyes of the present. With Hollywood motion pictures, of course, the "present" layer is in part dictated by technological development and industrial practice, which necessarily impose visual time-markers on each film: e.g., black-and-white vs. color, aspect ratio, lighting conventions, camera technology (such as the zoom lens), or stop-action animation vs. computer-generated special effects. A large component of the "present-day" layer of a Hollywood film is aesthetic, however, which is only to be expected in a commercial product whose profitability depends on its appeal to current audiences. Thus, contemporary standards largely dictated aesthetic choices that affected how a Hollywood film looked or sounded,¹³⁴ although studios appeared to have applied a sliding scale to their period films, with greater effort

¹³³ E.g., Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, 216. ("[E]verything we see [of the past] is filtered through present-day mental lenses.")

¹³⁴ For instance, popular singing styles change over time. Compare, for example, Snow White's singing style in Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) to that of Ariel in *The Little Mermaid* (1989) or Belle in *Beauty and the Beast* (1991). At least for those familiar with twentieth-century singing conventions, Snow White's reedy vibrato marks an otherwise "timeless" animated film as a product from relatively early in the century, while the heroines' more robust singing in *Mermaid* and *Beauty* identifies those films as late twentieth-century productions.

made to achieve period “authenticity” in more expensive, prestigious, and serious films than in less expensive ones or those of genres carrying less cultural capital. Thus, certain Dickens adaptations, such as MGM’s *David Copperfield* (1935) and *A Tale of Two Cities* (1935), were touted for their meticulous reproduction of period detail, and in these films, or in James Whale’s *Show Boat* (1936) with its hefty showgirls in thick tights, the balance between the films’ diegetic past and production present-day is tilted toward the past. Although these films are still grounded technologically in the time period in which they were produced, such as by their black-and-white photography and the academy aspect ratio, the dominant of the two time periods simultaneously represented on the screen is the historical setting. In “lighter” fare such as musicals or comedies, however, the balance is tipped the other way. With period “authenticity” being less crucial – and hence of less value – to these genres, and concomitantly, immediate accessibility and pleasure being more crucial to their success as lightweight entertainment, the present-day often takes precedence over the represented past or, at a minimum, is always evident, the two overlapping time periods co-existing in a visual blend of at least equal proportions. And although it seems counterintuitive that this foregrounding of the modern-day would be common practice in Hollywood “nostalgia” films of the post-war period, given the emphasis on their period setting implicit in their very characterization as “nostalgic,” the categorization of the “nostalgic” as a “lightweight” sort of entertainment and not “real” history, as well as the practical need to make these films appealing to younger audiences, make this practice seem almost inevitable.

In all period Hollywood films, the primary visual marker of the present-day was the presentation of the female, especially the female lead, whose construction of beauty through anachronistic make-up, hairstyle, performance style, and even costuming served as the key

method of ensuring that modern-day audiences experienced the film as visually pleasurable despite the potentially alienating effect of its period setting. Given the dual goals in the “nostalgia” film to represent the past as better or more appealing than it actually was and to please younger audiences who had (presumably) no particular affection for that past, the female form and voice often appear as an attractive and reassuringly modern elements in these films, as will be seen particularly in the case of Doris Day in the Warner Bros. musicals, *On Moonlight Bay* (1951) and *By the Light of the Silvery Moon* (1953), both set in the 1910s..

The “good past/ bad present” opposition in Hollywood’s post-war representation of the turn-of-the-century small town is undermined as well by the forward-looking attitude these films take toward municipal growth and technological innovation. It is true that, at least in some respects, this attitude can be viewed as historically accurate. As Francaviglia and other historians of the American small town have noted, a constant goal of nearly all such small towns was to become bigger – to become cities, in fact.¹³⁵ Francaviglia in particular notes the irony in the fact that the ornamental storefronts of what is popularly perceived (and represented) as the quintessential Main Street of Victorian and Edwardian small-town America represented the towns’ attempt to appear urban by emulating architectural styles developed in and imported from such metropolitan centers as Chicago. Moreover, Francaviglia points out that rather than exemplifying a town’s idiosyncrasy and self-sufficiency, presumably a major component of the “good past” which the turn-of-the-century small town represents, these storefronts were standardized, purchased by towns throughout the country from catalogs. It is in fact this standardization that makes the typical small-town “Main Street” so recognizable, causing

¹³⁵ Francaviglia, *Main Street Revisited*, 41.

Francaviglia to designate the Victorian-era commercial storefront as “the first truly national building form in the history of American architecture.”¹³⁶ Moreover, this standardization was made possible only by advances in technology, specifically the development of cast iron that, while enabling the rapid erection of the masonry buildings that were to give Main Street its distinctive late-twentieth century character, was part and parcel of the industrialization and mechanization that was to put an end to the horse-based economy and slow-paced lifestyle presumably at the heart of nostalgia for the turn-of-the-century small town.

Thus, as has been noted, the turn-of-the-century small town was a place very much in transition. The general goal for most towns was prosperity, for which municipal growth – in such terms as population, commerce, and whenever possible industry – was considered either a synonym or a prerequisite. Both individual and municipal prosperity was often symbolized by the trappings and more specifically the technology of urbanity and modernity, which in the years between 1880 and 1920 arrived in and established itself in the American small town, irrevocably transforming the town into its modern, present-day form in the process. Consequently, the decades immediately before and after the turn of the twentieth century constituted a moment on the cusp between the predominantly rural and horse-based lifestyle that had existed, essentially unchanged, since the country’s founding, and the industrialized, mechanized, and predominantly urban lifestyle led by the majority of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Americans. During these pivotal decades, the American small town was similarly a place on the cusp: it was poised between the isolated, self-sufficient community it had been since its inception and its position as a

¹³⁶ Ibid., 35.

link in a nationwide, interconnected technological web.¹³⁷

Indeed, part of the charm of the turn-of-the-century small town, exhibited for instance in Walt Disney's Main Street U.S.A. in Disneyland and Walt Disney World, is the introduction of the early, "crude" versions of the technologies – indoor plumbing, electricity, the telephone, the automobile, the motion picture – that had become necessities by mid-century. A technology's novelty and its everyday convenience are mutually exclusive, however; the latter is attained only by losing or forgetting the former. It was during the decades immediately before and after the turn of the century that, with respect to these technologies, the American small town permanently crossed the line separating technological novelty from such everyday convenience.

Thus, the turn-of-the-century small town has a particularly Janus quality in that it was a place that looked backward toward the pre-modern past and forward toward modernity simultaneously. Consequently, it is uniquely positioned to represent both a "good past" and the promise of a "good" or "better" present. This was, in fact, the role to which post-war Hollywood assigned it. As will be seen, in Twentieth Century Fox's *Wait Til the Sun Shines, Nellie* (1951), the turn-of-the-century small town is presented as the literal manifestation of the American ideal of prosperity-through-growth, whereby the small town is valorized for the promise that it will – or

¹³⁷ In Granville Hicks' 1945 account of his life in the small town of Roxborough, New York, he notes that "In 1915 Roxborough had only half as many people as it had had in 1850, but it still seemed to be a prosperous, self-sufficient little town. . . A man could have the security that subsistence farming gives and still enjoy a standard of living comparable to that of the cities. He could live with fair comfort in a compact, comprehensible, neighborly community." Granville Hicks, *Small Town* (New York: The Macmillan Co, 1946), 75. In the next thirty years, however, Roxborough become a bedroom community for the nearby town of Troy as well as becoming dependent on a summer tourist trade. Thus, by 1945, despite the continuity between past and present embodied in Roxborough's older, lifelong residents, those residents "know perfectly well that Roxborough is less of a community than it was thirty years ago . . ." Ibid., 87-88.

might – transform itself into something *other* than itself (i.e., something bigger and more urban). In addition, Hollywood’s idealization of the turn-of-the-century small town was increasingly undercut in the years following World War II by its celebration – in such films as *The Sainted Sisters* (1947), *Summer Holiday* (1948), and *Excuse My Dust* (1951) – of the technology by which those towns were to be transformed from their nineteenth-century into their twentieth-century form, such as indoor plumbing, electricity, the telephone, and motion pictures.

The technology exploited most predominantly, however, was one with ever-increasing importance to mid-century audiences and one having a similar impact on the American countryside – and conceptions of time, travel, and distance – that it had had at the turn of the century: the automobile. In most instances, these Hollywood films celebrate the early automobile as harbinger of mid-century life and simultaneously use its “primitiveness” as the basis for humor directed toward younger audiences. Both the celebration and gentle ridicule of the early automobile direct the audience’s attention away from the films’ diegetic present to their future (i.e., the audience’s present), the moment by which the exciting promise of the automobile, so laughingly unmet by early models, presumably has been achieved.

This forward-looking aspect of these films’ representation of technology, and particularly of the automobile, undermines both the “good past” and “bad present” components of the typical nostalgic opposition. By in effect embedding the origins of modernity in a prettified setting which, while positioned as central to America’s national identity, is simultaneously marked as innocent (unsophisticated, gullible, backward) and both historically and generically inconsequential, these films position the turn-of-the-century small town as America’s childhood self. This is a self to be looked back upon fondly (with perhaps some embarrassment at the

magnitude of that fondness) but not re-experienced, its obsolescence unquestioned and its primary value being its efforts toward achieving adulthood. The result is that in their representation of technology, these films, rather than being constructed to inspire longing for the past, must be read instead as predominantly offering a reassurance to mid-century audiences of America's "maturity," and of the superiority of that maturity over its childhood, however charming; in short, in Davis's terms, they must be read as presenting audiences the opportunity for a collective sigh of satisfaction at "how far we've come."

Technology

By the mid-1940s, a regularized set of textual markers had been established to indicate the turn-of-the-century setting of a Hollywood film: the tandem bicycle, the barbershop quartet, the bustle or leg-o'-mutton sleeve or peach-basket hat, the bandstand on the village green. One marker consistently appearing in the mise-en-scene of these films is late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century technology, often of a type or in a form no longer in use at the time of the film's production. Many times, this technology serves no narrative purpose within the film. Rather, it is simply inserted into a scene as a sort of throw-away curiosity, as what one might characterize as local "time" color, with the effect of grounding the film in a particular time period and differentiating that time period from the audience's present-day. Thus, for instance, characters attend a magic lantern slide presentation in *Centennial Summer* (1946) (set in 1876 Philadelphia), and a similar slide show is part of River City's 1912 Fourth of July celebration in *The Music Man* (1962). Characters view images in a stereoscopes in *Sweet Adeline* (1935) (1890), *Pollyanna* (1960) (c. 1913), and *Summer Magic* (1963) (c. 1915), and they watch a silent movie in *All the*

Way Home (1963). The Smiths' kitchen in *Meet Me in St. Louis* sports a water pump rather than a sink and faucet. In other films, this early technology plays a narrative role, such as the use of the gramophone in *So Dear to My Heart* (1948) and *On Moonlight Bay* in family or courtship rituals, respectively, a young boy's adopting the plot of a silent movie as his excuse for classroom misbehavior (*On Moonlight Bay*), or the telephone's potential for transmitting a marriage proposal in *Meet Me in St. Louis*.¹³⁸ In every case, it seems evident that filmmakers assumed mid-century audiences would read this technology, together with the film's other period markers, as situating the film's story in the decades immediately before or after 1900.

Rather than viewing this technology as a picturesque reminder of a more "charming" way of life, however, studio publicity and promotional materials, and contemporaneous film reviews, often see this antiquated technology as an object of humor. The joke lies in the technology's inefficiency and unfamiliar appearance, which are automatically understood to render it inferior to its modern-day counterparts.¹³⁹ At the same time, while some characters may express ambivalence or even hostility to this technology, its overall representation in these films is nearly always positive; however "primitive" and flawed, it is embraced by the films' primary characters and is otherwise marked as something to be celebrated, as a beneficially progressive step in the lives of men. Indeed, while Orson Welles' wartime *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942) mourns

¹³⁸ Similarly, in some cases early technology became the subject of songs or musical stage performances in post-war Hollywood backstage musicals set at or around the turn of the last century. For instance, "Hello, Frisco, Hello," is a number performed twice in the film of the same name, *Hello, Frisco, Hello* (TCF 1943), both times with the performers singing their "conversation" over an on-stage telephone.

¹³⁹ For example, the final race between rudimentary automobiles in *Excuse My Dust* is heralded as "a socko comedy set-up . . . which draws a lot of its humor from the sight of such incongruous carriages as compared to modern-day speed wagons." *Variety (W)*, May 23, 1951.

the coming of the automobile and its effect on the film's mid-sized town, Hollywood's late 1940s and 1950s representation of small-town America at the turn of the century uniformly depicts it as enthusiastically casting its lot with "modern" technology of the day.

This embrace of new technology and its attendant modernity is presented obliquely in RKO's gothic "dark old house" film, *The Spiral Staircase* (1946), where technological growth or progress is the thematic metaphor for the heroine's personal narrative. In adapting the 1941 novel *Some Must Watch* to the screen, the studio made two major changes: First, the setting was transposed from modern-day, rural England to a New England small town in 1904. Second, the main character, Helen, is transformed from a young woman with all her faculties to one who has been rendered mute by childhood trauma. Extant studio records do not reveal why these changes were made; early in 1941, RKO's reader lauded the novel as

[a] very exciting, horror murder story. Full of suspense and creepy thrills. I think this would be a better picture than THE LADY VANISHES. It is a superb vehicle for Hitchcock who would get the proper atmosphere and terror with which the book is full.¹⁴⁰

The comparison to Alfred Hitchcock's *The Lady Vanishes* (1938) is not accidental; *Some Must Watch*, published in 1933, was written by Ethel Lina White, who also wrote the 1936 novel, *The Wheel Spins*, on which *The Lady Vanishes* was based. At this stage in the acquisition process, then, the reader's comparison of *Some Must Watch* to *The Lady Vanishes*, a film set in modern times, suggests no anticipation of the film's having a period setting. Further, rather than becoming a Hitchcock vehicle, the film was assigned to Robert Siodmak, who had directed a number of films later to be classified *film noir*, such as *Phantom Lady* (1944), *The Suspect*

¹⁴⁰ Dorothy Fletcher, *Some Must Watch* coverage, January 17, 1941, RKO files, University of California Los Angeles Arts Special Collection ("UCLA Arts Special Collection").

(1945), and *The Strange Affair of Uncle Harry* (1945),¹⁴¹ which might again suggest that the film would retain the novel's modern-day setting. When Mel Dinelli was assigned the task of writing the screenplay in the summer of 1945, however, he produced a script that includes both the turn-of-the-century, small-town setting and Helen's disability.¹⁴²

Whatever the reason for the transposition of the novel's story into what one critic called "Lizzie Bordon territory,"¹⁴³ the result enabled a foregrounding of turn-of-the-century technology, which in fact bookends the film. The film begins in the small town's hotel, a room of which serves as a movie theater, during the showing of a silent film. Helen, the mute, first appears in a medium shot, sitting in the audience watching the film. The camera then tracks upward, "through" the ceiling into a hotel room above, where a silent voyeur – shown only in close-up as a giant eye – hides in a closet, watching a partially disabled women¹⁴⁴ as she dresses, and then emerges from the closet to strangle her to death. The film ends with Helen's not only having

¹⁴¹ Christened by some as the architect of *film noir*, Siodmak went on to direct such other *film noir* motion pictures as *The Killers* (1946), *The Dark Mirror* (1946), *Time Out of Mind* (1947), *Cry of the City* (1949), *The Great Sinner* (1949), *The File on Thelma Jordan* (1950), *The Whistle at Eaton Falls* (1951), *Card of Fate* (1954), *The Rats* (1955), *The Devil Came at Night* (1957), *Dorothea Angermann* (1958), and *The Rough and the Smooth* (1959).

¹⁴² Estimating Script, SOME MUST WATCH, July 12, 1945, RKO files, UCLA Arts Special Collection. Although this script contains the notation that some changes were made on July 17, 1945, RKO's Budget of Production Cost for the film indicates that the script actually shot was that dated July 12, 1945 and that Mel Demelli's assignment to write the screenplay had run from June 1 to August 11, 1945. Extant studio records also include a Final Script dated August 7, 1945, with relatively minor changes from the July 12, 1945 script, which is essentially identical to the final film. *Some Must Watch*, Final Script, August 7, 1945. RKO files, UCLA Arts Special Collection.

¹⁴³ "The Current Cinema," *New Yorker*, February 9, 1946.

¹⁴⁴ The woman walks with a lim

escaped the murderer – now dead – but having found her voice; the film’s final lines are her only lines in the film, identifying herself as she uses the telephone to call the man she loves to have him come take her away from the dark old house in which the majority of the film takes place.

Thus, over the course of the film, Helen is transformed from defective or incomplete to unimpaired and whole. In the first shot in which she appears, sitting in the theater audience, she is associated with silent film, even before the audience becomes aware of her muteness. (It was, in fact, this disability – her muteness – that made her the target of the murderer, a serial killer engaged in ridding his environment of the physically defective.) The last shot of the film, however, is a medium shot of Helen speaking into the telephone. In this shot, Helen is associated with the telephone, a technology that – at least in 1904 – requires sound to function. In between these bookend shots comes Helen’s earlier attempt to use the telephone to call for help, which fails because of her inability to speak; at that earlier point in the film, Helen’s disability renders the telephone a useless technology, or Helen herself ineffective because she cannot use that technology. At the end of the film, however, Helen is complete – capable of producing sound, unlike the “incomplete” silent cinema – and thus fully capable of engaging effectively with modern technology. Her ability to use technology (the telephone) demonstrates her recovery, her wholeness, her *lack* of defect. Throughout the film, silent looking – the silent film, Helen’s mute, watchful presence in the household, the killer’s voyeurism¹⁴⁵ – is associated with death, disease,

¹⁴⁵ Until the killer’s identity is revealed, late in the film, he appears on screen only as a giant eye, watching his intended victims. At one point, the film cuts from the close-up of the killer’s eye to a subjective shot of what he sees: Helen looking at herself in a full-length mirror, her face lacking a mouth

and defectiveness, while speech and sound¹⁴⁶ – are associated with life, health, and completeness. Speech and successful engagement with technology are also associated the *future*, as Helen’s phone call is positioned as the literal beginning of her new life with her soon-to-be-husband. Thus, the film implicitly champions what it posits as a *healthy* relationship to technology, one which rejects outdated and “incomplete” technologies such as silent cinema in favor of the “complete” technologies that had become commonplace by the late 1940s.

More often, however, the turn-of-the-century small town’s valorization of modern technology is explicit rather than metaphorical. Thus, in contrast to the symbolism employed in *The Spiral Staircase*, the equation of new technology with health is quite literal in Paramount’s 1948 comedy, *The Sainted Sisters*. Specifically, *The Sainted Sisters* explicitly champions technology as the cure for poverty and despair. *The Sainted Sisters* was based on an unproduced stage play entitled *The Sainted Sisters* by Elisa Bialk and Alden Nash (which was, in turn, based on a published short story by Elisa Bialk, “The Sainted Sisters of Sandy Creek”), the rights to which Paramount purchased in January 1947.¹⁴⁷ As was the case with *Some Must Watch*, the stage play, *The Sainted Sisters*, was not a period piece but was set in a Quebec fishing village “[a]

¹⁴⁶ Helen’s voice returns when, attacked by the killer, she screams in terror, attracting the attention of another in the household, who then shoots and kills him.

¹⁴⁷ Richard Sokolove to Sidney Justin, January 6, 1947. Paramount Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (“Motion Picture Academy Library”). In June 1946, while the studio had the property under option, Milton Krims was assigned to write the screenplay, Frank Cleaver to Mr. Simpson and Mr. McGuire, July 10, 1946. Paramount Collection, Academy Library, which he completed in November. Thereafter, a number of other screenwriters took their turn rewriting the script, the final version of which was completed in October 1947. Final screenwriting credit was given to Harry Clark and N. Richard Nash, while Mildred (Mildret) Lord was given an adaptation credit. Principal photography took place from October 13, 1947 to November 21, 1947. Daily Production Report, November 21, 1947, Paramount Collection, Motion Picture Academy Library.

few years ago.”¹⁴⁸ One of the sisters appears to gain and lose weight rapidly, depending on whether she has the sisters’ stolen money hidden in her clothes. In a March 1947 version of the screenplay, the story is set in present-day Canada,¹⁴⁹ and the device of one of the heroine’s hiding stolen money in her clothes is retained: “Polly has a weird build that zooms out as if she were wearing a bustle.”¹⁵⁰ By September 1947, however, a subsequent draft has changed the film’s setting from a present-day Canadian fishing village to Grove Falls, Maine in 1895.¹⁵¹ Extant studio records do not indicate a reason for the change, although it may have been made simply to allow the sisters to hide their ill-gotten gains in an actual bustle and thus avoid distorting the actresses’ figures in a manner unnatural to the diegesis.

In a plot created whole cloth for the film,¹⁵² 1895 Grove Falls is what one character calls “a penny-grubbing, dirt-poor town,” populated by characters twelve months behind in their rent or financially devastated by the death of a cow. Only one character, Hester Rivercomb, has money, and while her nephew, Sam, has plans for a local electric power plant, which he claims

¹⁴⁸ Elisa Bialk and Alden Nash, *The Sainted Sisters*, unproduced stage play. Paramount Collection, Motion Picture Academy Library.

¹⁴⁹ Eleanore Griffin and Joseph Hoffman, *The Sainted Sisters* script, March 19, 1947. Paramount Script Collection, Motion Picture Academy Library.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ *The Sainted Sisters* script, September 20, 1947. Paramount Script collection, Motion Picture Academy Library.

¹⁵² In the stage play, the sisters use their ill-begotten wealth to help various members of the fishing community, leading the town to believe that they can miraculously produce money when it is needed. Their “miracles” are individual, however, and they are not called upon to “save” the entire town. Further, set in modern times, the storyline does not involve the bringing of electricity to the community.

would be the town's salvation, Hester is "against anything that means moving ahead" and refuses to invest in Sam's project. Thus, twentieth-century technology is set up as the literal savior of the turn-of-the-century small town. Sam claims that electric "[p]ower means new industries in Grove Falls, jobs for everyone. Schools. A modern hospital. We've just got to have electricity. If we don't – if we don't – weeds'll grow on Main Street." After the sisters have donated their stolen cash toward construction of Grove Falls' power plant and paid their debt to society by going to prison for their initial theft, they return to town to be reunited with their love interests. The couples' final clinches are followed by the last shot in the film: an electric sign reading, "Merry Christmas/The Power and Light Company of Grove Falls."

In only one respect does the film express ambivalence toward electricity, the specific aspect of modernity Grove Falls seeks so desperately. Earlier in the film, before the town has obtained the money to build the power plant, Veronica Lake's character sings a song entitled, "Please Put Out the Light":

Since light became electric,
 You're sure to see a sight;
 But when we spoon,
 We want the moon,
 Please put out the light.

The couple in the corner
 Should not be seen too bright;
 Mister Edison
 You killed the fun,
 Please put out the light.

Ironically, an instrumental version of this song plays under the final image of the electric power

company sign and during the end credits that follow.¹⁵³ Despite this gentle poke at the “downside” of electricity, however, the thrust of the narrative toward not simply the benefits but the *necessity* of electric power – essential to Grove Falls’ very survival – dominates the film.

In other instances, the reassurance turn-of-the-century small-town films offer consists not only of the celebration of new technology in the films’ diegesis, by which characters’ enthusiasm for or success with that technology *aligns* them *with* modern-day audiences (and vice versa), but also the humorous treatment of that technology as “primitive,” less reliable and effectual than its mid-century counterpart, an invitation to modern-day audiences to enjoy a certain sense of superiority over the films’ characters or, at the very least, to congratulate themselves on the “advanced” state of their own, mid-century technology over that depicted in the films.

The single technological advance which serves this reassuring role most predominantly in Hollywood’s post-war representation of the turn of the century small town is the automobile. That the automobile should serve as this identificatory link between turn-of-the-century and mid-century America in these films is not surprising. As recorded in such works as the Lynds’ study of Middletown (Muncie, Indiana), the automobile was, at the least, the one innovation of the pre-World War I transitional era whose effect on small town life was the most immediately visible. As the Lynds report, between 1895 and 1929, the automobile transformed the typical Sunday from a day spent hosting or visiting neighbors and relatives to one which the nuclear family spent taking drives; the increased mobility and independence the automobile offered similarly affected adolescence and courtship rituals, even as it was the impetus for the paving of small-town streets

¹⁵³ The irony here is quite playful, however; presumably it was not lost on 1947 audiences that electricity had not actually “killed the fun” and that, indeed, one venue electricity had made available to “spooning” couples was the movie theater itself.

and caused multiple changes in, for example, retail and shopping practices and in municipal housing and growth patterns.¹⁵⁴ Fifty years later, the automobile again served a key material and symbolic role in transitions occurring in post-war America. Automobile production having been suspended during the war, demand for new cars was high once the war ended; this demand dovetailed with government and industry efforts to stave off post-war recession by promoting consumer spending on American-made goods, thus encouraging Americans to spend the savings they had accumulated during the war when the combination of low unemployment and austerity measures meant that nearly everyone had income but there was little for anyone to buy. The pervasiveness of the automobile in turn contributed to the growth of the suburb, with its attendant shift in retail and entertainment activity out of downtown to outlying areas, and was, of course, the justification for President Eisenhower's initiative in developing the national interstate highway system. Moreover, its mobility and visibility, as well as the aesthetic appeal and technological innovation emphasized in the automobile industry's marketing, quickly made the automobile one of the most prominent symbols of post-war status and material success.

The role of the automobile in Hollywood's "nostalgic" representation of the turn-of-the-century small town can be traced through a series of films released during and after the war, beginning with *The Magnificent Ambersons*, released in 1942, and concluding with the 1951 film, *Excuse My Dust*. In this progression, the automobile is transformed from an unwelcome harbinger of modernity and urbanization to a glorious symbol of progress and sophistication; it

¹⁵⁴ Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in American Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1929); Francaviglia, *Main Street Revisited*, 46-49; John A. Jakle, *The American Small Town: Twentieth-Century Place Images* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1982), 119-42.

serves as well as the marker by which the gaze of the American small town in these films is shifted from the past to the future, from what is being lost with the coming of new technology to what is being gained. It is a progression as well from one of the few Hollywood films to paint a truly “nostalgic” portrait of the turn-of-the-century small town – in the sense of a longing for a lost time and place – to the post-war construction of the turn-of-the-century small town as a time and place eager to be left behind, and as thematically, narratively, visually, and aurally aligned with the mid-century America of its audience.

Orson Welles’ *The Magnificent Ambersons* was released during the first year of the United States’ involvement in World War II, a time of uncertainty in which the Allies’ ultimate victory was by no means guaranteed.¹⁵⁵ The film was based on Booth Tarkington’s novel of the same name, a work which is awash in memory and loss. After earning acclaim for his first novel, *A Gentleman from Indiana* (1899), a laudatory account of a fictional small town in Indiana, Tarkington enjoyed further success with his Tom Sawyeresque young people’s novels, *Penrod* (1914) and *Penrod and Sam* (1916), and with *Seventeen* (1917) (all set in small Midwestern towns). In 1918, he published *The Magnificent Ambersons*, which won the 1919 Pulitzer Prize. Here he turned his attention from the very small Midwestern town to the mid-sized town in the process of becoming a city; the model for the unnamed town that is the subject of *The Magnificent Ambersons* was Tarkington’s lifelong home, Indianapolis.

In both the novel and the film, the Amberson family’s fall from its position of wealth and social prominence proceeds inversely to the town’s development into a city, both of which are

¹⁵⁵ 1942 was the year as well in which Americans began to feel the effects of the nation’s participation in World War II. For instance, nationwide food rationing was implemented in the spring of 1942. (*The Magnificent Ambersons* was released in July.)

presented as distinct losses. Robert Carringer argues, in fact, that one reason Welles was attracted to Tarkington's novel was its nostalgia for the time of Welles' boyhood.¹⁵⁶ Certainly, a sense of a remembered lost time and place is conveyed in the film in part through Orson Welles' voice-over narration describing, for instance, the Amberson ball as "the last of the great, long-remembered dances that everybody talked about," held at a time where the upper classes, at least, "had time enough for everything."¹⁵⁷

The primary means by which the film's dual narrative arcs – the decline of the Ambersons and the town's becoming a city – are conveyed is through transportation. The film begins with a long shot of a multi-storied Victorian home and the street on which it sits. In a long, single take, traffic passes back and forth in front of the house at pedestrian and horse-drawn speed, while a lilting waltz is performed by violin and harp on the soundtrack. A horse-drawn streetcar enters the frame from the left, runs over something on the street, and stops, while a woman calls from an upstairs window of the house to flag down the streetcar and then comes out of the house to board. The streetcar then proceeds on its way, exiting the frame to the right. Simultaneously, Welles' narration is heard on the soundtrack:

The magnificence of the Ambersons began in 1873. Their splendor lasted through all the years that saw their midland town spread and darken into a city. In that town and in those days all the women who wore silk or velvet knew all the other women who wore silk or velvet. And everybody knew everybody else's

¹⁵⁶ Robert L. Carringer, *The Magnificent Ambersons: A Reconstruction* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press 1993).

¹⁵⁷ V. F. Perkins argues, in fact, that it is Welles' narration describing the Amberson ball which introduces the mood of loss that prevails through the rest of the film: "Since nothing so far has indicated any loss of magnificence a new mood is set by the word 'last' and by Welles' delivery of the phrases that follow it in a heart-catching tone of regret." V. F. Perkins, *The Magnificent Ambersons* (London: BFI Publishing 1999), 45.

family horse and carriage. The only public conveyance was the streetcar. A lady could whistle to it from an upstairs window, and the car would halt at once and wait for her, while she shut the window, put on her hat and coat, went downstairs, found an umbrella, told the girl what to have for dinner, and came forth from the house. Too slow for us nowadays, because the faster we're carried, the less time we have to spare.

In contrast, one of the last sequences in the film is a montage of tracking, low-angle shots of industrial plants, warehouses, run-down frame houses and apartment buildings, power lines, and an overhead sign reading, "Automobiles Slow," all shown from George Minafer's point of view on his "last walk home." Eerie, unsettling music plays under Welles' voiceover:

George Amberson Minafer walked homeward slowly through what seemed to be the strange streets of a strange city. For the town was growing and changing. It was heaving up in the middle, incredibly. It was spreading, incredibly. And as it heaved and spread, it befouled itself and darkened its sky. This was the last walk home he was ever to take up National Avenue to Amberson Addition and the big old house at the foot of Amberson Boulevard. Tomorrow they were to move out. Tomorrow everything would be gone.

Two scenes later, George has been struck by an automobile; other characters learn of the accident from a newspaper article with the headline, "Auto Casualties Mount/Serious Accident," accompanied by a caricature of a speeding Model T. The low-angle shot of the accident's aftermath is overcrowded with figures – ambulance workers carrying George offscreen on a stretcher, the automobile's driver, a policeman, curious onlookers, and indifferent passersby trying to make their way past the accident – and with the sounds of street and traffic noise, the shouting of the driver and the policeman; one of the last shots in the film, it could not contrast more strongly with the film's initial long shot of the Victorian home and the leisurely paced traffic passing before it.

Thus, the specific technology that serves the narrative and symbolic purpose of

representing progress-as-loss is the automobile. Early in the film, the widowed Eugene Morgan, an automobile inventor, returns to the town of his youth to build an automobile manufacturing plant. He renews his acquaintance with his first love, Isabel Amberson Minafer, and her sister-in-law, Fanny Minafer. Throughout the film, the passage of time and the rise in Eugene's fortunes are conveyed through Eugene's appearance in a succession of early automobiles, each more "advanced" than the last. To be sure, the film's presentation of the automobile is not without a certain measure of ambivalence. For one thing, to the extent the film has a protagonist, it is Eugene, who is handsome, urbane, and increasingly prosperous, and he is the one character consistently associated with the automobile. Further, in a sequence in which Eugene's taking Isabel and Fanny on an automobile ride results in the vehicle's breaking down and later having to be pushed through a snowdrift, a similar mishap occurs during the simultaneous horse-drawn sleigh ride taken by Isabel's son George and Eugene's daughter, Lucy. George's horse bolts, upsetting the sleigh and revealing horse-drawn transportation to be no less dangerous or unreliable than the automobile. Finally, although the film ends with George's having been struck and injured by an automobile, this event ultimately reconciles George with Lucy and allows Eugene to come to terms with Isabel's death.¹⁵⁸

Nonetheless, the predominant tone by which the development of the automobile is presented is one of loss. V. F. Perkins notes, for instance, that in the simultaneous horseless carriage and sleigh ride scene, where Welles' filming in an icemaking plant meant that the actors' and horse's breath is visible in the air, this

¹⁵⁸ This resolution, of course, is the one created by RKO in its drastic editing of Welles' original version of the film. See generally, Perkins, *The Magnificent Ambersons*, 12-13; Carringer, *The Magnificent Ambersons: A Reconstruction*.

vapour creates an image of new-minted purity to contrast with the smoke that befouls the air as it issues from the exhaust of Eugene's horseless carriage. The negative side of this contrast belongs to the motor car, whose ultimate triumph is known to us. The characters, in these moments of happy ignorance, look threatened as their world displays to our eyes so clear a token of its doom.¹⁵⁹

The certain end of the characters' anachronistic way of life is implied as well in the punctuation Welles uses to end the scene: As the automobile and its laughing, singing passengers disappear over a hilltop, the screen is rendered black through the silent-movie device of the iris. This quotation of an outmoded film practice reinforces the viewer's knowledge that the diegetic moment thus ended is equally a relic, equally wedded to outmoded traditions and practices long since abandoned.

In addition, after Isabel's husband dies, the growing attraction between Isabel and Eugene – which represents a loss both to the spinster Fanny and to Isabel's spoiled son George – is explicitly linked with the automobile in a scene in which Eugene gives Isabel, Fanny, and George a tour of his automobile factory. Later, at Isabel's dinner party, guests laughingly chide Eugene for the devaluation of in-town property threatened by new, far-flung road-building which has been made both possible and necessary by the automobiles he has sold. This sense of loss is conveyed most explicitly, however, in the dinner party exchange between George and Eugene. Throughout the film, George has disparaged the automobile (pronouncing it with the emphasis on the third syllable: *automobile*) as a short-lived, foolhardy venture; now feeling threatened by the loss to Eugene of his mother's affection, he strikes out at Eugene by attacking the automobile as “a useless nuisance” that “had no business to be invented.” Eugene responds,

With all their speed forward, [automobiles] may be a step backward in civilization.

¹⁵⁹ Perkins, *The Magnificent Ambersons*, 47-48.

May be that they won't add to the beauty of the world or the life of men's souls. I'm not sure. But automobiles have come. And almost all outward things are going to be different because of what they bring. They're going to alter war, and they're going to alter peace. And I think men's minds are going to be changed in subtle ways because of automobiles. And it may be that George is right. May be that in ten or twenty years from now, if we can see the inward change in men by that time, I shouldn't be able to defend the gasoline engine but would have to agree with George that automobiles had no business to be invented.

This is a moment in which Eugene's loss of Isabel to George – accomplished by George's first taking Isabel for an extended stay in Europe and then preventing Eugene from seeing her when she returns home to die – is foreshadowed by Eugene's polite but palpably pained concession to George's position on the automobile. Tied as it is with what will prove to be Eugene's hopeless attempt to reunite with Isabel, the lost love of his youth, Eugene's speech suggests a broader regret at the irrevocable effects of time and change. As is the case with all nostalgic texts, the nostalgia explicitly expressed in *The Magnificent Ambersons* – for the time when “all the women who wore velvet or silk” attended “the last of the great, long-remembered dances that everybody talked about” – is for a *specific* moment enjoyed by a *specific* group. Here, that group is mid-America's privileged class, indeed a specific family within that class: the Ambersons, whose affluence was no doubt obtained at least in part through the exploitation of others and certainly was not universally shared by everyone in town. As a nostalgia for a lost life of privilege, *The Magnificent Amberson's* nostalgia is thus one a viewer can resist intellectually even if seduced emotionally by the film's elegiac tone; Perkins argues, in fact, that in the combination of script, cinematography, and Welles' voiceover narration, “[a] particular achievement of [*The Magnificent Ambersons*] is to have found a form that dramatises the awareness that an attachment to a past, and the piercing sense of its loss, is not dependent on a

judgment that it was better than the present, or that its values were ones we should wish to recover.”¹⁶⁰ I contend that the visual and thematic linking of the decline of the Ambersons’ fortunes with the advance of urbanization via the symbol of the automobile in particular enlarges the film’s sense of loss to something beyond the Ambersons’ being stripped of their privileged lifestyle to a more generalized regret at modernity’s extinguishment of some implied, unarticulated quality of life known by – and consequently lost to – all strata of society. Thus, insofar as nostalgia is defined as a *longing* for a lost time and place, *The Magnificent Ambersons* is an overtly nostalgic text, elegizing the small town of the late nineteenth century as lost to *all* with the coming of the twentieth-century modernization, urbanization, and mechanization succinctly symbolized by Eugene’s automobile.

In the nine years after the release of *The Magnificent Ambersons*, MGM produced three turn-of-the-century small-town musical comedies that progressively deny, discard, and eventually replace this lament with a celebration of the automobile: *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944), *Summer Holiday* (1948), and *Excuse My Dust* (1951). The first two of these films can be traced back to a Depression-era turn to nostalgia for the turn of the century and particularly the turn-of-the-century small town, a pendulum swing from 1920s literature collectively known as the Revolt from the Village most famously exemplified by Sinclair Lewis’ *Main Street*.¹⁶¹ The first of these 1930s literary and dramatic reminiscences of turn-of-the-century America was Eugene O’Neill’s stage play *Ah, Wilderness!*, set in a small fictional Connecticut town in 1906, which the

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 68.

¹⁶¹ Published in 1920, *Main Street* chronicles the years 1912 through the end of World War I in Gropher Prairie, Minnesota.

playwright wrote in 1932 and which premiered in New York City in 1933.¹⁶² In 1934, Henry Seidel Canby published his memoir of growing up in Wilmington, Delaware, *The Age of Confidence: Life in the Nineties*. Although set in New York City rather than a small town, Clarence Day's books, *Life With Father* (1935) and *Life With Mother* (1937), were comedic remembrances of Day's family during his 1880s childhood, and the Broadway play based on those books, *Life With Father* by Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse, premiered in 1939. Thornton Wilder's hugely popular stage play, *Our Town*, premiered in 1938 and, as has been seen, was generally viewed as a nostalgic look back at the New England small town of 1901. In 1939, Welles' Mercury Players performed *The Magnificent Ambersons* on radio.¹⁶³ At the end of the decade, in June 1941, Sally Benson began publishing her Kensington stories, fictionalized accounts of her turn-of-the-century childhood in St. Louis, in the *New Yorker* magazine. Having lost out to Warner Bros. for the film rights to the stage play *Life With Father* and seeking a comparable property, MGM settled on Benson's Kensington stories, which would reach the

¹⁶² The play opened at Broadway's Guild Theatre on October 2, 1933, and ran for 289 performances.

¹⁶³ Perkins, *The Magnificent Ambersons*, 11. Thus, Welles' decision to direct *The Magnificent Ambersons* could have been part of this general nostalgia for the turn-of-the-century small town, although his fondness for Tarkington's novels has been well documented, and more than one commentator has pointed to aspects of Welles' own past that arguably account for his attraction to this particular novel. See, e.g., Carringer, *The Magnificent Ambersons: A Reconstruction*, 7. In any event, RKO agreed to the project in mid-1941, and Welles spent July and August of 1941 working on the script, the final version of which is dated October 15, 1941. After five weeks' rehearsal, principal photography occurred from October 31, 1941 through January 3, 1942. Between January and July 1942, when *The Magnificent Ambersons* was released, the infamous mutilation of the film occurred. See generally, Carringer, *The Magnificent Ambersons: A Reconstruction*.

screen as *Meet Me in St. Louis*.¹⁶⁴ MGM had acquired the screen rights to *Ah, Wilderness!* shortly after its 1933 premiere and had released a film version in 1935; a decade later, on the heels of the success of *Meet Me in St. Louis*, the studio decided to produce *Summer Holiday*, a musical adaptation of the 1935 film.

Indeed, *Meet Me in St. Louis* and *Summer Holiday*, both produced by Arthur Freed, are a sort of Freed Unit *Pinkie* and *Blue Boy*, both based on works of nostalgic memory, both set in small towns shortly after the turn of the last century, both centering on a white, comfortably middle-class family who live in picturesque surroundings and face no significant problems, both consisting of narratives in which few events occur, and both films visually idyllic: *Meet Me in St. Louis* reproduces in meticulous detail the ornately ornamental home of Benson's childhood, *Summer Holiday* includes such images as a *tableau vivant* of a croquet game on a summer's lawn, and both films costume their female characters as so many colorful blossoms, bedecked in yards of lace, ruffles, and ribbons. Further, each is a vehicle for one half of MGM's most popular juvenile song-and-dance couple, Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney. As Garland and Rooney were linked in the public's mind by their performances together in three Andy Hardy films¹⁶⁵ and a number of successful and heavily promoted musicals,¹⁶⁶ it seems clear that in *Summer Holiday*, a property

¹⁶⁴ In conjunction with MGM's film, the twelve stories – one for each month of a calendar year – were compiled in a book entitled *Meet Me in St. Louis*, published in 1945.

¹⁶⁵ In three of the Andy Hardy films – *Love Finds Andy Hardy* (1938), *Andy Hardy Meets a Debutante* (1940), and *Life Begins for Andy Hardy* (1941) – Garland joined Rooney, appearing as Andy's platonic friend, Betsy Booth.

¹⁶⁶ Rooney and Garland were paired in the musical, *Babes in Arms* (1939), which was such a hit that when the two toured Washington, DC, New Haven, Hartford, and New York City to publicize it and Garland's other major 1939 release, *The Wizard of Oz*, they were "mobbed by thousands of cheering fans." Jane Ellen Jane Ellen Wayne, *The Leading Men of MGM* (New

comparable in many ways to *Meet Me in St. Louis*, Rooney was intended to duplicate Garland's success in the earlier film.¹⁶⁷

The source material for both films, the stage play *Ah, Wilderness!* and the Kensington stories, were very much the product of memory, and both were nostalgic works. Born in 1897, Benson was forty-four years old when the first of the Kensington stories was published. The stories reflect the wish-fulfillment at the heart of nostalgia in that, unlike the fictional Smiths, Benson's family did in fact move to New York, and so she did not attend the St. Louis World's Fair. The vividness of her memory of a home she had left thirty-eight years before and of events she and her sisters had purportedly experienced there bespeaks a profound attachment to a period of her life that ended when she was six years old; indeed, she provided MGM a three-page description of her family's St. Louis home in detail that is quite striking, reportedly the basis for the set design of the interiors of the Smith home in the film.¹⁶⁸ Benson's having prepared this

York: Carroll and Graf Publishers 2004), 248. In addition, Rooney was nominated for an Oscar for his *Babes in Arms* performance. Thereafter, Garland and Rooney co-starred in two more musicals, *Strike Up the Band* (1940) and *Girl Crazy* (1943).

¹⁶⁷ *Summer Holiday*'s 1948 release date is misleading because the film was shot in 1946, and the studio began work on it in late 1945. Indeed, the timing of the studio's initial work on a musical version of *Ah, Wilderness!* suggests that it was intended as a repeat of the successful formula of *Meet Me in St. Louis*, which premiered in December 1944 and played in theaters throughout most of 1945. The studio had owned the film rights to O'Neill's play since the mid-1930s, but it was only in late 1945, at the conclusion of the year of *Meet Me in St. Louis*'s enormous success, that MGM decided to attempt a musical version. In December 1945, MGM assigned Irving Brecher, the credited screenwriter on *Meet Me in St. Louis*, to begin work on the musical adaptation. Other indications that *Summer Holiday* was meant as the next *Meet Me in St. Louis* are that it was also an Arthur Freed production and that Ralph Blane, who wrote the song lyrics for *Meet Me in St. Louis*, was assigned to do the same for *Summer Holiday*.

¹⁶⁸ Sally Benson and Doris Gilbert, "'Meet Me in St. Louis'(add. material)," April 24 1942, MGM Script Collection, Motion Picture Academy Library.

description, as well as her writing the first version of the screenplay,¹⁶⁹ suggests an almost proprietary desire that the film “get it right” – that is, that her childhood memories be re-created “accurately,” or as accurately as her memory could make them – one effect of which would have been a cinematic re-experience of them.

As for *Ah, Wilderness!*, O’Neill made no bones about its nostalgic nature. Calling it a “Nostalgic Comedy”¹⁷⁰ and “a comedy of recollection,”¹⁷¹ he himself told a friend that the play’s “whole importance and reality depend on its conveying a mood of memory in exactly the right illuminating blend of wistful grin and lump in the throat.”¹⁷² In addition, he wrote that his purpose ““was to write a play true to the spirit of the American large small-town at the turn of the century. Its quality depended upon atmosphere, sentiment, an exact evocation of the mood of a dead past.””¹⁷³

The particular “dead past” O’Neill sought to evoke was his “breathless, innocent” romance with a young girl named Maibelle Scott, with whom he fell in love in the fall of 1912, while he was twenty-four and Maibelle, eighteen (making O’Neill seven years older than the

¹⁶⁹ Gerald Kaufman, *Meet Me in St. Louis* (London: BFI Publishing, 1994), 11-12.

¹⁷⁰ Charles A. Carpenter, “Eugene O’Neill, 1888-1953: A Descriptive Chronology of His Plays, Theatrical Career, and Dramatic Theories” in *Modern British, Irish, and American Drama: A Descriptive Chronology, 1865-1965*, <http://www.eoneill.com/essays/carpenter.htm> (2003).

¹⁷¹ Gilbert Gabriel, “Personal Element,” *New York American*, October 3, 1933. Gabriel characterizes the play as being set “in the year of innocence of 1906” and as “wistfully reminiscent of the days when family life was the life.” Ibid.

¹⁷² Carpenter, “Eugene O’Neill,” <http://www.eoneill.com/essays/carpenter.htm>.

¹⁷³ Tom Milne, *Rouben Mamoulian* (London: Thames & Hudson in ass’n with the BFI, 1969), 139.

fictional Richard Miller and Maibelle three years older than her fictional counterpart, Muriel).¹⁷⁴ One might argue that wish-fulfillment played an even greater role in *Ah, Wilderness!* than in the Kensington stories, for the play's family is modeled not on O'Neill's own family; in fact, his parents' marriage was stormy, his relationship with his alcoholic brother was troubled, and, in today's terms, his family would be characterized as dysfunctional. Thus, O'Neill called *Ah, Wilderness!* "the other side of the coin," meaning that it represented his fantasy of what his own youth might have been, rather than what he believed it to have been (as dramatized later in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*).¹⁷⁵ Further, O'Neill did not have a true home while he was growing up. His family spent its summers in a modest home in a small town in Connecticut, but his boyhood was otherwise spent either in hotels while his parents pursued theatrical careers or in boarding schools. In *Ah, Wilderness!*, however, O'Neill created the stable home and the harmonious and loving family (in which alcoholism is a merely harmless, humorous, and endearing character trait) that he never actually had. In this respect, the source on which *Summer Holiday* is based is nostalgic in the truest sense, as it presents a memory of experiences that quite literally never occurred.

Significantly, however, the source for *Meet Me in St. Louis* is a woman's recollections, whereas those from which *Summer Holiday* is derived are those of a man. As has been widely recognized, *Meet Me in St. Louis* is a matriarchal, female-dominated story, with Judy Garland as its star and with a supporting cast dominated by more established, familiar female names –

¹⁷⁴ Arthur Gelb and Barbara Gelb, *O'Neill* (New York: Harper, 1962), 205.

¹⁷⁵ "Eugene Gladstone O'Neill: A Short Biography," <http://www.eoneill.com/biography.htm> (2003).

Margaret O'Brien, Mary Astor, Marjorie Main – than male (Leon Ames being the only male in the cast likely to have wide name-recognition). In contrast, *Summer Holiday* is a male-dominated story. In an MGM press release, the film's director, Rouben Mamoulian, is credited with saying that his screen version had successfully shifted the focus of the story to that which O'Neill had intended: the teen-aged son, Richard.

As O'Neill wrote it, Mamoulian said to me, the emphasis was on the character of the adolescent boy looking at life and evaluating what he saw. In the stage play George M. Cohan was the star, in the film, Wallace Beery [sic: Lionel Barrymore]. Because of the strength of these actors, the values of the drama were distorted and we saw a father looking at a son instead of a son looking at his father.¹⁷⁶

In either instance, a father looking at his son or a son looking at his father, the primary axis around which the text revolves is the father-son relationship, in contrast to the various sister-sister relationships which structure *Meet Me in St. Louis*.

The gendered viewpoints of these two works, at least in part, underlie significant differences that, in the execution, exist between the two films. As Gerald Kaufman has noted, *Meet Me in St. Louis* is very much a film set in cozy interiors. In contrast, *Summer Holiday* is a film of *exteriors*. For instance, the "Skip to My Lou" young people's square dance is performed in the Smith home at night in *Meet Me in St. Louis*, while a comparable young people's dance ("Independence Day") in *Summer Holiday* occurs outdoors in a sunny park during a Fourth of July picnic. In fact, nearly all of the film's musical numbers were filmed outdoors.¹⁷⁷ This

¹⁷⁶ "Florabel Muir Says: Mamoulian Creates New Art Form for Screen," *Hollywood Citizen-News*, May 6, 1946.

¹⁷⁷ "With the exception of a few interiors, the opening ["Our Home Town"] was photographed outdoors, on the [MGM] New England Street. . . ." Hugh Fordin, *The World of Entertainment: Hollywood's Greatest Musicals* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1975),

emphasis on sunny, naturalistic exteriors in *Summer Holiday* is largely attributable to Mamoulian. His envisioned the film as “a distinctively American folk-pattern musical show,”¹⁷⁸ a key element of which was a color palette limited to “a very narrow chromatic range – various degrees of yellow, beige and green,” which Mamoulian considered “to be the colors of “Americana” – like Thomas [Hart] Benton, John [Steuart] Curry and Grant Wood.”¹⁷⁹ Thus, while *Meet Me in St. Louis* is painted in saturated jewel tones, too intense to be real, *Summer Holiday*’s palette consists of these unobtrusive, sun-bleached pastels, which both echo and blend into the foliage of the film’s exterior scenes.

A certain gendering of the two films’ representation of technology occurs as well, insofar as ambivalence toward technology might be stereotypically characterized as a feminine reaction and embrace of new technology stereotypically viewed as masculine. *Meet Me in St. Louis* does, of course, contain a hint of modernism. The Smiths’ home has indoor plumbing, for instance, and more significantly, a telephone. Moreover, the World’s Fair itself is positioned as an incarnation of the wonders of modernity, its very presence in St. Louis not only bestowing on the city status and glamour but serving as a harbinger of the city’s future growth into something grander and

198. The “Stanley Steamer” number was filmed on location in Irvine Park, while the “Independence Day” Fourth of July picnic was filmed in Pasadena’s Busch Gardens. Ibid. at 199-200. Similarly, although they are first seen in an ice cream parlor as the final participants in the film’s introductory song, “Our Home Town,” Rooney and his love interest, Gloria De Haven, leave the parlor to walk, sing, and dance through a park for the film’s second musical number, “Afraid to Fall in Love.” The only musical number in the film that occurs exclusively in an interior set is the “Weary Blues” number in which the “chorus girl” Belle attempts to seduce Richard in the back room of a bar.

¹⁷⁸ Fordin, *The World of Entertainment*, 189.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

more technologically progressive than it currently is.

At the same time, however, the film's representation of technology is highly ambivalent, as reflected most obviously in the family's relationship to the telephone. Historically, the film captures a moment when telephone technology requires users to shout over the line¹⁸⁰ and when the protocols for telephone use were being developed. For instance, the telephone call's status as a public or private event was still being negotiated, as evidenced by the telephone's location in the family dining room and the family's sitting as audience to Rose's conversation with Warren, as well as the telephone's ability to confer on Rose – as the recipient of a long-distance call – public admiration and status.¹⁸¹ Thus, the telephone is a novelty rather than a tool integrated into its users' lives; Mr. Smith, annoyed at dinner's being interrupted by a telephone call, threatens to have the phone taken out, a move which, in 1903, might still have been an option one might reasonably consider, even if in reality, it was one which a middle-class family such as the Smiths would never take.

Moreover, at this moment, the telephone is at once a mechanism that can be used in service of tradition and an instrument subject to distrust and ridicule: Rose and Esther expect that Warren's purpose in making the long-distance phone call is to propose to Rose, while the family's

¹⁸⁰ These technological flaws are, of course, the source of humor, as when Rose shouts so loudly over the telephone that her mother hurries to shut the window to avoid disturbing the neighbors (or making them privy to Warren's courtship of Rose), and when despite the shouting, Warren, calling from New York, exclaims enthusiastically that it sounds as if Rose were in the next room.

¹⁸¹ When despite expectations, Warren fails to propose to Rose during the telephone call, Esther transforms Rose's humiliating disappointment into triumph by observing that Rose was probably the only girl in St. Louis whom a Harvard man had called long distance just to inquire about her health.

cook, Katy, states that she wouldn't marry a man "who proposed to me over an *invention*." In this respect, *Meet Me in St. Louis* reflects some of the ambivalence that Carolyn Marvin describes as accompanying the necessary social as well as technological integration of modern technology into American life.¹⁸²

The World's Fair itself of course is a herald of St. Louis's eventual urbanization and simultaneously a source of awe, excitement, and pride for the town's residents. As Babington and Evans recognize, "[t]he dazzling lights of the fair at the end of *Meet Me in St. Louis* are the most extreme example of a metaphor that holds together both the past and progress in an impossible image, in spite of reason's claim that the world of the city, by entering the small town, must destroy it."¹⁸³ While anticipation for the fair pervades the entire film,¹⁸⁴ the fair itself is curiously lacking from the film; as Robin Wood recognizes, our expectation for a conventional finale, a big production number at the Fair, is disappointed.¹⁸⁵ In the end, then, the forces of change, progress, and disruption present in the film are overshadowed by the dominant images and narrative force of attachment to a world in which twentieth-century technology has yet had little effect.

¹⁸² Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

¹⁸³ Bruce Babington and Peter William Evans, *Blue Skies and Silver Linings: Aspects of the Hollywood Musical* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 144. Similarly, Mr. Smith justifies the decision not to move to New York (that is, to avoid the plagues of urbanization) by exclaiming that the World's Fair ensures that "big things" would be coming to St. Louis.

¹⁸⁴ The film begins with members of the Smith family singing "Meet Me in St. Louis" in anticipation of the fair, still eight months away.

¹⁸⁵ Robin Wood, "The American Family Comedy: from *Meet Me in St. Louis* to *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*," *Wide Angle* 3 (1978): 11.

Thus, as part of its narrative and thematic strategy of preserving the “moment before” – the moment before the arrival of the Fair and before the changes it promises and portends, the moment before the Smith family begins to disperse with Esther’s and Rose’s marriages or Grandfather’s death¹⁸⁶ – *Meet Me in St. Louis*, despite its 1903-04 setting, is positioned at the *moment before* the automobile arrives. That is, the automobile is effectively absent from the film altogether. In the opening long shot of the Smiths’ home, two automobiles drive by, but they are the only ones in the film. With the exception of the trolley car that is the setting for the “Trolley Song” number, the transportation the Smith family uses is exclusively horse-drawn: Tootie’s ice wagon, the carriages and buggies in which Esther and Rose travel with their friends and beaux, the elegant hired rig in which the Smith family rides to the Fair. In ignoring the automobile altogether, much as in its “absent” presentation of the World’s Fair, *Meet Me in St. Louis* neatly sidesteps the automobile’s threat to the way of life the film portrays so charmingly.

In contrast, *Summer Holiday* paints a more ambivalent and unstable portrait of the turn-of-the-century small town, a key component of which is the characters’ celebratory embrace of the automobile. Unlike the equation of small town as home and haven established in *Meet Me in St. Louis*, where the major dramatic tension – the threat of expulsion – is resolved in favor of maintaining that equation when Mr. Smith cancels the family’s move to New York City, the characters’ assessment of Dannville in *Summer Holiday* is not universally favorable. It is true that *Summer Holiday* valorizes the idea of the town’s timeless stability; for instance, one line from the film’s first song, “Our Home Town,” is that in Dannville, “nothing ever changes.” At the same

¹⁸⁶ Kaufman, *Meet Me in St. Louis*, 65-66.

time, however, this “pass-along” song¹⁸⁷ is used to express less sanguine views of Dannville as well. In particular, when the song passes to eighteen-year-old Richard Miller, the film’s protagonist, he complains that the town is dull and backward. Although his girlfriend Muriel defends it, Richard eagerly anticipates leaving Dannville for college and the chance to experience “real life.” Throughout most of the film, he espouses radical ideas, expressing disdain for Dannville’s provincialism. Moreover, even though he eventually “outgrows” this “immature” view of Dannville and comes to appreciate the merit of the traditional, family-oriented life it represents, Richard is still scheduled to leave Dannville for college at the film’s end..

Central to the depiction of Dannville in *Summer Holiday*, in fact, is the casting of Mickey Rooney as Richard. MGM’s 1935 film *Ah, Wilderness!* is not identical to O’Neill’s play, but it has a somewhat bemused, reflective tone, the characters and their town portrayed with a gentle, almost ethereal touch, which one imagines may well be similar to that of the original Broadway play. In addition, the 1935 film retains the full range of the play’s characters, so that all the Millers’ children, including Richard’s older brother Arthur and younger sister Mildred, have significant roles. For instance, the film includes the scene from the stage play in which, while Richard is missing and the Millers sit up anxiously past midnight awaiting his return, Arthur and Mildred attempt to distract Mrs. Miller from her worry by playing and singing songs at the piano.

¹⁸⁷ As Mamoulian had done in prior films, such as *Love Me Tonight* (1932), he stages “Our Home Town,” with which the film opens, as a song that is “passed along” from one character to another, beginning with Nat Miller, publisher of the town’s newspaper as he leaves the newspaper office to walk home for lunch. When he arrives home, the song is taken up sequentially by his wife, his youngest son, and other members of the family, and finally his son Richard and his girlfriend Muriel. With Richard and Muriel, the song’s locus is suddenly shifted back out of the Miller home to Dannville’s Main Street business district (the town’s ice cream parlor).

In short, in the 1935 film, Richard is a significant character and indeed, the film's central character, but the film comes across very much as a story about the entire Miller family.

Summer Holiday, by contrast, is very much a Rooney vehicle, and hence has been reduced almost entirely to Richard's story. Apart from nine-year-old Tommy, Richard's siblings have virtually disappeared. Moreover, just as *Summer Holiday*'s representation of Dannville is much more expansive than that of St. Louis in the earlier film, consisting of multiple locations, many of them exteriors filmed in sweeping long shots in which crowds or couples perform boisterous dance routines, Rooney's characteristically exuberant and kinetic performance – what reviewers criticized as “exhibitionistic,”¹⁸⁸ “close to burlesque,”¹⁸⁹ and “shameless . . . mugging”¹⁹⁰ – gives *Summer Holiday* a brash, energetic tone very different from both MGM's 1935 *Ah, Wilderness!* and the music-box quality of *Meet Me in St. Louis*. Thus, even though *Summer Holiday* concludes with a chastened Richard rediscovering his appreciation for his small-town roots, this brief contemplative moment with which the film ends is more than outweighed by Rooney's brassy, “show business” performance throughout the rest of the film.

¹⁸⁸ Seymour Peck, “Too Much Folklore, Not Enough O'Neill,” *PM*, June 12, 1948.

¹⁸⁹ Archer Winsten, “Movies: ‘Summer Holiday’ at Loew's State,” *New York Post and the Home News*, June 13, 1948. Similarly, the *New York Times* states that

. . . Mr. Rooney is given to clowning in his familiarly broad and impish way. He makes puppy love with burlesque shyness, he wears his clothes in exaggerated style and he acts the big cheese in his household, exactly as Andy Hardy does. With little regard for illumination, he sacrifices character for laughs – which may make for round-house entertainment, but does not make for a sensitive, balanced scan.

Bosley Crowther, “‘Summer Holiday,’ the New Bill at State, is Film Version of Eugene O'Neill Play,” *New York Times*, June 12, 1948.

¹⁹⁰ Mildred Martin, “‘Summer Holiday’ at The Karlton,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 26, 1948.

Within this context, rather than lamenting or ignoring the coming of the automobile, *Summer Holiday* embraces it. Unlike the telephone in the process of being domesticated in *Meet Me in St. Louis*, the automobile in *Summer Holiday* is coded as a masculine machine promising motion, speed, and excitement. Moreover, instead of being an object of ambivalence or a fleeting on-screen image such as the 1904 World's Fair electrical show, the automobile in *Summer Holiday* is the focus of full-blown utopian celebration. A telling comparison, in fact, is that between the "Trolley Song" in *Meet Me in St. Louis* and the "Stanley Steamer" number in *Summer Holiday*. Both are moments in which modern transportation becomes, in Richard Dyer's terms, the focus of utopian celebration by being made subject of songs. And to be sure, the purpose for the trolley ride in *Meet Me in St. Louis* is a visit to the swamp that has been drained to form the fairgrounds. Thus, the trolley is technology literally used on the road to progress and the future, as represented by the fair. The purpose of the trip is downplayed, however, being conveyed only by three or four lines of dialogue (most of which occur as background business while the film audience's attention is focused elsewhere) and a sign on the side of the trolley car labeling this as a chartered trip to the fairgrounds. Thus, the dominant impression the number leaves is as a celebration of young love.

In contrast, the "Stanley Steamer" number is an overt celebration of the very technology that heralds the end of the era the film purports to valorize. It seems clear that the "Stanley Steamer" number was included in hopes of duplicating the success of "The Trolley Song,"¹⁹¹ but

¹⁹¹ Indeed, "The Stanley Steamer" was recorded by Dinah Shore and the Modernaires, Tony Martin, Jo Stafford and the Pied Pipers, Ray McKinley, and Blue Barron in recordings that were released on September 15, 1947, seven months before the film was released. As of August 14, 1947, Abe Green of Robbins Music Corporation Publishers reported to MGM that "The Stanley Steamer" was the only song from the film's score that had "hit possibilities" and was, in

its effect is very different, given that it celebrates *only* the experience of riding in the Stanley Steamer (as opposed to the metaphorical use of the trolley ride in *Meet Me in St. Louis* as symbolizing the exhilaration of young love) and given that it celebrates not *public* transportation but an individual consumer good, possession of which, according to the song, bestows style and luster. At the same time, as has been noted, in Dyer's terms, presentation of the automobile via song and music makes it a utopian object and the ride home a utopian experience.¹⁹² The Stanley Steamer's literal overtaking of pre-existing forms of transportation – walking, the horse-and-buggy, the bicycle – symbolizes the manner in which the automobile will – and, for the film's 1948 audience, has – become the dominant means of transportation, as well as a predominant form of recreation and means of self-identity. In this, the film simultaneously celebrates both the past and the future, and in fact celebrates the future at the very moment at which it begins to invade, replace, and dismantle the past.

In addition, the characters' naive, somewhat open-eyed attitude toward this new technology seems designed to reassure mid-twentieth century audiences of their own sophistication and of the superiority – and desirability – of “modern” technology. Thus, Richard Miller brags of the Stanley Steamer's ability to travel at twenty-five miles per hour, while his

fact, the only song that record companies had been willing to record, believing it to be “the only tune that looks good.” Abe Green to Richard J. Powers, August 14, 1947, Arthur Freed Collection, University of Southern California Archives “USC-Arthur Freed Collection”).

¹⁹² O'Neill's stage play only made reference to the family's taking an off-stage drive in its Buick. In its 1935 screenplay, MGM added the high school graduation scene, the disruptive effect of the family automobile on nearby horses, and the family's ride home. The adaptation of the screenplay into musical form in *Summer Holiday*, however, offered the opportunity, in Dyer's terms, to use song and music to give this occasion the quality of utopia in a manner unavailable in the stage and non-musical versions.

girlfriend responds with alarm at the idea of traveling at such a break-neck speed. At the same time, the Stanley Steamer itself is a not entirely stable technology, its engine igniting with an explosion of billowing white smoke and its repeated backfires startling man and beast alike. The naivete of these characters and the unpredictability of the technology, played for laughs, give the modern audience a sense of superiority in its comfortable relationship to the obviously “advanced” technology it enjoys. Further, the use of the Stanley Steamer is something of a technological blind alley in that steam-powered automobiles, although popular with the public for a period of time, eventually lost out to the gasoline-powered combustion automobile. Thus, ironically, the film’s characters sing the praises of a technology that is destined for obsolescence; this celebration of an ultimately obsolete technology, however, again puts the 1948 audience in a position of superiority over the film’s appealing but “misguided” characters. Nonetheless, it is significant that in the original draft of the *Summer Holiday* screenplay, “The Stanley Steamer” number ends “high and then a front tire blows out. As Richard alights, a buggy passes, and the couple occupying it give the Stanley Steamer a horse laugh.”¹⁹³ This breakdown of the Stanley Steamer was eliminated in later drafts of the script; the number ends instead on a triumphant note as the image of the family riding in its prized automobile fades to black; that is, the number ends with a cinematic moment of undiluted celebration of the automobile.

MGM’s 1951 release, *Excuse My Dust*, takes up where *Summer Holiday*’s “Stanley Steamer” number left off in its celebration of the American automobile. Rather than being based

¹⁹³ Irving Brecher, “Ah Wilderness” screenplay, January 16, 1946, Motion Picture Academy Library Script Collection.

on a pre-existing work, *Excuse My Dust* was an original screenplay written by George Wells.¹⁹⁴

A Technicolor musical comedy starring Red Skelton, *Excuse My Dust* is set in the fictional small town of Willow Falls, Indiana; this is “America 1895,” the film’s narrator tells us, “the era of great inventors and great inventions.” Skelton’s character, Joe Beldon, is trying to invent a working “gasamobile,” an endeavor which subjects him to ridicule by all the town’s residents except his mother, his girl friend Liz, and his best friend Ben; the film’s biggest production number is “Get a Horse,” which the entire town sings to Joe when his gasamobile breaks down in the middle of town square. Similarly, his friend Ben, a musician, has discovered a new style of music he calls “jass,” which the elders of the town denounce as discordant and scandalous.

Contemporary reviews label the film “nostalgic” and indicate that at least some of the film’s appeal was its recollection of such turn-of-the-century, small town pleasures as hay rides and sing-alongs:

Red Skelton’s usual brand of slapstick is restrained to homey fun in a comedy with music, as the “gasmobile” and “jazz” simultaneously descend upon a rural American town at the turn of the century. A horse-drawn fire brigade, picnics and hayrides lend nostalgic touches to an amusing struggle between the old and the new¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁴ Studio records indicate that Wells worked on the script from November 1948 through October 1950. Motion Picture Academy Library Script Collection.

¹⁹⁵ “Excuse My Dust,” *Hollywood Citizen-News*, July 18, 1951. Other critics assessed the film in a similar manner. “Corn-fed humor blends with more legitimate comedy to make this nostalgic piece one of Red Skelton’s better offerings” *Variety (D)*, May 23 1951; “It’s a pleasant nostalgic piece about a small-town inventor at the turn of the century who devotes his unpredictable and frequently disastrous talents toward developing gadgets, the latest of which he calls a horseless carriage” “New Films: Just for Laughs: Excuse My Dust,” *Cue*, June 30, 1951; “The film’s main appeal is to the eye. Filmed in Technicolor, the picture is adorned with many a bright set recreating life in the Gay 90s. And the costumes are faithful to the times. . . .” *Hollywood Citizen News*, July 9, 1951. “As wholesome and refreshing as the turn-of-the-century Hoosier backgrounds against which the story is told is this romantic comedy.” *Box Office*, May

Nonetheless, even as the film's art direction was praised for its re-creation of a "charming period" and for female period costumes "worth the price of admission on their own,"¹⁹⁶ at least one reviewer perceived those costumes as objects of humor as well as appeal: "Period settings and costumes agreeably picturesque and *add measure of incidental comedy*. . . . [T]he period settings and costumes are attractive *and amusing*; . . ."¹⁹⁷ Indeed, in the film's "amusing struggle between the old and the new," the old was consistently recognized as the basis for most of the film's humor. Most significantly, the film concludes with a cross-country race among a dozen early-model self-propelled vehicles, which critics lauded as the highlight of the film.¹⁹⁸ As had been the case with the Stanley Steamer, a major part of the humor of this sequence was the unfamiliar, outmoded appearance and inefficient operation of the early vehicles themselves. For instance, one critic wrote that "[t]he race is the most amusing sequence in the film. The ancient gas buggies evoke many a hearty laugh as they careen over the old country roads."¹⁹⁹ Similarly, another called the race sequence "a socko comedy set-up . . . which draws a lot of its humor from

26, 1951. "The story is mainly concerned with joshing the era when very few people took the gasoline buggy seriously." "SRL Goes to the Movies: The Horseless Carriage in War and Peace," *Saturday Review*, June 30, 1951.

¹⁹⁶ "Rowland Meg Zips Cummings Prod'n: 'Excuse My Dust,'" *Hollywood Reporter*, May 23, 1951.

¹⁹⁷ "Excuse My Dust," *Today's Cinema*, June 15, 1951 (emphasis added).

¹⁹⁸ "[L]et us not overlook that finale motor race, surely one of the wildest and most uninhibited contests on wheels ever imagined by man." Ezra Goodman, "Excuse My Dust," *Los Angeles Daily News*, July 9, 1951; "[Director Roy] Rowland maintains a breezy style in his direction, which socks over the humorous aspects of the film, particularly the vintage auto race, a gem of comedy presentation." *Variety (D)*, May 23, 1951

¹⁹⁹ Lowell E. Redelings, "'Excuse My Dust' Funny Road Race Marks Comic Film," *Hollywood Citizen-News*, July 9, 1951.

the sight of such incongruous carriages as compared to modern-day speed wagons.”²⁰⁰

Similarly, with Skelton, the comic, as its protagonist, the film relies for much of its humor on the mishaps and failures Joe experiences in his attempt to develop his gasamobile.²⁰¹ Further, the film includes several “flash forwards” in which Joe – with unerring accuracy – rapturously envisions the automobile’s future. In his vision of the 1910 automobile, one joke is Joe’s description of the 1910 Model T as having “beauty in every line and curve,”²⁰² while another is based on the “ah-oo-gah” sound of the vehicle’s horn. MGM posters for *Excuse My Dust* include a cartoon of Red Skelton and Sally Forrest, his love interest in the film, riding in a horseless carriage. Forrest is depicted sitting in Skelton’s lap, and Skelton’s face is a caricature of the expression associated with his comedic persona. Here, the very notion of a horseless carriage

²⁰⁰ *Variety (W)*, May 23, 1951. Other reviewers expressed similar sentiments. “The auto race in which contestants drive every conceivable variety of self-propelled vehicle, makes for an hilarious climax” “Excuse My Dust,” *Hollywood Citizen-News*, July 18, 1951; “‘Excuse My Dust’ adds up to a thoroughly delightful movie[,] . . . culminating in a riotous road race between eight of those newfangled horseless carriages.” Kay Proctor, “Skelton Film Full of Fun,” *Los Angeles Examiner*, July 9, 1951; “A hilarious finale where a collection of antiquated automobiles speeds across the fields in a nutty 20-miles-an-hour race. . . .” “Rowland Meg Zips Cummings Prod’n: ‘Excuse My Dust,’” *Hollywood Reporter*, May 23, 1951; “[T]he old crocks race in the climax is a delight.” “Excuse My Dust,” *Today’s Cinema*, June 15, 1951; “The windup employs some wonderful ancient vehicles in a twenty-mile cross-country race That kind of thing was funny in the silent movies and it still is, miraculously, even though the talkies have been here for quite awhile.” “SRL Goes to the Movies: The Horseless Carriage in War and Peace,” *Saturday Review*, June 30, 1951.

²⁰¹ A sequence in which Joe, as a member of the town’s volunteer fire department, tries to extinguish his own burning barn, set aflame by his work on the gasamobile, was written in part with input from Buster Keaton. Buster Keaton, Roy Rowland, and George Wells, “Notes, ‘Excuse My Dust,’” September 5, 1950, Motion Picture Academy Library Script Collection.

²⁰² In the April 17, 1950 version of the script, the Model T that appears in the “flash forward” to 1910 is described as “a touring car with an ungainly canvas top, looking about 9 feet tall.” *Excuse My Dust* script, April 17, 1950, Motion Picture Academy Library Script Collection.

is presented as comedy. All of this is humor which, by definition, depends on the audience's sense of the superiority of the mid-century automobile over its turn-of-the-century counterpart.

At the same time, however, Joe ultimately triumphs in the film, both in winning the auto race and the girl, and in convincing his future father-in-law to convert his livery stable into a garage; furthermore, the 1951 audience knew that Joe was right and that the rest of the town was wrong about the future of the automobile. Even as it laughs at him, the film celebrates Joe as a visionary in his prediction that “[e]verything is going to change in the next fifty years” and his insistence that the country is entering a “New World – the World of the Future – the Machine Age.” The film similarly pits period-style music and mores against contemporary tastes in music. “I’d Like to Take You Out Dreaming,” a sing-along number written in turn-of-the-century style and performed by a group of swaying young people sitting on the front porch of a Victorian-style frame home,²⁰³ is immediately followed by Ben’s persuading a young lady visiting from St. Louis to perform a 1950s-style number, “Lorelei Brown.” The contrast here is not only between styles of music but between styles of *performance*: the communal sing-along of an era when most entertainment was “homegrown” and often participatory is opposed to the commodified, orchestrated, professional performance by the “exotic” individual (the singing or Hollywood star, marked off diegetically within the film as an outsider from the city) to be received (and enjoyed) passively. Implicit in the juxtaposition is the understanding that not only is the latter what contemporary audiences will prefer, but it is clearly *superior* to the former; the latter, of course, is

²⁰³ In the April 17, 1950 version of the screenplay, this house is described as “the showcase of Willow Falls – a monstrous three-story frame structure, loaded with cupolas, gingerbread woodwork and stained glass windows.” *Excuse My Dust* script, April 17, 1950, Motion Picture Academy Library Script Collection.

also what the studio is in the business of selling.

As comic devices, Joe's visionary flash-forwards do contain an element of satire. His vision of the 1920s, for instance, shows a family taking a drive to the country but unable to see any trees because of the billboards lining the road.²⁰⁴ Nonetheless, the predominant effect of the film is to place the audience in the position of opposing "old" – pre-modern – attitudes and celebrating the hero's forward-looking aspirations. In this respect, the contrast between *The Magnificent Ambersons* and *Excuse My Dust* could not be stronger. The 1895 small town of *Excuse My Dust* is positioned not as something mournfully lost or as a place to long to go back to, but as a place eager to be left behind – as quickly as possible – for the present.

Municipal "Progress"

In Twentieth Century Fox's *Wait Til the Sun Shines, Nellie* (1952), this forward-looking view of the turn-of-the-century small town as something to be left behind is articulated more explicitly, but in terms of community *progress* – i.e., commerce, municipal growth, and economic prosperity – rather than technology per se. Through its protagonist Ben Halper, the town barber, *Wait Til the Sun Shines, Nellie* chronicles the "life" of the fictional small town of Sevellinois, Illinois from 1895 to 1945, although the majority of the film covers the years 1895 through 1925. The film begins in 1945, with the town's fiftieth anniversary celebration, but soon moves into Ben's memory, a flashback to 1895, the year in which Ben brought his new bride,

²⁰⁴ In addition, early versions of the script concluded with a final flash-forward to 1951, in which characters cannot get their car out of the driveway because of the density of the traffic on their street. E.g., *Excuse My Dust* script, July 5, 1950, Motion Picture Academy Library Script Collection. This ending was deleted from the script, however, before filming began.

Nellie, to town to set up his barber shop. In the years that follow, the Spanish-American War, World War I, and Prohibition occur, with varying effects on the town's inhabitants. Shortly after Ben's son is killed in the 1920s through his involvement in a gangster's protection racket, the wedding of Ben's daughter to the banker's son ends the flashback, and the film concludes with a triumphant parade down Main Street in 1945.

Wait Til the Sun Shines, Nellie was based on the novel *I Heard Them Sing* by Ferdinand Reyher, published in 1946. Reyher's novel was originally purchased by Sol Lesser's production company, Thalia Co.,²⁰⁵ for whom Paul Trivers wrote a script adaptation.²⁰⁶ Included in this adaptation are lists of contemporary songs for each of the film's time periods (1895, 1912, 1919, 1924, 1929, and 1933), as well as suggestions for advertisements and calendar art to be shown hanging on the barbershop walls at these various points in time (for example, for 1890-1900, Trivers suggests an advertisement reading "General Joe Wheeler Praises Peruna," which he describes as an "ubiquitous advertising slogan of the time"; for 1924, four Jazz Age pictures by John Held, Jr.). In addition, this initial screenplay includes descriptions of or references to a series of visual markers of the passage of time: Trivers describes the town's main street in 1895, lined with hitching posts, as being unpaved and as carrying exclusively horse-drawn traffic. In 1912, "Main St. is now paved with bricks. Lined with three and four story buildings. Electric signs over stores. There are still horse and buggies, but also a few cars."²⁰⁷ In 1917, Main Street

²⁰⁵ *Los Angeles Times*, October 16, 1946.

²⁰⁶ Paul Trivers, *I Heard Them Sing* screenplay, February 17, 1947, UCLA Arts Special Collection.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

is now paved with asphalt, traveled by “cars from 1914-17 vintage,” with a street car running down the center. James Montgomery Flagg posters advertise a World War I rally to be held at the town’s Opera House. Buildings are taller, and the town “is fairly well on the way to becoming a city.”²⁰⁸ These specific period details, which read as if Trivers compiled them from his personal memory, echo Benson’s meticulous written description of her childhood St. Louis home. Here again is the almost proprietary sense of wanting to “get it right” – to re-create the past the way it “really was” – which suggests at the very least a great fondness for that past, as well as a definite pleasure in the contemplation of its re-creation. In Trivers’ screenplay, however, this affection extends not simply to the past at a specific moment, such as Benson’s 1903 St. Louis, but to the *progression* of fashions and technology – indeed, of all the various visual and aural markers signaling the development of a small American town – over the four decades from 1895 to 1933.

Ultimately, Lesser did not produce *Wait Til the Sun Shines, Nellie*, and Trivers’ screenplay was not used, although when Twentieth Century Fox bought the property in October 1950,²⁰⁹ it acquired Trivers’ script as well, which presumably was available to Fox’s screenwriters as they worked on the screenplay. Further, extant studio records reflect a similar attraction to the idea of re-creating the visual and aural progression of small-town American life from the late nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century. For instance, after reviewing Allan Scott’s story treatment,²¹⁰ producer George Jessel urged Darryl Zanuck to exercise the

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ “Fox buys film rts to FB’s novel, *I Hear Them Singing* (published by Little, Brown in 1946),” *Variety* October 16, 1950.

²¹⁰ This treatment was largely followed in the final film, with the exception of a final, third-generation section which chronicled the early adult life of Ben’s granddaughter and which Zanuck

studio's option on the property, arguing that the treatment relates "a warm, nostalgic, intimate drama of one man's life, reduced to a common denominator of great audience identification."²¹¹

It is our intention that even the montages which bridge the periods between the dramatic acts will be entertaining in themselves, for they will be illustrated with the changing scenes of Americana as seen in the fashions that pass the barbershop windows, from the bustles to the hobble-skirt to the New Look; by the changes in transportation, from the buggy, to the horse car, to the streamlined automobile; by the changes in barbershop paraphernalia, from the striped pole, to the whirling pole, to the electric lather-maker; by the barber supply calendar from Ed Pinaud's waxed moustache, to the Varga girl; and by the thousand and one bits of Americana from the cigar store Indian, to the moustache cup, to the appurtenances of the modern beauty salon. *All of these montage bits can be handled so that they will engender laughter and reminiscence.*

And there will be added entertainment, of course, in the use of the barbershop quartette [sic] songs used on scene and as underscoring from period to period.²¹²

In response, Zanuck cautioned that

[w]e must . . . be aware of every possibility for comedy and genuine humor. We must not reach out for extraneous gags and certainly we do not want any hoke or farce but we must not pass up any chance for genuine comedy. This has the makings of a fine entertainment. It has a great deal of warm sentiment. *It can be loaded up with nostalgia but we do not want to keep it always in the vein of being a "sentimental piece"*. We should keep the sentiment but always be aware that *we want a show and an entertainment*. It should be a warm and wonderful piece of Americana loaded with human qualities *but not on the "sad side"*.²¹³

At the same time, however, in directing that a third-generation storyline involving Ben's

had eliminated before shooting began.

²¹¹ Inter-office Correspondence from George Jessel and Maxwell Shane to Darryl Zanuck, August 31, 1950. UCLA Arts Special Collection.

²¹² Ibid. (emphasis added).

²¹³ Inter-office Correspondence from Darryl Zanuck to George Jessel, Allan Scott, F. D. Langton, Lew Schreter, and Molly Mandaville, October 3, 1950 (emphasis added). UCLA Arts Special Collection.

granddaughter be eliminated from the script, so that the flashback ends with Ben's walk to his former barbershop after his daughter's wedding and a dissolve to his memory of the barbershop in 1895, Zanuck insisted that the writers "[m]ust end story as intimately and personally as [they] began it. . . . [T]he main elements of the human interest come from *the lone figure of Ben, standing there on the street, listening to that old song.*"²¹⁴

Thus, the intent was to produce a film that was above all entertainment, concluding with an overtly nostalgic moment but in toto not overly sentimental, whose evocation of the past would be designed to generate laughter among younger audiences and reminiscence by older ones: "[T]he possibilities for real entertainment are boundless, as we have stressed a foreground of humorous scenes, *interlarded with songs and period oddities which will be nostalgic to older members of the audience and funny to younger ones.*"²¹⁵ In promoting the film, Twentieth Century Fox called it "a *nostalgic drama* spanning half a century of life in a mid-America village,"²¹⁶ and much of the publicity department's promotional document entitled, "Vital Statistics" is devoted to describing Castleton, the tiny Kansas town in which the film's exteriors

²¹⁴ 5/29/51 Memo from Darryl Zanuck to George Jessel/Henry King/Allan Scott RE: Seeing Nellie Home/Final Screenplay of 5/22/51, May 29, 1951, UCLA Arts Special Collection (emphasis added). In the film, Ben's memory takes the form of a dissolve to the 1895 barbershop, where Ben's friends sing a barbershop quartet rendition of "Wait Til the Sun Shines, Nellie." Despite Zanuck's suggestion, this was the last shot in the flashback but not the last shot in the film. Instead, as has been noted, the flashback ends and the film returns to 1945, concluding with a parade down Main Street, in which the town band plays an upbeat version of "Wait Til the Sun Shines, Nellie."

²¹⁵ Inter-office Correspondence from George Jessel and Maxwell Shane to Darryl Zanuck, August 31, 1950, UCLA Arts Special Collection (emphasis added).

²¹⁶ Harry Brand, Director of Publicity, 20th Century Fox Studio, "'Vital Statistics' for 'Wait Til the Sun Shines, Nellie,'" UCLA Arts Special Collection.

were shot, whose very existence seems to guarantee a certain nostalgic authenticity:

[Director Henry King] found [in Castleton] a ready-made set. In addition to the decrepit and faded depot, still in occasional use, he discovered antiquated store buildings, weathered and long vacant, little changed from their external appearance more than 50 years ago. Hitching posts lined the town. On the front porches of picturesque frame houses, all painted white, hung old-fashioned swings. White picket fences mined down the country lanes. Native sunflowers grew in exquisite profusion on every vacant lot.

....

From the handful of residents remaining in the community, King hired extras needed to fill out his cast. In most instances, there was no need to find costumes for them from studio supplies. Out of musty attics and from old trunks stored in barns the villagers resurrected authentic period garments worn by their forebears decades ago.²¹⁷

Furthermore, although *Wait Til the Sun Shines, Nellie* is not a musical, period music – particularly the title song – plays a dominant role in the film. Indeed, barbershop harmony is performed quite literally throughout the film by four regular patrons of Ben’s barber sho²¹⁸ The name of Ben’s wife, in fact, was dictated by period music; Millie in Reyher’s novel and Trivers’ screenplay, she became Nellie in early Fox drafts when the film was given the title of the period song “Seeing Nellie Home,” and this was of course the name she kept when the film was renamed (for the last time) for another period song, “Wait Til the Sun Shines, Nellie,” which unsurprisingly is played and performed repeatedly throughout the film.

Indeed, some reviewers found the title misleading, as it seemed to promise a song-and-

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Sung by the barbershop quartet, included in the film’s score, or both are “Open the Door,” “On the Banks of the Wabash,” “Listen to the Mockingbird,” “The Candle Waltz,” “For I’m Not Coming Home,” “The Grizzly Bear,” “Pack Up Your Troubles,” and “Smiles.”

dance musical,²¹⁹ but most reviewers praised the film, characterizing it in terms similar to Fox's marketing as "a nostalgic reminiscence of a small town's history for 50 years"²²⁰ and "[an] atmospherically authentic glimpse into [America's] early past"²²¹ that "capture[s] the changes taking place in a community during a half century of growth."²²² According to the *Los Angeles Examiner*, "[t]he drama, told through half a century of small-town barber's life, also tells the story of the town's development, seen through his affectionate eyes. For anyone who has lived in a small town, it will be a nostalgic story. For anyone who hasn't – well, he'll find out what he missed."²²³

But if *Wait Til the Sun Shines, Nellie* was promoted and read as cinematic nostalgia for the American small town of bygone years, the text itself renders its precise nostalgic object unclear or at least unstable. Certainly, the film purports to valorize the "typical" small town at the turn of the nineteenth century and into the early decades of the twentieth century. This

²¹⁹ Contrary to the implications of its title, "Wait Til the Sun Shines Nellie" is no song and dance show. Except for an occasional interlude of barbershop harmonizing on the title tune, [the film] is a drama that turns back the pages in a family album across half a century of life in a small town. . . . Sentimental memories abound, but they are a heavy drag to the picture, which could have used a few good musical numbers to liven things up Margaret Harford, "Long-Winded Film Tells Saga of a Small Town," *Hollywood Citizen-News*, July 3, 1952.

²²⁰ David Bongard, "Film Review," *Los Angeles Daily News*, July 3, 1952.

²²¹ *Box Office*, May 31, 1952.

²²² "'Nellie' Enchanting Drama Finely Acted and Directed; Jessel, King Score with Grand Prod'n; Wayne Acting Tops," *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 26, 1952.

²²³ Lynn Bowers, "David Wayne Scores Hit," *Los Angeles Examiner*, July 3, 1952.

valorization is constructed in part by the fate of the two characters who dislike and disparage Seville. The first is Nellie, the small-town girl who marries Ben in part because of his promise to rescue her from small-town life and take her to cities such as Chicago and New York. On their wedding night, however, Ben has her disembark the Chicago-bound train in Seville, a town as small as the one Nellie left behind, where, unbeknownst to her, he has purchased a barber shop and plans for the couple to live. Once there, he is oblivious to her disappointment and sense of betrayal. Later in the film, fed up with Ben's repeated lies to her about his long-term plans to stay in Seville, Nellie runs away to Chicago, accompanied by a neighbor's husband, and both are immediately killed in a train accident. The second such character is Ben Jr., the couple's son, who rebels against Ben's plans for him to become the town's doctor. Instead, he leaves Seville for Chicago to pursue a stage career as a song-and-dance man.²²⁴ After that career is cut short by injuries he suffers in World War I, he then seeks escape from the tedium of Ben's barbershop by going to work for a Chicago-based gangster, which leads to his being killed in a shoot-out. Thus, Chicago itself is set up in opposition to Seville as the distinguishing "other" whose charms and attractions prove ultimately to be false, even fatal, as the characters who are dissatisfied with Seville and reject it for the city – Nellie and Ben Jr. – are punished with death. In contrast, Ben Jr.'s wife, listening to radio reports of gangland shootings in Chicago, tells Ben

²²⁴ Perhaps in recognition that audiences might expect *Wait Til the Sun Shines, Nellie* to be a musical, Ben Jr.'s brief stage career seems intended primarily to inject into the film a song-and-dance number typical of Fox 1940s musicals. These films usually took the form of backstage musicals and a good number of them, such as the Betty Grable vehicles *Coney Island* (1943) and *Sweet Rosie O'Grady* (1943), were set at or near the turn of the last century and featured diegetic stage performances of period songs. Here, in a manner staged much like comparable numbers in Fox's period backstage musicals, Ben Jr. and fiancée sing and dance to the period songs "Grizzly Bear" and "Wait Til the Sun Shines, Nellie."

that she would never want to live in a city. Rather, she is content to stay in Sevilinois, keeping house for her father-in-law and rearing his granddaughter.

At the same time, however, the film portrays very little of the neighborliness and close-knit community that one might expect to be central to the nostalgic appeal of the turn-of-the-century small town, at least insofar as one associates these characteristics with family or indeed with women. The film's true "community" is the group of business- and tradesmen who spend their leisure time in Ben's barbershop; the set that appears most often in the film is the interior of the barbershop itself. While the town banker immediately offers to lend Ben the funds to rebuild his barbershop when it burns down and others in the group offer him largely inarticulate support after Nellie's betrayal and death, the actual bond between these men is their shared pride in Sevilinois' progress from settlement to town to – at least as implied in the 1945 frame story – small city. For instance, Ben responds to Nellie's dismay at learning, on her wedding night, of his plans for the couple's future in Sevilinois, by saying, "What 's better than this? Having a business of your own, and a town to grow up with?" Each new enterprise opening its doors on Main Street is cause for cheer among the barbershop's habitués, whose lives are recounted in Ben's voiceover narration in terms of their business and career successes, which in turn are often explicitly linked to specific milestones in the town's growth. Even the film's vignettes of Ben's participation in the volunteer fire department and town band are markers of the town's having reached the critical mass necessary to make these organizations possible. This is the Sevilinois that *Wait Til the Sun Shines*, Nellie celebrates; not its communal rituals and celebrations as in *Summer Holiday* or later

in *The Music Man* (1962) or *Pollyanna* (1960),²²⁵ and not the community-as-family, as in *Meet Me in St. Louis*, but the small town as *process* and *achievement*.

The claim of nostalgia is particularly difficult to justify in the early portion of the film, before Nellie's death, which is dominated by her unhappiness with the life Ben has unilaterally chosen for her, the opposite of what he'd promised her during their courtship. Unlike Ben, Nellie has no role to play in Seville's municipal development (except, of course, for bearing children). Indeed, despite Ben's enthusiasm for the role he will play in building Seville into a thriving town and city, neither he nor the film gives Nellie any particular reason to like the place. Consigned without her foreknowledge or consent to live in a cramped apartment behind the barber shop, Nellie is not only barred from the "men-only" barbershop itself – a scandalized Ben rushes her out of the shop when, unaware of the ban on women, she enters it on the couple's first morning in town – but she is never shown as having any friends of her own. The casting of David Wayne as Ben renders her devotion to him difficult to understand, as his performance lacks any sort of charm or appeal that would compensate Nellie for his consistent disregard for her feelings and continuing deception over his plans to stay in Seville permanently.²²⁶ Tellingly, however,

²²⁵ *Wait Til the Sun Shines, Nellie* contains two community get-togethers, both of which occur while Nellie is still alive. When the banker and their wife host a party, Nellie alienates the hostess by arriving in an exact copy of her dress and then must fend off the advances of the neighbor with whom she will eventually run away. In the meantime, Ben and his friends exclaim over the technological marvels of the banker's indoor bathroom, the first one in town. Later, Ben plans a surprise party for Nellie at the new home which he has purchased without her knowledge; her unhappiness at this turn of events and her alienation from the guests surrounding her, all eager to share the "joy" of this surprise, are palpable.

²²⁶ In an early memo, Zanuck suggested either James Cagney or James Stewart for the role. Darryl Zanuck to George Jessel, Conference Note on "Seeing Nellie Home," October 3, 1950, UCLA Arts Special Collection. One can only imagine the films that might have been – albeit quite distinct from each other – had either actor played the part. Each in his own way,

the studio found Nellie to be the potentially unsympathetic character; apparently finding Ben's actions justified and the merit of his beliefs self-evident, Zanuck felt the need, in contrast, to develop motivations for and provide clarifications of Nellie's actions so as to "soften" her character.²²⁷

Ben's failure to understand – or even acknowledge – Nellie's dislike for Seville stems from the fact that they see it as two different towns. Indeed, throughout the film, Ben's town pride is never in what Seville *is* but in what it *will become* – and in his role in helping it along its way. While the film's theme purports to be that America's glory is its small towns, in fact it glorifies small towns not *as* small towns but as sites of opportunity to create – rather than simply experience – modernity. In this respect, the film recreates the boosterism mentality that Francaviglia demonstrates ironically accounts for the modern-day perception of the turn-of-the-century small town's charm. The result here is that 1895 Seville *as it actually exists* is as unsatisfactory to Ben as it is to Nellie. He ignores its current state, however, in favor of his vision of its future promise, whereas Nellie, who will play little or no role in its achieving that promise and indeed has no interest in town-building, sees *only* its current state. Thus, Ben is eager to

either actor could have infused Seville with a charm built largely on their respective screen personae, well established by the early 1950s, of mischievous, energetic likeableness (Cagney) or simple, down-home likeableness (Stewart). By 1951, however, both actors were probably too old for the part; in any event, there is no indication in extant studio records that either was approached for the role.

²²⁷ In particular, it was feared that Nellie's leaving Ben with another man would render her irredeemably unsympathetic, and so care was taken to motivate her sudden decision to take the train to Chicago as anger with Ben's lies and not an intent to initiate an affair with the other man, who was in fact taking the same train to Chicago for business but whose advances she had consistently rebuffed throughout the film. Darryl Zanuck to George Jessel, "Conference Notes on 'Seeing Nellie Home,'" October 3, 1950, UCLA Arts Special Collection.

change Sevillinois and is willing to put in the time and effort to do so, while Nellie simply wants to leave. For neither character, however, is Sevillinois acceptable as it is.

As the film's reviewers recognized, *Wait Til the Sun Shines, Nellie* is the story of a town's growth and development over fifty years; thus it is not a single place, as is St. Louis in the moment preserved in *Meet Me in St. Louis*, but a succession of places. Admittedly, each place in this succession in and of itself constitutes a small American town at some moment during the decades surrounding the turn of the last century; none, however, is lauded for its current condition, but only for the promise of what it is yet to become. Thus, this succession of places is one moving as quickly as the city fathers can accomplish toward its 1945 iteration – that is, toward the America of the film's audience and toward the categorization of *city* rather than *town*. The studio's promotion of the film with exhibitors reflects this view of the film: “‘Wait Til the Sun Shines, Nellie’ is ready-made for adoption by every phase of the great American public. . . . Through its eyes, which are alternately filled with tears and smiles, is re-told the story of a half-century of progress. . . . With stars and nostalgia, songs and Technicolor, ‘Wait Til the Sun Shines, Nellie’ is surefire for every market.”²²⁸ In the film's terms, the key word in this transition is *progress*, presented as an unalloyed good, and as the primary laudatory characteristic of Sevillinois, it renders the turn-of-the-century small town a place to regard not with a longing to return but with a satisfied pride at *its having left itself behind*, at its having advanced beyond its moment to triumphantly enter the present.

²²⁸ *Wait Til the Sun Shines, Nellie* Exhibitor's Campaign Book, Twentieth Century Fox, 8, University of Southern California Cinema-Television Library Pressbook Collection (“USC-CNTV Pressbook Collection”).

Presentation of the Female

Although its representation of the automobile was the primary means by which *Excuse My Dust* elevated mid-century over turn-of-the-century America, the automobile was not the only element in the film to serve this function; as described previously, popular music was also one such element. A third was the female form, specifically in an extended dance performed by the film's female lead, Sally Forrest, as Liz. Throughout the film, Forrest wears the long skirts, high-necked bodices, and leg-o'-mutton sleeves associated with 1895 fashion – with the single exception of this dance number. The characters are attending a ball when Joe, exhibiting his usual prescience, announces that in fifty years, clothes will weigh half what they currently do because 1890s clothing would be too heavy for the mobile life of the future. Cy Random, Joe's rival for Liz's affections, overhears Joe's remarks. As he watches Liz sway to Ben's latest "jass" tune, a fantasy sequence begins in which Liz, walking behind a series of barriers, emerges from each one with one less layer of clothing, until she is wearing a camisole and the bloomer-style underwear of the 1890s. Slipping behind the final barrier, she emerges in a 1950s dance outfit – tight sweater, knee-length skirt, and flat shoes – and a lengthy choreographed dance routine follows of the type common to 1950s film musicals. At the conclusion of the number, the same device is used to return to Liz to her 1895 costuming: again, she walks behind a series of barriers, emerging each time now wearing an additional other layer of clothing. The punch line of the routine is Cy shaking his head and saying, "I wonder how long a man can live."

At least one reviewer regarded Forrest's flash-forward, modern-day dance number to be the best moment in the film:

Highlight of the film is the "Waterfront Lowdown" dance routine featuring

Miss Forrest. She scores strongly in this sequence and the dance itself is impressive, comparable to the “Slaughter on Tenth Avenue” routine from an earlier musical. The choreography on this is imaginative and provocative. Hermes Pan gets credit for an outstanding chore.²²⁹

Certainly, its inclusion reflects the studio’s on-going effort to provide “something for everyone.” Moreover, it was obviously intended as Forrest’s showcase number in the film. At six minutes, its length gives it emphasis within the film, as does its completely anachronistic costuming and staging. Introduced by Joe’s prediction that, “in fifty years, clothes will weigh half that,” and immediately followed by Cy’s expressed desire to live long enough to see 1950s fashions, this sequence is built on the premise that the audience is happy to be in the place where Cy desires to be. The implicit understanding between film and audience is that 1950s women’s fashions are more attractive and hence *superior* to the multi-layered, covered-up look worn by the 1890s woman. This attitude is conveyed as well in MGM’s advertising for the film. Photos from the Forrest dance number are included in all the studio’s posters for the film. The upper half of one poster in particular shows the star, Skelton, being kissed by two young ladies, each wearing bonnets of indeterminate vintage, while the lower half of the poster contains a still from Forrest’s modern dance number in which she wears tights and a short skirt. Thus, there is very little indication in this poster that the film takes place in 1895, and Forrest’s modern, sultry dance number takes up a third of the poster, implying, to the contrary, that the film is a modern musical.

In Warner Bros.’ *On Moonlight Bay* (1951) and its sequel, *By the Light of the Silvery Moon* (1953), set in the late 1910s in a small Indiana town, the female lead, Doris Day, is costumed in a similarly anachronistic manner. Rather than being bracketed in a fantasy

²²⁹ George H. Jackson, “Red Foils Heat Wave; ‘Excuse My Dust’ is Gay Frolic in Color,” *Los Angeles Evening Herald Examiner*, July 9, 1951.

production number, however, Day's anachronistic costuming occurs throughout the films, a demonstration of her centrality to the films (as opposed to Forrest's supporting role in *Excuse My Dust*, a Skelton vehicle) and, more significantly, to the studio's use of Day to "sell" the film and its music to American youth.

These films are part of a loose cycle of period comedies and musicals set at or near the turn of the century which depict the adventures and misadventures of a single family. Begun, in fact, with *Meet Me in St. Louis*, this cycle was carried forward not only with *Summer Holiday* but with *Centennial Summer* (TCF 1946) (set in 1876 Philadelphia), *Life With Father* (WB 1947) (1880s New York City), *Two Weeks With Love* (MGM 1950) (1900 Catskills resort), and *Darling, How Could You?* (Paramount 1951) (1900 New York City). *On Moonlight Bay* and *By the Light of the Silvery Moon* are particularly derivative of *Meet Me in St. Louis* and *Summer Holiday*. Here again is a comfortably middle-class white family living in a small town in the early years of the twentieth century; here again the multi-story Victorian frame home with the spacious front porch, situated on a wide, leafy street; here again young love with the neighbor boy (next door in *Meet Me in St. Louis*, across the street in *Summer Holiday* and *On Moonlight Bay/By the Light of the Silvery Moon*); here again the callow youth (MacRae as a college senior in *On Moonlight Bay* and Mickey Rooney as a high school senior in *Summer Holiday*) espousing shocking, radical views; here again, the irascible housekeeper/cook (Marjorie Main as Katie in *Meet Me in St. Louis*; Mary Wickes as Stella in *On Moonlight Bay/By the Light of the Silvery Moon*).

In other respects, however, this idyllic turn-of-the-century family differs from that of the earlier MGM films. *On Moonlight Bay* posits the road *not* taken in *Meet Me in St. Louis*: it

begins with the Winfield family's leaving its long-time home, albeit not to move to New York or some other city, but to another neighborhood in the same small Indiana town in which the family has always lived. Nonetheless, the film begins with everyone in the family – including cook/housekeeper Stella – angry with the family patriarch, again played by Leon Ames (Mr. Smith in *Meet Me in St. Louis*), for the disruption to their lives caused by the move. Thus, from the outset, *On Moonlight Bay* challenges the stability celebrated and reinforced in *Meet Me in St. Louis* and questioned in *Summer Holiday* only by Richard's future, offscreen departure for college; *On Moonlight Bay* replaces that stability with the notion of the family as *mobile* unit, much as the aftereffects of World War II introduced a new mobility into American life, and as a unit ultimately happy in its new location at that. In the Warner Bros. films, the extended family (grandfather in *Meet Me in St. Louis* and the unmarried uncle and aunt in *Summer Holiday*) is gone, and instead of the Smiths' six children in *Meet Me in St. Louis* or the Millers' four children in *Summer Holiday*, the Winfields have just two offspring. Indeed, in this scaled-down, "modern" nuclear family, *On Moonlight Bay* and *By the Light of the Silvery Moon* anticipate the television domestic sitcom of the late 1950s and early 1960s,²³⁰ although that perception is undeniably strengthened by the knowledge that Billy Gray, who portrays Day's younger brother, Wesley, was later to become Bud in *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960).

The most significant departure from the earlier MGM films, insofar as the films' relationship to its represented past is concerned, is Warner Bros.' eschewing MGM's meticulous

²³⁰ In addition, as Horace Newcomb recognizes, the neighborhood streets in an early domestic sitcom such as *Father Knows Best* resemble less the 1950s Levittown-style suburb than the Hollywood small town. Horace Newcomb, *TV: The Most Popular Art* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1974), 44.

devotion to authenticity in costuming the film's female lead. It is significant that, except for female extras, this anachronistic costuming is largely limited to Day herself. In contrast, for instance, Ames as Mr. Winfield, the family patriarch, is costumed in much the same manner as he was as Mr. Smith in *Meet Me in St. Louis*;²³¹ the younger male characters – Day's love interest and his rival – wear characteristically early-twentieth century clothing such as strawboaters, striped jackets, and fur coats. Gray as the younger brother wears knickerbockers and cloth caps, as do the other boys in his class at school.

In scenes featuring a group of young people, such as dances, the other young women, who appear only in the background, wear 1950s style make-up and costumes like Day's, and in larger crowd scenes, such as on a carnival boardwalk, the female background extras of all ages wear clothing that would be largely indistinguishable from that one would see in a similar crowd

²³¹ In fact, a number of Warner Bros. press releases relate that Ames was made up and costumed to look like his own father, whose life paralleled that of Ames' character in *On Moonlight Bay* and *By the Light of the Silvery Moon*. One such press release reads in part:

Ames . . . remarked, "The man I am to play [in *On Moonlight Bay*] could be my own father. His imposing, yet friendly personality, his manner of lecturing and reprimanding his family all remind me of my father."

When Ames noted that even the locale of the story was that of his own boyhood – a small town in Indiana, he definitely decided to pattern his portrayal on his father. Ames as Doris Day's father in "On Moonlight Bay" is a small town banker. So was Ames' pater.

Not only is he using his father's mannerisms, but he is copying his clothes, mustache, etc. Before starting the picture, Ames gave the wardrobe and makeup departments photographs of his dad. He was then made up to resemble his father as he looked in 1916, the period of the story.

. . . .

[Ames] hopes that his father, Charles Elmer Wycoff, will exclaim, "That's me," when he sees the picture.

Ashton, Warner Bros. Studio press release, undated, University of Southern California Warner Bros. Collection ("USC-WB Collection").

scene in a 1950s modern-day film.²³² The more prominent female characters, however, appear in costumes that are truer to period styles. Wesley's schoolteacher, for instance, is primly attired in the high-necked, long-sleeved shirtwaists of a style slightly pre-dating the late 1910s. Wickes as the family's cook and housekeeper is dressed in utilitarian long-sleeved bouses and ankle-length skirts. Rosemary De Camp, portraying Mrs. Winfield, wears dresses with the large collars, square necklines, three-quarter-length sleeves, slightly elevated waistlines, and straight skirts seen in 1910s issues of fashion magazines such as *The Delineator*.

In contrast, Day, as Marjorie Winfield, appears in costumes that make little reference to the 1910s and often appear to come straight from 1952. Indeed, the studio's research department records suggest that the authenticity of women's fashions in these films was not a high priority. Warner Bros.' Research Record for *On Moonlight Bay* indicates that between September 13, 1949 and March 27, 1951, eighty-seven requests were made of the studio's research department for period-related information. The film's screenwriter and later its art director sought information about such things as 1915 amusement parks, college life, popular songs and dances, elementary school classrooms, home decor, and magic lanterns. Aside from a request for

²³² To some degree, this anachronistic costuming of female extras can be attributed to Warner Bros.' house style. From its inception, Warners had been a much more cost-conscious studio than a studio such as MGM, known for its lavish productions, and Warners had always produced, on average, less expensive films. (Indeed, Jack L. Warner, head of Warners' film production, was known for being the most cost-conscious of the studio moguls.) Thus, throughout the studio's history, Warners' production strategy was to produce the number of films its theaters required at the lowest possible cost and to make a small profit with every film. Warner Bros. continued to be profitable in the eight years after the end of the war, but after 1947, profits began to decline until in 1953, they had dropped to the 1940 level of \$3,000,000. The studio had stayed in the black primarily through cutting costs, and it is unsurprising that authenticity in the costuming of extras would be something the studio perceived as an unnecessary expense.

trousseau details, however, only two requests were for samples of ladies' wardrobes of the 1910s.²³³ Similarly, the Research Record for *By the Light of the Silvery Moon* contains three requests for information about girls' 1919 skating costumes, but only one request for information about women's 1919 fashions, in response to which the Research Department sent "4 clips wardrobe files, Delineator Jan. & Mar. 1919, Vogue Sept. 15, 1919."²³⁴

One immediately apparent explanation for this limited interest in period authenticity and Day's resultant anachronistic representation in these films is that, particularly in such genres as musicals and comedies, Classic Hollywood was never interested in reproducing "reality"; indeed, its commercial success was often due to its choice not to do so. In his account of Hollywood costuming, David Chierichetti observes that costume designs during the Hollywood studio era required a "subtle mixture of fact and imagination."²³⁵ Thus, "if the studio wanted a historical drama – some fiction and some history – then the designer would be required to pay some respect to the clothes people wore in the past, but, at the same time not suppress imagination altogether."²³⁶ Consequently, "[w]hat people actually wore, whether in the present or the past, was largely lost sight of in the efforts to instill films with mystique. . . ."²³⁷ Chierichetti recounts, in fact, that Louis B. Mayer disliked Irene Sharaff's costumes for *Meet Me in St. Louis* because

²³³ Warner Bros. Studio Research Record, Moonlight Bay, USC-WB Collection.

²³⁴ Warner Bros. Studio Research Record, *By the Light of the Silvery Moon*, USC-WB Collection.

²³⁵ David Chierichetti, *Hollywood Costume Design* (New York: Harmony Books, 1976), 8.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*

²³⁷ *Ibid.*

they were too authentic.²³⁸

Hollywood's aversion to potentially alienating authenticity and the resulting anachronism in women's costuming in particular can be traced to the relationship between the motion picture and the women's clothing industries. In Western society, women's social and economic dependence on men had long required them to attract male attention by distinguishing themselves from other women; Ruth Rubenstein argues that the original "trend-setter" in establishing socially condoned methods of adornment, the courtesan, was replaced in late nineteenth and early twentieth century by the chorus girl and movie star,²³⁹ following the mid-nineteenth century introduction of ready-made clothing which Stuart Ewen and Elizabeth Ewen note "blurred class distinctions" and performed the "ideological function . . . [of keeping] up the appearance of equality."²⁴⁰ That is, as Rubenstein argues, "[t]he media conveyed the message that any woman with beauty and talent could dance or sing her way to affluence,"²⁴¹ and as Leo Lowenthal concluded from his study of twentieth century popular magazine biographies, the magical, larger-than-life quality of stars positioned them to serve as consumer society's models of consumption,

²³⁸ Ibid., 34. Similarly, Irene Dunne and director Wesley Ruggles were skeptical of Walter Plunkett's sketches for Dunne's costumes for *Cimarron* (1931), which featured big 1890s leg-o'-mutton sleeves that Dunne and Ruggles feared would alien audiences. Their solution was to give Dunne dialogue at the first reaction to them in the film: "They say in Chicago that they'll be even bigger by fall." Ibid., 136.

²³⁹ Ruth Rubenstein, *Dress Codes: Meanings and Messages in American Culture* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001), 149-50.

²⁴⁰ Charlotte Cornelia Herzog and Jane Gaines, "Puffed Sleeves Before Tea-Time," in *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, ed. Christine Gledhill, (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 84.

²⁴¹ Rubenstein, *Dress Codes*, 149-50.

whose degree of spending could not be matched but could be imitated on a smaller scale.²⁴²

Indeed, as early as 1929, fashion analyst Elizabeth Hurlock wrote that film stars had become the most powerful determinants of fashion,²⁴³ and Charles Eckert has concluded that in the growing cooperation between the motion picture and women's clothing industries in the 1930s was the result of two parallel, separate histories: the showcasing of fashions, cosmetics, furniture, and other consumer goods in Hollywood films and the practice of "tie-ups" with manufacturers, corporations, and industries.²⁴⁴ As Charlotte Herzog and Jane Gaines have determined, the result was a large-scale effort to use fashion to draw women into movie theaters, which was achieved by such cross-fertilization as studios' providing fashion magazines copy and photographs of stars in the clothes from their films.²⁴⁵ Gaines argues, in fact, that the studios' efforts to influence what women actually wore stemmed from the desire to have women serve, in effect, as walking advertisements for films; it was thus in the studios' interests for women to view Hollywood costuming and fashion as one.²⁴⁶ Indeed, Annette Kuhn concludes that Hollywood's images of unobtainable female perfection create a insatiable desire that brings the filmgoer back to the cinema again and again, meaning that "[w]omen's bodies and selling were identified:

²⁴² Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: BFI 1979), 45, citing Leo Lowenthal, "The Triumph of Mass Idols," in *Literature, Popular Culture and Society* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall 1961), 109-40.

²⁴³ Stuart Ewen and Elizabeth Ewen, *Channels of Desire: Mass Images and the Shaping of American Consciousness* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1982), 201.

²⁴⁴ Charles Eckert, "The Carole Lombard in Macy's Window," in *Stardom*, 32.

²⁴⁵ Herzog and Gaines, "'Puffed Sleeves Before Tea-Time,'" 82-83.

²⁴⁶ Jane Gaines, "The Popular Icon as Commodity and Sign: The Circulation of Betty Grable 1941-45" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1982), 162-63.

representations of women became the commodities that film producers were able to exchange in return for money.”²⁴⁷

Within this context, then, it is unsurprising that a female lead’s appearance in a period musical, a sub-genre not particularly committed to verisimilitude, would be constructed along modern lines. In all these respects, then, the insistence that a female lead embody *current* standards of beauty would not be limited to Day’s period films. Nor, for that matter, would this modern presentation of female leads be limited to period films set at the turn of the last century. Certainly, in both *On Moonlight Bay* and *By the Light of the Silvery Moon*, Day is simultaneously a figure of the past and the present, her responsibility to provide visual pleasure in *contemporary* terms effectively trumping her obligation to “fit” within the film’s diegesis. Nonetheless, this Hollywood practice alone is an incomplete explanation for Day’s costuming in these films, which was also dictated by the type of film Warner intended, which, in turn, was shaped by the nature of Day’s particular stardom.

From the outset, Warners intended *On Moonlight Bay* (and later, its sequel *By the Light of the Silvery Moon*) to be *family fare* – that is, films that offered something for everyone. In December 1950, the *New York Times* reported that Warner Bros. was in the process of producing a musical version of Booth Tarkington’s Penrod stories, on which the studio had based several films released in the 1930s.²⁴⁸ The *Times* reported that the screenwriters of *On Moonlight Bay*,

²⁴⁷ Annette Kuhn, *The Power of the Image: Essays on Representation and Sexuality* (London, Boston, Melbourne and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 13.

²⁴⁸ First National (later absorbed into Warner Bros.) released two silent film versions of Tarkington’s Penrod novels, *Penrod* (1922) and *Penrod and Sam* (1923). In the 1930s, Warner Bros. produced three low-budget programmers: *The Adventures of Penrod and Sam* (1931), *Penrod and Sam* (1937), and *Penrod and His Twin Brother* (1938). These films updated

Melville Shavelson and Jack Rose, had “conceived the idea of reviving the Tarkington stories because of advices from studio field men that ‘family’ pictures are still eminently salable”²⁴⁹ As has been seen, those involved in the film industry viewed nostalgia in particular as one means of broadening a film’s appeal to more than one audience: it offered pleasant reminiscences for older audiences, especially those who had actual memories of the period represented, while it promised to be a humorous curiosity for younger audiences. In this case, a primary source for nostalgia in *On Moonlight Bay* and *By the Light of the Silvery Moon*, as their titles imply, were the period songs featured in the films. In fact, the legend is that in 1950, Warners’ song library included a number of period songs that were no longer earning royalties. Jack Warner reasoned that using them as the names of films and featuring them in those films might revive them and rejuvenate their earning power. Thus, at random, he chose the song “On Moonlight Bay” and instructed Shavelson and Rose to write a film with *On Moonlight Bay* as its title. Shavelson decided to base the script on Tarkington’s Penrod books,²⁵⁰ children’s stories he had enjoyed as a child. The result, in *On Moonlight Bay* and its sequel, *By the Light of the Silvery Moon*, are musical films in which nearly all the musical numbers are period and Tin Pan Alley songs written decades before the films’ release.

In this respect, *On Moonlight Bay* and *By the Light of the Silvery Moon* were but two in a

Tarkington’s stories to the modern day; like the 1950s films, they are only very loosely based on their source material, but somewhat in the manner of *Our Gang* shorts, their primary focus is Penrod and his friends rather than his older sister (Day in the 1950s films).

²⁴⁹ “Secret Out,” *New York Times*, December 10, 1950.

²⁵⁰ *Penrod* (1916), *Penrod and Sam* (1919), and *Penrod Jashber* (1929). In writing these books, Tarkington drew on his observations of his nephews at play and his memories of his own childhood in the 1870s.

long line of films produced by several studios in which turn-of-the-century and Tin Pan Alley songs were showcased and hence “recycled.” This line of films began with a scattering of early period backstage musicals, usually set in the 1890s, such as Paramount’s *Belle of the Nineties* (1934),²⁵¹ Warner Bros. *Sweet Adeline* (1935), and Universal’s *Showboat* (1936). Each of these films featured performances of period songs in addition to more contemporary songs. In particular, to ensure the film’s period flavor, *Showboat* both invoked prior musical styles in new musical compositions²⁵² and included genuine period songs that spanned its diegetic time frame of 1885 to 1925.²⁵³ The historical catalog in *Showboat* of popular musical and theatrical styles helped pave the way for 20th Century Fox’s Technicolor period backstage musicals of the 1940s. In 1938, for example, 20th Century Fox released *In Old Chicago* (1938),²⁵⁴ an account of a

²⁵¹ Although both of these films featured period songs such as “And the Band Played On,” “Bicycle Built for Two,” and “Silver Threads Among the Gold,” West’s musical performances were almost exclusively blues numbers such as “Frankie and Johnny,” “Memphis Blues,” and “One of the Devil’s Daughters.”

²⁵² Specifically, Magnolia’s “Gallivantin’ Around” showboat number is intended as a visual and musical reproduction of nineteenth century minstrelsy, and both “Ol’ Man River” and “Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man” were perceived as strongly influenced by and evocative of black spirituals.

²⁵³ In the New Year’s sequence at the Trocadero, Magnolia sings “After the Ball,” which a character describes as an “old favorite” so as to clarify the film’s chronology to the film audience. From Magnolia’s costume and the diegetic events in the film, her performance appears to occur near the turn of the century, while “After the Ball” was first published in 1892. In 1936, of course, many moviegoers would have been alive in both 1900 and 1892, so that this almost off-hand explanation would have had meaning. In this same sequence, the film’s comic couple, Frank and Ellie Schultz, perform the period songs, “Good-by My Lady Love” and “At a Georgia Camp Meeting.” (Although largely unnecessary to serve this purpose in MGM’s 1951 remake, “After the Ball” is introduced there as a new song, dating Magnolia’s performance to 1892, a result of the script’s being rewritten to span only seven years instead of more than twenty.)

²⁵⁴ Two other key influences behind 20th Century Fox’s period backstage musicals were the spectacular event period film and Darryl F. Zanuck’s production practice of doggedly imitating and repeating prior successful formulas. In particular, the success of MGM’s *San*

fictional bandleader from 1911 through 1937 whose score consists of twenty of Irving Berlin's standards. *Alexander's Ragtime Band* was the first of what was to be a steady stream of Gay Nineties, turn-of-the-century, and early vaudeville backstage musicals that 20th Century Fox released throughout the following decade. Featuring period songs, a collection of a contemporary composer's standards, or a combination of both, the films were consistent box office successes constructed around often repetitive, formulaic narratives. After the success of *Alexander's Ragtime Band*, the studio produced twelve more of these musicals between 1940 and 1950, most starring Alice Faye, Betty Grable, or June Haver.²⁵⁵ In addition, the studio made extensive use of period music in *Wait Til the Sun Shines, Nellie*. Not surprisingly, "Wait Til the Sun Shines, Nellie" appears repeatedly in the film's score; it was also performed several times by Ben's barbershop quartet (including in Ben's nostalgic return to his barbershop at the end of the flashback, when the barbershop quartet appears only in Ben's imagination, as young men dressed as they had been in 1895), and it is the song the marching band plays in the 1945 Sevillinois

San Francisco (1936), renowned for its recreation of the 1906 earthquake, inspired Zanuck to try for like success with *In Old Chicago* (1938), a big-budget production whose dramatic climax was the 1871 Chicago fire. The male lead was Tyrone Power, and as *San Francisco* had co-starred Jeannette MacDonald, who sang several times during the film (including three renditions of the film's title song), Zanuck's female lead also had to be a singer. For this role, he cast relative newcomer Alice Faye, and the spectacular success of the film made her a star. In typical fashion, the popularity of *In Old Chicago* made Zanuck quick to pair Tyrone and Faye again in *Alexander's Ragtime Band*.

²⁵⁵ Both Alice Faye and Betty Grable starred in *Tin Pan Alley* (1940). Faye starred in *Lillian Russell* (1940) and *Hello, Frisco, Hello* (1943), and Grable starred in *Sweet Rosie O'Grady* (1943), *Coney Island* (1943), *The Dolly Sisters* (1945), and *Mother Wore Tights* (1947). (In addition, Grable remade *Coney Island* as *Wabash Avenue* in 1950.) Haver was the star in *I Wonder Who's Kissing Her Now* (1947), *Oh, You Beautiful Doll* (1949), and *The Daughter of Rosie O'Grady* (1950). In addition, Fox released *My Gal Sal*, a musical biography of songwriter Paul Dresser starring Rita Hayworth, in 1942.

anniversary parade with which the film ends. In addition, the quartet performs other period songs, such as “On the Banks of the Wabash,” “Break the News to Mother,” and “Open the Door,” the melodies of which are echoed in the film score.

MGM followed 20th Century Fox’s lead with the fictional period backstage musicals *For Me and My Gal* (1942), *Two Sisters from Boston* (1946), *Easter Parade* (1948), and *Take Me Out to the Ballgame* (1949), and with the quasi-biographies of musical show business personalities *Till the Clouds Roll By* (1946) (Jerome Kern) and *Deep in My Heart* (1954) (songwriter Sigmund Romberg). For its part, Warner Bros. produced the musical biography of George M. Cohan, *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, in 1942,²⁵⁶ and used period music effectively in *The Strawberry Blonde* (1941), where “The Band Played On” and “I’ll Take You Home Again, Kathleen,” are used as motifs for the characters portrayed by Rita Hayworth and Olivia de Havilland, respectively. In fact, “The Band Played On,” written in 1895, became a hit all over again with the film’s 1941 release.

At the same time, MGM and, to a lesser extent, 20th Century Fox also produced films set at or near the turn-of-the-century which, rather than backstage musicals, were integrated musicals in the sense that at least some of the songs are not diegetic stage performances but are sung “spontaneously” by the characters in the ordinary course of their lives. In some of these films as well, the musical score is a mixture of new and period songs, such as in MGM’s *In the Good Old*

²⁵⁶ This film was part of a Warners series of such biographical films about popular composers, the other films being *Rhapsody in Blue* (1943) (George Gershwin), *This is the Army* (1943) (Irving Berlin), and *Night and Day* (1946) (Cole Porter).

Summertime (1949) (a musical adaptation of *The Shop Around the Corner* (1940))²⁵⁷ and Warner Bros. *One Sunday Afternoon* (1948), a musical version of *The Strawberry Blonde*. Finally, on occasion, the turn-of-the-century-family film referred to previously included period songs, such as the title song and “Skip to My Lou” in *Meet Me in St. Louis*.

Consequently, in light of this industrial practice, for Warners the term “nostalgic” when applied to songs would have translated into “presold.” During production of *By the Light of the Silvery Moon*, Louella Parsons reported that “[t]here has never been theme music used as often in movies as ‘By the Light of the Silvery Moon,’ which has either been sung or played 60 times. Usually, as in the case of ‘Wilson,’ it is used to denote the turn of the century.”²⁵⁸ One reviewer of *By the Light of the Silvery Moon* reported that “[a] Warner Bros. producer remarked recently that all the dimensions in the world would never do a movie as much good as a clever combination of *old songs and fresh comedy*,” and opined that *By the Light of the Silvery Moon* “has the combination.”²⁵⁹ Ultimately, the faintly recognizable Penrod stories on which the films were loosely based, as well as the films’ early twentieth century songs, were expected to appeal to older audiences who knew the stories and the songs from their youth. The intended appeal to younger audiences was the humor inherent in “the good old days” and the romantic coupling of Gordon MacRae and Doris Day, which had proved popular in Warner Bros.’ earlier films, *Tea for Two* (1950) and *The West Point Story* (1950). In addition, however, Day was to “translate” these

²⁵⁷ Notably, with *In the Good Old Summertime*, MGM “Americanized” the story by moving it from its original Budapest to turn-of-the-century Chicago.

²⁵⁸ Louella Parsons, *Los Angeles Examiner*, November 12, 1951.

²⁵⁹ Tom Coffey, “Old Songs, New Laughs Light ‘Moon,’” *The Mirror*, April 25, 1953 (emphasis added).

songs of an earlier generation into the current idiom of her contemporary and very popular singing style, rendering them not only palatable but attractive to – and consumable by – younger audiences as well.

Indeed, Day's having come to movies via her singing career shaped both her introduction into film and the trajectory of her film career. In the late 1930s, she sang with the big bands of Barney Rapp, Bob Crosby, and Les Brown. Twelve of her recordings with Brown made the Hit Parade, and two reached the number one spot: "My Dreams Are Getting Better All the Time" and "Sentimental Journey," which was particularly popular with World War II GIs. In the 1940s, she left Brown's band and began an independent singing and recording career, enjoying continued success. Thus, hers was a popular and familiar voice when Warner Bros. put her under contract in 1948. Unsurprisingly, Warners began Day's film career by putting her in a musical, *Romance on the High Seas* (1948). With the film's release, she was an instant star, and the studio immediately cast her in *My Dream is Yours* (1949). Both films were successful, if not huge hits, each earning a respectable profit of \$650,000.²⁶⁰ The studio quickly moved to capitalize on Day's popularity, starring her in another 1949 release, *It's a Great Feeling*,²⁶¹ and thereafter in three films in 1950 and four in 1951.

In the early 1950s, Day's popularity grew rapidly. Between May 1951 and September 1953, she appeared on the cover of fifteen issues of movie fan magazines, such as *Photoplay* and *Modern Screen*. In addition, Warner Bros. press releases report that on April 19, 1951, 1000

²⁶⁰ James C. Robertson, *The Casablanca Man: The Cinema of Michael Curtiz* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 99.

²⁶¹ In these first three films, Day's co-star was Jack Carson. A. E. Hotchner, *Doris Day: Her Own Story* (New York: William Morrow & Co., Inc., 1976), 112.

college men at Loras College in Iowa had chosen Day as “our girl” in a recent poll,²⁶² in May 1951, the Yale Daily News column of film criticism, “Screen Sketches,” named Day as the one making “the greatest contribution to musical films during college year 1950-51;”²⁶³ U.S. exhibitors voted Day to be the number one female box office attraction of 1951 on the basis of her films *I’ll See You in My Dreams*, *On Moonlight Bay*, and *Lullaby of Broadway*,²⁶⁴ in May 1953, Day was named the top female motion picture star in a popularity poll conducted by the Kemsley publications in the British Isles.²⁶⁵

Ultimately, in the seven years Day was under contract to Warner Bros., she made seventeen films, of which all but two were musicals. Moreover, in the early years of her contract, many of those musicals were of a particular kind, often set back in time and featuring for the most part period songs or established standards:

In those Warner Brothers years, the pictures I enjoyed the most (not the scripts but the fun I had making them) were the nostalgic musicals – *Tea for Two* [1950], *Lullaby of Broadway* [1951], *On Moonlight Bay* [1951], *I’ll See You in My Dreams* [1951]²⁶⁶, *By the Light of the Silvery Moon* [1953], *Calamity Jane* [1953]. I liked the old songs, and the good old times that those films captured.²⁶⁷

This cycle of “nostalgia films” which Day made for Warners in the first five years of her contract

²⁶² Warner Bros. Studio press release, April 19, 1951, USC-WB Collection.

²⁶³ Warner Bros. Studio press release, May 9, 1951, USC-WB Collection.

²⁶⁴ Warner Bros. Studio press release, September 1, 1952, USC-WB Collection.

²⁶⁵ Warner Bros. Studio press release, May 4, 1953, USC-WB Collection.

²⁶⁶ *I’ll See You in My Dreams* was the musical biography of songwriter Gus Kahn, played by Danny Thomas.

²⁶⁷ Hotchner, *Doris Day*, 117 (emphasis added).

(which were also the first five years of her film career) – that is, a cycle of films in which she sang songs with which the audience was already familiar – was a logical exploitation of her pre-existing relationship with the American public.

Indeed, throughout the time Day spent under contract to Warners, she produced two products which the company promoted and sold: films and recordings. Both she and MacRae released recordings of the songs from *On Moonlight Bay* and *By the Light of the Silvery Moon*, and, as was the case with the films themselves, the production and release of these recordings by Warners' music division was the subject of studio promotional efforts. For instance, on June 10, 1951, the studio held a screening of *On Moonlight Bay* for disc jockeys and music store personnel at the Academy Theatre. The next day, a studio executive sent a memo to Jack Warner, telling him that the screening had been a “complete success.” Nine hundred music store personnel had attended, which “assured 2000+ window displays throughout Southern California and even more counter displays.” The disc jockeys who attended also liked the film, which meant they would “promote the picture and the Doris Day-Gordon MacRae recordings of its songs.”²⁶⁸ Press releases issued during the production of both *On Moonlight Bay* and *By the Light of the Silvery Moon* announced which songs would be featured in the films. For instance, one press release stated that “[t]wo of the greatest song sellers of all time, ‘Till We Meet Again’ and ‘Tell Me,’ have been set for the musical score of ‘On Moonlight Bay’ . . . starting production in early January,”²⁶⁹ while another named the “dozen all-time favorites” that Day, MacRae, and co-star

²⁶⁸ Alex Evelove to Jack L. Warner, Warner Bros. Studio Interoffice Communication, July 11, 1951, USC-WB Collection.

²⁶⁹ Warner Bros. Studio press release, December 20, 1950, USC-WB Collection.

Jack Smith would sing in the film.²⁷⁰ This emphasis on the films' music is not surprising; whether one believes that Jack Warner ordered screenwriters to come up with a script to match the title, *On Moonlight Bay*, it is undeniable that to the extent Warners could repeatedly re-introduce songs it owned into contemporary popular culture, reviving them and keeping them in cultural circulation, those songs represented a potentially never-ending source of revenue.²⁷¹

Thus, to meet the studio's general goal of producing films that appealed to the widest possible audience, and the particular goal of making *On Moonlight Bay* and *By the Light of the Silvery Moon* successful *family fare*, Day served the dual role of drawing in and appealing to younger audiences, such as fans of her work as a band singer, and simultaneously making those audiences new fans of the film's period songs. In so doing, she also served as a vehicle for putting and keeping these songs in circulation, a role which she could accomplish only by her *contemporaneity*, both as a singer and as an object of appeal to younger audiences. Hence, particularly during the early years of her film career at Warners, when she was featured almost

²⁷⁰ Warner Bros. Studio press release, January 2, 1951, USC-WB Collection. Press releases also informed the public when recordings of the films' songs were being made. Thus in April 1951, for instance, Warner Bros. issued a press release stating that "Doris Day starts recording next week eight songs from 'On Moonlight Bay.' Miss Day's album from 'Lullaby of Broadway,' her previous Warners musical, has broken all sales records for picture music albums." Warner Bros. Studio press release, April 18, 1951, USC-WB Collection. Moreover, as was customary at the time, other performers also released recordings of the songs featured in these films, and these other recordings in turn were the subject of Warners' publicity efforts. Warner Bros. Studio press release, December 20, 1950, USC-WB Collection.

²⁷¹ Specifically, songs were sold in recordings and as sheet music, and production numbers of popular songs in a particular film attracted audiences to see the film. Reliable "draws" because of their pre-existing familiarity, these songs could be made familiar again – or newly familiar to younger audiences – each time they appeared in a film, and hence they could be made continually available as a means to "put a film over"; each such film that successfully re-introduced the songs into cultural circulation generated the possibility for another such film to do so again at a later date, with a new wave of attendant recording and sheet music sales.

exclusively in musicals, Day's contemporaneousness was a crucial component of her star persona. In her "as-told-to" biography, Day herself notes that while she was herself "an old-fashioned girl" who loved the older songs she performed in the "nostalgic" films she made for Warners in the early 1950s, "*I look so contemporary that I always seem misplaced in those period costumes.*"²⁷²

This "contemporary" quality is attributable as well to Day's early 1950s star image as the archetypal girl-next-door. Tamar Jeffers perceives two distinct star personae in Day's career, corresponding to the two peaks of her popularity: the first in the early 1950s and the second in the early to mid-1960s. Day's first star image was "the innocent, energetic tomboy, made more of a lady through an awakening love, retaining her perkiness despite swapping dungarees or buckskins for skirts in the last reel."²⁷³ Jeffers argues that by the late 1950s, Hollywood costuming of female leads had been bifurcated into two silhouettes: the figure-hugging sheath and the New-Look-inspired "swing-skirted silhouette, with tight waist and multiple, full stiff petticoats supporting circular skirts."²⁷⁴ The former was Hollywood's costume of choice for overtly sexually available women and career girls, while the latter was "cinematic shorthand for virgins"²⁷⁵ and as such, had dominated Day's costuming until *Pillow Talk* (1959), where Jeffers argues that Day's costuming in "career girl" sheaths was a key factor in the creation of her second, "mature" star image. It is not insignificant, then, that the "virginal" tight waist and full, circular skirt – a

²⁷² Hotchner, *Doris Day*, 117 (emphasis added).

²⁷³ Tamar Jeffers, "*Pillow Talk's* Repackaging of Doris Day; 'Under all those dirndls ...'" in *Fashioning Film Stars: Dress, Culture, Identity*, ed. Rachel Moseley (London: BFI Publishing, 2005), 50.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

complete anachronism for 1919 – is particularly prevalent in Day’s costuming in *By the Light of the Silvery Moon*, released later in the decade than *On Moonlight Bay* and at a time when Day was a bigger and more established star than she had been at the time the earlier film came out.²⁷⁶ This silhouette was, in Hollywood’s terms, essentially synonymous with Day’s specific star image and hence, to serve its symbolic role, had to be transported with her into whatever diegetic time period her film roles took her.

Warners’ publicity for *On Moonlight Bay* and *By the Light of the Silvery Moon* reflected the ambivalent, simultaneous embrace and rejection of the films’ period setting that was inherent in its use of Day in these films. To be sure, that publicity did occasionally nod to the superiority of the “good old days,” such as in promoting the “old-fashioned” waltz²⁷⁷ or the family sing-along.

²⁷⁸ As far as Day herself is concerned, one press release quotes her as championing “old-

²⁷⁶ Several of Warner Bros.’ press releases promoting *By the Light of the Silvery Moon* made note of the fact that Day was now the number one female box office star with exhibitors. E.g., “Production Notes on ‘By the Light of the Silvery Moon,’” Warner Bros. Studio, undated, USC-WB Collection.

²⁷⁷ For instance, in one press release, the film’s dance director, Le Roy Prinz, is quoted as calling for a return of old dances such as the one step and the waltz:

“Grandfather really knows what he is talking about when he refers to the good old days,” commented Prinz, “People in the 1895-1917 era really enjoyed dancing. Now a young couple gets on the dance floor primarily to hug each other and incidentally jig around a bit. Grandpa saved his romancing for later. His only contact with his girl was a gentle hand on the waist or back to guide her. He was on the dance floor to dance and he did so gracefully.”

Ashton, Warner Bros. Studios press release, undated, USC-WB Collection.

²⁷⁸ In promoting both *On Moonlight Bay* and *By the Light of the Silvery Moon*, the studio issued press releases in which MacRae advocates the family sing-along:

Gordon MacRae on the set of Warner Bros.’ Technicolor musical, “On Moonlight Bay,” in which he plays a 1916 University student:

“More children should learn to sing and play a musical instrument. Modern

fashioned” romance over modern dating practices.

“Everything today is too streamlined and that includes the art of courting a girl,” said Miss Day who plays a belle of 1919 in Warner Brothers’ “By the Light of the Silvery Moon.” “In this atomic age with planes zooming through space at 600 miles an hour, some men adopt the attitude that they should be equally fast in romance.”

....

The slower courtship approach of the 1919 male may seem more diffident, but actually it was a lot more interesting than 1952 impetuosity, explains Miss Day.

....

.... “Young couples would have a lot more fun if they didn’t fall so readily into each other’s arms. Most things may be improved by streamlining, but love isn’t one of them.”²⁷⁹

In promoting the earlier film, *On Moonlight Bay*, however, a studio press release quotes Day as preferring modern times over the time of the film’s period setting, in terms that promote her 1950s tomboy image:

“Girls don’t appreciate the freedom they have today until they look back at the girls of 35 or 40 years ago.”

That’s what Doris Day decided when studying how a feminine teen-ager acted back in 1915 for her role in the Warner Bros. Technicolor musical, “On

inventions can take some of the blame for this falling off in musical ability. Though they have brought us many benefits, new inventions have also caused us to lose some of our former pleasures, one of which is the ability to entertain ourselves.

“Our parents and grandparents would get together, sing their own songs and play their own tunes. They would have their favorite songs, which they would play year after year.

....

“I believe that if adults sang more and played more music, there would be fewer people with ulcers. Music is a wonderful means of relieving the tension we are all living under in these critical times.”

Ashton, “For Lowell Rodellings (One Minute Interviews), Warner Bros. Studio press release, undated, USC-WB Collection.

²⁷⁹ Edith Kermit Roosevelt, United Press Hollywood Correspondent, Sunday Art Piece for Monday, Oct. 13 [1952], Warner Bros. Studio press release, USC-WB Collection.

Moonlight Bay.”

“I’m glad I didn’t live in grandma’s time,” said the actress

“Take baseball, for instance. I’m classed as a tomboy in the picture because I like to play baseball and know the batting averages of all the big leaguers.”

“When I finally catch a beau, I’m afraid to tell him I want to see a game for fear he’ll think I’m un-feminine and walk out on me.

. . . .

“[But a] man today is delighted if his girl friend can play pitch and catch with him, or if she’ll accompany him to a baseball game.”²⁸⁰

Most significantly, with respect to Day’s *look* in the films, the studio’s publicity either dismisses the films’ historical setting by stressing the *similarity* between 1910s and 1950s fashions, implicitly arguing that the past is indistinguishable from the present, or denigrates that historical setting by explicitly asserting the superiority of 1950s fashions over those of 1916. In either case, the modern-day is valorized, and nothing from the past is granted any distinct appeal; indeed, often the past is denied any distinction at all. Rather, the promise of these films – and in particular, of Day’s appearance in them – is that the audience will encounter nothing unfamiliar or discomfiting:

“After 35 years of experimenting it is great to see that the fashion designers have finally put the woman’s waistline back where it belongs – at the waist,” declared Director Roy Del Ruth.

Del Ruth, who has been doing some research work on women’s fashions, got off on the subject of waistlines after directing a scene with Doris Day dressed as a 1916 belle in Warner Bros.’ Technicolor musical, “On Moonlight Bay.”

Pointing to Doris’ shapely waistline, he explained, “The designers of 1916 and 1951 agreed that the natural location of the waist line is the most becoming.”²⁸¹

²⁸⁰ Friedman, Warner Bros. Studio press release, undated, USC-WB Collection (emphasis added).

²⁸¹ Ashton, Warner Bros. Studio press release, undated, USC-WB Collection (emphasis added).

Another Warner Bros. press release disparages 1950s fashions when they copy those of 1916 but, in doing so, again emphasizes the similarities between the two:

“Ugly” and “ridiculous” are a few of the derisive terms [costume designer] Milo [Anderson] hurled at modern dresses. “Dresses today are not being made for present conditions,” stated the volatile Mr. Anderson. “We are aping fashions of the last century and of the World War I era. These are not practical for this day and age of busy career woman and avid participants in sports.”

Milo pointed out the *similarity between the dresses of 1950-51 and those of the 1916-17 period* for which he is designing Doris Day’s costumes in “On Moonlight Bay.” “Both are war periods in which the designers, themselves, seem to show the stress of the times and give their imagination full rein in creating bizarre effects,” he explained.

However, the dresses in “On Moonlight Bay” *won’t be exact copies of those of the 1916-17 period. Milo is making certain modifications to give them greater beauty and symmetry.*²⁸²

Thus, studio publicity justified Day’s anachronistic costume designs by asserting that little differentiated 1910s fashion from that of 1950s America. One press release for *By the Light of the Silvery Moon* claims that when Day ran directly from the Warner Bros. lot to a dinner party without changing out of her costume, “[i]nstead of being greeted with looks of bewilderment . . . Doris was complimented on her beautiful *new* dress,” an incident that offered “striking proof of the amazing similarity between the fashions of 1919 and those of today.”²⁸³ Another press release quoted Leah Rhodes, the film’s costume designer, as saying,

“When some people see Doris’ dresses in [*By the Light of the Silvery Moon*] they may question the authenticity of the design since her dresses look so much like the 1952 models. It just so happens that in the cycle of fashions the year 1952 does resemble 1919. The only concession I have permitted is to design the

²⁸² Ashton, Warner Bros. Studios press release, undated, USC-WB Collection (emphasis added).

²⁸³ Ashton, Warner Bros. Studio press release, undated, USC-WB Collection (emphasis original).

dresses a bit more form fitting than was customary in 1919. . . .”²⁸⁴

Even more significantly, the studios’ visual promotion of these films often downplayed their period setting, particularly that of *By the Light of the Silvery Moon*. For instance, a publicity poster for *By the Light of the Silvery Moon* shows Doris Day and Gordon MacRae on a swing under a big full moon in entirely modern costuming. Nothing in the poster hints that the film has a period setting except for its title. Similarly, the multiple LP set of Doris Day’s recording of the songs from *By the Light of the Silvery Moon* pictures Day in a farm girl costume of pigtails and overalls rolled up to the knee that she wears during a digetic performance of “Chanticleer” put on at the local YMCA. Again, this costuming does nothing to suggest that the film itself is set in 1919 rather than 1953. Posters for the film also show Day in the “Chanticleer” costume, although the length of the overalls has now been shortened to “short-short” length, and Day’s hairdo consists of short, modern-day curls rather than pigtails. Thus, she is presented so as to appeal to modern-day tastes in female beauty and is, in fact, presented as a modern-day (i.e., 1953) figure; not insignificantly, opposite Day’s image in the poster is Gordon MacRae’s smiling, disembodied head, which is engaged solely in looking at Day.

The result of Day’s presentation within and in connection with these films is that an overt address to her contemporary popularity and image is privileged over historical accuracy. In fact, Day’s leading role in the “selling” of period songs to young, modern audiences contributes to a star persona that, as Day herself recognized, resists participation in a historical setting. Rather, she is bound visually and aurally to the moment of her films’ production. Thus, the notion of

²⁸⁴ Horace Greenletter, “Save Your Old Clothes!” *News*, November 14, 1952, USC-WB Collection.

“nostalgia” as connoting a desire to return to a prior time and place is disturbed in these films by Day’s appearance and singing style, which are too insistently modern for her to serve as a figure representing early twentieth-century America.

Indeed, Day’s modern presence and presentation in her period musicals results in their offering a cinematic pleasure that is essentially identical to that of her present-day musicals. This use of Day’s body, adornment, and voice to “remake” the past to appeal to modern tastes limits her accessibility to the familiar, so that the tyranny of the beauty standard might be seen as assuming a second layer of restriction: a star such as Day is not only required to be beautiful but to be beautiful in a *particular* way. Of course, in the abstract, this restriction is the same as that imposed on all female stars in all roles. Within the context of a period film, however, the result of this aesthetic requirement is that the female lead is simultaneously assigned the responsibility of making the past familiar (that is, pleasurable) *and* denied full access to the film’s diegesis.

The result, again, is not a yearning for a lost past but an implicit celebration of how much the past and the present are alike. Further, I would argue that the past as depicted in Day’s period films was appealing precisely *because* it was not unfamiliar but one in which the mid-century viewer was afforded the visual and aural pleasures of the present. Thus, in her period films, Day serves as the vehicle for what David Lowenthal recognizes as the general urge to “improve” the past: “We *reshape* our heritage to make it attractive in *modern* terms; we seek to make it part of ourselves, and ourselves part of it.”²⁸⁵ In this respect, as Warners’ press releases asserted explicitly, Day’s anachronistic image “corrects” the past by simply making it prettier to contemporary eyes and more pleasing to contemporary ears; she provided post-war audiences a

²⁸⁵ Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, 49.

picture of how the turn of the century *ought to have looked and sounded* so as to appeal to a mid-century audience as much as the films imply it was a pleasurable time in which to live.

Conclusion

As has been shown, Hollywood's representation of the turn-of-the-century small town in the immediate post-war period 1947-1953 increasingly positioned it as a time and place "corrected" – at least with respect to key cinematic elements – to look and sound like mid-century America and/or as a time and place eager to leave itself behind for the technology and urbanization of the post-war suburb and city. In their explicit, thematic, and/or aesthetic valorization of the present-day – their diegetic future – these films invert the "good past/bad present" opposition which is supposedly central to the definition of nostalgia. To be sure, all representations of the past, whether actual or fictional, necessarily remake it in present-day terms, and the pull of this tendency is particularly strong in products of mass entertainment, which try to appeal to as wide a modern audience as possible. Thus, for instance, Marmee becomes a pre-suffragette feminist in the 1994 version of *Little Women*, and John Quincy Adams becomes a proponent of humankind's innate right to freedom in Steven Spielberg's *Amistad* (1997). Moreover, it is precisely the power to wrap up current ideologies in the trappings of an idealized past and thus give those ideologies the force of tradition or nature that makes nostalgia such an effective rhetorical strategy.²⁸⁶

Two aspects of this cinematic nostalgia for the turn-of-the-century small town warrant

²⁸⁶ See, e.g., Janice Doane and Devon Hodges, *Nostalgia and Sexual Difference: The Resistance to Contemporary Feminism* (New York: Methuen, 1987).

consideration. The first is nature of the reassurance being offered by these particular nostalgic texts, which in turn raises the question of the nature of the anxiety the reassurance is designed to alleviate. Certainly, with the end of World War II, material prosperity increased for most Americans,²⁸⁷ and the United States itself – alone among major powers virtually unscathed by the war’s destruction – was at the peak of its strength and power. Nonetheless, Robert Ray argues that the essence of the American dream – as personified in Hollywood films by what he calls the reluctant hero, the man who is drawn unwillingly into a community’s problems, solves them, and then leaves – is a self-image of self-sufficient independence and isolationism. With the end of the war, such isolationism as a national foreign policy was no longer possible, meaning that

by fighting the war to preserve the American dream, the United States had been forced to forsake permanently the splendid isolationism on which that dream rested. More than any other issue, it was this paradox that haunted Americans in the late forties and fifties, causing widespread disillusionment and anxiety. America had won the war, but in doing so had lost some essential part of its self-definition²⁸⁸

For this reason the Korean War, for instance, as a prolonged entanglement with no possibility of a clear-cut victory, was anxiety-provoking in a manner that World War II had not been.²⁸⁹

²⁸⁷ John Belton notes that during the war years, when unemployment was low but consumer goods unavailable, Americans tended to save rather than spend their salaries. With the end of the war and renewed production of consumer goods, people not only were in a position to acquire new material possessions but, after a decade and a half of the deprivation of the Depression and war time shortages, eager to do so. John Belton, *Wide Screen Cinema* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1992), 69. The existence of the G.I. Bill, which offered many young men educational opportunity they would not otherwise have had, also provided an avenue for upward economic mobility.

²⁸⁸ Robert B. Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1900-1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 133-34.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 134-36.

It is difficult to determine whether Ray's assessment of the post-war American psyche is accurate and, indeed, he not only fails to cite any specific support for his interpretation but also acknowledges that "[t]he conservative evolution of the American Cinema of the [post-war] period indicates that for most Americans, domestic optimism outweighed any conscious recognition of how radically the country's situation had been altered by the atomic age."²⁹⁰ Mike Chopra-Gant argues as well that examination of the *type* of Hollywood films enjoying the most popularity in the post-war era reflects an optimistic celebration of core elements of America's self-image, such as democracy, classlessness, and individualism.²⁹¹ It is a popular conception, however, that underlying this domestic optimism was a general sense of national insecurity attributable to such factors as the development of atomic and nuclear weapons, and their role in the Cold War, which itself, in turn, posed the threat of takeover by Communism. This latter threat in particular is one that seems posed most directly at America's self-identity, since the repressive totalitarianism of Soviet Communism promised to extinguish those very qualities that surely, for many, defined what made America America, such as the freedoms of expression and self-determination.

Perhaps more specifically to the point here, Hortense Powdermaker, in her anthropological study of Hollywood in the years 1946-47, claims that the "daydreams" Hollywood provided American audiences were an anesthetizing means of manipulation by which the industry profited from Americans' post-war insecurities. She contends that

[m]any people would agree with the characterization of our society . . . as "The Age of Anxiety." The present generation had known two world wars and is

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 137.

²⁹¹ Mike Chopra-Gant, *Hollywood Genres and Post-war America: Masculinity, Family and Nation in Popular Movies and Film Noir* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2006).

worried about the possibility of a third, even more devastating. We won the last war and are probably the strongest nation, and yet we are insecure in our relations with former enemies and allies. Our country is prosperous and we have demonstrated an enormous capacity for production, but we are worried about a possible recession and unemployment. We live in a fast changing world but have lost faith in our belief that change is always for the better and that progress is inevitable. We are not so sure of the happy ending.

Man has become increasingly lonely. Although people live in close physical contact, their relationships have become more and more depersonalized. We have a sense of being with people, and yet do not feel in any way related to them. In cities we are accustomed to having strange people beside us in street car, bus, or uncomfortably close in the subway. . . . The market place is . . . basically impersonal. Over the radio, we listen to voices of strangers relating intimate domestic stories or giving us their opinion about the latest national or world event. All these factors give an illusion of companionship which, however, only increases the feeling of being alone.²⁹²

While her description makes intuitive sense, Powdermaker offers no specific evidence of her claim of this increasing loneliness in American life. Nonetheless, Lynn Spigel points to a number of 1950s sociological studies, such as William H. Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1957),²⁹³ John Keats' *The Crack in the Picture Window* (1956),²⁹⁴ and Henry Henderson's study of Levittown (1953), as documenting the anxiety caused by the forced homogeneity of the suburbs, "instant neighborhoods . . . composed of total strangers represent[ing] friendships only at the abstract level of demographic similarities in age, income, family size, and occupation."²⁹⁵ As Betty Friedan

²⁹² Hortense Powdermaker, *Hollywood, The Dream Factory: An Anthropologist Looks at the Movie-Makers* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1950), 307-08.

²⁹³ William Holingsworth Whyte, *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956).

²⁹⁴ John Keats, *The Crack in the Picture Window* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1956).

²⁹⁵ Lynn Spigel, "The Suburban Home Companion: Television and the Neighborhood Ideal in Post-War America," in *Feminist Television Criticism: A Reader*, eds. Charlotte Brunson, Julie D'Acci, and Lynn Spigel (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 222.

was later to argue in *The Feminine Mystique*,²⁹⁶ the 1950s suburbs created a sense of suffocating dissatisfaction among white, middle-class housewives; similar accounts of numbing conformism in such works as *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*²⁹⁷ speak of a similar malaise among male, middle-class, white collar workers.²⁹⁸

It is perhaps unsurprising then that a hunger for reassurance about the present or even for guidance about how to *be* in that present might have existed in post-war America. In any event, in such films as *The Sainted Sisters*, *Wait Til the Sun Shines*, *Nellie*, *Excuse My Dust*, and the Doris Day vehicles *On Moonlight Bay* and *By the Light of the Silvery Moon*, Hollywood in effect offers post-war values in the packaging of the long-standing image of America's "purer" self. After the economic restrictions of the Depression and World War II decades, expenditure – both at the individual and public levels – was once again possible; concepts or buzzwords such as "growth," "opportunity," "development," and "progress" in effect defined post-war expectations for the American individual and his community. Thus, the turn-of-the-century small town in *Wait Til the Sun Shines*, *Nellie*, cast as the site of "forward-moving" achievement leading to economic prosperity, and Skelton's entrepreneurial efforts to develop and produce the "machine of the future" in *Excuse My Dust* are both metaphors for the nation's post-war program for itself. In addition, in their celebration of modern technology and their use of turn-of-the-century characters

²⁹⁶ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963).

²⁹⁷ Sloan Wilson, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955).

²⁹⁸ Not addressed here are the situations of ethnic and racial minorities, whose circumstances, particularly among poor blacks in the Southeast, had not undergone the changes of white, middle-class America and had, indeed, been difficult for decades.

as foils for the audience's more sophisticated and comfortable relationship with that technology, these films operate similarly to such early television programs as "The Goldbergs" and "Life With Luigi," which George Lipsitz argues enjoyed popularity, despite their appearing at odds with the dominant 1950s social trends of urban renewal and suburbanization, because they "evoked experiences of the [ethnic, working class] past to lend legitimacy to the dominant ideology of the present."²⁹⁹ Specifically, he argues that in the early 1950s, American television networks used urban/ethnic/working class sitcoms to help the American public overcome psychic, moral, and political resistance to embracing the consumerist lifestyle that the government and America's business interests had concluded was necessary to ensure the country's post-war economic prosperity. In particular, Lipsitz contends that these sitcoms were able to perform this function by appearing to align the new consumerism with the public's collective memory of the traditional values of prewar society. In this, these sitcoms and these films operate much as Doane and Hodges claim the television show, *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*, does, by positioning within familiar genres, long constitutive of America's self-identity, the assertion that the "answer" to present-day anxieties has been part of the nation's history and identity all along. Consequently, then, there is nothing to be anxious about after all; all is well, and everything is proceeding (or has proceeded) as it should.

Further, as Spigel has argued, the post-war period was one of increased emphasis on domesticity as the marriage rate rose and the baby boom began, and as the Housing Act of 1949, the resulting suburban construction boom, and the GI bill enabled middle-class and even lower

²⁹⁹ George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 42.

middle-class and blue-collar workers to buy homes. Spigel argues that “[p]opular media . . . participated in the cultural revitalization of domesticity, taking the white, middle-class suburban home as their favored model of family bliss.”³⁰⁰ While this was an updated version of the family ideal, it was also a new evolutionary step in the progression from Victorian domesticity of moral uplift to what Spigel calls the late Victorian and Progressive “compassionate household”: the more close-knit, informal, and secular family, housed in the pastoral ideal of the bungalow cottage, that developed in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century.³⁰¹ This post-war domestic ideal of “the nuclear family, living in a private suburban home, was a potent utopian fantasy that engaged the imagination of many men and women. While the actual lived experience of domesticity was fraught with problems, the family ideal still promised material benefits and personal stability in a confusing social world.”³⁰² Thus, the Winfield family from *On Moonlight Bay* and *By the Light of the Silvery Moon*, as contrasted to the multi-generational, multi-offspring families in *Meet Me in St. Louis* and *Summer Holiday*, is in effect a post-war suburban family, even as Day is the quintessential “all-American” teen-aged girl; cast as a small-town, turn-of-the-century family, it marries the post-war domestic suburban ideal to America’s foundational self-image of the turn-of-the-century “home town.”

Thus, this post-war representation of the turn-of-the-century small town does not so much try to *compensate* audiences for deficiencies in a defective present as to use the past to embrace

³⁰⁰ Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Post-war America* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 33.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 18-23.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 34.

both the changes being effected in Post-war America and audiences' own position in American culture at mid-century. David Lowenthal has listed certain benefits of the past as *familiarity* (the past's ability to render the present familiar via its traces (often unconsciously internalized) that help us make sense of today); *reaffirmation and validation* (the past's validation of present attitudes and actions by affirming their resemblance to former ones); and *enrichment* (the past's ability to lengthen life's reach "by linking us with events and people prior to ourselves" and the magnification of present experience by projecting it backwards in time, which evocation of the past "makes it over as our own."³⁰³). These films deliberately manipulate their representation of the past so as artificially exaggerate these effects, re-working America's image of its early self so that it serves as a template for the current self that post-war economic, social, and cultural conditions demand.

The second aspect of this post-war "nostalgic" representation of the turn-of-the-century small town to be considered is the manner in which these films' nostalgia operated or was created. A distinct disconnect exists between this representation and the way in which that representation was received. Critical response to these films indicates that, despite their valorization of the present over the past, they were *read* as nostalgic films. Critics' reading of *Meet Me in St. Louis*, to be sure, is consistent with the film's jewel-like preservation of a moment in time, achieved largely through ignoring such incursions of modernity as the automobile: "[a] Technicolor tintype that might have been lifted from the pages of your favorite family album, 'Meet Me in St. Louis' combines nostalgia, gay good humor, and lilting melodies to emerge as a cinematic gem . . . aimed

³⁰³ Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, 48.

straight at the heart of anyone with the slightest streak of sentimentality”;³⁰⁴ the film was “a faithful document of an American family in a happy day, gone forever[,]”³⁰⁵ in which “[h]ourglass figures and hair ribbons, horse and buggy, sideburns and watch chains parade with all the nostalgic charm of another generation’s nosegay in the daguerreotype-manner.”³⁰⁶ Significantly, however, reviewers of subsequent post-war films with a like turn-of-the-century small-town setting described them in similar terms despite content that increasingly favored the modern-day over the represented past. For instance, *Summer Holiday*, with its “flavorsome reflections of small-town life in the sweet long-ago”³⁰⁷ was “a simple and effective examining of a wonderful family . . . at the turn of the century, when there were Stanley Steamers and Fourth of July beer busts and when the only women who smoked Sweet Caporals were the kind who would drink gin in a saloon.”³⁰⁸ Similarly, the *Los Angeles Examiner* describes *On Moonlight Bay* as going “[b]ack to front porch rockers and lemonade, back to hammocks strung between shade trees and cool lawns”[:]³⁰⁹ it is “a very pleasant, richly melodious movie excursion into the rose-

³⁰⁴ “Meet Me in St. Louis,” *Box Office*, November 11, 1944.

³⁰⁵ Lee Mortimer, “Astor’s ‘Meet Me in St. Louis’ Is a Hit,” *New York Daily Mirror*, November 30, 1944.

³⁰⁶ Red Kann, “Review: ‘Meet Me in St. Louis,’” *Motion Picture Daily*, October 31, 1944.

³⁰⁷ Bosley Crowther, “‘Summer Holiday,’ the New Bill at State, is Film Version of Eugene O’Neill Play,” *New York Times*, June 12, 1948.

³⁰⁸ Ray Lanning, “Summer Holiday,” *Motion Picture Herald*, unknown date (emphasis added).

³⁰⁹ Dorothy Manners, “‘Moonlight Bay’ Nostalgic,” *Los Angeles Examiner*, July 26, 1951.

tinted days of the past[,]”³¹⁰ “a folksy period musical . . . [s]et in an innocent, brightly colored Indiana during World War II[,]”³¹¹ when “[t]he pace of living seemed less hectic and family life more secure”³¹² The film’s sequel was similarly regarded: “[*By the Light of the Silvery Moon*] is a sentimental hark-back to the raccoon-coat, model-T days of family solidarity and parlor romance in which Hollywood dreamers so delight to indulge[,]”³¹³ “a story of small-time life in the sweetened memory of yesteryear[,]”³¹⁴ and “[a] . . . sweetly innocent bit of reminiscence and nostalgia, calling up a vision of small town life in Indiana, circa 1919, bringing back all the old song and old memories of a way of life that has long since passed away”³¹⁵ As has been seen, in *Excuse My Dust*, “[a] horse-drawn fire brigade, picnics and hayrides lend nostalgic touches to an amusing struggle between the old and the new”[;]”³¹⁶ it is a film “[a]s wholesome and refreshing as the turn-of-the-century Hoosier backgrounds against which the story is told.”³¹⁷ And *Wait Til the Sun Shines*, *Nellie* is “a pleasant mixture of nostalgia, sentimentality and . . .

³¹⁰ “On Moonlight Bay,” *Cue*, July 28, 1951.

³¹¹ Unknown publication, unknown date, USC-WB Collection.

³¹² Margaret Harford, “Sentimental Days Brought Back Again: ‘On Moonlight Bay’ Screening,” *Hollywood Citizen News*, July 26, 1951.

³¹³ *New York Times*, April 5, 1953.

³¹⁴ Otis L. Guernsey, Jr., “On the Screen,” *Tribune*, unknown date, USC-WB Collection.

³¹⁵ Leo Mishkin, “Impressive Easter Pageant Into Music Hall; Nostalgia on Screen,” *New York Morning Telegraph*, March 27, 1953.

³¹⁶ “Excuse My Dust,” *Hollywood Citizen-News*, July 18, 1951.

³¹⁷ *Box Office*, May 26, 1951.

melodrama[,]”³¹⁸ “a nostalgic reminiscence of a small town’s history for 50 years[,]”³¹⁹ and “an inspiring bit of Americana . . . [p]roduced with exquisite taste by that master of nostalgia George Jessel, . . .”³²⁰

These reviews reflect a broader cultural image of the turn-of-the-century small town that, in some instances, results in embroidering on the films’ actual content, such as references to “hammocks strung between shade trees and cool lawns,” or in extratextual characterizing of the films’ setting as one where “[t]he pace of living seemed less hectic and family life more secure.” Moreover, these critics’ very insistence on the nostalgic qualities of these films – of their “calling up a vision of small town life in Indiana, circa 1919” and bringing back “old memories of a way of life that has long since passed away” – suggests that these viewers “saw” something different when watching these films from what a twenty-first-century viewer sees. Indeed, as has been shown, nostalgia does not exist within the films’ content itself, or at least it does so only incompletely; rather, it appears that the films’ visual and aural “markers” of their period setting served instead as catalysts that vivified extratextual personal and/or cultural memories and images. In short, for their original audiences, the nostalgic effect of these films lay equally – if not more – in viewers’ pre-existing conception of the turn-of-the-century small town than in what actually appeared on the screen. Thus, this is nostalgia that operated not so much by re-creating the past on screen but by means of a sort of metaphorical chemical reaction between the product and the

³¹⁸ *Variety*, May 27, 1952.

³¹⁹ David Bongard, *Los Angeles Daily News*, July 3, 1952.

³²⁰ “‘Nellie’ Enchanting Drama Finely Acted and Directed,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 26, 1952.

viewer's reaction to it, with that reaction determined by well-established and widely held conceptions of – and emotional attachment to – the idealized moment of the American small town at the turn of the last century

CHAPTER THREE
PLAYGROUND OR LOST UTOPIA:
THE NOSTALGIAS OF WALT DISNEY AND ROD SERLING
FOR AMERICA'S TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY SMALL TOWN

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, commercial visual media's orientation of America at the turn of the twentieth century, and the turn-of-the-century small town in particular as an object of popular interest, regard, and source of entertainment, underwent a change. This was a reversal of the prior relationship between the fictionalized setting and its modern-day context: While the turn-of-the-century small town had formerly been a time and place portrayed and constructed in Hollywood films as looking forward toward mid-century America, the orientation was now reversed, so that it now became a place to be looked back upon, distinct from the modern-day and appealing in its own right. In this, its Hollywood and televisual representation returns to the stasis which had dominated *Meet Me in St. Louis*: an idealized time and place content with its moment, the encroachment of modernity largely downplayed – either turned into picturesque set dressing, ignored altogether, or celebrated for its absence.

These films exist within and reflect a broader late 1950s/early 1960s cultural turn toward a “looking back” at the turn-of-the-century small town, which in fact consists of two separate strains, one of which arguably fathered the other: first, works of reminiscence by the generation who had experienced early twentieth-century small-town life as children and second, works of time-travel fantasy produced for the most part by the subsequent generation. Producers of the former were often motivated by what might be termed a “historical” impulse – a desire to educate younger readers about a former way of life or, through recording their personal memories, to “preserve” it in a tangible form – as well as by an implied or expressed nostalgia for the time and

place they describe. Thus, the entire enterprise is premised on the notion of *difference* between the works' subject matter and the modern day, with that difference, in fact, being the offered appeal. Further, implicit – or sometimes stated explicitly – in the comparison of the old and the new is a ranking of the two, in which very often, despite the physical conveniences of mid-century life, the turn-of-the-century small town comes out on top. Moreover, readers who were of the same generation as these writers probably experienced in these books a pleasurable sense of recognition and remembrance. Made up of texts of personal reminiscence, then, this strain of late 1950s/early 1960s “looking back” to turn-of-the-century small-town America is an example of both Davis' conception of nostalgia as idealized remembrance of one's personal experience and his recognition of the possibility of that nostalgia's being experienced by many simultaneously via the circulation of the products of popular culture.

To be sure, in American popular culture other than Hollywood films, turn-of-the-century America and the turn-of-the-century small town in particular had always had some presence in the decades since the onset of the Great Depression. As has been noted, the 1930s saw a literary and dramatic revival of the idealized turn-of-the-century small town in such works as Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* and Sally Benson's Kensington stories. In the 1940s and 1950s, in a similar vein to Benson's work, certain women writers produced children's book series – geared primarily to girls – based on their childhood memories of growing up at or around the turn of the century: e.g., the “Betsy-Tacy” series by Maud Hart Lovelace (1892-1980),³²¹ the “Moffats” series by

³²¹ *Betsy, Tacy and Tib* (1941); *Betsy and Tacy Go Over the Big Hill* (1942); *Betsy and Tacy Go Downtown* (1943); *Heaven to Betsy* (1945); *Betsy in Spite of Herself* (1946); *Betsy Was a Junior* (1947); *Betsy and Joe* (1948); *Betsy and the Great World* (1952); *Betsy's Wedding* (1955). This series, set in the 1910s, is about girls growing up in the fictional town of Deep Valley, Minnesota, modeled on Lovelace's home town of Mankato, Minnesota.

Eleanor Estes (1906-1988),³²² and the “All of a Kind Family” series by Sydney Taylor (1904-1978).³²³

However, just as writers in the 1930s such as Henry Seidel Canby (1878-1961)³²⁴ and Rose Wilder Lane (1886-1968)³²⁵ had published memoirs of late nineteenth-century life in small-town America, a number of memoirs chronicling small-town life in the early years of the twentieth century began to appear in the late 1950s, targeted for adults and nearly all written by men:

Williamstown Branch: Impersonal Memories of a Vermont Boyhood (1958) by R. L. Duffus (1888-1972); *Maple Hill Stories* (1961) by Roderick Turnbull (1904-?); *A Vanished World* (1964) by Anne Gertrude Sneller (1883-?); “Individualists under the Shade Trees: Pine Grove, Pennsylvania” by Conrad Richter (1890-1968) in *A Vanishing America: The Life and Times of the Small Town* (1964); *Burns Fuller Remembers: Fenton – My Home Town* (1966) by Burns Fuller (1892-?); *How It Was in Hartford: An Affectionate Account of a Michigan Small Town in the Early Years of the Twentieth Century* (1968) by Willis Frederick Dunbar (1902 -). Similarly,

³²² *The Moffats* (1941); *The Middle Moffat* (1942); *Rufus M.* (1943); *The Moffat Museum* (1983). These books were set in 1910s Cranbury, Connecticut, a fictionalized version of West Haven, where Estes lived as a child.

³²³ *All-of-a-Kind Family* (1951); *More All-of-a-Kind Family* (1954); *All-of-a-Kind Family Uptown* (1958); *All-of-a-Kind Family Downtown* (1972); *Ella of All-of-a-Kind Family* (1978). Although set in New York City rather than a small town, the “All of a Kind Family” series also chronicles a family’s adventures in the 1910s and was also based on the author’s childhood. All three of these series – the “Betsy-Tacy” series, the “Moffats” series, and the “All-of-a-Kind” series – are still in print today, as is, of course, the “Little House” series of Laura Ingalls Wilder (1867-1957), first published between 1932 and 1943, and based on her family’s history as rural settlers in the American plains states during earlier period of the 1870s and 1880s.

³²⁴ Henry Seidel Canby, *The Age of Confidence: Life in the Nineties* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart 1934).

³²⁵ Rose Wilder Lane, *Old Home Town* (NY and Toronto: Longmans, Green & Co. 1935).

Sterling North (1906-1974) published his best-selling memoir, *Rascal: A Memoir of a Better Era*, in 1963; set in 1917 and written for young readers, it is a remembrance of his childhood experiences with a pet raccoon during the year of his mother's death, while his family was living in a small Wisconsin town. At the same time, as will be developed more fully in the next chapter, Meredith Willson's *The Music Man*, set in 1912 River City, Iowa, opened on Broadway in 1957 and ran until April 1961; the musical play was loosely based on Willson's memories of growing up in Mason City, Iowa in the 1910s.³²⁶ A more poignant and less laudatory account of early-twentieth century life, the novel *A Death in the Family* by James Agee (1909-1954) is set in 1915 Knoxville; a fictional account of the death of Agee's father when Agee was six years old, it was published in 1956 and adapted as a Pulitzer Prize-winning stage play, *All the Way Home*, by Tad Mosel in 1961. In 1960, this group of writers ranged in age from seventy-seven to forty-nine years old, with an average age of fifty-six. Collectively, they were engaged in a memorialization of their childhoods and in the world they had known as children, in nearly every case perceiving a need for this memorialization in the degraded quality of mid-century urban or suburban life when compared to that in the early-twentieth-century small town. For example, Dunbar writes of Hartford, Michigan in the early 1900s:

There was a feeling of security . . . which in our time is only a memory. Of course there was no nuclear bomb to worry about and no population explosion. . . .

There were other facets of small-town life in those years that contributed to this feeling of security. You had a sense of belonging to a community, and a feeling that you could count on help if trouble came. There always were neighbors and kinfolk to lend a hand in case of sickness or other distress. There was a considerable amount of sharing in the neighborhoods of the town. Everyone knew you by your first name or your nickname. There were plenty of cantankerous

³²⁶ Born in 1902, Willson himself, as a radio personality, had entertained audiences throughout the 1940s and '50s with stories of his 1910s boyhood in Mason City, Iowa.

people along with those who were kindly and helpful, but you never felt alone as you can in the city³²⁷

Of these white, male, middle-aged cultural producers engaged in memorializing and valorizing the time, locus, and events of their childhood, however, the most prominent and most influential was Walt Disney. His most significant contribution to the late 1950s/early 1960s construction of the idealized turn-of-the-century small town was Disneyland's Main Street, U.S.A., first opened to the public in July 1955. This nostalgic impulse, however, to which most of these writers gave voice only upon reaching late middle age or later, had in fact shaped Disney's cultural production from his earliest work in animation, in which references to and representations of turn-of-the-century rural and small-town life appeared frequently. Moreover, Disney constructed the turn-of-the-century small town as America's universally held ideal, as a communally shared memory of a cherished time which deep in our hearts we all miss, as if determined to provide the country a shared collective self and to do so by grounding that collective self in a common memory that was, in fact, largely his own memory – or rather, his memory corrected to what it *should* have been. Thus, while the various memoirs of turn-of-the-century small-town life published in the 1950s and 1960s were works of personal memory and hence in most cases enhanced only to degree that all such memory is inevitably enhanced by the act of remembering, in Disney's case, this memory was deliberately reshaped into idealized, eminently appealing, and commodified form; but in both cases, the raw material was similar, and the nostalgia driving the cultural expression was that for a time and place personally experienced. As a commodity, however, Disney's version of the turn-of-the-century small town became

³²⁷ Willis Frederick Dunbar, *How It Was in Hartford: An Affectionate Account of a Michigan Small Town in the Early Years of the Twentieth Century* (Eerdmans, 1968), 71-72.

something to be celebrated, its object a playful venue to be enjoyed and even entered into as escapist entertainment. Moreover, it was a malleable thing, its presentation to be shaped to whatever commercial purposes Disney needed it to serve at the moment, which Disney used skillfully to win audiences over to innovations in his commercial enterprises.

In contrast to the personally reminiscent strain of the late 1950s/early 1960s “looking back” to the turn-of-the-century small town, the time-travel strain expressed its valorization with fantasies of actually returning to that “lost” time and place, exemplified by such writers as Jack Finney (1911-1995), Edward Ormondroyd (1925-), and Richard Matheson (1926-), in whose fiction travel to times pre-dating their own lifetimes is presented as an alluring escape from modern-day life. Although he was born in 1911, Finney’s time-travel fantasies most often involve returns to the 1880s and 1890s; in particular, Galesburg, Illinois, at and before the turn of the century is set up as an especially idyllic moment in more than one of his short stories, although Finney himself knew the town in the early 1930s, when he lived there as a college student. Similarly, Ormondroyd’s young readers’ novel, *Time at the Top*, describes a fantasy return to a time, the 1880s, decades before his 1925 birth, just as Matheson’s *Bid Time Return* (1975), involves time-travel to 1896, the time of – or even pre-dating – his parents’ youth. In these works, then, for the first time is an explicit expression of Pickering’s second type of nostalgia – imaginary nostalgia for events not personally experienced – for the turn of the century and particularly the turn-of-the-century small town. At the same time, dissatisfaction with the present day and an explicit *desire* to return to what is perceived as a simpler, more fulfilling, and more attractive way of life – in short, nostalgia in its full sense as a longing for a prior “good” past to escape a “bad” present – is manifest in these works and, indeed, less equivocal than in the

contemporaneous nonfiction memoirs, in which comparisons between the 1900s/10s and the 1950s/60s at times explicitly acknowledge the ways in which technological innovations since 1900 have eased the physical burdens of day-to-day existence.

The source of this dissatisfaction with the present day can be traced to specific social concerns at the forefront of public discourse at the time, such as the environmental consciousness of the 1960s, the Vietnam War, and the Cold War arms race. It reflects as well more a generalized malaise with the effects of mid-twentieth-century mechanism, urbanization, and capitalism. That the “good past” chosen to be set up in opposition to this “bad present” should be the American small town at the turn of the twentieth century, while an apparently “natural” choice in the case of individual remembrances of childhood spent there, may be attributable in the case of these subsequent-generation time-travel fantasies not only to such factors as their producers’ personal bent for nostalgia but the general cultural and nostalgic notion of “the good old days” that colored critical reaction to Wilder’s *Our Town* and post-war Hollywood films such as *Excuse My Dust*. As has been seen, this perception was in general circulation throughout the 1940s and ‘50s, and it is impossible to determine if the published memoirs of turn-of-the-century small-town life contributed to younger writers’ seizing upon that moment as the ideal escape from modern-day stress in time-travel narratives or if the simultaneous appearance of these memoirs and time-travel tales in the late 1950s and early 1960s simply reflects a common, multi-generational perception of mid-century life as at best impoverished and at worst rendered destructive and alienating by modernity. Certainly, however, the older generation’s memoirs contributed to the general notion of the “good old days” of America’s small towns at the turn of the last century and, if nothing else, gave legitimacy to those towns and to that time as appealing and appropriate time-

travel destinations. Richard Francaviglia argues, in fact, that Disney is a major source of such a perception; with Main Street U.S.A., Disney “effectively *instigated* a deep collective longing for pre-urban Anglo America”³²⁸

Of most relevance here because of his *visual* representation of this time-travel impulse is Rod Serling, born in 1924. Time travel occurs regularly in his *Twilight Zone* television series, and his personal favorite time-travel destination, as reflected in interviews and in several *Twilight Zone* episodes, was the American small town in the last decades of the nineteenth century. These *Twilight Zone* episodes reflect a similar distaste for the pace, pressures, and environmental pollution of modern-day life as that expressed in Finney’s and Ormondroyd’s fiction, as well as a similar desire for escape. Running through Serling’s work, however, is a pessimism not present in these writers’ works, whose characters are often successful in their permanent return to pre-modern America; rather, Serling’s time-travel protagonists are consistently disillusioned by or thwarted in their attempts to escape to the “simpler” time held out to them so tantalizingly as an idyllic alternative to their mid-century existence. In this, the turn-of-the-century small town is doubly idealized: both by Serling’s lack of personal experience with it, which allows him to ignore its limitations and hardships, and by its ultimate unavailability. Similarly, his work demonstrates both the seductive appeal and the treachery of idealized “memory,” although his apparent emotional investment in the former renders it the stronger element in his work. In Serling’s construction, the late nineteenth century small town – although a time and place Serling never knew himself – is the object of “classic” nostalgia, of a longing for an idealized lost past,

³²⁸ Richard V. Francaviglia, “Main Street, U.S.A.: A Comparison/Contrast of Streetscapes in Disneyland and Walt Disney World,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 15 (Summer 1981): 143 (emphasis added).

irrevocably out of reach.

Two Nostalgic Men

In the lives of Disney and Serling, the two meanings of nostalgia (i.e., its original meaning, homesickness, and its later meaning of a longing for an idealized past) were collapsed, as both men experienced throughout their adult lives a nostalgia for a lost home of their youth. For Disney, this lost home was the family farm in Marceline, Missouri where the Disneys lived from 1906 to 1910. Disney was born in Chicago in 1901, and this five-year stint in Marceline, from the time he was five to nine years old, was in fact the only time in his life he lived in a rural or small-town setting. From what Disney repeatedly recalled in interviews as idyllic years in Marceline, however, he was plunged into the most difficult period of his boyhood when his family moved to Kansas City and he was put to work in his father's newspaper distributorship. For the next six years – until he was fifteen years old – Disney's days began at 3:30 a.m.; he put in hours of work before and after attending a full day of school and for several hours every Saturday and Sunday as well. His father was a harsh taskmaster, purportedly physically abusive, and years later, Disney reported still having nightmares in which he failed to complete his newspaper deliveries and faced his father's wrath as a result. It was thus to this life of mental strain and physical exhaustion that Disney lost what he remembered as a carefree existence on the Marceline farm.

Rod Serling's lost boyhood home was Binghamton, New York, where his family moved in 1926, when he was two years old, and where he grew up as the favored of two sons in a comfortably middle-class family. Biographers describe him as a charming, precocious child who habitually craved, sought, and received attention and approval from adults and peers. Through

high school, the popular Serling lived what he later recalled as an idyllic life, but while he was serving in the South Pacific in World War II, his father died unexpectedly, and his mother sold the family home and moved out of town to go live with her sister. Serling's older brother had also left Binghamton several years earlier. Thus, Serling returned home after the war to find that, in fact, he no longer had a home.

That the Disneys' Marceline farm and Binghamton in the 1920s and 30s were not in fact the idyllic places their favorite sons recalled is, of course, beside the point. What the men shared was the *loss* of something irreplaceable, what their memory shaped into and enshrined as the perfect home, and for both, this lost home became a cornerstone of their cultural production. Disney biographer Steven Watts finds Disney's elevation of America's rural and small town tradition ironic, given that his own roots in that tradition were so shallow;³²⁹ in fact, however, it was the very brevity of Disney's stay in Marceline – during which he did not grow old enough to take on an adult load of the grueling farmwork that drove his two eldest brothers to run away, never to return – which would have made the loss feel so premature and his time on the farm so unfinished. Such a sense of incompleteness, of having been cheated of the full course of a particular experience can be a powerful stimulant to nostalgia, by which the lost object is infused with the idealizing patina of not only what-might-have-been but what-*should*-have-been. Serling's return from World War II was a similar experience; Serling biographers describe Serling's combat experience in the South Pacific as harrowing, and his older brother Robert has stated that

³²⁹ Steven Watts, *The Magic Kingdom: Walt Disney and the American Way of Life* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1997), 6.

“I think where Rod got the great love for the small town was in the Army, when he was overseas. It was the ‘I’m dreaming of a white Christmas’ syndrome. Everything he had taken for granted as a child had suddenly become preciously dear to him. He thought he’d never see it again.”³³⁰

And in fact, despite having survived the war, he never did see it again, at least not as he’d left it. Instead of the homecoming he surely dreamt of while overseas, Serling arrived back in the United States traumatized by his battle experiences, grieving his father’s death, finding his mother preternaturally aged by her husband’s death, and, with the family home sold, discovering his ties to Binghamton unexpectedly severed.

Biographers tell us that throughout their lives, Disney spoke often of his days at Marceline, describing them as the happiest of his life, and Serling frequently traveled to Binghamton, although he never lived there again. These are words and actions that bespeak the effect on these men, as individuals, of having lost these beloved boyhood homes . As two very different men, of different generations and with markedly different life experiences, however, Disney and Serling were influenced in their work by this loss of the home in ways that diverged more often than not, as an examination of their respective representations of the turn-of-the-century small town, and the nature of the “nostalgia” contained in those representations, will reveal.

³³⁰ Paul Mandell, “‘Walking Distance’ From *The Twilight Zone*,” *American Cinematographer* 69 (June 1968): 40. Serling biographer Joel Engel reports that, “[a]s [Serling] later conceded in an interview, the war remained forever the emotional low point of his life: ‘I was convinced I wasn’t going to come back,’ he said.” Joel Engel, *Rod Serling: The Dreams and Nightmares of Life in the Twilight Zone* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1989), 13.

Walt Disney: So Dear to My Heart and Main Street, U.S.A.

For Disney, the turn-of-the-century small town was the emotional core of his cultural production, which, if his studio's promotional materials are any indication, he seemed to believe was the emotional heart of the United States as well – a beloved and shared heritage to which all would return if only they could. At the same time, Disney masterfully manipulated this revered icon to serve different commercial purposes at different times, as demonstrated in four of his cultural products: *So Dear to My Heart* (1949), Disneyland's Main Street, U.S.A., *Pollyanna* (1960), and *Summer Magic* (1963). His apparently genuine, heartfelt investment in this “innocent” moment made it a potent vehicle for innovation; as part of the post-war reconfiguration of his enterprise from a movie studio to an integrated, multi-faceted leisure empire, Disney's use of the turn-of-the-century small town, while facially “true” to the myth of America's reassuringly “purer” self, skillfully guided the public into acceptance of and taste for the post-war Disney product, much of which differed significantly from his prewar animation but was crucial not only to the company's post-war profitability but to its very survival; later he would recast it as an attraction geared specifically for teenagers in an attempt to hold onto Hayley Mills' fan base as she matured. This milieu was one in which Disney personally felt comfortable and which, in an apparent mixture of personal taste and marketing instinct, he often exploited successfully to his advantage, particularly in moments when he needed to move the public in new directions.

The foundation for this strategy was Disney's lifelong emotional connection to Marceline and its influence on him, which is also the centerpiece of the self-generated Walt Disney persona and legend. As Disney biographers such as Richard Schickel and Leonard Mosley note, Disney,

as an individual, was remote and often morose, at times callous toward employees (who nicknamed him “the wounded bear”); at the core, he was a distrustful and insecure man. At the same time, however, he was a master at self-promotion, manufacturing over decades of media interviews and television appearances the persona of “Uncle Walt,” the avuncular spinner of homespun tales and wholesome entertainment, the down-to-earth Midwesterner whose convincing authenticity rested on his oft-recounted origins as a simple country boy from the nation’s heartland. Schnickel argues that this life script was one Disney spun so seamlessly and repeated so often that Disney’s childhood self became a flattened archetype of American boyhood, simply another version of the mischievous boy who populated so many of his films.³³¹ Certainly, multiple accounts, including both published interviews throughout Disney’s lifetime and testimony by Disney and others quoted in various full-length biographies, are replete with Disney’s reminiscences of the Maceline farm, and he is quoted as saying, “To tell the truth, more things of importance happened to me in Marceline than have happened since – or are likely to in the future.”³³² When he first arrived in Marceline, Disney was “immediately enchanted with [his] first sight of [his] new home. ‘It was set in green rolling countryside,’ Walt said later, ‘and the apple and plum orchards were just starting to blossom. I thought it was a beautiful place.’”³³³

Another typical account reads:

“I haven’t always lived in a city . . . When I was five my family moved out of Chicago and we went to Marceline, Missouri, where my father had bought a

³³¹ Richard Schickel, *The Disney Version: The Life, Times, Art and Commerce of Walt Disney* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), 62.

³³² City of Marceline website home page, <http://www.marceline.org/>

³³³ Leonard Mosley, *Disney’s World* (New York: Stein and Day Publishers, 1985), 27.

farm. We lived there six years, and I guess it must have made a deep impression on me. I can clearly remember every detail – just as if it had been yesterday. I even remember the train ride from Chicago to Marceline, and I remember the new things that I saw as I looked out of the window. You see, I had never been to the country before.

. . . .

“Those were the happiest days of my life. . . . And maybe that’s why I go in for country cartoons. Gosh, I hated to leave it – but we had to. The place was sold at auction, and I remember how terrible my brother Roy and I felt as we went about the countryside tacking up signs announcing the sale of our furniture and stuff.

. . . .

“I think that everything you do has some effect on you, and that old farm certainly made an impression on me.”³³⁴

Similarly, the “Uncle Walt” persona is reflected in countless published observations and quotations: “[Disney] is a Hollywood rajah who looks, talks, and lives like the owner of a Midwest hardware store”;³³⁵ one who explains his choice to produce solely “family entertainment” by saying, “I don’t know, I’m kind of *simple and corny at heart*, and I think the majority of the people are on my side.”³³⁶

³³⁴ George Kent, “Snow White’s Daddy” (from *The Family Circle* 12 (June 24, 1938)), *Walt Disney Conversations*, ed. Kathy Merlock Jackson (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi 2006), 10-11.

³³⁵ “The Wide World of Walt Disney” (from *Newsweek*, December 31, 1962), *Walt Disney Conversations*, 81. Writing in 1963, a writer for *The New Yorker* observed that when he had met and talked with Disney several years earlier, Disney “had impressed me as matter-of-fact to the point of folksiness. Now it struck me that this was simply further proof of eccentric artfulness.” Kevin Wallace, “Onward and Upward with the Arts: The Engineering of Ease,” *The New Yorker* (September 1963): 104. See also Aubrey Menen, “Dazzled in Disneyland,” *Holiday* (July 1963): 75 (“Before I met him, every effort was made by his aides to impress me that Walt Disney was, in fact, avuncular. . . . Instead I met a tall, somber man who appeared to be under the lash of some private demon. . . . In private he smiles less [than in public appearances] . . . and he is not at ease.”).

³³⁶ Stan Hellenk, “Interview with Stan Hellenk” (conducted for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation July 22, 1960), *Walt Disney Conversations*, 80 (emphasis added).

Of the many probable influences the Marceline years had on Disney's work, a well-recognized one is the rural and barnyard themes or settings of many of his animated cartoons, beginning with his first cartoon with sound, *Steamboat Willie* (1928). In addition, the years of his boyhood held particular appeal for him; one of Disney's longtime animators, Ward Kimball, noted that Disney was "'very preoccupied with his own history,' and set many of his pictures in 'the Gay Nineties or the early 1900s – because that was when he was a kid.'"³³⁷ For instance, *Cinderella*, first published in 1697, has been illustrated in children's books as occurring variously from medieval to Napoleonic times, but it is depicted most often in twentieth century editions as occurring in the eighteenth century. Disney's animated version, however, sets the story at the turn of the twentieth century. Similarly, L. Travers' *Mary Poppins* and its sequels, published between 1934 and 1952, are set in modern times, while Disney's film moves the story to the early twentieth century; *The Lady and the Tramp* (1955), based on Ward Greene's 1937 novel entitled *Happy Dan, The Whistling Dog*, is a particularly picturesque depiction of life in a small town – or of a neighborhood within a larger city – at the turn of the last century. One source Disney often turned to for story ideas was books – particularly children's books – written or taking place at the turn of the century, such as *Pollyanna* (1913), *Mother Carey's Chickens* (1911) (*Summer Magic* (1963)), *Toby Tyler* (1881), and *My Philadelphia Father* (1963), a biography of Anthony Drexel Biddle (1876- 948) which Disney adapted as *The Happiest Millionaire* (1967).

Moreover, as Schickel has noted, in the post-war period, Disney's live-action films were increasingly set in small towns, both of the present day and of the past.

The place where [Disney] operated most comfortably in the late Fifties and early

³³⁷ Watts, *The Magic Kingdom*, 7.

Sixties was the American small town and in the country surrounding it. Admittedly, this locale, as he pictured it, was not unattractive. It was always verdant, and the old houses, with their wide verandas and big front lawns, sitting complacently on their quiet streets, formed an irresistible setting for the little romances and comedies and animal stories that unfolded there at a leisurely pace and in a warm, chuckly tone. Even when he used this setting for a crime story, as he did in *That Darn Cat*, it completely lacked menace. Or modern reality. The small town is today as subject to blight as any other American place . . . the blare of television and the gunning of hot-rod motors drown out the chirp of crickets in the evening hours. Only in Disney films has it remained unchanged.³³⁸

In the later years of Disney's animated shorts production,³³⁹ even Mickey Mouse and his friends, originally inhabitants of the barnyard, had become small-town residents.

The quintessential expression of Disney's affection for, simultaneously, the turn of the century and the American small town was introduced to the American public in July 1955. It was, of course, Disneyland's Main Street U.S.A., the retail corridor through which all visitors pass to reach Disneyland's hub, Sleeping Beauty's castle, and from there, the rides and attractions themselves in the park's four "lands": Fantasyland, Adventureland, Frontierland, and Tomorrowland. As Christopher Anderson has demonstrated, Disneyland was the culmination of a deliberate post-war reconfiguration of the Disney company that Disney and his brother initiated because of financial and labor difficulties the company experienced during the war years, "transform[ing] the Disney studio from an independent producer of feature films and cartoon short subjects into a diversified leisure and entertainment corporation."³⁴⁰ In 1953, Disney took

³³⁸ Schickel, *The Disney Version*, 301.

³³⁹ Disney stopped producing animated shorts, which had become unprofitable when exhibitors began abandoning the practice of showing short subjects, in 1953. Christopher Anderson, *Hollywood TV: The Studio System in the Fifties* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 137.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

the first steps in this process. The company established its subsidiary, Buena Vista, to handle its theatrical distribution in-house. As further cost-cutting measures, the studio stopped producing animation shorts and, while reducing the number of its animated features, began to emphasize nature documentaries and live-action films, which were much quicker and less expensive to produce.³⁴¹ The next year, Disney began construction of Disneyland and, simultaneously, entered into television programming. As Anderson and others³⁴² have established, the latter two ventures were intrinsically intertwined from the outset. During the first year that *Disneyland* was on the air, Disney used the hour-long program not only to raise necessary funding for Disneyland's construction – making ABC's broadcast rights to the Disney television show contingent on the third-place network's \$500,000 investment in the park itself – but to sell Disneyland itself to American families with periodic episodes devoted to its progress during the entire year of its construction. The *Disneyland* television program thus enabled the company “for the first time to unite the disparate realms of the Disney empire”[;]³⁴³ Disney's entry into television marked the company's switch “from the prewar culture of motion pictures to a post-war culture . . . [of] an increasingly integrated leisure market that also included television, recorded music, theme parks, tourism, and consumer merchandise.”³⁴⁴

At the time the Disneys embarked on this post-war corporate transformation, however, its

³⁴¹ Ibid. The typical Disney full-length animated feature took three years to produce.

³⁴² E.g., George Lipsitz, “The Making of Disneyland,” in *True Stories from the American Past*, ed. William Graener. (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1993).

³⁴³ Anderson, *Hollywood TV*, 134.

³⁴⁴ Ibid.

success was far from assured. Although Disneyland was ultimately to become the engine for Disney's integrated-leisure enterprise, the money cow by which Disney achieved for the first time sustained financial stability and profitability,³⁴⁵ it was derided in its early stages as "Disney's folly" and not even supported within the Disney company itself. Roy Disney, Disney's older brother and chief financial officer, refused to commit more than \$10,000 in corporate funds to Disneyland, forcing Disney to fund it initially with his own savings and with the cash proceeds from his life insurance policy.³⁴⁶ Moreover, Disney's move from animation into live-action features was met with resistance and hostility. The latter in particular, however, being necessary to the company's survival, was a move Disney could not afford *not* to make, and in fact its orchestration was carefully planned and effectively completed before the 1950s began, so as to allow the post-1950 changes in Disney production practice to occur virtually unnoticed.

Ironically, pivotal to these innovations was the image of the turn-of-the-century small town, portrayed in Disney's terms as America's commonly shared golden past. In 1949 Disney released a film set in rural and small-town Indiana at the turn of the century that on one hand, was the vehicle by which Disney won the public over to his new cinematic product, the live-action feature film, and on the other, was the impetus to Disney's embarking on the path to the physical re-creation of his long-lost boyhood "home" as a place to be entered into, an actual experience for the public to enjoy. Thus, this film is both a pre-Main Street U.S.A. example of Disney's using

³⁴⁵ Disneyland had had more than one million visitors in the first six months it was open and three million within the first year, grossing \$10 million in revenues. In that first year alone, Disneyland's revenues were more than that of any single Disney film in the studio's history. Schickel, *The Disney Version*, 316. By 1959, Walt Disney Enterprises, Disneyland's corporate identity, grossed \$58.4 million. *Ibid.*

³⁴⁶ Mosley, *Disney's World*, 229.

turn-of-the-century small-town nostalgia to introduce commercially necessary innovation, and a key inspiration for and stepping stone in the development of Main Street U.S.A.; indeed, one could argue that in this film lie the seeds of the actualization of Disneyland itself. Based on Sterling North's 1943 children's book, *Midnight and Jeremiah*, and his subsequent novelization of the same story,³⁴⁷ this film was entitled *So Dear to My Heart*.

North's story was prime Disney material. It is the tale of Jeremiah, a young orphan being raised by his grandmother in rural Indiana in the early 1900s, who, despite his grandmother's objections, raises a troublesome black lamb (named Midnight in the children's book and Danny in the novel and the Disney film). In the end, the lamb validates Jerry's efforts by winning a ribbon at the annual county fair. The title of the film was particularly apt, as *So Dear to My Heart* held a special place in Disney's affection. It was, in fact, Disney's personal favorite from the time of its release through its broadcast on the *Disneyland* television show in 1954³⁴⁸: "*So Dear* was especially close to me. Why, that's the life my brother and I grew up with as kids out in Missouri."³⁴⁹

It seems unlikely that it was accidental that Disney chose this sentimental tale, set in Disney's beloved rural Midwest during his favorite time period of the early 1900s, for the *type* of

³⁴⁷ In 1947, North reworked and published the children's story as a novel intended for older readers, now entitled *So Dear to My Heart*. Apparently, Disney's film was already in the works, for the 1947 novel was released as "a Walt Disney Production, published by special arrangement with the Artists and Writers Guild, Inc."

³⁴⁸ Karal Ann Marling, ed., *Designing Disney's Theme Parks: The Architecture of Reassurance* (Paris and New York: Flammarion, 1997), 27.

³⁴⁹ Steve Mannheim, *Walt Disney and the Quest for Community* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2002), 19.

film he planned to produce. One new enterprise Disney began at this time was the series of *True-Life Adventure* nature documentary shorts, the first of which, *Seal Island*, was released in 1948. *Seal Island*, however, was just one step in Disney's transition from animated to live-action production. In 1943, Disney had produced a film for the armed forces, *Victory Through Airpower*, in which the studio combined both animation and live action film of U.S. aircraft. After the war ended, Disney tried this combination for commercial distribution in a compilation of two shorts entitled *Fun and Fancy Free* (1947) and, with disastrous results, in *Song of the South* (1946), a full-length feature dramatizing several of Joel Chandler Harris's Uncle Remus stories.

In addition to the racial controversy that erupted around *Song of the South*,³⁵⁰ the film was vehemently condemned by many critics for the introduction of live action into a Disney feature film, something not only unexpected from the nation's master animator but perceived here to be executed clumsily³⁵¹ (although one wonders today if the latter perception was not in fact the result of the former). Live-action films being necessary to the studio's survival, however, Disney had no choice but to win audiences over, and this, at least for the time being, appeared to require meeting the public's expectation of animation as well. Thus, Disney would attempt the live-action/animation feature film again, and to do so, he needed a vehicle whose virtues would allow him to overcome the resistance and hostility *Song of the South* had generated. This time, he not only chose a vehicle for which he had a deep personal affinity, but one which was also bathed in the warm glow of a memory that could be safely (if inaccurately) attributed to "America" itself: the reassuringly familiar mythos of the American heartland. Like a bride, this film would hold

³⁵⁰ See Watts, *The Magic Kingdom*, 273-80.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 275.

something old and something new, or more accurately, something new garbed in something both old and beloved. To regain his threatened place in America's heart, Disney needed the material he knew and loved best, and in which he had the greatest faith. He needed to come home.

So Dear to My Heart is, in fact, one of Disney's most overtly nostalgic films. Disney casts the entire film as a grown man's memory of events from his turn-of-the-century childhood, a narrative frame entirely missing from North's story. This is accomplished in large part through the key motif of a scrapbook stored away in a cluttered attic, in which, years ago, the little boy pasted mementos of his hopes, dreams, and accomplishments, and with which the movie opens. Thus, after the credits, which are shown against a background of a cross-stitched patchwork quilt, the film fades in on the attic. On the soundtrack, a male narrator states, "The greatest wealth a man may acquire is the wisdom he gains from living. And sometimes out of the small beginnings come the forces that shape a whole life." As the camera tracks in on the scrapbook and as its pages magically begin to turn, the song "So Dear to My Heart" begins to play on the soundtrack:

So dear to my heart
That September-y day
When that old shady lane we strolled
Was just turning scarlet and gold
So dear to my heart

So dear to my heart
That December-y day
When the first touch of frost and snow
Had painted each tree in the row
So dear to my heart

I still can picture the flowers in a shower
And that picnic in July
And I still treasure each and every hour
Of those years that had to fly

There locked in my heart
 In a corner apart
 While I tenderly hold the key
 As long as I live, they will be
 So dear to my heart.

As the camera tracks in on a turn-of-the-century postcard of an autumn country scene glued in the scrapbook, the film dissolves into animation whereby we travel into the postcard's bucolic fall countryside and come to a red schoolhouse. A swirling fall leaf then dissolves into a dried leaf pasted into the scrapbook. The page turns, and now we see affixed in the scrapbook a turn-of-the-century Christmas card with a picture of a snow-covered church; via Disney's animation, the church is transformed into a Nativity scene. In animation, a silhouetted horse-and-buggy are then shown standing nearby a picnic, the colors of which blur and wash away in a summer rainstorm, and as the vocalist sings, "And I still treasure each and every hour/Of those years that had to fly," a picture pasted into the scrapbook of a Tom Sawyeresque boy, sitting on a river bank fishing, appears on screen. While the last verse of the song plays on the soundtrack, the scrapbook turns to an ornate, multi-layered Valentine. In the animation, the camera appears to track *into* the Valentine, where a pale blue background becomes a skyscape; the image dissolves into a painting of Granny Kincaid's homestead. As the voiceover narration begins, the painting becomes a photographic still that then "comes to life;" in conjunction with the voiceover, the film then cuts to a long shot of the tiny town of Fulton Corners:

I can still see the old Kincaid homestead, just the way it was then. The split rail fence, the red barn, the chink-log cabin with its little loft bedroom, where I used to do my dreaming.

And I can still see Granny out there in the field and General Jackson pulling her plow.

And just a mile or so away, Fulton Corners, a crossroads of my small world. At Grundy's General Store, you could get most anything from jack knives to fish hooks or candy – that is, if you had the money.

And if you didn't, why free-for-nothing you might get to see old 99 go highballing through.

At this point, the action of the film begins with the train's arrival and the film's young protagonists – Jeremiah Kincaid (Bobby Driscoll) and his playmate Tildy (Luana Patton) – running across a field into town to meet the train.

In fact, in terms of technological innovation and difficulty, the use of animation in *So Dear to My Heart* represents a retreat from what Disney had attempted in *Song of the South*, where live actors appear against cartoon backgrounds and interact with cartoon characters. This retreat was entirely strategic, however, for *So Dear to My Heart* is actually a *live-action* film, the first full-length live-action feature Disney produced, albeit one supplemented with animated interludes and thereby effectively “disguised” as vintage Disney. Thus, the film's animation is segregated from the live action, and structurally, it serves primarily as a bridge between distinct sections of the film separated by the diegetic passage of time. As has been noted, animation is used immediately after the credit sequence, as if to immediately reassure viewers that this is, indeed, a Disney picture. Moreover, the relatively straight-forward dissolve from the “real” postcards and magazine cut-outs in the scrapbook to their animated versions is employed repeatedly with respect to images that are recognizably “old”: these quaint and ornate postcards and Valentines are, practically by definition, unthreatening. In addition, they contain overtly beautiful and traditional images: a fall countryside, a snow-covered church, an idealized barefoot boy and his fishing pole. The final image – that of the elaborate, turn-of-the-century Valentine into which the animated “camera” moves to eventually find Granny Kincaid at work plowing – identifies the framed story as a Valentine from the grown Jeremiah to his grandmother and arguably, the entire film as a comparable Valentine from Disney to his audience. Here the equation between Disney's familiar,

beloved animation and such “universal” familiar and beloved images as a scrapbook’s old Christmas cards and Valentines is made explicit, reassuring viewers that what will follow will be more of the same, and not radically unlike what they had come to expect and love in Disney films.

The other three animated sequences in the film, as has been noted, serve as bridges or ellipses between different points in time in the diegesis; narratively, their function is to teach Jeremiah important “lessons” to apply in the live-action portion of the film. These three sequences occur at different points in the story when Jerry is looking at or pasting pictures into his scrapbook and suddenly characters in those pasted-in images “come to life” to sing a song. The two recurring animated characters are a wise old owl and a cartoon version of Danny, the black lamb. The owl, wearing an academic cap and gown, appears on a series of cards Jerry has pasted into his scrapbook, each showing the owl standing in front of a chalkboard on which a didactic homily is written, and the homilies are the basis for the first two of the songs: “It’s Whatcha Do With Whatcha Got [That Counts]” and “Stick-to-it-Tivity.” The third song, “At the County Fair,” which the owl also sings, is an animated celebration and preview of the fair Jerry and his family will soon attend.

The first time the owl comes to “life,” there is a very brief overlap of live action footage and animation in which Jerry and the owl appear on screen simultaneously and Jerry reacts to this surprising turn of events. Otherwise, however, these three animated sequences are simply musical cartoons inserted into the live-action film; during each, the animation fills the screen, and no live actors or other images from the live-action footage are visible. When each cartoon ends, the film cuts or dissolves to live-action footage, and the story continues. While the “lessons” Jerry learns from the owl during these flights of fancy have application to the situation Jerry is encountering

and the choices he will be called upon to make elsewhere in the live-action portion of the film, the cartoons themselves have nothing to do with the rest of the film³⁵² and could, in fact, be deleted entirely without affecting it at all except by shortening its running time by approximately one-fifth. Narratively, they are interruptions, during which the action of the story stops completely. Thus, in its shift of story-telling from animated to live-action footage,³⁵³ *So Dear to My Heart* represents a crucial step in the studio's progression from animated features to live-action features.

Two primary themes run through the studio's promotional materials for *So Dear to My Heart*: first, its animation-and-live-action format and second, but more predominantly, its nostalgia. Disney studio promotional materials laud *So Dear to My Heart* for its combination of animation and live action while simultaneously preparing audiences for its "deviation" from the "traditional" Disney film. Prepared newspaper articles in the film's pressbook have such headlines as "'So Dear to My Heart' Required Two Years' Fabulous Fabrication," "Cartoon, Live-Action Combine to Keep 'So Dear to My Heart' Warm," and "'So Dear to My Heart' Adds Animation to a Wonderfully Human Story."³⁵⁴ These prepared articles were developed from the studio's Production History of the film, a promotional document provided to exhibitors, which reads in part:

³⁵² The animated sequences, in fact, include fanciful animated recreations of David's victory over Goliath, Christopher Columbus' initial crossing of the Atlantic Ocean, and Robert Bruce's defeat of the English as laudable examples of courage and perseverance for Jerry to follow.

³⁵³ In *Song of the South*, the live actors – Bobby Driscoll as Johnny and James Baskett as Uncle Remus – functioned as the frame for the film's story, which consisted of the animated B'rer Rabbit tales.

³⁵⁴ *So Dear to My Heart* pressbook, Disney Productions ("Pressbook"), USC-CNTV Pressbook Collection.

“SO DEAR TO MY HEART” is not only the most stirring story Walt Disney ever has produced, but it is also his most unique offering, in that its *predominant live action* contrasts strikingly with his customary all-cartoon animations. In addition, the comedy-drama with its rich musical accompaniment deals with *familiar reality instead of fabled fantasy*.

.....

While his newest full-length feature relies to great extent on the powers of a gifted living cast to create its enchantment, the picture is as distinctively Disney as any of his previous most lauded productions.

.....

There is a certain amount of cartoon animation, but it ornaments rather than promotes the main story line with its simple plot and its wealth of heart-touching and laugh-making incident.

.....

This the answer to the curious speculation which always precedes release of any Disney picture – how will Walt entertain us this time?³⁵⁵

Much more of the studio’s promotional effort, however, is directed to advertising the film’s nostalgia, an indication that the selling of Disney’s new live-action format actually lies here. Certainly these promotional materials, containing such prepared newspaper stories as, “‘So Dear to My Heart’ Smacks of Walt Disney’s Own Boyhood,” “Nostalgic America Lives Once Again In ‘So Dear to My Heart,’” and “Old Vogues Reign In ‘So Dear To My Heart,’” reflect the assumption that nostalgia itself is a strong draw. In addition, even though this promotion, like that of other 1940s/50s Hollywood turn-of-the-century period films, anticipates a difference in appeal for younger audiences than for those with actual memory of the film’s setting, its appeal for young people is expected to be *education* rather than *humor*: “For persons over 40, the film will bring back a flood of golden, romantic and often amusing memories of their own callow days. For younger ones, the interest should be equally strong in what the older generation prized and

³⁵⁵ “Production Story, ‘So Dear to My Heart,’” date unknown, Motion Picture Academy Library Collection.

endured in those other ‘happy days. . . .’³⁵⁶ Thus, for both nostalgic and learning purposes, *authenticity* is a key component of the film’s representation of the past; in this, Disney pursues a different strategy from that of Warner Bros., for instance in *On Moonlight Bay* and *By the Light of the Silvery Moon*, as Disney’s interest is in using a simulated return to the old to hide, rather than to market, the new.

Further, in these stories and other studio publicity, the film’s nostalgia positions it simultaneously as Disney’s “personal” project and as a “universal” American story. Thus, for instance, one pressbook article identifies *So Dear to My Heart* as Disney’s “favorite motion picture story,” while another claims that the film “could easily be an account based on Disney’s own boyhood in the Midwest. . . . in a small rural community.”³⁵⁷ Similarly, Disney’s personal investment in the film’s subject matter is credited with much of the film’s crucial authenticity:

Determined that “SO DEAR TO MY HEART” should have every support of reality, Walt spent a great deal of time and location scouting to find a suitable background and valid atmosphere.

. . . .
The location [Tulare County, California, 250 miles from Hollywood] was carefully selected to resemble the Indiana landscape of Brown County [Indiana], where the story is placed. . . .

Disney lived on location during the filming. *He personally supervised much of the action*

From his own boyhood in Marceline, Missouri, Walt recalled many a vivid and pertinent adventure, recollected much village lore, and *measured the development of the story and its picturesque incident against his family life in the*

³⁵⁶ Similarly, the Disney publicists point to the film’s adult male voiceover narration by the “grown-up Jeremiah” as an element designed to foster the film’s appeal to multiple generations. By “bring[ing] a mature viewpoint to the recollected events of childhood[,]” the voiceover narration “is especially well used in this picture to insure adults as well as juveniles the fullest pleasure in the adventures of the Kincaid boy.” “Production Story, ‘So Dear to My Heart,’” 3.

³⁵⁷ “‘So Dear to My Heart’ Smacks of Walt Disney’s Own Boyhood,” Pressbook, 5.

*heart of the Union a short generation ago.*³⁵⁸

In describing the story itself and its setting, studio publicists emphasize its nostalgia for an idyllic American moment. The film's setting is "[n]ostalgic America, a nation of peace and quiet, living mostly far from the madding throng before the days of World Wars and Atom Bombs and the Space Race to the Moon"[;]³⁵⁹ other publicity boasts that

[i]t's all there, the old ideas of good and thoughtful living, the annual advent of the happy county fair, the little family struggles, the lovely countryside *unspoiled by the automobile* – and the singing times, when *a whole community could doff its minor worries and relax in the evening breezes.*³⁶⁰

Behind the struggle and antics of the warm characters there glows, in gorgeous Technicolor, a whole pageant of *American life of another well-remembered time*, with its village tranquility, its haunting songs and gay dances, its lone train shuffling through once a day, the county fair, the priceless blue ribbons, and a *happy atmosphere unclouded by modern-day brinksmanship*³⁶¹

[*So Dear to My Heart*] is the story of a recollected boyhood out of the heartland of America a generation ago . . . packed with emotion and *the pleasant tingle of treasured remembrance*; filled with the gaiety, songs and dances and with the *sentiment of its time and place in Indiana.*³⁶²

Further, this nostalgic appeal is one felt by any American of any background; the film's story, characters, and setting are presented as *universally American* and *timeless*. Disney's "Thumbnail Synopsis" of *So Dear to My Heart* describes the film as not simply the story "of a boy [and] his black lamb" but, more broadly, of "the dreams, the aspirations, the disappointments, and the joys

³⁵⁸ "Production Story, 'So Dear to My Heart,'" 4 (emphasis added).

³⁵⁹ "Old Vogues Reign In 'So Dear To My Heart,'" Pressbook, 8.

³⁶⁰ "Nostalgic America Lives Once Again in 'So Dear to My Heart,'" Pressbook, 8 (emphasis added).

³⁶¹ "Famous Story Inspired 'So Dear to My Heart,'" Pressbook, 6 (emphasis added).

³⁶² "Production Story, 'So Dear to My Heart,'" 4 (emphasis added).

and faith of childhood”[;]³⁶³ Jeremiah Kincaid is “a valid reflection of all spirited American boyhood, from pioneer times to this very day.”³⁶⁴ As proof, the pressbook includes an anecdote about a purported audience response to preview screenings of the film::

Walt was not long in discovering he had no monopoly on the boyhood memories furnished by the film. Following early previews of “So Dear to My Heart,” over forty per cent of the male audience excitedly inscribed their preview cards with the information that many of the incidents and characters surrounding the small boy of the picture, evidently and mysteriously, had been borrowed intact from their own youth.³⁶⁵

Similarly, Fulton Corners itself, with all its period authenticity, is held forth as representing more than its particular time and place:

The buildings of Fulton Corners and on the Kincaid farm – the village store, the blacksmith shop, the little jerkwater railway station, the frame houses amongst the sycamores, the stables and tool houses – these may age and wrinkle with weather, but the people who inhabit them and use them . . . change little in their affections and their codes and their essential character with the fleeting decades.

The so-called Kincaid family and their neighbors are *so typical of the American folk for the past 40 years that innumerable myriads of people viewing “SO DEAR” will see themselves and part of their life poignantly reflected in its Technicolor scenes.*³⁶⁶

Thus, just as the publisher’s slogan for North’s novel was that “this nostalgic, simple, engrossing tale about the universal American boy of his era, the early 1900’s, ‘takes you back again to Fulton Corners’ – Fulton Corners being a name for the countless birthplaces of America’s country-reared

³⁶³ “Thumbnail Synopsis,” date unknown, Motion Picture Academy Library Collection.

³⁶⁴ “Production Story, ‘So Dear to My Heart,’” 11.

³⁶⁵ “‘So Dear to My Heart’ Smacks of Walt Disney’s Own Boyhood, Pressbook, 5.

³⁶⁶ “Production Story, ‘So Dear to My Heart,’” 11-12.

millions”³⁶⁷ – Disney publicity claims that “[t]he picture will take you back home to Fulton Corners, wherever the home of your youth may be, in town or city or countryside. For, although the scene may shift, people change but little in the play of affections and in response to circumstance. *And on this keynote Disney bases the nostalgic appeal.*”³⁶⁸

In keeping with the tenor of this promotional campaign, which heralded the film as a golden tale of everyone’s sweetly remembered childhood in mid-America, Disney’s distributor, RKO, premiered *So Dear to My Heart* in the nation’s heartland, by means of an “area premiere” in 150 theaters in Ohio, Indiana, West Virginia, and Kentucky.³⁶⁹ Upon the film’s release, critics either condemned *So Dear to My Heart* for its saccharine sentimentality and simplistic, slow-moving story (“ an extended stretch of nostalgia coated with sweetness, tenderness and an almost revolting excess of sentimentality. . . a rose-tinted calendar-art valentine to childhood. . . . a cooing little tale”³⁷⁰) or embraced it for its warm good-heartedness and wholesome suitability for

³⁶⁷ “Production Story, ‘So Dear to My Heart,’” 11.

³⁶⁸ “Production Story, ‘So Dear to My Heart,’” 12 (emphasis added).

³⁶⁹ With Disney and several cast members participating in the area premiere, “great activity throughout the four states, starting from January 15 [1949] and ending January 22 [1949]” was scheduled, specifically in Chicago, Lafayette, Indiana (Purdue University), Columbus, Ohio, Indianapolis, Indiana (where the world premiere occurred on January 18), Louisville, Kentucky, and Nashville, Tennessee. Production Story, “So Dear to My Heart,” 14. Disney studio promotional materials indicate that the film’s musical numbers had been the subject of “25 different records . . . [by] such top artists as Freddy Martin, Sammy Kaye, Dinah Shore, Gene Krupa, Peggy Lee, Jack Smith, Carmen Cavallero, the Pied Pipers, Johnny Johnston and Mel Torme. Songs receiving heaviest plugs prior to the picture’s release and credited with important effect on opening attendance are “So Dear to My Heart,” “Lavender Blue,” and “It’s Whatcha Do With Whatcha Got.” “Production Story, ‘So Dear to My Heart,’” 16-17. “Lavender Blue,” in fact, was nominated for the 1949 Academy Award for Best Song.

³⁷⁰ *So Dear to My Heart, Cue*, January 29, 1949. Similarly, the *Daily News*’ sarcastic assessment was that

family viewing (“solid sentiment – unadulterated, undiluted, yet so disarming in its bucolic charm that the crotchety may make an exception in this case,”³⁷¹ inspiring “a warm, affectionate feeling, a glow of complete satisfaction”³⁷²); overall, however, the latter assessment was in the majority.

Insofar as the film’s format is concerned, critics at the *New York Times* and *The New Yorker* continued their criticism of Disney’s use of live action in favor of animation.

[*So Dear to My Heart*] . . . would be highly insufficient as a full-length picture from Mr. Disney if it weren’t for his promise that this one is the last – at least, for now – of such half-fare.

. . . .
[N]o one need tell Mr. Disney that such efforts are far from his best and that they seriously jeopardize his trade-mark, which stands for animation and cartoon. No one need tell him that his forte and the essence of his art is the expression of fanciful whimsies which no live actor can perform. . . . Wherefore his next two features – “Two Fabulous Characters” and “Cinderella” – will be cartoons.³⁷³

Walt Disney’s latter-day practice of intruding “live action” into his films, thus displacing in increasing measure his familiar animated images, has worked out something like the donkey which meekly stuck its head in the door. “Live action” has now taken over his latest feature, “So Dear to My Heart.” Except for brief passages in cartoon, which altogether run for 12 minutes at most, the bulk of this

Walt Disney’s “So Dear to My Heart” . . . is a highly moral picture, suitable for children and valuable to adults who want their values uplifted.

. . . .
It’s a melange of improving phrases, exemplary deeds and people who appear to live in another world composed entirely of sweetness, light and honest hard work, the reward of which is deep satisfaction and tranquility.

Darr Smith, “Film Review: ‘So Dear to My Heart,’” *Daily News*, February 23, 1949.

³⁷¹ “Disney’s Heart,” *Newsweek*, February 2, 1949.

³⁷² Leo Mishkin, *Morning Telegraph*, date unknown.

³⁷³ Bosley Crowther, “So Dear to Our Hearts: In Praise of Mr. Disney’s Particular Talent,” *New York Times*, February 6, 1949. In fact, *Two Fabulous Characters* was never produced; *Cinderella* was released in 1950.

children's fable . . . is in straight "live action" style. . . . [The animated "Stick-to-It-Tivity" sequence] has the imagination and special charm which the film, in general, lacks . . . We are happy to say as a footnote that Mr. Disney will fully animate his next long film.³⁷⁴

Walt Disney's "So Dear to My Heart" is another attempt by the Master to combine real actors and cartoon characters in a film. It isn't as objectionable as "Song of the South," Disney's previous excursion into this sort of thing . . . but it's hardly up to the stuff that Disney used to turn out when he stuck to this easel and created his own cast. . . .³⁷⁵

In the majority of the film's reviews, however, critics have become reconciled to Disney's use of live action, many of them concluding that with the segregated format, whereby live action carries the story and animation serves only an ornamental or tangential function, Disney has achieved a successful marriage of live action and animation within a single film. A typical such review reads:

In *So Dear to My Heart*, Disney has gone a long way along the road to solving the problem of welding cartoon and flesh-and-blood into something like a cohesive entity. He uses the cartoon as a neat dramatic device, rather as he used Jiminy Cricket as the voice of Conscience in *Pinocchio*. . . . Whenever things are looking pretty dark for [Jeremiah and Danny] the Wise Old Owl turns up with a flash of Disney homespun wisdom and a song to cheer them up and indicate the way ahead. Thus, the cartoon items in the picture have a set dramatic purpose, and the two elements fuse much more gracefully than in previous Disney works of this type.³⁷⁶

It seems evident, however, that Disney has artfully misdirected critical focus to his marriage of live action and animation; when a critic concludes that "Sterling North's 'live' story . . . is so heartwarming that the cartoons excellent as they are, *never overshadow*,"³⁷⁷ Disney has achieved

³⁷⁴ Bosley Crowther, *New York Times*, unknown date.

³⁷⁵ *The New Yorker*, February 5, 1949.

³⁷⁶ "Test Piece for Disney," *New Review*, September 29, 1949.

³⁷⁷ "So Dear to My Heart," *Variety (W)*, December 8, 1948.

his true goal: public and critical acceptance of live-action feature-length films. In 1950, the studio released *Treasure Island*, its first all live-action feature film, which was a box office success. It was followed by the equally successful *The Story of Robin Hood* (1952), and indeed, *Treasure Island* initiated a series of live-action Disney films presenting historical or fabled tales, such as *The Sword and the Rose* (1953) and *Rob Roy, The Highland Rogue* (1953). With these films, Disney established the pattern his company would follow thereafter of releasing live-action films alongside animated features such as *Cinderella* (1950), *Alice in Wonderland* (1951), and *Peter Pan* (1953).

Like Disney's animated fairy tale features, these live-action films had the advantage of timelessness, in that their historical or historically mythical settings could never become dated or out of style; hence they were, in Schickel's terms, "endlessly re-releasable."³⁷⁸ At the same time, this very timelessness established a kinship to the beloved animated films on which Disney's initial fame was based. The choice of subject matter for Disney's 1950s live-action films then bespeaks a simultaneous concern for both future and present utility of those films. In and of itself, however, the not-of-this-world kinship between Disney's prewar animated and post-war live-action films was not necessarily sufficient to assure the profitability of the latter. Rather, as a corrective to the disastrous mis-step of *Song of the South*, *So Dear to My Heart* played a crucial role – perhaps subliminally – in establishing this connection, in educating viewers as to the “continuity” between the “old” Disney and the “new.” Part of this education was literally present on the screen, conveyed in the animated interludes interspersed throughout the film. More fundamental was the physical recreation of the rural settings and humor of Disney's many

³⁷⁸ Schickel, *The Disney Version*, 21.

“barnyard” cartoons, and even more fundamental was the overtly nostalgic call to America’s “childhood,” conveyed as picturesquely in live-action images as Disney’s fairy tales had been in animation, a deliberately manufactured communal memory that made the transition to live-action films feasible and not only palatable but warmly, reassuringly pleasurable. As we have seen, this communal memory was only partly constructed by Disney, but it is one to which Disney’s deliberate and skillful contribution – perhaps because of his own personal investment in it – seems particularly potent, even as it was simultaneously effective in advancing his commercial interests.

In addition to serving as the vehicle which sold Disney’s audiences on his live-action films, *So Dear to My Heart* played a second role in Disney’s post-war transformation, and that was its catalytic role in the form Disneyland was to take. Interestingly, in its pressbook and other publicity for *So Dear to My Heart*, Disney’s studio stresses the communal aspect of the film’s story to a degree not actually supported by the content of the film itself. For instance, one publicity piece claims that “[u]sing the best selling story of Americana, ‘So Dear to My Heart’, Walt Disney has brought to the screen a full-length story, *recreating an entire community in Indiana with the problems, joys and ties of the average American small town.*”³⁷⁹ Similarly, a studio synopsis of the film’s story reads:

Jeremiah’s problems revolve around a neglected little black lamb which he resolved to keep and rear against the practical considerations of his grandma, whose hard workaday farm life is upset by the arrival of the lamb with its dark fleece not marketable. The altercation between the boy and his elder grows into a conflict of wills, and *finally involves the whole community* before the determined boy wins a coveted prize for his pet at the county fair and finds his character set in

³⁷⁹ “Walt Disney’s Unique Characters Move from Cartoon Treatment to Live Action in ‘So Dear to My Heart,’” undated promotional material, Motion Picture Academy Library Collection (emphasis added).

“The way the twig is bent,” to his granny’s great and loving relief³⁸⁰

In fact, however, little of the action in *So Dear to My Heart* occurs in Fulton Corners itself, although the film’s framed story begins and ends with the community’s gathering there. As the film begins, a crowd congregates when Old 99 stops in Fulton Corners and – wonder of wonders! – the renowned race horse Dan Patch is led out to allow the village blacksmith to replace a defective horseshoe. In the last scene in the framed story, the town turns out to meet the train when Jerry, Granny, Tildy, Uncle Hiram, and the black sheep Danny arrive home from the county fair, with Jerry sporting Danny’s “Special Award” ribbon. The grocer Grundy invites everyone into his store for watermelon to celebrate Danny’s victory, and as the camera pulls back to the same long shot which introduced the town at the beginning of the film, the town’s residents slowly disappear into the store. Thus, the unifying motifs of the arriving train – an image to be repeated in the opening credit sequence of *Pollyanna* – and the gathered community serve as “bookends” to the film’s framed story, in which, in the townspeople’s celebratory welcome, Jerry’s accomplishment within his community is equated with the nationally acclaimed successes of the race horse Dan Patch. With the exception of these two scenes, however, nearly all the action of *So Dear to My Heart* occurs either in Granny Kincaid’s pioneer-style homestead or in the woods and uncultivated countryside surrounding Fulton Corners, where Jerry and Tildy are free to run, play, and explore; apart from the crowd scenes, the grocer, his cracker barrel companion, and the grocer’s son are the only characters given screen time other than Jeremiah,

³⁸⁰ “Story,” undated promotional material, Motion Picture Academy Library Collection (emphasis added).

Tildy, Granny, and Uncle Hiram.³⁸¹

Indeed, in 1903, Fulton Corners, Indiana is not yet the established community recreated in Disneyland's Main Street U.S.A. It is barely two blocks long and consists of a handful of buildings lining an unpaved road; scarcely more than a train stop and trade center for the farmers of the surrounding countryside, it is a hard-scrabble place whose inhabitants and rural visitors – particularly the women in their faded sunbonnets – resemble pioneer families far more than they do the tailored or ruffled and beribboned Smith family of 1903 St. Louis in *Meet Me in St. Louis*. Similarly, Granny Kincaid's homestead is a decidedly rural – rather than small town – dwelling; moreover, it, too, resembles a pioneer homestead, lacking electricity and furnished with Granny's working spinning wheel and loom; Jerry's bedroom is an upstairs sleeping loft, accessible only by a retractable ladder, and Granny walks behind the mule to plow her fields.

Nonetheless, one of the studio pressbook's prepared stories, comparing the film of *So Dear to My Heart* to a family scrapbook, hints at the impulse behind Disney's meticulous attention to detail in producing the film's sets, with which Marling reports the studio "took enormous pains" despite "efforts to contain costs in the post-war period."³⁸²

In every old family album – and there must be millions of them still - resides some reminder, picture or souvenir which calls to mind the life and times of another day so dear to our hearts, a day so warmly featured in Walt Disney's motion picture, "So Dear to My Heart."

For *Walt's favorite film story*, while packed with color, excitement, and the cliff-hanging adventures of a young country boy, *is in a very great sense* an old

³⁸¹ In addition to the "bookend" community scenes, one scene occurs in Uncle Hiram's blacksmith shop, and three or four brief scenes inside Grundy's store.

³⁸² Marling, *Designing Disney's Theme Parks*, 27. The railroad depot in Disneyland's Frontierland was constructed from the original working drawings for the depot set from *So Dear to My Heart* which, in turn, were a duplicate of a depot from Eastern Pennsylvania. *Ibid.*

family album – *everyone’s old family album*.

.....

“So Dear to My Heart” is a story of the very young, their joys and sorrows, their adventures and their disappointments, their awe of and contempt for adult authority, and a carefreeness they enjoyed then, without really knowing it, and will never enjoy again. A time every adult would give his right arm to relive, and cannot, *unless he goes to see the Disney picture*.

The family album is personal. It conjures up old times. *But it is static*. The photos do not move from the confines of their well-stuck-in art corners. *The Disney story, though, moves*, and with great heart and color, music and laughter, and a tearful cheeriness that mere pasteboard pages could never convey.³⁸³

Similarly, other Disney publicity characterizes *So Dear to My Heart* as “smilingly recall[ing] that time many millions of Americans still fondly remember *and would gladly relive if such things were possible*. . . . Disney’s picture . . . will bring that realization *as close as it will ever come in this life*.”³⁸⁴

Disney’s ultimate goal, however, was to put the lie to his own publicity claims. The frustrated desire underlying this publicity, in fact, was the impetus for Disney’s next major project and his last great love: Disneyland. Disneyland – and in particular, its Main Street, U.S.A. – would in fact take the scrapbook in *So Dear to My Heart* one step further: from static images of America’s golden past to colorful images which moved, laughed, and sang, and finally to a three-dimensional re-creation which one could enter – in which one could actually *relive* this carefree time and place, as Disney contended his adult audience would sacrifice an appendage to do.

As has been well-documented, Disney’s desire to build an amusement park was initially sparked by his trips to amusement parks with his young daughters in the 1930s, where he was

³⁸³ “Walt Disney’s ‘So Dear to My Heart’ is Truly Everybody’s Family Album,” Pressbook, 8 (emphasis added).

³⁸⁴ “Nostalgic America Lives Once Again in ‘So Dear to My Heart,’” Pressbook, 8 (emphasis added).

dissatisfied, among other things, by the fact that the parks provided adults little entertainment.³⁸⁵ His first idea was to build a small park on land adjoining the Disney Burbank studio for use by Disney employees and their families; there he envisioned a spot decorated with figures and scenes from Disney animation. Once Disney decided to create something for the public, however, the American turn-of-the-century small town became central to the concept; in early plans, the park was nothing but a re-creation of the small town, and in no version of the park after 1952 does the turn-of-the-century small town *not* appear as an integral component of the design. In the creation of what would eventually become Main Street U.S.A., Disney's memories of Marceline were a key driving force³⁸⁶; the catalytic influence of *So Dear to My Heart* and the opportunity it had provided for Disney to re-create his boyhood days on the Marceline farm, however, cannot be doubted. The curious emphasis in the film's publicity on the town and community of Fulton Corners, despite its barely constituting a town in physical terms and its minimal presence in the film itself, suggests Disney's preoccupation with the particular entity of the turn-of-the-century small town during this time frame, a preoccupation that appears to have extended beyond the content of the film itself, perhaps to memories of his own past, plans for the future, or both.

In 1950, Disney designed a free-standing workshop to be erected in his backyard; in form,

³⁸⁵ See, e.g., Watts, *The Magic Kingdom*, 384; Menon, "Dazzled in Disneyland," 106.

³⁸⁶ At Disney's meetings with his designers, designated "story sessions," he "would reminisce by the hour about Marceline's Midwestern Main Street: the barbershop, the dry-goods store, and the post office were each laid out in his narrative like scenes in a movie script. . . . [He is remembered as saying] 'Here we [have] a Main Street, that is now kind of passing away One side [is] related to the other side and to its neighbor.' After each meeting [art designer Marvin] Davis 'made a list of everything he mentioned and took it from there.'" Karling, *Designing Disney's Theme Parks*, 60.

this workshop was a re-creation of the barn from the Disney Marceline farm. In the workshop, Disney indulged in his hobby of building miniatures, and his first project was a miniature re-creation of Granny Kincaid's house from *So Dear to My Heart*. At the time, Disney was planning a project he called Disneylandia, which was to be a traveling show of miniatures of structures from small-town America at the time of his boyhood, intended to educate the public about vanishing customs and practices from America's past. Disney subsequently built two more miniatures. One was a small-town barbershop, complete with miniature shaving mugs and a barber shop quartet who, in an early version of the automating technology he would later use throughout Disneyland, were programmed to sing "By the Old Millstream." The other was an opera house, which also included an automated performing figure. The closest that Disneylandia came to existence, however, was the exhibition of Granny Kincaid's cabin at the 1950 Festival of California Living at the Pan-Pacific Auditorium in Los Angeles,³⁸⁷ where it was accompanied by a recording by Beulah Bondi, who had portrayed Granny in *So Dear to My Heart*, describing the way of life it represented. As Marling suggests, the unsatisfying static quality of the miniature exhibit was surely a factor in Disney's decision to move from a miniature to a life-sized re-creation of the way of life he remembered with such affection.³⁸⁸

In any event, when Harper Goff produced the first plans for Disneyland, they consisted solely of a re-creation of a turn-of-the-century small town, complete with a full-scale reproduction of Granny Kincaid's cabin, as well as such other structures as a church and a haunted house.

³⁸⁷ Michael Barrier, *The Animated Man: A Life of Walt Disney* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2007), 231.

³⁸⁸ Marling, *Designing Disney's Theme Parks*, 48.

While Disney considered and rejected various ideas for the other areas of the park, the small town remained a constant; with Marvin Davis's plans, produced in 1953, the final design of the introductory corridor of Main Street U.S.A, the Sleeping Beauty castle as hub, and the four "lands" radiating from that hub, was in place. Created not by architects but Disney artists and set designers, Disneyland was generally understood from its earliest days to have been designed in cinematic terms, as a *narrative* for visitors to *experience*, with Main Street, U.S.A. as "Scene One"; the design was intended as well to give park visitors the sensation of having entered a Disney film. Main Street, U.S.A. in particular was also an explicit call to a communal nostalgia, in that it was a reproduction of Disney once again asserted was a universal "home town" memory, only *better*. Disney is quoted as saying,

"Many of us fondly remember our small hometown and its friendly way of life at the turn of the century. To me, this era represents an important part of our nation's heritage. On Main Street we have endeavored to recapture those by-gone days."

. . . .

"For those of us who remember the carefree times it recreates, Main Street will bring back happy memories. For younger visitors, it is an adventure in turning back the calendar to the days of grandfather's youth."³⁸⁹

This was, however, "Walt's and anyone else's home town – the way it *should have been*,"³⁹⁰ and it is indeed much cleaner, more visually cohesive, more color-coordinated, and altogether more picturesque than any real town at the turn of the last century would have been. Further,

³⁸⁹ *Disneyland: The First Thirty Years* (Walt Disney Productions 1985), 16.

³⁹⁰ Lipsitz, "The Making of Disneyland," 189 (emphasis added). The same claim was repeated with the opening of Disney World in 1971. "Main Street was not designed as an imitation of any existing small town street, 'but it's what a Main Street *should* be,' says John Hench, vice president of WED and one of the top design men from its inception. 'Ours is a kind of universally true Main Street – it's better than the real Main Streets of the turn of the century ever could be.'" Paul Goldberger, "Mickey Mouse Teaches the Architects," *The New York Times Magazine*, October 22, 1972, Section 6, 94.

contemporary accounts describe explicitly the sleight-of-hand at work in Main Street's design: all the buildings were constructed at five-eighths scale, but upper stories are smaller in scale than those at ground level, utilizing the stage and set design technique of forced perspective to make the buildings appear taller than they actually are.³⁹¹ Disney's intention in implementing this reduced-scale design,³⁹² as was publicized at the time, was to make Main Street a plaything:

“It's not apparent at a casual glance,” [Disney] said, “but this street is only a scale model. We had every brick and shingle and gas lamp made five-eighths true size. This cost more, but it made the street a toy, and the imagination can play more freely with a toy. Besides, people like to think that their world is somehow more grown-up than Papa's was.”³⁹³

³⁹¹ Shortly after the park opened, Aubrey Menen reported on his visit there and his observations of Main Street:

At first glance, it all appeared to be an exact imitation. The architectural decorations were right, the windows perfect copies of the real thing. . . . It seemed all to be of the right size: the shops were open, and people were going in and out of them.

. . . .

. . . . I have trained my eye to look . . . at the proportions of the building, because it is by these that the architect makes his effect. . . .

I, therefore, studied the buildings in this strange main street with the same eye, and I immediately saw that the proportions were wrong. Everything on the first floor was as it should be, The doors were the right height for the people using them. But above them were windows that were too small; above them, again, were gables that were smaller still. The reduction in size as one's eye traveled upward was so beautifully done that it was almost imperceptible.

Menen, “Dazzled in Disneyland,” 70.

³⁹² “I asked who had thought of [the use of forced perspective]. I was told it was Disney.” Ibid.

³⁹³ Ira Wolfert, “Walt Disney's Magic Kingdom,” *Reader's Digest* (April 1960): 145-46. One twenty-first-century online source claims that Main Street's reduced scale and forced perspective design was necessary to create the intended view of Sleeping Beauty's castle: “If the original Disneyland architects had made the buildings a full two stories high, they would have looked incongruously tall compared to the castle in view at the end of the street.” Main Street, U.S.A., Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia (Redirected from Main Street), http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Street_USA.

One could argue as well that the smaller scale replicates the adult's experience of returning to the sites of childhood, which often appear smaller to adult eyes than they were in childhood memory, further reinforcing the sense of nostalgia older visitors were intended to feel when visiting Main Street, U.S.A. in the 1950s. Another observer's reaction was that the reduced scale and forced perspective gave Main Street the simultaneously real and unreal quality of a dream,³⁹⁴ while George Lipsitz notes that the illusion of height created by the forced perspective gives adults the perspective of a child while walking through Main Street.³⁹⁵ Thus, the result appears to have been to make Main Street both smaller and larger than life, or somehow simultaneously to have made Main Street a toy and its adult visitors children, by "shrinking" both.

John Hench, one of Disneyland's designers, has stated that Disneyland was designed to provide its visitors *reassurance*. Although a primary means through which he perceives Disneyland as giving this reassurance is with "safe" risks and adventures – resulting in the reassuring sense of having "survived" a danger or challenge³⁹⁶ – he also "points to the child

³⁹⁴ Menen, "Dazzled in Disneyland," 72. ("The effect was to give the street the reality of a dream – right, but wrong at the same time.")

³⁹⁵ Lipsitz, "The Making of Disneyland," 189.

³⁹⁶ John Hench, reflecting on his 50-year career with Disney, has stated, "Actually, what we're selling throughout the Park is reassurance. We offer adventures in which you survive a kind of personal challenge . . . We let your survival instincts triumph over adversity. A trip to Disneyland is an exercise in reassurance about oneself and one's ability to maybe even handle the real challenges of life."

Judith A. Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 97.

archetype in people and the park's ability to reach that."³⁹⁷ Karal Marling argues, in fact, that the entire physical environment of Disneyland is an "architecture of reassurance"; in Main Street in particular, she points to the reduced scale and to the meticulously coordinated colors – all pastels – of Main Street's buildings,³⁹⁸ as well as to the piped-in period music, as elements of this architecture of reassurance.³⁹⁹ She concludes that,

in marked distinction to Los Angeles in 1955, the buildings of Disneyland were meant to be seen at close hand by pedestrians, whose cars had been consigned to a distant parking lot, forgotten for the day behind a tall earthen wall. *Disneyland was pretty*. Blatant competition between store and store was banished. The scale of the place was *homelike*, as unlike the corporate skyscraper and the hulking mall as could be imagined. If the product being sold at Disneyland is not really shoes or soap or civic betterment but contentment and pleasure, there might be profit, too, in unmasking the faults of urban America – its dullness, tawdriness, confusion, its overbearing swagger. And substituting harmony, mild adventure, safety, and order – the order of art; the art of reassurance: the architecture of Disneyland.⁴⁰⁰

Indeed, in Disneyland's early years, architect Charles Moore suggested that it was, in fact, Los Angeles' town square, its success due in part to its giving "Californians a chance to respond

³⁹⁷ Mannheim, *Walt Disney and the Quest for Community*, 58. "Hench also states that the company has consulted 'a number of psychiatrists who've discovered that there's something beyond an amusement park there.'" Ibid.

³⁹⁸ I also learned that Walt and his art directors worked out a very precise pattern of more than two hundred specific color shades for just these store fronts along here, which are completely repainted once every two years. And during the years in between, and more often if scuffing occurs, the ground-level portions are repainted from a second complete color chart to match the faded upper portions.
Kevin Wallace, "Onward and Upward with the Arts: The Engineering of Ease," *The New Yorker*, (September 1963): 124.

³⁹⁹ Marling, *Designing Disney's Theme Parks*, 85; see also Mannheim, *Walt Disney and the Quest for Community*, 57.

⁴⁰⁰ Marling, *Designing Disney Theme Parks*, 85-86.

to a public environment, something Los Angeles, a city of suburban tracts and freeways, most emphatically does not have.”⁴⁰¹ Mannheim notes that Hench echoed this belief “when he said that Disneyland . . . attempted to create a missing sense of place in megalopolis. The key to creating this sense, according to Hench, was ‘plenty of diversity [in design], but there isn’t contradiction.’”⁴⁰² Marling describes how this lack of contradiction was achieved in Main Street: “Every part of Main Street – every hitching post and sign and awning, every molding – was of a piece, a complement to all the rest, part of a harmonious picture that admitted no jarring elements.”⁴⁰³

Whether these observers are correct in their belief that Main Street, U.S.A. served to assuage a mid-century hunger for a sense of “place,” Disneyland itself was a hugely successful in attracting visitors. At the same time, from the outset it had detractors as well as proponents. Critics condemned it for its artificiality and tranquilizing effect, for its calculating and cloying falseness, for its overriding commercialism,⁴⁰⁴ and for its ideological endorsement of American “monetary ambitions” to the exclusion of “spiritual aspiration, mental enrichment, or personal growth,” as evident through the presence of a railroad, an emporium, and a city hall, but the

⁴⁰¹ Goldberger, “Mickey Mouse Teaches the Architects,” 95. “In an uncharted sea of suburbia, Disney has created a place, indeed, a whole public world, full of sequential occurrences, of big and little drama, of hierarchies of importance and excitement, with opportunities to respond at the speed of rocketing bobsleds or of horsedrawn street cars.” Ibid.

⁴⁰² Mannheim, *Walt Disney and the Quest for Community*, 55.

⁴⁰³ Marling, *Designing Disney Theme Parks*, 81.

⁴⁰⁴ John Clarke, “Manner of Speaking: Foamrubbersville,” *The Saturday Review*, 48 (June 19, 1965): 20; Julian Halevy, “Disneyland and Las Vegas,” *The Nation* (June 7, 1958): 511.

absence of any church or school.⁴⁰⁵ In contrast, other observers acknowledged the pleasure of the play-acting which Disneyland made possible, particularly for adults,⁴⁰⁶ citing, without condemnation, the very appeal of this play as evidence of mid-century America's need for it and of Main Street's palliative effect: "Perhaps, then, the lesson of Disney's lands is that a sense of fantasy, and the chance to play-act, are what we really crave in our real urban environments."⁴⁰⁷ Paul Goldberger argues, in fact, the game is so obvious, its artifice as blatant as it is pleasurable, that it is underlaid with a trace of knowing, winking irony; he argues that the Polynesian rooms of Disney World's Contemporary Resort-Hotel don't convince visitors they're actually on a South Seas island but that they're not intended to; "[t]he juxtaposition of fake thatched roofs and clearly modern, air-conditioned rooms is an obvious put-on, *like Main Street with its tricks of scale*. But like Main Street it is such a skillful put on, and such a joyous one, that *we willingly play along with Disney's game and share in its irony*."⁴⁰⁸

Similarly, rather than condemning Main Street as being "packaged to sell," developer Mel Kaufman praised it precisely for being packaged so well. For of course, even as Disney chose the turn-of-the-century small town – a time and place which held a particularly potent resonance for

⁴⁰⁵ Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry*, 98-99.

⁴⁰⁶ As Disney predicted, from the outset, adult visitors to Disneyland have outnumbered children. "Most of the visitors are grownups. As the park statistics prove, adult guests outnumber children three and a half to one." Robert de Roos, "The Magic Worlds of Walt Disney," *National Geographic*, 124 (August 1963):194.

⁴⁰⁷ Goldberger, "Mickey Mouse Teaches the Architects," 94-95; see also Wallace, "Onward and Upward with the Arts," 104 (explicitly equating Disneyland's appeal to that of a Hollywood musical, which produces "the same atmosphere of ease, cheer, and immaculacy").

⁴⁰⁸ Goldberger, "Mickey Mouse Teaches the Architects," 98 (emphasis added).

him – to serve as visitors’ *psychological* transition from mid-century America to the park’s Never Never Land,⁴⁰⁹ Main Street’s *physical* function within the park is entirely commercial. Although the storefronts of the various establishments along Main Street appear to be distinct buildings, in fact the building interiors consist of large, common commercial spaces in which Disney products are sold. Although at times decorated with period touches – such as three-dimensional turn-of-the-century tableaux set up on “balconies” near the ceiling – this commercial space is entirely modern, arranged much like Disney stores now found in shopping malls throughout the country. Karling notes that while Main Street is actually “a strip mall all dressed up in a scintillating Victorian costume,”⁴¹⁰ this visually pleasing costume caused Kaufman to observe that “Main Street’s purpose is exactly the same as Korvettes in the Bronx . . . but it manages to make shopping wonderful and pleasant at the same time. I’m sure people buy more when they’re happy.”⁴¹¹

In any case, Main Street U.S.A., although some find it too artificial, too perfect, too controlled, and too manipulative to take up, is an embodiment of all that beguiles in the turn-of-the-century small town myth; in the words of architectural historian Richard Francaviglia, Main Street U.S.A. “creates the impression that all was right with the world in the small town at the turn

⁴⁰⁹ As has been noted by numerous observers, in Disneyland, the present doesn’t exist: “World of today vanishes in a unique park. Here there is no present – only nostalgic past, hopeful future, and the miracle of times that never were.” De Roos, “The Magic Worlds of Walt Disney,” 182. Disney built a high earth embankment around the park precisely because “I don’t want the public to see the real world they live in while they’re in the park. I want them to feel they are in another world.” Ibid., 193.

⁴¹⁰ Marling, *Designing Disney’s Theme Parks*, 79.

⁴¹¹ Goldberger, “Mickey Mouse Teaches the Architects,” 94-95.

of the century; it implies that commerce (and merchants) thrive along Main Street, and that society and a community are working together in harmony.”⁴¹² As Francaviglia notes, however, the Disney’s idealization of Main Street is essentially one of *immaturity*: “Main Street mirrors a pre-adolescent period free from the change and turmoil that characterizes much of life.”⁴¹³ Thus, Main Street not only reflects America’s “childhood self” but the nature of its appeal to adult visitors is an imaginary return to childhood themselves. Moreover, Main Street is a space devoted entirely to consumption, both visual consumption of its prettified, perfectly orchestrated environment (which after all, can be walked through and looked at but never lived in) and actual consumption of souvenirs and food. In addition, Main Street is a space of metaphorical indulgence as well: here one can have one’s cake and eat it too in terms of grabbing onto the best of the past. Disney places Main Street, U.S.A. as existing simultaneously in all the years between 1890 and 1910; Francaviglia points out that in offering visitors rides in both the horse-drawn streetcar (obsolete by 1900 or 1905) and the motorized omnibus (commonplace only after 1905), Disney created the only place on earth where “vehicles that had replaced their predecessors and those predecessors co-exist.”⁴¹⁴ This is a nostalgia that operates by giving visitors an “experience” of a turn-of-the-century small town environment that – despite the meticulous “authenticity” of that reproduction – is rendered blatantly artificial by the qualities that make it so attractive; it celebrates the past by being a delightful confection which telegraphs itself as a fantasy, albeit *precisely* that of the turn-of-the-century small town myth itself. In Main Street, U.S.A., Disney captured a communal

⁴¹² Francaviglia, *Main Street Revisited*, 156.

⁴¹³ *Ibid.*

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*

daydream of an idealized time and place, and then made it even *more* perfect; it is still positioned as America's common past, but instead of teaching lessons in selflessness, industry, and courage, as did *So Dear to My Heart*, Main Street turns that daydream into what even its proponents concede is a playground escape from the "real" world outside its borders.

Walt Disney: Pollyanna and Summer Magic

In the early 1960s, with *Pollyanna* (1960) and *Summer Magic* (1963), Disney returned to his beloved turn-of-the-century small town, albeit for two very different purposes. With *Pollyanna*, Disney comes full circle: Just as *So Dear to My Heart*'s representation of the turn-of-the-century small town was a major impetus in the ultimate construction of Disneyland's Main Street, U.S.A., Main Street, U.S.A. became the model for the small town presented in *Pollyanna*, painted as a place of play and consumption, and shot through with the late twentieth-century "needs" for pleasure and self-indulgence. With *Summer Magic*, however, the turn-of-the-century small town has become a sort of short-hand "Disney" signature, a superficial keying of the film to his audience's memories of and affection for *Pollyanna*. As *Pollyanna*'s star had moved from childhood to adolescence, however, so presumably had her audience, who the Disney studio apparently believed could no longer be fed a timeless children's tale but would want something out of "teensville." Thus, once the turn-of-the-century small town in *Summer Magic* is established as the film's setting, it has little role or presence in the film itself, Disney's characteristic devotion to period accuracy abandoned in favor of a "jazzy" tone and visuals designed to appeal to 1960s teenagers, most particularly in the film's cast of handsome young people, presented so as to appeal to modern tastes in physical beauty. Here, then, Disney's use of the turn-of-the-century small

town is a throwback to Warner Bros.' approach to the Doris Day films *On Moonlight Bay* and *By the Light of the Silvery Moon*.

In February 1959, when Disney acquired the screen rights to Porter's *Pollyanna* and *Pollyanna Grows Up*⁴¹⁵ with the intent of adapting the books for the screen in a live-action film, his subject matter was once again – like the many fairy tales he had made into animated films – part of America's cultural experience of childhood. Published in 1913 by New England writer Eleanor Porter, *Pollyanna* was a novel about an eleven-year-old orphan, Pollyanna Whittier, who comes to live with her stern, duty-bound Aunt Polly in the town of Beldingsville, Vermont. The book was an overnight success; there were fifteen reprintings in 1913 alone, and ultimately millions of copies were sold worldwide. Its immense popularity resulted in young girls' "Glad" clubs throughout the country and then abroad, once *Pollyanna* was translated into several foreign languages; a 1916 Broadway play starring Helen Hayes; a 1920 film starring Mary Pickford (then twenty-seven years old); and a 1915 Parker Brothers Parcheesi-style board game called "Pollyanna The Glad Game." Although the derogatory connotation of the name "Pollyanna" to refer to a foolishly or blindly optimistic was in wide use within a decade of the book's first publication,⁴¹⁶ the popularity of the fictional character Pollyanna remained strong throughout the first half of the twentieth century and beyond. After Porter's death in 1920, several other authors continued the series. All told,

⁴¹⁵ Paul Nathan, "Rights and Permissions," *Publishers Weekly*, February 16, 1959.

⁴¹⁶ The Mavens' Word of the Day, Words @ Random, <http://www.randomhouse.com/wotd/?date=19980227> (27 February 1998). Significantly, Porter invented the name "Pollyanna" for her book; thus, the name and its generic connotation came into existence almost simultaneously. One online reviewer of the Disney *Pollyanna* DVD notes that, until he viewed the DVD, he had not known the source of the generic term. Similarly, a thirty-something acquaintance to whom I was recently describing my research asked me if the term derived from the Disney film, of whose existence she was unaware until I told her about it.

fourteen Pollyanna books were published (in which Pollyanna grows up, marries, and has children), the last in 1951.⁴¹⁷ The Parker Brothers game was produced and sold until at least 1967, and the original book has never been out of print.⁴¹⁸

Like *So Dear to My Heart*, *Pollyanna* was a project for which Disney had a particular affection. The film's screenwriter and director, David Swift, reports that, "[u]ntil the final script was finished, [Disney] sat in on everything, and always had a concept of how the movie was going to be, the music, the photography, the casting, the look of it."⁴¹⁹ This was not simply a matter of Disney's investing his usual time and interest in a project, however. Swift notes that after he sent Disney the *Pollyanna* draft script, Disney told him that when he read it, "I got a little tear there."⁴²⁰

"*Pollyanna* was Walt's favorite film," David Swift said later. "Because watching it made him cry. Of course, he would cry at the drop of a chord. I remember I showed him the rough cut of *Pollyanna*, which ran two hours and twenty minutes, and I was surprised to see him crying, right there in the sweatbox. I hated it. But he had his handkerchief out and he was crying. I said, 'Walt, we've got to take twenty minutes out of this,' and he said, 'No, no, no, don't touch it!'"⁴²¹

⁴¹⁷ *Pollyanna* (1913; Eleanor Porter); *Pollyanna Grows Up* (1914; Eleanor Porter); *Pollyanna of the Orange Blossoms* (1924, Harriet Lummis Smith); *Pollyanna's Jewels* (1925, Harriet Lummis Smith); *Pollyanna's Debt of Honor* (1927, Harriet Lummis Smith); *Pollyanna's Western Adventure* (1929, Harriet Lummis Smith); *Pollyanna in Hollywood* (1931, Elizabeth Borton); *Pollyanna's Castle in Mexico* (1934, Elizabeth Borton); *Pollyanna's Door to Happiness* (1936, Elizabeth Borton); *Pollyanna's Golden Horse* (1939, Elizabeth Borton); *Pollyanna's Protégé* (1944, Margaret Piper Chalmers); *Pollyanna of Magic Valley* (1949 Virginia May Moffitt); *Pollyanna at Six Star Ranch* (1947, Virginia May Moffitt); *Pollyanna and the Secret Mission* (1951, Elizabeth Borton).

⁴¹⁸ In recent years, a number of Pollyanna dolls have been produced, including a Madame Alexander doll and dolls by Wendy Lawton, Robin Woods, and Julie Good-Krueger.

⁴¹⁹ Mosley, *Disney's World*, 256.

⁴²⁰ Ibid..

⁴²¹ Ibid., 260.

Not surprisingly, there were some similarities in *So Dear to My Heart* and *Pollyanna*, and in the way in which Disney marketed them. For one thing, the town of Harrington's proximity to and intimate connection with surrounding farmland and uncultivated countryside is just as evident in *Pollyanna* as Fulton Corners' had been in *So Dear to My Heart*. Indeed, Harrington's natural setting is made immediately evident. The film's credit sequence begins with a shot of young boys skinny-dipping in the muddy water below the railroad trestle. After a locomotive barrels by, the camera finds and follows a young boy who is rolling a hoop through the countryside, past a covered bridge, a picturesque mill, a herd of sheep, and eventually into Harrington itself, where he passes children playing in a grassy park, horses-and-buggies, and a turn-of-the-century automobile before – as the credits end – he sends his hoop crashing into a stack of chicken crates sitting on the railroad depot platform. Further, the studio's promotion of *Pollyanna* echoed that of *So Dear to My Heart* in its accounts of the period authenticity of the site of its location shooting, Santa Rosa, chosen after the film's associate producer and location crew

traveled the length of California searching for an area which physically resembled the eastern United States and had, still standing, spacious homes of the early 1900 era. It turned out that Santa Rosa looked like an eastern town and there were a number of homes which pre-dated 1912 and which could be set down anywhere on the northern Atlantic seaboard and look like they belonged.⁴²²

Publicity accounts of the film's costume design and set design and decoration likewise emphasize their period authenticity; extensive research went into the film's costumes, particularly in determining "what the small, eastern town, well-to-do would wear[,]” which designer Walter Plunkett and head of wardrobe Chuck Keehne claim differed from the clothes of wealthy city

⁴²² “Production Story,” *Pollyanna*, 7-8, Motion Picture Academy Library Collection.

dwellers of the same time period.⁴²³ Further, because “Disney insists on accuracy to the minutest detail,” the film’s set decorators spent days searching for the props called for in the art director’s designs, some of which had to be specially made for the movie and some of which were authentic antiques and one-of-a-kind items obtained in San Francisco and elsewhere. Significantly, however, in contrast to the pioneer-style simplicity of *So Dear to My Heart*, the result of the painstaking search for authenticity in *Pollyanna* is that “[t]he interior sets used in the filming of ‘Pollyanna,’ particularly with regards to [Aunt Polly’s] home, were the most opulent and expensive ever attempted in a Disney motion picture.”⁴²⁴

That difference lies at least in part in Harrington’s closer resemblance to Main Street, U.S.A. than to Fulton Corners. Indeed, if *So Dear to My Heart* was an impetus to Disney’s effort to physically recreate the experience of the turn-of-the-century small town in what ultimately became Main Street U.S.A., *Pollyanna* is his most dedicated effort to bring Main Street U.S.A. to the movie screen; *Pollyanna* is, in effect, Main Street U.S.A.’s cinematic twin. It is the film in which Disney presents the American small town of the early twentieth century most lovingly and with the greatest authenticity, and *Pollyanna*’s Harrington, unlike *So Dear*’s Fulton Corners, is presented in the full flower of its development, at the same moment in time as is purportedly captured and reproduced in Main Street U.S.A. Disney’s nostalgia for the past always contained within it an enthusiasm for the past’s incipient promise of “progress” – particularly technological progress – which, with a peculiarly nineteenth-century sensibility, Disney always viewed as the solution to all human ills. Thus, despite the harmonious serenity created and maintained with such

⁴²³ Ibid., 15-16.

⁴²⁴ Ibid., 14-15.

craftsmanship in Disneyland's Main Street U.S.A., the streetscape in fact quite consciously represents not a static moment in American history but a time of change:

Here is America from 1890 to 1910, at the crossroads of an era. Here the gas lamp is giving way to the electric lamp, and a newcomer, the sputtering "horseless carriage," has challenged Old Dobbin for the streetcar right-of-way. America was in transition; the discoveries of the late 19th Century were changing our way of life.⁴²⁵

Disney's *Pollyanna* recreates this precise moment in the fictional town of Harrington, setting the film's action during the 1912-13 period at which Eleanor Porter's children's book was published. The studio's promotional materials locate Harrington on the East Coast, as was the case in Porter's novel,⁴²⁶ but in an interview included in the 2-disc DVD set of *Pollyanna*, Swift indicates that the town portrayed in the film had been shifted from Porter's Vermont to the Midwest and thereby infused with Swift's (and Disney's) affection for the "flyover" states of mid-America, where both men grew up. Whether intended to be a New England or Midwestern town, however, Harrington is a much larger and older community than Fulton Corners, with an implied geography of multiple, paved streets through which Pollyanna is chauffeured in a gleaming early-twentieth-century automobile. Its exteriors filmed on location in Santa Rosa, California, much of the physical structure of Harrington, in fact, is implied, existing only as that which we know to be just offscreen. On screen, it consists of images of wide streets and leafy trees, a footbridge, a grassy park (and bandstand), the exteriors of a church and orphanage, and a railroad depot, but only glimpses of Victorian homes as Pollyanna passes through town, and a town square ringed

⁴²⁵ *Disneyland: The First Thirty Years*, 16.

⁴²⁶ "'Pollyanna' is a simple story of an American orphan girl, raised by her missionary parents in the British West Indies, who comes to live with her aunt in the small, east coast U.S. town of Harrington in the year 1912." Production Story, "Pollyanna," 2.

with barely perceptible local establishments shown in long shot, such as a barbershop, clothing store (both shown on screen), and an ice cream parlor, which is only referred to in dialogue. While Aunt Polly's mansion is shown as a magnificent three-story Victorian⁴²⁷ positioned at the end of a long, shady drive, whose grounds include such idyllic touches as a gazebo and a free-standing bench swing, there is, in fact, no comparable long or establishing shot of Harrington's Main Street; no moment in which the viewer is given the same view of Harrington's mercantile district as a Disneyland's visitors receive of Main Street U.S.A. when they first enter the park.

Even so, Harrington emerges as a distinct character in a way it had not been in Porter's book. In the Disney film, the town's name is changed from Beldingsville, as it was called in Porter's book, to Harrington. According to Swift's DVD interview, this change was made to emphasize the relationship between Pollyanna's aunt, Polly Harrington, and the town her forefathers had founded and which she, as heir to that founding dynasty, still controls. A central narrative arc in the film is the town's achieving independence from Aunt Polly's dominance, a storyline that did not exist in Porter's book and was made up whole cloth for the Disney film. Thus, the studio's Production Story describes the narrative arc of the story as the transformation of Harrington, the small town: "In the end, a town that has been dominated by one woman, Pollyanna's aunt Polly Harrington, begins to think and act for itself, begins to *take on the mantle of community* rather than one woman's private preserve."⁴²⁸ When Disney broadcast the film in December 1963 on *The Wonderful World of Color*, this characterization of the town of Harrington

⁴²⁷ In fact, as is recounted on *Pollyanna: The Making of a Masterpiece*, a short documentary included on the *Pollyanna* DVD, the Santa Rosa home used for the exterior shots of Aunt Polly's home had only two stories; the third story was a matte painting.

⁴²⁸ "Production Story," *Pollyanna*, 2.

was made even more explicit. The film was broadcast over three successive Sundays. At the conclusion of Part 1, Disney states, “Well, as you can see, Pollyanna has brought a new and different philosophy to the people of Harrington. Now, it’s plain that somebody’s going to have to change, and it isn’t likely to be Pollyanna. On the other hand, Aunt Polly owns Harrington, and she’s against any changes around the town.” By the time Disney introduces Part 3, he can confidently tell the audience, “Now of course you know by now that this is more than the story of Pollyanna Whittier. It’s also the story of the town of Harrington and the people who live there. Around the turn of the century, towns like Harrington were fairly common – communities founded by, built by, and controlled by a single family. Nowadays, we don’t see that too often, probably because progress just won’t stand for it. But in the case of Harrington, there was another reason, and that was Pollyanna.” Thus, the turn-of-the-century small town, although crippled by despotism at the beginning of the film, has been healed and transformed into its mythic ideal by the end of the film, so that now community, neighborliness, and joy govern the day.

Upon its release, reviewers praised the film’s period authenticity (“[Disney] has taken time to mount a period production that, from antimacassars to zinnias, is approximately perfect”⁴²⁹; “David Swift . . . has . . . surely and unerringly re-created a period. Through Russell Harlan’s camera his age of innocence sparkles like the prisms in the parlor of Mr. Pendergast, the meanest man in town, after Pollyanna has let the sunlight in.”⁴³⁰) and lavish production values (“Rich and lavish in every aspect – cast, technical production, settings, color, costume and script . . . this big

⁴²⁹ *Time Magazine*, May 9, 1960.

⁴³⁰ Philip K. Scheuer, “Disney ‘Pollyanna’ Re-creates an Era,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 28, 1960.

and plush Walt Disney production brings to the screen, faithful in every detail as is the Disney habit, the story that caught the imagination of an earlier and more naive America”⁴³¹). It was heralded as well as for its broad-based nostalgic appeal; characterizing *Pollyanna* as a “warm and friendly and memorable celluloid crosscut of Americana – one of Disney’s finest films in years,” the *Hollywood Citizen-News* praised it as “glowing with honest human values Grandma will find nostalgia in bushels; small fry will learn how grandma lived at the Turn of the Century, when the ‘motorized horse’ was coming into its own.”⁴³² Similarly, the *Los Angeles Examiner* praised the film as good-hearted family fare and a healthy update of Porter’s novel for mid-century audiences:

Just as its success flabbergasted the reading world in 1912, ‘Pollyanna’ emerges as a downright daring movie in 1960! Audaciously, and reckless of consequence, it dares to be a clean motion picture, fit film fare for the entire family and filled to the brim . . . with nothing but fun, laughter, and wholesome entertainment. . . . [But] this “Pollyanna” is . . . specifically tailored . . . to modern measurements. . . . [Disney’s film] emphasize[s] . . . the story’s inherent humor, spice it with wit, and counterbalance[s] cloying sweetness with pungent scenes and quips. Thus, ‘Pollyanna’ here is no saintly do-gooder, but a healthy, normal, imaginative elf of a child with the natural shortcomings of any child of her years. And the story thereby takes on the added dimension of honesty.⁴³³

Other reviewers, however, panned the film:

With his infallible instinct for what will fill the public’s sweet tooth, Walt Disney has taken *Pollyanna* off the back shelf and . . . photographed the little horror in throbbing colors, bloated it with big names . . . and generally calculated its gasps and sniffles, homilies and heehaws with . . . shrewdness . . . [to produce] a Niagara of drivel and a masterpiece of smarm. . . .⁴³⁴

⁴³¹ “Pollyanna,” *Motion Picture Herald*, April 9, 1960.

⁴³² Lowell E. Redelings, “The Hollywood Scene,” *Hollywood Citizen-News*, July 28, 1960.

⁴³³ Kay Proctor, “‘Pollyanna’ Will Flip You,” *Los Angeles Examiner*, July 28, 1960.

⁴³⁴ *Time Magazine*, May 9, 1960.

Nonetheless, the film was a box office success, particularly with young girls who made Mills an instant star and eagerly acquired whatever *Pollyanna* merchandise they could persuade their parents to buy them. As one of Disney's major productions, *Pollyanna* had been introduced with an extensive promotional campaign, including numerous tie-ins. According to the film's pressbook, Buena Vista's pre-release campaign for *Pollyanna* consisted of

- ★ A series of special invitational performances for leading opinion molders in over 40 key communication centers across the nation.⁴³⁵
- ★ Feature end-plugs throughout the Summer on "Walt Disney Presents," presented over the ABC-TV network to 160 U.S. Cities, reaching in excess of 32,000,000 viewers.
- ★ Full-page, four-color ads in LIFE and LOOK, the great "Family-Audience" magazines.
- ★ Coast-to-coast Radio and Television Campaigns; show-selling commercials and entertainment clips.

All creating "Go-To-See" Momentum on a national scale – POINTING TOWARD YOUR ENGAGEMENT!

The film's merchandising tie-ins consisted of a Little Golden Book, a Dell Movie Classic comic book (with the tag line, "An orphan's 'glad game' changes a whole town's destiny"),⁴³⁶ several musical recordings,⁴³⁷ a *Pollyanna* coloring book, a Golden Funtime Punchout Paper-Doll Book, a

⁴³⁵ Following each such invitational performance, a large display ad was published in the relevant community's newspaper: "Months in advance of the national release of 'Pollyanna,' the ad above caught the public eye in the 40 principal cities in which special invitational performances were held. The ad appeared in 95 major newspapers with a combined total circulation that reaches half the population of the United States." Pressbook, *Pollyanna*, 11, USC- CNTV Library Pressbook Collection.

⁴³⁶ In addition, a *Pollyanna* Sunday color comic series presented by King Features Syndicate ran from July 3 through September 25, 1960 and was published in 55 principal city newspapers, reaching more than 40,000,000 readers, according to the film's pressbook. *Ibid.*, 28.

⁴³⁷ One Golden Record 78 RPM recording by Nathalie Foss and the Jimmy Carroll Orchestra contained "The *Pollyanna* Song" and "American the Beautiful"; a 33 1/3 RMP LP was entitled "The Story of *Pollyanna*" and was described as being recorded from the original motion picture sound track; and a 45 RPM record entitled "*Pollyanna* Songs" contained "[a] selection of

Walt Disney's Pollyanna doll by Uneda, and a new hardcover edition of Porter's novel, with caricatures of the film's major players on the back of the dust cover. An additional component of the film's merchandising consisted of what the pressbook calls "a multi-million dollar back-to-school program" of "co-ordinated Pollyanna fashions" for young girls being offered by eleven children's wear manufacturers. While the extensive merchandising associated with *Pollyanna* might appear at first glance to be somewhat at odds with the idealized "simpler" time the film represents, in fact any such contradiction is largely illusory. Indeed, one aspect of small town life highlighted repeatedly in *Pollyanna* is *consumption*. Pollyanna, the orphaned daughter of missionary parents, is now ward of the town's despotic matriarch. Although admonished that it is bad taste to speak of it, Pollyanna is delighted to have become so rich; in a kiss-ass scene later echoed in the film *Pretty Woman*, store clerks flutter around Aunt Polly as she buys Pollyanna a new wardrobe which, in boxes piled several feet high, takes three salesmen to carry. Also running through the film is the motif of consumption in the literal sense: again and again, Pollyanna is shown eating or drinking.

Further, from the outset, a key aspect of Disney's turn-of-the-century small town in *Pollyanna* is its focus on children. Not only is the film's very first image that of boys skinny-dipping in the river below the railroad trestle, but the character we follow into town is a boy rolling a hoop, who passes two little girls with their doll carriages and another standing beside a disabled automobile (while the adult repairing the automobile lies beneath it, out of sight); and once the boy arrives in town, he passes more children playing in the town square. Certainly, this emphasis on children is to be expected in a Disney film; its effect, however, as is particularly evident in this

happy tunes that have captured the full richness of the turn-of-the-century gaiety." Ibid., 29.

opening credits sequence, is to infuse the film's turn-of-the-century, small-town setting with a sense of *play*. In fact, play and recreation appear repeatedly throughout the film. Pollyanna is twice shown walking through town past groups of children playing; she and Jimmie Bean (the boy with the hoop) go fishing and climb trees; her return home from the town bazaar is a hayride; in more than one scene, she strings decorative prisms across windows to "paint rainbows" on the opposite wall; she enlivens the chore of delivering Ladies' Aid charity baskets by teaching her companion songs.

The dual motifs of play and consumption are brought together and given their fullest expression in the town bazaar, at which townspeople play games, dance, and eat. Arriving late to the bazaar and scheduled to participate in a patriotic tableau, Pollyanna becomes a figure of frustrated gratification as she samples all the bazaar's goodies – watermelon, corn on the cob, a gigantic slice of cake – but is repeatedly pulled toward the stage before she can finish them. At the same time, while playing a game of chance, she wins her very first doll. The bazaar sequence narratively serves as the town's emancipation from Aunt Polly's tyranny and its achievement of community, and the bazaar portrays that community as an experience of pleasure, consumption, and play. A similar emphasis appears in studio publicity, which describes the production of the bazaar sequence in some detail:

The single most expensive scene filmed for "Pollyanna" was the night bazaar . . . The entire cast, with the exception of Miss Wyman, was included in the scene. Some 250 extras, an old-fashioned summer park-concert band, 24 dancers and more than 30 children were used in the segment.

Thirty-two booths, selling everything from corn on the cob to a prize bull, plus the bandstand and dance floor covered the two-acre park. Literally hundreds of gaily colored Japanese lanterns, two-score bicycles decorated with red-white-and-blue crepe paper, one truck load of watermelons, a half a truck full of cantaloupes, two fifty-gallon vats of hot water with steaming yellow corn cooking, two-dozen cakes, 40 pies, ice cream cones, hundreds of balloons, booths for

contests of strength and skill and all of the other activities which go to make up an old-fashioned, small town bazaar were included in the set.

. . . .

Total cost of the bazaar segment, including stars, extras and the physical properties used was in excess of \$50,000, and the result was one of the most colorful scenes ever put on a motion picture screen. When the shooting was over, the cast and crew were invited to take the watermelons and cantaloupes home for their families – as a bonus for a well-done night’s work.⁴³⁸

Thus, ultimately *Pollyanna*, like Main Street U.S.A., recasts of the turn-of-the-century small town as a site of play and consumption. It is also something simultaneously unavailable and available. It is a “better” place than any “real life” community of 1960, but not a place totally out of reach, even if one could no longer live there. Rather, one could visit it by coming to Anaheim and strolling down Disneyland’s Main Street U.S.A., where Harrington’s happy, harmonized community of pleasure and consumption exists in the form of Main Street’s visually harmonized buildings, town square, trolley car, and lamp posts, and in its extensive retail space, abundantly full of merchandise replicating Disney’s long-familiar characters. Disneyland’s visitors literally enter and leave Disneyland via Main Street’s railroad depot – passing under it to enter Main Street’s main “square” (actually circular) – just as the action in *Pollyanna* begins and ends with Pollyanna’s arrival in and (temporary) departure from Harrington by train. Among Main Street’s store fronts are an ice cream parlor and a candy store; tucked into picturesque corners are the Carnation Café and the Corner Café (both situated near the end of Main Street that opens into the park’s hub), at which Disneyland visitors can partake of goodies comparable to the cake and succulent watermelon of the Harrington town bazaar; visitors may take rides in the Model T and in the horse-drawn trolley and fire engine, replicating Pollyanna’s bedazzled ride from the depot to Aunt

⁴³⁸ “Production Story,” *Pollyanna*, 13-14.

Polly's house and horse-drawn hayride home from the bazaar. More broadly, Main Street, U.S.A. is the visitor's entry into a place entirely devoted to pleasure and consumption, and to an environment, like *Pollyanna*'s Harrington at the conclusion of the film, from which all threatening, unpleasant aspects of its imaginary "life"⁴³⁹ have been banished, and all that is left is the pretty, the fun, the safe, the delicious, the harmonized, the delightful, the picturesque.

With *Summer Magic* (1963), released just three years after *Pollyanna*, however, Disney does not so much attempt to create a fantasy turn-of-the-century small town as to set it up as a superficial "hook" on which to hang an otherwise modern-day concoction of elements designed to appeal to a teen-aged audience that had grown up watching Disney's television programs. Certainly, in several respects, *Summer Magic* seems designed to replicate the appeal of *Pollyanna*. Like *Pollyanna*, *Summer Magic* is based on a children's book published near the turn of the century: *Mother Carey's Chickens* (1911) by Kate Douglas Wiggin, best known for *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* (1903). As was true in *Pollyanna*, the story is set in the 1910s, and most of the film's action takes place in a small New England town. And just as in *Pollyanna*, the film's central character is a young girl played by Hayley Mills. In mood and style of presentation, and particularly in the manner in which it was sold to American audiences, however, *Summer Magic* is very different from *Pollyanna*, and its turn-of-the-century small town, rather than a character lovingly portrayed, serves primarily as a sort of familiar, short-hand grounding for the totally new enterprise of wooing the teenager.

In the three years since the release of *Pollyanna*, in fact, Mills had become a teenager – the

⁴³⁹ As a visitor enters the park, a plaque on the depot overpass reads, "Here You Leave Today and Enter the World of Yesterday, Tomorrow and Fantasy."

most popular teenager in the world, according to a lengthy *National Geographic* article on Disneyland published during the filming of *Summer Magic*⁴⁴⁰ – with the result that *Summer Magic* itself was geared almost entirely to appeal to that demographic. In its execution, *Summer Magic* actually comes across as a sort of hodge-podge of “nostalgic,” “modern,” and “Disney” elements: In addition to the former Pollyanna, the cast includes Eddie Hodges, Winthrop from the original Broadway production of *The Music Man*, and Burl Ives, Uncle Hiram from *So Dear to My Heart*, as well as Dorothy McGuire, who had played mothers in Disney’s pioneer story, *Old Yeller* (1957) and early nineteenth-century adventure, *Swiss Family Robinson* (1960). The screenplay was written by Sally Benson, author of the autobiographical Kensington Stories upon which MGM’s *Meet Me in St. Louis* was based. At the same time, the cast also includes Deborah Walley, who had recently starred as Gidget in *Gidget Goes Hawaiian* (1961), and Jimmy Mathers, younger brother of *Leave It To Beaver*’s Jerry Mathers, whose physical resemblance to his older brother is unmistakable. Moreover, one of the film’s musical numbers, “The Ugly Bug’s Ball,” is accompanied by close-ups of various insects. Similarly, shots of the family gathered on the large front porch on their first evening in their new rural home are intercut with shots of rabbits and other wild life presumably populating the surrounding countryside; in both instances, these “nature” shots are taken straight from Disney’s *True-Life Adventure* documentary tradition.

The pressbook for *Summer Magic* reveals a primary emphasis on Hayley Mills, but rather than a charming, delightful child, she is now presented as a romantic lead. Moreover, the film’s period setting is downplayed to the point that it virtually disappears; thus, Mills is positioned as a *contemporary* leading lady, presumably of the type to appeal to teenaged audiences. Multiple

⁴⁴⁰ De Roos, “The Magic Worlds of Walt Disney,” 161.

posters and display pieces have the tagline, “That Wonderful Hayley! A’Flitterin’ in a Romantic Whirl of Her Own!” In the center of such posters is an image of Mills – in contemporary costuming – under an umbrella with Peter Brown, her romantic interest in the film. Running down the right-hand side of the poster are four small line drawings, only one of which – a sketch of a turn-of-the-century automobile – gives any indication of the film’s period setting. Of the four television commercials offered to exhibitors, three focus primarily on Mills and include romantic scenes of Mills with Brown; one has the explicit theme of “Hayley’s got a boyfriend!” and consists of “Hayley, Debby, Peter Brown and Jim Stacey in boy-and-girl sequences. Set off by gags and music.”⁴⁴¹ In the pressbook’s prepared newspaper stories, again Mills dominates, with such headlines as “Interest in Hayley Mills Continues at Record Pace,” “What is Hayley Like? A Few Who Met Her Speak Up,” “Hayley Mills Has Own Ideas on Dating,” and “Hayley Mills of the Spindly Days Grows into Dream of Face, Figure.” Ives is also the subject of several of these articles, his presentation often slanted to emphasize his appeal to teenagers, such as in an article entitled, “Burl Ives, Star of ‘Summer Magic’ Knows Magic of Teen-age Living.”⁴⁴²

In addition, although the studio provides a line drawing for use in a coloring contest for “youngster appeal,” and tie-ins include a Gold Key comic book and a heart-shaped photo locket necklace (complete with a photo of Mills inside) that might have appealed to pre-teens more than teenagers, the pressbook includes five full pages of music-related tie-ins which seem designed to

⁴⁴¹ Pressbook, *Summer Magic*, 3, USC-CNTV Library Pressbook Collection.

⁴⁴² This prepared article begins, “Burl Ives, star of Walt Disney’s songful feature motion picture, ‘Summer Magic,’ owes much of his burgeoning success with the teen-agers as a recording artist to his visits in Nashville, capital of country music.” It goes on to describe Ives’ “hit parade albums” (“Funny Way of Laughin’” and “The Versatile Burl Ives”) as being “born at Nashville.” *Ibid.*, 9.

appeal to teenagers.⁴⁴³ The Production Story also emphasizes the appeal of the film’s music for teenagers: “Seven songs rendered by some of the most popular singers current, plus a light-hearted score, are designed to make “Summer Magic” top entertainment for the summer scene. . . . Hayley Mills, Burl Ives and Eddie Hodges, all great with the teen-agers as recording artists, carry the main singing load. . . .”⁴⁴⁴ Only one music-related page of the pressbook deals with something other than recordings; this page, containing a cartoon-like drawing of an upright piano and promoting Aeolian Music Rolls releases of *Summer Music* songs, reads, “Look What’s Back! Player Pianos! And Look What You Can Play on Them – All the Songs from ‘Summer Magic’!!!” Also promoted on this page is an LP record album of piano-player renditions of *Summer Magic*’s songs, the sole tie-in that might be designed to appeal to older audiences.⁴⁴⁵

In like fashion, the studio’s “Production Story” of *Summer Magic*, describing the film as a “full-fledged Technicolor feature based on the loveable ragtime era” that “is as hilarious as it is musical and may prove to be the most heartwarming of all Disney pictures,”⁴⁴⁶ touts the film as family entertainment but promotes its appeal to teenagers as well:

[*Summer Magic*] is also for the teen-agers, with Hayley Mills, Deborah Walley, Peter Brown, Eddie Hodges and Mr. Ives, who lately has been one of the hottest items in the teen-agers’ recording requirements along with Miss Mills and

⁴⁴³ The pressbook promotes three Buena Vista recordings – a 33 1/3 LP soundtrack album and two 45 records, one featuring Mills and Hodges and the other, Ives alone – all presented with the banner, “Hayley’s a Hit and Burl’s the Most in Teensville, U.S.A.!” Ibid., 29. In addition, Alcoa Wrap sponsored a special promotion of a \$.35 45 RPM record, featuring Burl Ives and Hayley Mills singing several songs from the film. Ibid., 30-31.

⁴⁴⁴ “Production Story,” *Summer Magic*, 13-14.

⁴⁴⁵ Pressbook, *Summer Magic*, 32.

⁴⁴⁶ “Production Story,” *Summer Magic*, 1.

Mr. Hodges.

Miss Mills, now 17 and growing more beautiful by the day, happens to be the most fascinating teen-ager abroad, whether you are speaking of the United States, Europe, Australia or the Orient. And Ives, besides being a singles artist of no mean repute with all ages, has been universally cited as the greatest ballad singer of all time.⁴⁴⁷

Mills is described as being “the subject of more fan mail than any other motion picture star in the world” and “probably the most renowned teen-age girl in the world,” whose *The Parent Trap* (1961) “stands as the second biggest boxoffice attraction in [Disney] studio history” and who has been named “Number One Star of Tomorrow following a poll among U.S. and Canadian exhibitors. . . .”⁴⁴⁸

Other than in the pressbook’s prepared review,⁴⁴⁹ and one article about the Stutz Bearcat roadster driven by Brown’s character, Mills’ love interest,⁴⁵⁰ the pressbook’s prepared newspaper articles make virtually no reference to the film’s time period or to its small-town setting, other than

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid., 1-2.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid., 2-3. Similarly, Mills’ co-star Walley is described as “easily one of the most exciting young personalities to hit the screen in recent years” who “flashed into the nation’s consciousness with her superb title role in ‘Gidget Goes Hawaiian’ for Columbia.” Hodges’ name is one

Broadway and the teenagers, both, will certainly remember, for Eddie’s 405 performances in the smash musical, “The Music Man,” in New York, and for his several single records which have stamped him a top recording artist of the day. . .

. Eddie is well known for his records particularly, “Girls, Girls, Girls,” for his Broadway role in “The Music Man,” and for pictures like “A Hole in the Head” and “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.”

Ibid., 6-7.

⁴⁴⁹ “[*Summer Magic*] is musical nostalgia personified, set in the wonderful ragtime era of around 1911” ‘Summer Magic’ is Disney Magic,” Pressbook, *Summer Magic*, 8.

⁴⁵⁰ “Red Bearcat Roars with Big Power In Walt Disney’s ‘Summer Magic,’” Ibid., 5.

references to “ragtime.”⁴⁵¹ Similarly, suggestions for exhibitor promotions focus almost entirely on the film’s title and release date – summer – and have little, if anything, to do with the film’s period setting; for example, exhibitors are advised to mount promotions tied to beachwear, ice cream, vacation resorts, barbeque and backyard equipment for sale in houseware and department stores, air conditioning suppliers, and airlines, steamship lines and travel bureaus (“Add your ‘Summer Magic’ poster to window displays of brilliant travel posters.”)⁴⁵²

Unsurprisingly, given the almost exclusive emphasis in this publicity on Mills as the film’s star attraction, in the film itself, Mills’ visual presentation is much more that of a 1960s teenager than that of a young lady of the 1910s. In one scene, Mills is shown wearing an anachronistic pair of blue jeans, and even her dresses are cut along modern lines – with the natural waistline and gathered skirt in vogue in the early 1960s – as are her high-heeled pumps in the film’s final party scene. Thus, here Disney employs the same strategy that Warner Bros. had used in the early 1950s with Doris Day in *On Moonlight Bay* and *By the Light of the Silvery Moon*, and for the same reason: The film’s romantic female lead is costumed in a manner to appeal to present-day notions of female beauty rather than in the potentially alienating styles of the past. Further, the resemblance of the two male leads – James Stacey as Waller’s love interest and Brown as Mills’ – to contemporary pop stars such as Bobby Darrin gives the film’s final images of the couples dancing the look of an early 1960s “teen pic” in which Gidget or Annette would not be out of place.

⁴⁵¹ E.g., “Songs and story are based on the ragtime era, circa 1910, when no one had heard of war and totalitarianism, and getting up in time for work was the most serious piece of business at hand.” “Seven Songs, Bright Score Make Disney’s ‘Summer Magic’ Delight,” *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴⁵² *Ibid.*, 10-11.

Although characters refer disparagingly to Beulah as a “hick” town, and occasional period touches appear – such as the family’s viewing pictures on a stereograph and a couple of period automobiles – the film draws little attention to its turn-of-the-century small-town setting. As was the case with *So Dear to My Heart*, more of the film’s action takes place in the characters’ home – the “big yellow house” out in the country – than in the small town (here, Beulah, Maine) itself. Like *So Dear to My Heart* and unlike *Pollyanna*, *Summer Magic*’s cast is limited, albeit to two families rather than the single family in *So Dear to My Heart*. On the family’s first trip into town, Jimmy Mathers’ character has an encounter with a group of boys and a barber, but otherwise, the Carey family’s sole interactions are with Burl Ives as Osh Popham, his wife, and his two children; the sole interior set in the town is Osh’s hardware store/post office. The use of nature shots calls to mind not only Disney’s nature films of the last decade but his weekly television program, the venue where most viewers were likely to have seen them. In contrast to the folk songs he sang in *So Dear to My Heart*, Ives sings lively new songs with a decidedly contemporary tone, such as “The Ugly Bug Ball,” which he sings to Mathers while, as has been noted, nature shots of various insects appear on the screen; both Mathers and the nature shots call television to mind.

Most prominent in the critical response to the film is recognition of its appropriateness as family fare, even among those who find the film innocuous and slight; more particular is the acknowledgment of Disney’s flare for making even such lightweight entertainment attractive and palatable to the family audience. Thus, *The Los Angeles Times* refers to *Summer Magic* as “a pleasant little tale” that “school vacationers” and their parents will find “lives up to its name

admirably”⁴⁵³; while the plot is “slim,” Disney has “worked sentimentality and humor into a nice blend.”⁴⁵⁴ For some reviewers, the Disneyesque qualities of *Summer Magic* were its strengths; these were qualities that had little if anything to do with the film’s period or small town setting but that reflect the type of entertainment that had come to be associated with the Disney name. Thus *Summer Magic* won praise for, in effect, being the result of the Disney studio’s consistent and reliable “quality control,” whereby the known quantity of “the Disney film” could be counted on to provide a certain type of entertainment and no other:

“Summer Magic” follows the Walt Disney trend in many ways. It’s for the entire family. . . . It’s funny and down to earth and it’s a Disney picture which is bound to make it a hit. But even more there’s no sex or filth to mar fine acting performances which it seems many producers of pictures today feel is a necessity and Disney proves is a fallacy.⁴⁵⁵

At the same time, other critics found these very qualities to be the film’s downfall:

Remember the old children’s story called “Mother Carey’s Chickens” - the one about the nice, impoverished widow and her irrepressible brood, who find hard times and happiness in a quaint rural community.

You might think such a plot would seem cliché-ridden in 1963 – and you would certainly be right. Trust Walt Disney, just the same, to deck out the old war horse with color, animals, songs and Hayley Mills, and book it into neighborhood theaters all over town where it landed yesterday with only the mildest of thuds.⁴⁵⁶

Ultimately, however, whether praising or denigrating *Summer Magic* for its family-safe wholesomeness, reviewers highlighted a disparity between the film as likely to be received and

⁴⁵³ John L. Scott, “‘Summer Magic’ Fine Family Screen Fare,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 16, 1963.

⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁵ Frank Lieberman, “‘Summer Magic’ Another Disney Hit,” *Citizen News*, September 16, 1963.

⁴⁵⁶ Eugene Archer, “Summer Magic,” *New York Times*, August 22, 1963.

Disney's marketing campaign for the film; as *Boxoffice* noted, "today's teenage audiences may find this screen version of Kate Douglas Wiggin's [sic] book "Mother Carey's Chickens," of the early 1900s somewhat saccharine and lacking in excitement, although older patrons will enjoy its period charm and nostalgic appeal. . . ."⁴⁵⁷

If indeed *Summer Magic* failed in its goal of attracting a teenage audience, that failure could be attributable to the limited attraction of the studio's strategy to teenagers, or perhaps to the limited effectiveness of that strategy in general if not pursued consistently throughout a film. For once again we see at least lip service being paid to the Disney strategy of clothing the new – here, the grown-up, leading lady Hayley Mills – in the reassuring, picturesque old; it is indisputable that *Summer Magic* is another example of Disney's use of the turn-of-the-century small town for a distinct commercial purpose – here, capitalizing on Mills' maturation to try to develop a teenage audience, or perhaps simply to hold onto Mills' fan base as it moved into the teenaged years. In any event, the result is a curiously lackluster evocation of the past – possibly by design, stemming from the belief that the past has little appeal to teenagers, or possibly the result of a sort of benign neglect, reflecting Disney's personal loss of interest in film-making and increasing absorption in Disneyland and the planning of Disney World in the years leading up to his death in 1966. As has been noted, *Summer Magic* is an odd mix of disparate Disney elements, the tried-and-true elements of the period small-town setting and the early-twentieth-century children's book source called upon almost by rote and mixed together with inflections of TV and the 1960s teenager, in what appears today to be a curiously clumsy attempt to attract the film's ostensible target audience. Certainly, this deliberate mixing of the old and the new, this neither-fish-nor-fowl approach to

⁴⁵⁷ "Summer Magic," *BoxOffice*, July 1, 1963.

America's past, had worked for Warner Bros., for instance, in its early 1950s Doris Day films *On Moonlight Bay* and *By the Light of the Silvery Moon*, but Warners had no tradition, as Disney did, of offering up this setting as a golden site of innocent pleasure and familial memory (both of the "real" past and of the experience of its idealized re-creation) to conflict with the distinctly modern cast of Day's presence in those films. This Disney legacy, however, seems entirely at odds with the "teensville" market to which the studio directed its promotion of the film; moreover, it was a legacy so well-established by 1963 that it dictated critics' reading of the film and supplied, in fact, the elements for which the film was praised by those who recommended it to audiences as "decidedly Disney" family fare. Thus, in part because of the incongruities inherent in the project itself and in part because of its diffuse, something-for-everyone execution, *Summer Magic* seems a curious mis-step or miscalculation when compared to Disney's sure-handed commercial uses of his beloved turn-of-the-century small town in *So Dear to My Heart*, *Pollyanna*, and Disneyland's Main Street, U.S.A. In any event, *Summer Magic*'s presentation of the turn-of-the-century small town, like that of *Excuse My Dust* or the Day vehicles, is largely of 1960s America in disguise – in this particular case, that disguise taking the incongruous form of a teenaged hangout.

Rod Serling and The Twilight Zone: "A Stop at Willoughby" and Other Stories

When asked by an interviewer late in his life to identify a time period in which he would have liked to live, Serling replied, "Victorian times. Small town. Bandstands. Summer. That kind of thing. Without disease. I think that's what I would crave, a simpler form of existence."⁴⁵⁸

⁴⁵⁸ Peter Wolfe, *In the Zone: The Twilight World of Rod Serling* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1997), 40.

In his *Twilight Zone* episodes that act out this fantasy, Serling is a practitioner of the second, time-travel strain of early 1960s “looking back” at the turn-of-the-century small town; in this, he exhibits Pickering’s concept of an imaginary nostalgia for a time never experienced, or what Davis identifies as the “secondary experience” of near-nostalgia for a time period whose frequent representation in popular culture (e.g., music and movies) has created the illusion of experience.

That Serling imagines a return to a time that predates his own lifetime is a key distinction between his nostalgia and Disney’s for the pre-industrial small town. It is one that explains, perhaps, both his – and his characters’ – idealization of that time and the futility of their hope of experiencing it; in some instances in Serling’s work, the idealizing effect of nostalgia is itself exposed as a fraud, but that exposure itself is portrayed as a painful – if necessary and even healthy – loss. Commentators such as Fredric Jameson and Paul Monaco were drawn to examine the cultural phenomenon of nostalgia by such late-1960s and early-1970s films as *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *American Graffiti* (1973); Monaco in particular postulates that the sociocultural disruptions in America of the mid- to late-1960s, beginning with President Kennedy’s assassination in November 1963, generated an anxiety that was partially assuaged by such fanciful Hollywood retreats into the past. The oft-expressed desire to flee from modernity in Serling’s *Twilight Zone* (1959-1964), however, is an expression of this anxiety predating the cataclysmic events and significant sociocultural shifts of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and while this desire in fact took a number of forms in *The Twilight Zone*, none was more telling than Serling’s evocation of the explicit desire to return to the late-nineteenth-century small town, with its bandstands and perpetual summer and promise of a simpler existence.

The very concept of time travel to a more desirable past is nostalgic *per se*; thus, this the

appearance of this fantasy in the late 1950s and early 1960s bespeaks a streak of overt nostalgia for the turn of the century, and the turn-of-the-century small town, more pronounced than earlier manifestations in popular culture. The writer in whose work this impulse is manifested most often is Jack Finney, a science fiction and fantasy writer who was born in 1911 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He attended Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois, graduating in 1934, and began publishing short stories in 1946. In his short stories he describes characters traveling back in time to the late nineteenth or early twentieth century,⁴⁵⁹ communicating with inhabitants of that time period,⁴⁶⁰ literally rebuilding and retreating into an 1890s lifestyle,⁴⁶¹ or encountering ghostly visitations from the turn of the century, which ward off modern threats to a small town's slow-paced quality of life.⁴⁶² While his novel *The Body Snatchers* (1955) was the basis for the various film versions of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956, 1978, 2007), Finney's most successful work was *Time and Again* (1970), in which a young man travels back in time to 1880s New York City. Another such writer is Edward Ormondroyd, born in 1925, whose young readers' novel, *Time at the Top* (1963), tells the story of a young girl who travels from her modern-day New York City apartment building to the 1880s home that once stood on its site; this trip has carried her not only back in time but from an urban to a rural setting, as in the 1880s, the house is located in

⁴⁵⁹ Jack Finney, "The Face in the Photo," in *I Love Galesburg in the Springtime* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963), 139-58; "The Third Level," in *The Third Level* (New York and Toronto: Rinehart & Co. 1957), 9-13; "Second Chance," in *Third Level*, 151-69.

⁴⁶⁰ Jack Finney, "The Love Letter," in *I Love Galesburg in the Springtime* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), 205-224.

⁴⁶¹ Finney, "Where the Cluetts Are," in *Galesburg*, 57-76.

⁴⁶² Finney, "I Love Galesburg in the Springtime," in *Galesburg*, 11-32.

countryside the city has not yet absorbed. In 1975, Richard Matheson published *Bid Time Return*, in which a young man living in 1971 falls in love with a photograph of a nineteenth-century actress and time-travels back to 1896 to find her.⁴⁶³ Significantly, in these stories and novels, the time-traveling character chooses to stay permanently in the past or regrets remaining in or returning to the present. Indeed, in *Time at the Top*, Susan is delighted to escape the “tinny” sound of her neighbor’s television, which she can hear through her apartment walls, as well as the grayness of the urban environment that surrounds her, and to be able to wear the lovely clothes that, had she lived out her dream for a twentieth-century life, would have been only costumes in her theatrical career. Moreover, she unites her widowed father with an 1880s widow who is the mother of two children, thereby converting her truncated 1960s family into a complete one containing both a full set of parents and siblings.⁴⁶⁴ When the mid-century protagonist of Finney’s “The Third Level” accidentally stumbles into New York City’s Grand Central Station in 1894, he decides to purchase train tickets to Galesburg, Illinois:

Have you ever been [to Galesburg?] It’s a wonderful town still, with big old frame houses, huge lawns and tremendous trees whose branches meet overhead and roof the streets. And in 1894, summer evenings were twice as long, and people sat out on their lawns, the men smoking cigars and talking quietly, the women waving palm-leaf fans, with the fireflies all around, in a peaceful world. To be back there with the First World War still twenty years off, and World War II over forty years in the future . . . I wanted two tickets for that.⁴⁶⁵

⁴⁶³ *Bid Time Return* was later adapted for film as *Somewhere in Time* (1980), in which the protagonist is transported from 1979 to 1912, and the novel was then re-released under that name.

⁴⁶⁴ In 1975, Ormondroyd published a sequel to *Time at The Top* entitled, *All in Good Time*, in which we learn what happened to Susan and her father in their early days of adjusting to life in the 1880s.

⁴⁶⁵ Finney, “The Third Level,” in *The Third Level*, 11-12.

Similarly, when the protagonist in *Time and Again* must decide whether he and his love interest, a young woman from the 1880s, should live out their lives in the late nineteenth or the late twentieth century, he realizes that he can't ask her to stay in his time, ravaged as it is by pollution and racism, threatened by the arms race and sullied by atrocities committed in Vietnam, "a time when it becomes harder and harder to continue telling yourself that we are still good people. We hate each other. And we're used to it."⁴⁶⁶ Thus, even though he recognizes that 1880s America was also "an imperfect world," he decides to remain there, where "the air was still clean. The rivers flowed fresh, as they had since time began. And the first of the terrible corrupting wars still lay decades ahead."⁴⁶⁷

These are the same complaints about the expediency and commercialization of modern life that appear at times in the 1950s/60s memoirs of middle-aged men looking back on their childhoods, a generalized sense that without the driven pace that demands for speed and commodification had imposed on American culture, life was once not only a more pleasant but a more *genuine* experience than it is now. "I'm Scared," a short story recounting inexplicable "ruptures" in time that Finney published in 1951 when he was forty years old, is narrated by a sixty-six-year-old narrator who asks:

Haven't you noticed . . . on the part of nearly everyone you know, a growing rebellion against the *present*? And an increasing longing for the past? I have . . . Never before in all my long life have I heard so many people wish that they lived "at the turn of the century," or "when life was simpler," or "worth living," or "when you could bring children into the world and count on the future," or simply "in the good old days." People didn't talk that way when I was young! The

⁴⁶⁶ Finney, *Time and Again* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Tokyo, Singapore: Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1970), 379.

⁴⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 398.

present was a glorious time! But they talk that way now.⁴⁶⁸

And these are the same reasons which Serling's *Twilight Zone* characters give for their efforts to go back in time to the "halcyon" days of the late-nineteenth-century small town; in Serling's case, however, as will be seen, those efforts are invariably unsuccessful, consigning those characters to live out their lives in the spiritually and environmentally impoverished America of the twentieth century. In this, Serling's nostalgia is for what is explicitly recognized as a *lost* past, the comfort of an imaginary return to it only transitory and hence illusionary.

By the time *The Twilight Zone* debuted in October 1959, Rod Serling was an acclaimed television writer of TV's "Golden Age"; at age thirty-five, his work had been performed on the prestigious anthology programs *Playhouse 90* and *Lux Video Theater*, and he had won Emmys for his teleplays *Patterns* (1955), *Requiem for a Heavyweight* (1956), and *The Comedian* (1957), as well as a Peabody Award for Television Writing.⁴⁶⁹ He had come to television writing through radio. The autumn after his return home from serving in World War II, he enrolled in Antioch College, located in another small town to which, like Binghamton, he would become emotionally attached, Yellow Springs, Ohio. When he graduated in 1950, Serling took a job writing advertisements at WLW, a Cincinnati radio station, and spent his spare time writing radio scripts for a weekly dramatic show broadcast on a different local station. In 1951, he abandoned radio to begin writing exclusively for television; in 1954, he and his wife moved to Connecticut to be closer to New York, the seat of the television market, and with the 1955 broadcast of the critically acclaimed *Patterns*, his fame as a television writer was established.

⁴⁶⁸ Finney, "I'm Scared," in *The Third Level*, 46.

⁴⁶⁹ Wolfe, *In the Zone*, 21.

In 1959, just as his work on *The Twilight Zone* was beginning, Serling wrote, “Everybody has a hometown. In the strangely brittle, terribly sensitive make-up of a human being, *there is a need for a place to hang a hat*, for a kind of *geographic womb to crawl back into*. Binghamton’s mine.”⁴⁷⁰ Indeed, Serling biographers uniformly recognize the effect of Serling’s nostalgia for Binghamton on his life and his work. Gordon Sandler argues, in fact, that Serling “never really left Binghamton.”⁴⁷¹ In 1953, he and his wife established a summer residence in Interlaken, on Lake Cayuga, sixty miles away from Binghamton, in a lakeside cottage once owned by his wife’s grandfather.

From there, Serling drove or flew to his hometown at least a dozen times a year, usually alone. . . . Did Binghamton Central need a high school graduation speaker? Rod Serling would be there, even if it meant flying in from Los Angeles. Did Broome County need a celebrity to crown the Broome County Aviation Queen of 1960? Rod Serling, Hollywood celebrity, proud son of the Southern Tier, would be there, gladly, regardless of the expense.

More often than not, the restless playwright returned to his hometown out of pure, obsessive nostalgia. Thus the solo car trips southward, away from Lake Cayuga, back to Binghamton, which would often end with the writer driving in circles around his old neighborhood, occasionally stopping and getting out and staring at his family’s old house on Bennett Avenue, or some other monument of his youth . . . before reluctantly returning to the present day.⁴⁷²

⁴⁷⁰ Gordon F. Sandler, *Serling: The Rise and Twilight of Television’s Last Angry Man* (New York: Plume, 1992), 9 (emphasis added).

⁴⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴⁷² *Ibid.* Similarly, Engel recounts that

Jim Haley remembers seeing [Serling] unexpectedly one day after the war, standing on Court Street in front of the Security Mutual Building, staring straight up at the most famous [neoclassic] architecture in Binghamton. Other times Serling would knock on the door of his old house on Bennett Avenue and ask the new owners for a quick look around – “just to see what you’ve done with the place.”

Engel, *Rod Serling*, 101-02.

Joel Engel characterizes these frequent returns to Binghamton as inspired by an “untethered sensation, almost of homelessness,” which “became a seminal influence on [Serling].”⁴⁷³ Thus, “[t]hroughout his career, *hometown* was Serling’s favorite metaphor for the land somewhere over the rainbow – a place without problems – and he would return to it often. . . .”⁴⁷⁴ Engel argues in particular that the soothing image of the hometown “almost always found its way into a script when Serling was personally distressed about the present.”⁴⁷⁵ Certainly the concept of the hometown appears in a number of *Twilight Zone* episodes; in “Walking Distance” and “No Time Like the Past,” in fact, the protagonists return via time travel to small towns in the past named, with no undue subtlety, Homewood and Homeville.

Indeed, a cluster of themes, settings, and narrative devices appear frequently in *Twilight Zone* episodes which seem to have appealed to Serling generally but which arguably are related to his nostalgic tendencies as well. A broader concept than the particularity of a “hometown” is the small town itself, which is often the setting of *Twilight Zone* episodes; the city is as well, although sometimes positioned in specific opposition to the small town, but very few *Twilight Zone* episodes are set in suburbs. In addition, the narrative device of time travel recurs frequently in Serling’s *Twilight Zone* episodes, (both backward into the past (e.g., “The Trouble with Templeton” (9 Dec. 1960); “Back There” (13 Jan. 1961); “The 7th is Made Up of Phantoms” (6 Dec. 1963)) and forward into the future (“The Last Flight” (5 Feb. 1960); “Execution” (1 April 1960); “A Hundred Yards Over the Rim” (7 April 1961)); in all, seventeen episodes in this series involve time travel of

⁴⁷³ Ibid., 65-66.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., 101-02.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid., 102.

some form or another.⁴⁷⁶ Similarly, and sometimes as a trigger for a time-travel journey, a common theme is the obsession with one's past, often coupled with the fickle unreliability of memory or the futility or foolishness of attempting any permanent return to the past; such episodes as "The Trouble with Templeton" (9 Dec. 1960) and "The Incredible World of Horace Ford" (18 April 1963), in fact, take the form of parables in which the protagonist's confrontation with the reality behind his idealized memories is necessary to free him from the grip of a crippling nostalgia.

Moreover, long before *The Twilight Zone*, Serling's apparent fascination with time travel included a "do-over" impulse, a desire to go back in time and change the course of history for the better, even as he necessarily recognized the impossibility of doing so:

One of Serling's recurring fantasies after the war, when plagued by combat

⁴⁷⁶ "Walking Distance" (30 Oct. 1959); "The Last Flight" (5 Feb. 1960); "Execution" (1 April 1960); "Nightmare as a Child" (29 April 1960); "A Stop at Willoughby" (6 May 1960); "The Trouble With Templeton" (9 Dec. 1960); "Back There" (13 Jan. 1961); "The Odyssey of Flight 33" (24 Feb. 1961); "A Hundred Yards Over the Rim" (7 April 1961); "Once Upon a Time" (15 Dec. 1961); "Showdown with Rance McGrew" (2 Feb. 1962); "No Time Like the Past" (7 March 1963); "Of Late I Think of Cliffordville" (11 April 1963); "The Incredible World of Horace Ford" (18 April 1963); "In Praise of Pip" (27 Sept. 1963); "The 7th is Made Up of Phantoms" (6 Dec. 1963); "Spur of the Moment" (21 Feb. 1964). Two of these episodes involve a protagonist whose past or future self visits her in the present ("Nightmare as a Child"; "Spur of the Moment.") In addition, the final episode of the series, "Bewitchin' Pool" (19 June 1964), is about two children whose family swimming pool is a passage to what Serling's narration calls a "never-neverland": a sunny, rural setting where boys dressed like Tom Sawyer go fishing and children, like Jimmie Bean in the opening credits of *Pollyanna*, have fun rolling hoops; the children live with and are cared for a nurturing Aunt T in her picturesque rural cottage. The protagonists' names – Jeb and Sport – seem directly patterned on Jem and Scout from *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and in fact Sport is portrayed by Mary Badham, Scout in the 1962 film (itself set in the 1930s); Aunt T, in turn, is reminiscent of Lillian Gish's Rachel Cooper from *Night of the Hunter* (1955) (also set in the 1930s). Thus, although this is a fantasy location even within the diegesis of the episode, it is infused with images and allusions to the past. *The Twilight Zone* also includes two episodes containing devices that play with time – stopping it or providing glimpses of the future ("A Kind of Stopwatch" (18 Oct. 1963); "A Most Unusual Camera" (16 Dec. 1960)) – as well as two episodes in which elements of the past manifest themselves in the present ("Static" (10 March 1961) (radio broadcasts); "The Arrival" (22 Sept. 1961) (a lost aircraft)).

nightmares and resultant amnesia, was a scenario in which he rescues Pearl Harbor from devastation. . . . Several times he imagined himself going back in time, changing the historic events, issuing the brass at Pearl Harbor a stern warning.⁴⁷⁷

In the mid-1950s, Serling developed this idea into a teleplay, “The Time Element,” about a man describing to his psychiatrist a recurring dream in which he is transported back in time to Pearl Harbor and tries repeatedly but unsuccessfully to warn the military of Japan’s impending attack. Suddenly the psychiatrist finds himself alone in his office; he goes to a nearby bar where a photo of his patient hangs on the wall. When he inquires about the man in the photo, whom he doesn’t know but who looks vaguely familiar, he is told the man died at Pearl Harbor.⁴⁷⁸ It was, in fact, “The Time Element” that sold CBS on *The Twilight Zone*. It aired on the *Desilu Playhouse* on November 24, 1958, “and received more telegrams, phone calls, and, eventually, mail than any other drama CBS ever aired.”⁴⁷⁹ As a consequence, CBS immediately ordered a pilot *Twilight Zone* episode, which was rushed into preproduction.

Serling’s pre-*Twilight Zone* television writing had consisted, for the most part, of realist dramas laced with social commentary, the content of which was subject to censorship and control by program sponsors. Thus, from the outset, he sought – and was given – complete artistic control over *The Twilight Zone*, as well as the contractual obligation to write the majority of the

⁴⁷⁷ Engel, *Rod Serling*, 153.

⁴⁷⁸ Engel notes a number of autobiographical elements in this teleplay. In common with the patient on the couch, Serling had experienced nightmares and had seen a psychiatrist, and he also had a father who was a butcher. *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 174.

episodes.⁴⁸⁰ Serling, in fact, owned a percentage of the program, and also served as one of the series' producers; ultimately, he was responsible not only for writing most of the episodes – in the end, he wrote over 90 of 156 – but for hiring the writers who would write the others. Thus, what William Boddy calls the “authorial quality” of Serling’s on-screen appearances, introducing and concluding each week’s episode, is backed up with his day-to-day control of the series’ content.⁴⁸¹

Whether Engel is correct in his conclusion that Serling’s scripts tended to return to the comforting “geographic womb” of the hometown during times he was suffering particular personal stress, it is instructive to look at the timing of his production of certain scripts, particular during the early days of the program. For instance, the very first *Twilight Zone* episode was set in a small town. In “Where Is Everybody?”, a man inexplicably finds himself in a small town which, while full of evidence of recent inhabitation, such as cigarettes smoking in a diner’s ashtrays, is eerily empty. Because some of the public response to “The Time Element” had been confusion over what had “happened” in that story – how could the ending logically be explained? – CBS insisted that “Where Is Everybody?” include such a “logical” explanation. Therefore, the story ends with

⁴⁸⁰ “Serling only wanted to do *The Twilight Zone* if he could have total creative control of the show, and thanks to some hard bargaining by his agents . . . , that is exactly what he got. The contract he signed bound him to write 90 percent of the scripts for the show’s first three seasons. . . . Ultimately, he would write over 90 of the 156 episodes over the show’s five seasons.” Sandler, *Serling*, 147.

⁴⁸¹ Noting that Serling was “executive producer as well as chief writer for the series, and worked closely on casting, re-writes and post-production,” William Boddy asserts that “Serling’s characteristically stylized direct address and the frequently epigrammatic and moralistic closing voice-overs underscore the *authorial* quality of Serling’s interventions. Moreover, the specific form of Serling’s opening commentary in each episode, which usually playfully or ambiguously place him temporarily in the space of the fiction, also serve as assertions of the agency of the fiction’s author.” William Boddy, “Entering ‘The Twilight Zone’: William Boddy Examines the Transition to ‘Hollywood Television,’” *Screen* 25 (July-October 1984): 107-08.

the revelation that the protagonist had been undergoing a sensory deprivation experiment and that his frantic search for others through the deserted small town had been a hallucination brought on by the conditions of the experiment.

Dissatisfied with what he considered this “hokey” ending, Serling wanted the next *Twilight Zone* script to be “something richer and more intimate.”⁴⁸² The result was “Walking Distance,”⁴⁸³ generally recognized as the most autobiographical of all his *Twilight Zone* scripts and one which Serling himself acknowledged to be the product of his nostalgia for Binghamton:

“My major hang-up is nostalgia,” Serling once said. “I hunger to go back to knickers and nickel ice cream cones. One time, I went walking in a recreational park in my home town *called* ‘Recreation Park.’ There’s a merry-go-round in it which I spent one given night staring at.” Later, when *The Twilight Zone* was sold, he strolled through a standing set at MGM and was hit by the similarity to his home town. “It struck me that all of us have a deep feeling to go back – as we remember it. It was from this simple incident that I wrote the story [of ‘Walking Distance.’]”⁴⁸⁴

In “Walking Distance,” a 1960s, stressed-out advertising executive, walking into a town called Homewood, is returned to 1934 and encounters both his eleven-year-old self and his father as a young man. Although the executive longs to remain in the hometown of his boyhood, his father convinces him that he has no choice but to return to his adult life in the present. Significantly, this time, when network executives balked at the notion of time travel, Serling stood his ground:

“Look: we’re asking audiences to suspend their disbelief for half an hour and enjoy themselves.

⁴⁸² Mandell, “‘Walking Distance’ From *The Twilight Zone*,” 8.

⁴⁸³ Although the second *Twilight Zone* script written, “Walking Distance” was the fifth episode aired, on October 30, 1959; the home exteriors for “Walking Distance” were MGM’s Lot 3, built in 1944 for *Meet Me in St. Louis*.

⁴⁸⁴ Mandell, “‘Walking Distance’ From *The Twilight Zone*,” 38.

People are going to walk out of a door in the twentieth century and walk into the eighteenth century. That's what *The Twilight Zone* is all about."⁴⁸⁵

In "Walking Distance," 1934 Homewood obviously stands in for the Binghamton of Serling's childhood,⁴⁸⁶ and the epilogue to "Walking Distance" reflects a theme that was to be repeated in a number of *Twilight Zone* episodes: the intertwined desires to go "home" and to go back in time, and the impossibility of doing so:

Martin Sloan, . . . [s]uccessful at most things, but not at the one effort most men try at some time in their lives – trying to go home again [P]erhaps there will be an occasion when . . . across his mind there'll flit a little errant wish – that a man might not have to become old – never outgrow the parks and the merry-go-rounds of his youth. And he'll smile then, too, because he'll know it *is* just an errant wish.

Although critically acclaimed, *The Twilight Zone*'s initial ratings were abysmal; the

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁶ Binghamton itself has staked out its position as the model for Homewood in "Walking Distance." In 1988, the *New York Times* reported on the placement of a plaque honoring Serling in the Binghamton Recreation Park's newly restored bandstand, which Serling used as the basis for the setting in the episode "Walking Distance," said Helen Foley, one of the [Rod Serling] Foundation's members. . . .

. . . .
 "You would think the episode had been filmed in Binghamton," said Ms. Foley, a retired drama teacher who taught Mr. Serling in the 1930's.
 "Honoring Serling: An Almost-Native Son," *New York Times* December 27, 1988. Similarly, a *New York Times* article about Binghamton's lobbying effort for issuance of a Rod Serling commemorative postage stamp describes Binghamton as having been "[d]isguised as 'Homewood' in one of the first 'Twilight Zone' episodes." The article notes that 1992 "would be the 33d anniversary of the debut of 'The Twilight Zone.' Thirty-three years since 'Walking Distance,' the episode featuring the band shell and carousel in a local [Binghamton] park." James Barron, "Rod Serling's Hometown Likes to Bask in His 'Twilight,'" *New York Times*, January 30 1989..

premiere episode “got trounced in the ratings,”⁴⁸⁷ and its third episode earned only a 16.3 rating.⁴⁸⁸ Thus, during the initial contractual evaluation period in which the program’s sponsors would decide whether to continue their sponsorship, Serling scheduled what he considered the most promising episodes, among them “Walking Distance”⁴⁸⁹ Although ratings slowly began to rise, Serling was understandably anxious to ensure the survival of the financial and creative opportunity *The Twilight Zone* offered him. The following spring, concerned that he might lose one of the program’s sponsors, Kimberly-Clark, he again scheduled what he considered the strongest episodes for the weeks paid for by Kimberly-Clark: “Bill Tall Wish,” “A Passage for Trumpet,” and “A Stop at Willoughby.” It is not insignificant that in the *Twilight Zone*’s initial season, during which Serling produced what are generally regarded as his freshest and most creative scripts, two of what he himself considered the top nine scripts were “Walking Distance” and “A Stop in Willoughby,” both of which portrayed harried advertising executives’ longing to return to small-town life at an earlier, “simpler,” more picturesque moment in America’s past.

“A Stop at Willoughby” is, in fact, the first of four *Twilight Zone* episodes that involve time travel from the present to late eighteenth-century or early twentieth-century small towns. Notably, in none of these episodes does a modern-day character remain permanently in the past, with the possible exception of “Willoughby,” where the cost of doing so is life itself. Neither do all four 1960s time travelers uniformly find the turn-of-the-century small town to be the idyllic or satisfying experience they anticipate. The stated “moral” in “Once Upon a Past,” for instance, is in effect,

⁴⁸⁷ Engel, *Rod Serling*, 189.

⁴⁸⁸ Sandler, *Serling*, 152.

⁴⁸⁹ Engel, *Rod Serling*, 190.

“Stay in your own time,” and the protagonist in “Of Late I Think of Cliffordville” discovers that his memories of the small town of his youth are false and incomplete, robbing him of opportunities he expected to find and enjoy there.

Nonetheless, the overall effect of these episodes is to align the viewer with a view of the American pre-modern small town as a moment of quiet, unhurried, picturesque life which, despite its inaccessibility and even our own lack of fit, maintains an irresistible appeal, the necessary loss of which is the cause for regret. The most unadulterated expression of this view appears in “A Stop at Willoughby,” a close twin in many ways to “Walking Distance,” except that its ulcer-ridden protagonist seeks solace and escape not in his own past but in a sunny, generalized moment predating his own experience. “A Stop at Willoughby” lacks, therefore, the personal connection involved in Martin Sloan’s time travel in “Walking Distance”; it lacks as well the full-blown presentation of the time traveler’s small-town destination. Although most of the action in “Walking Distance” occurs in 1934 Homewood, with a narrative frame of Sloan’s arriving from and returning to the present bracketing the bulk of the episode, the 1880s Willoughby is only a periodic and briefly experienced image of a sunny town square, leisurely strolling pedestrians, and old-time band music, a much more ephemeral ideal than Homewood but arguably one all the more tantalizing as a result. Tellingly, despite the autobiographical cast to “Walking Distance,” one website, albeit without attribution, claims that “A Stop at Willoughby,” not “Walking Distance,” was Serling’s personal favorite of *The Twilight Zone*’s first season episodes.⁴⁹⁰

“A Stop at Willoughby” is the tale of Gart Williams, an unhappy advertising executive, ill-

⁴⁹⁰ “Mr. Serling said that this was his favorite episode of the first season.” TV.com, <http://www.tv.com/the-twilight-zone/a-stop-at-willoughby/episode/12614/summary.html>.

suiting to the unrelenting pressures of his job. Falling asleep on the commute from Manhattan to the status-laden, Connecticut home he cannot afford and the wife who despises him for his lack of drive, he repeatedly awakes to find that the train has stopped in Willoughby on a beautiful sunny day in 1888. The conductor describes Willoughby to him as “[p]eaceful, restful. Where a man can slow down to a walk and live his life full measure.” Before Williams can leave the train, however, he finds himself back on the 1960 commuter train. When his situation becomes intolerable at work and his scornful wife rejects his pleas for support, he resolves to get off the train the next time it stops at Willoughby. He does so, greeted by the music from a band concert taking place in the town square’s central gazebo – the band is playing “Beautiful Dreamer” – and welcomed by name by the town residents. Two Tom Sawyeresque boys invite him to go fishing, and the train conductor smiles warmly as Williams steps off the depot platform and into the Willoughby’s idyllic community.

Serling creates a similar protagonist and uses nearly identical iconography in “No Time Like the Past,” a one-hour episode that aired on March 7, 1963, during the series’ fourth season, the only one featuring sixty-minute rather than half-hour episodes. In “No Time Like the Past,” Serling expresses again the “do-over” time travel wish of “The Time Element”: here, the protagonist, Paul Driscoll, describes the twentieth century as a “cesspool . . . a gigantic sewage complex in which runs the dregs, the filth, the misery-laden slop of the race of men. . . .” which race is destined, ultimately, for destruction with the push of a button. Having perfected a time-travel machine, he tries unsuccessfully to prevent events he sees as key in creating “*this* kind of twentieth century” (the bombing of Hiroshima, Hitler’s rise to power, and the sinking of the

Lusitania),⁴⁹¹ when he learns the past can't be changed, he chooses to go live in an 1880s town with the apt name of Homeville, a “serene” and “charming” place where he will inhabit “a world of band concerts and summer nights on front porches. A world that never heard of an atomic bomb or world wars or germ warfare”

In the scene in which Driscoll arrives in Homeville, a lilting, romantic tune plays on the soundtrack while he walks into town. Homeville, once again, is built around a grassy town square with a large bandstand in the middle. (In fact, the camera lingers on the bandstand, a deliberate visual echo of Driscoll's earlier reference to “a world of band concerts.”) As was the case in Willoughby, riders on high-wheeled, “penny farthing” bicycles criss-cross the screen; a group of children laugh and play in the square. Lady passersby adorned in ruffly bustles stroll by Driscoll and nod to him as he tips his hat. A close-up of Dana Andrews as Driscoll reveals his contentment as he views the quiet, sunny day before him.

A comedic episode from the series' second season, written especially for Buster Keaton and not by Serling but by Richard Matheson (the author of the time-travel novel, *Somewhere in Time*), takes a different tone toward the 1890s small town it portrays but ultimately reinforces its connotation of quiet contentment and simplicity. “Once Upon a Time,” in fact expresses a nostalgia not only for the late nineteenth-century small town but for the silent cinema of the 1910s (Keaton's silent film career began in 1917). The first part of the episode, taking place in 1890 in Harmony, New York, is presented as a silent movie; the soundtrack consists solely of ragtime-style piano music, and characters' dialogue (as well as the quacking of ducks and oinking of pigs) is

⁴⁹¹ In “Back There” (Jan. 13, 1961), Serling again exhibits this “do-over” time-travel impulse; there, the protagonist travels back in time and tries in vain to prevent Lincoln's assassination.

presented in intertitles. Keaton works as a janitor for a pair of inventors; dissatisfied by what he perceives as the excessive noise and exorbitant prices of his own time, he borrows his employers' time-travel helmet to travel into the future, where he anticipates these problems will have disappeared.

The instant that Keaton arrives in the middle of a busy street in 1961, the soundtrack converts to synchronized sound, which at that moment consists of dozens of blaring car horns. Horrified by 1960s noise, traffic, and prices, Keaton resolves to return to 1890, but the time-travel helmet has been damaged and must first be repaired. Keaton is befriended by an overbearing, unctuous man who helps Keaton get the helmet repaired, but only because he secretly plans to use it himself to travel to the "halcyon days" of 1890, his rhapsodic description of his destination similar to that of Andrews' Driscoll in "No Time Like the Past." Ultimately, Keaton and his companion return to 1890 together, whereupon the new time-traveler discovers he is miserable without such modern conveniences as air conditioning and frozen TV dinners. To rid himself of his companion's constant complaining, Keaton sends him and the time-travel helmet back to 1961; once this nuisance is gone, he is quite content with the life in 1890 Harmony for which, the episode's epilogue indicates, he was intended and to which he is suited.

Only in "Of Late I Think of Cliffordville" is the turn-of-the-century small town something the time-traveling protagonist comes to actively dislike, reject, and fear. "Of Late I Think of Cliffordville" was another hour-long broadcast aired during the series' fourth season,⁴⁹² thus twice in this season Serling used the narrative device of time-travel back to a turn-of-the-century small town. In this episode, an elderly, ruthless business mogul, having just ruined his long-time

⁴⁹² "Of Late I Think of Cliffordville" aired April 11, 1963.

competitor, finds himself bored now that he has won all his battles and gained everything he set out to gain. He makes a deal with the Devil to return to the town of his youth, a young man himself once again, so that he can win the hand of the young lady he was denied the first time around and, at the same time, re-experience the joy and challenge of amassing his fortune all over again. Thus returned to his hometown of the 1910s, he discovers, however, that the girl of his dreams is not what he remembered but dreadful and shrill; moreover, having bought up the town's surrounding swampland with all the money the devil allowed him to bring with him, he realizes that he has made a great miscalculation: the technological ability to retrieve the oil he knows lies underneath that land will not exist for decades. Desperate to return to the present, he must raise enough money to buy a ticket home from the Devil. He sells his sole asset, title to the swampland, to the man who, in 1963, had been his company's janitor. Once he returns to the present, we learn that this sale has reversed the two men's positions; the former janitor is now the wealthy mogul, and his former boss now the janitor.

Even though time-travelers in "Once Upon a Time" and "Of Late I Think of Cliffordville" who arrive in turn-of-the-century small towns from the 1960s are disillusioned by what they discover there, a reaction that at first blush undercuts a sense of idealizing nostalgia for that prior time and place, it is not insignificant that they are both unsympathetic characters, the "villains" of their respective pieces, whose enterprises, in typical *Twilight Zone* fashion, are doomed to disappointment and failure. Keaton's positioning as the character who comes to appreciate his 1890 small town in "Once Upon a Time" in particular causes his reaction to dominate, particularly given the long-term familiarity with and affection for Keaton's stone face, and gentle humor of the silent cinema format of the episode's 1890 scenes, which in itself is a call to nostalgia for an earlier

type of viewing experience, albeit one the program's large teenaged audience had rarely – if ever – known themselves.

At the same time, all four of these episodes combine an idealization of the past with the stark realization that it is – and always must be – out of reach; that someone living in mid-century America not only cannot return to this presumably “better” time but could never belong there even if he or she could. Ultimately, the peace and serenity, the respite and the haven Willoughby and Homeville offer are unavailable to those living in the 1960s. The protagonist experiences himself as awakening in 1888 Willoughby and being welcomed there; in his 1960 “reality,” however, he has thrown himself off the train and been killed, and the funeral home that collects the body is “Willoughby and Sons.” In “No Place Like the Past,” the protagonist tries to prevent a local fire which he knows from his twentieth-century research will occur and ends up causing it instead; concluding that he simply doesn't belong in the past, he returns to 1963, despite having fallen in love with the town's 1880s schoolteacher. And “Of Late I Think of Cliffordville,” in its example of the protagonist's inaccurate memory of the girl who got away, undercuts the validity of the very idealization of pre-twentieth century small town itself. Thus, even in the fictional universe of *The Twilight Zone* where time travel is possible, mid-century Americans cannot permanently remain in the idyllic turn-of-the-century small town, either because they do not belong there or because it never existed in the first place. Significantly, however, these *Twilight Zone* episodes – with the possible exception of “Of Late I Think of Cliffordville” – are shot through with the *desire* to return to this never-never land, even as they simultaneously recognize the impossibility of doing so and even the foolhardiness of the attempt.

The source of this time-travel impulse in Serling's *Twilight Zone* episodes, and the

nostalgia it reveals, suggests not only Serling's personal nostalgia for his lost boyhood home town but his broader unease with the twentieth century in general, which he has the protagonist in "No Time Like the Past" describe as a cesspool. Commentators have noted that this sense of alienation pervades much of Serling's *Twilight Zone*, whether or not the episodes dramatize the overt desire for escape of his time-travel episodes. David Cochran views Serling's work in *The Twilight Zone* as reflecting the political position of the "consensus liberal" of the post-war period, by which he means liberals who had formed with conservatives a consensus with respect to two basic beliefs: first, American capitalism was an essentially sound system that, with economic growth, would continue to support society effectively; and second, the major threat to this system was international Communism, while the desire for more radical social change within America could be forestalled with societal reform.⁴⁹³ As Cochran explains, however, this liberal consensus "was actually built on a series of fundamental paradoxes. The belief in consensus and unity was undermined by a concept of cultural pluralism that viewed society as being in a constant state of struggle. . . ."⁴⁹⁴ This view of life as essentially Kafkaesque meant that within the liberal half of the dominant Cold War consensus, "a modest political program masked an underlying (though rarely consciously admitted) vision marked by chaos, anxiety, and alienation."⁴⁹⁵ While Cochran sees Serling's 1950s realist television plays as reflecting the consensus liberal view of Communism as being the world's major threat, he perceives in the fantasies Serling wrote for *The Twilight Zone* an

⁴⁹³ David Cochran, *American Noir: Underground Writers and Filmmakers of the Post-war Era* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), 7-8.

⁴⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

increasingly vivid expression of this “chaos, anxiety, and alienation.” He finds all *Twilight Zone* episodes to be “firmly situated in the post-war context,”⁴⁹⁶ all too conscious of the nuclear threat of the Cold War era and of other threats posed to humanity’s well-being by modern civilization; in addition, he notes that “[a] strong urban sensibility . . . runs throughout *The Twilight Zone*,” agreeing with Marc Scott Zicree that the series was one of the first on television to regularly address the theme of urban alienation. “Numerous episodes used the chaos of modern urban society as a starting point for exploring questions of paranoia, isolation, and reality.”⁴⁹⁷ Further, Cochran notes that Serling often presented the contemporary workplace as the site of modern urban dehumanization, such as in the automation that takes over the industrial firm in “The Brain Center at Whipples,” or of numbing conformity, such as in “Miniature,” where the main character is fired because he is “not a ‘team player’ but a ‘square peg’ who does not fit” into the office “‘team or platoon.’”⁴⁹⁸ Humanity is also often threatened by “a conspiracy of machines and technology,” such as a car that haunts a hit-and-run driver⁴⁹⁹ or a talking doll who kills a man.⁵⁰⁰

Thus, while it was generally the case that the wicked received their comeuppance in the typical *Twilight Zone* episode, so that the most unsettling fates are visited only upon those who deserve them, at the same time, Cochran argues that “the central vision of the show [was] a world steeped in paranoia with humans at the mercy of vast forces beyond their control, a universe

⁴⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 208.

⁴⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁴⁹⁹ “You Drive” (aired January 3, 1964).

⁵⁰⁰ “Living Doll” (aired November 1, 1963).

marked by absurdity and governed by a strong sense of irony,”⁵⁰¹ where “everything – animate and inanimate, earthy and extraterrestrial – can conspire against someone.”⁵⁰² Similarly, Rick Worland characterizes *The Twilight Zone* as “overtly didactic,” its episodes functioning as “political parable[s]” whose twist endings were “often a lesson in New Frontier-era liberalism.”⁵⁰³ As Worland states,

In retrospect, perhaps no other popular television programming of this period so clearly indicates the cracks beginning to open in the Cold War consensus as certain eerie forays into *The Twilight Zone* and *The Outer Limits*, outings pervaded by sadness, ambivalence, and unresolved political and moral confusion. As expressions of contemporary fears as well as aspirations in a crucial period of our history, the titles of these two memorable programs seem more evocative than their creators realized.⁵⁰⁴

Conclusion

The despairing world view that biographers attribute to Serling could not differ more from Disney’s populist optimism, whereby, as Michael Wallace has observed of Dearborn, Michigan’s Greenfield Village and Henry Ford Museum, “the past was better, and things have been getting better ever since.”⁵⁰⁵ It explains in large part the significant differences between Disney’s and Serling’s “nostalgia” for the turn-of-the-century small town. To be sure, there are certainly

⁵⁰¹ Cochran, *American Noir*, 207-08.

⁵⁰² *Ibid.*, 211.

⁵⁰³ Rick Worland, “Sign-Posts Up Ahead: *The Twilight Zone*, *The Outer Limits*, and TV Political Fantasy 1959-1965,” in *Science-Fiction Studies*, 23 (1996): 105.

⁵⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁵⁰⁵ Michael Wallace, “Visiting the Past: History Museums in the United States,” in *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* (Temple University Press, 1996), 3-32.

similarities between the Disney and the Serling presentations of this time and place. In both are seen the period architecture, the horse and buggy, the tranquil street, the carefree, playing children. As was the case in “A Stop at Willoughby” and “No Time Like the Past,” the town bandstand in *Pollyanna* is a key set piece, literally the center of the festive town bazaar. Further, it is not insignificant to the nostalgias being created here that in all of the relevant *Twilight Zone* episodes and in the three Disney films, the town is shown in summer. This is, in fact, an explicit narrative point in “Willoughby”; the man entering the town has time-traveled from a 1960 Manhattan commuter train traveling through a dark, snowy November to Willoughby in July 1888. Similarly, the action in *So Dear to My Heart* begins with the birth of the spring lambs and concludes with the fall county fair; *Summer Magic* chronicles a family’s first summer living in Beulah, Maine, and *Pollyanna*, Pollyanna’s first summer in Harrington. Moreover, Disney’s concrete version of turn-of-the-century small town, Main Street U.S.A., exists – in Anaheim’s Disneyland and Orlando’s Disney World – in a climate of perpetual summer. This eternal summer contrasts, for instance, with such films as *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944) or *On Moonlight Bay* (1951), whose turn-of-the-century, small-town narratives quite self-consciously pass through the four seasons of a calendar year. For both Serling and Disney, it seems, part of the nostalgia for the turn-of-the-century small town is its imaginative pause in what was for the child and adolescent – the person which these fantasies suggest we all would like to be again – is the time of vacation, leisure, and freedom from responsibility.

Still, significant substantive differences exist between Disney’s and Serling’s presentation of the turn-of-the-century small town. As is to be expected, Disney’s version of the turn-of-the-century small town in these films is centered around children (*So Dear to My Heart*; *Pollyanna*) or

adolescents (*Summer Magic*); the sense of community is communicated through festive communal gatherings (the celebratory watermelon at the conclusion of *So Dear to My Heart*; the town bazaar in *Pollyanna*; the afternoon croquet and Halloween parties in *Summer Magic*), all of which paint the town in terms of play, pleasure, and consumption that are echoed in the concrete experience of Main Street, U.S.A. In contrast, the late-nineteenth-century small town of Serling's *Twilight Zone* episodes is a place of charm and serenity, offering peace and respite to those harried by the pressures of mid-century America or haunted by the specter of global thermonuclear destruction. It is a haven sought by adults rather than a world occupied as if by right by children. Further, because Serling's characters arrive in the turn-of-the-century small town via time travel, the attitude toward that location is expressed by characters who (except for the train conductor in *Willoughby*) are not of that time but are looking back at it from the future. They express explicit nostalgia, a desire to escape the pressures of their own time and to find ease and respite in an earlier moment. Disney's characters, on the other hand, are not nostalgic; rather, they simply live in an idealized environment which, by film's end, will be enjoyed by all, just as it could be enjoyed by visitors to Disneyland in its comforting, color-coordinated version, Main Street, U.S.A.

Moreover, unlike his own boyhood – which was Disney's object of nostalgia in *So Dear to My Heart*, *Pollyanna*, and *Summer Magic* – it is a time and place pre-dating his lifetime, the late-nineteenth-century, pre-modern small town, that Serling posits as a lost utopia in “*Willoughby*” and “*No Place Like the Past*.” For the twentieth century man of Serling's *Twilight Zone*, the security and comfort missing from 1960s America is something entirely outside his own life experience; it can be only be imagined, and imagined only in a time and place he never knew. As such, it is something he can never attain.

Considering Disney and Serling as individuals, one can speculate a number of reasons for these differences. One is the generational difference, and more particularly Disney's having actually experienced the changes brought by modernity. He was of the generation whose formative years were a testament to the possibility of change, and more particularly to the possibility of achieving, via technological change, control of the physical world. Disney's lifelong enthusiasm for technological change, in fact, can be attributed to the physical hardship and drudgery that was his poverty-stricken family's day-to-day life as he grew up, and to his firsthand knowledge of the degree to which purely physical discomfort and inconvenience were alleviated by such innovations as indoor plumbing, central heat, and electricity. Consequently, any nostalgia for the rural Midwest of his boyhood had to have been accompanied with a knowledge, however unacknowledged, of the physical benefits received in exchange for the loss of that way of life. Thus, Disney could wax nostalgic about life in the turn-of-the-century small town while simultaneously appreciating the physical improvements to life that had occurred since; knowing both the pleasant and not-so-pleasant of this time and place, he could remember the pleasant fondly and strive at the same time to reproduce it in a form that eliminated all the unpleasant.

In addition, as various biographers have observed, the rags-to-riches arc of Disney's life, his origins in poverty, hard times, and physical hardship, instilled in him a driving need for control over his life's work, as well as a determination to change his situation and his environment. Having lived through the transition to modernity, he was of a generation to view the creation of the "ideal" environment as *possible*; his early deprivations were, of course, a stupendous motivation to do so. Whereas Serling was a successful television writer who became, in effect, a

franchise,⁵⁰⁶ Disney was an *entrepreneur*.

Moreover, Serling came from a comfortably middle-class background; unlike Disney, he was never driven by physical need. Certainly, Disney was motivated by psychological need as well; Schickel argues that the emotional deprivation of his boyhood spurred Disney to spend his life trying to create the idyllic childhood he had always wanted but never known.⁵⁰⁷ Serling's primary and lifelong psychological need, however, was for recognition and acclaim. Moreover, he was a member of the first generation to have known *only* modernity; the lifestyle changes that occurred between 1930s and the 1960s were changes only of degree, not of kind, as opposed to the substantive changes Disney witnessed between life during his 1900s boyhood and that of 1930s or 1960s America. Without a grounding of physical need, and never having known anything else, Serling could blind himself to the benefits of modernity and thus idealize the pre-modern small town. It would be a setting in which the constant need to *perform* would disappear; in which anonymity would not constitute failure but simply the norm. More broadly, Serling was of a temperament that was creative but not entrepreneurial; his particular insecurities, capable of being calmed only by others' recognition, were such that he probably had little faith in his ability to change or create his own environment to suit his purposes. At its core, Serling's nostalgia for the late-nineteenth-century small town is grounded in futility; a part of its appeal is its impossibility, bespeaking the lifelong hunger of a man who, at a fundamental level, never really believed he

⁵⁰⁶ For instance, the 1970s television program *Night Gallery* (1970-73) used Serling's name, and he served as each episode's host, much as he had done for *The Twilight Zone*, but he had nothing to do with writing or producing the program. Similarly, he was not involved in the various *Twilight Zone* books that were published during and after the show aired.

⁵⁰⁷ Schickel, *The Disney Version*, 37.

would ever be fed.

It is significant as well that Serling's nostalgia is for what he called "Victorian" rather than Edwardian times, for the *pre-modern* small town of the 1880s⁵⁰⁸ before the appearance of the first automobiles, for example, as opposed to Disney's nostalgia for the American small town of the 1900s and 1910s, a time of transition in which the elements of modern-day America were being introduced. Ultimately, the anxiety reflected in Serling's representation and use of the late-nineteenth-century small town, as Cochran and Worland suggest, was something too great to be appeased by an imaginary trip to the time of Serling's own boyhood – although his first effort to express his personal longing for a nonexistent safe haven was the evocation of Binghamton in "Walking Distance"; it was too great, in fact, to be assuaged by a fictional return to the transitional time represented in *Main Street, U.S.A.*, *Pollyanna*, and *Summer Magic* – a time which, after all, contains in its earliest, quaintly picturesque form, the promise of what life would be in the 1960s. Rather, these episodes of Serling's *Twilight Zone* suggest that for the generation coming of age during World War II and taking on the responsibilities of adulthood in the post-war, post-Hiroshima, Cold War era, relief from modernity could be imagined only at a moment and in a place where it had not yet begun to manifest itself.

Finally, Serling's nostalgia was necessarily based on cultural products of some kind – movies, plays, histories, novels, even photographs or postcards – or reminiscences he might have heard as a child from individuals who could actually remember life in the 1880s; like that of his contemporary time-travel fantasy writers, it was clearly a nostalgia based on *mediated* rather than

⁵⁰⁸ The town of Willoughby in "A Stop at Willoughby" is set in 1888; the Homewood of "No Time Like the Past," 1881, and Harmony of "Once Upon a Time," 1890. Only the town in "Of Late I Think of Cliffordville" is set in the 1910s.

lived experience, and as such, an early example of what would become a common phenomenon by the end of the twentieth century. At the same time, this was a nostalgia very much *of its time*, a product of the general perception of the “good old days” in circulation throughout the 1940s, ‘50s, and ‘60s and to which the cultural producers of Disney’s generation contributed, even if Serling’s particular nostalgic object – the late-eighteenth-century small town – was not the one described by the 1950s/1960s memoirists whose work was in cultural circulation at the time he wrote his *Twilight Zone* episodes. While the particularly poignant quality of Serling’s nostalgia can be attributed not only to a growing cultural despair with twentieth-century life but to that nostalgia’s being itself founded on a myth, it is undeniable that his nostalgia would not have taken the particular form it did if that myth had not been culturally available to him to supply the ideal of all that was missing from the modern-day.

Thus, while both Disney’s and Serling’s representations of the turn-of-the-century small town are both labeled “nostalgia,” they actually constitute two different cultural positions – two different pop culture nostalgias – albeit for a common object. Both representations are idealized, but they differ in their *availability*. For Disney, the turn-of-the-century small town is not lost; rather, it’s a particularly apt form of consumable “happiness.” It is something to be turned into a playground, a perfected promenade of make believe, with all flaws erased, or to be reproduced in lavish detail – and thus consumed – on the screen (and outside the theater, for instance, in *Pollyanna* dolls, comic books, Golden Books, and paper dolls). For Serling, in contrast, it is something the twentieth century has never known and can never have, and yet still desperately wants; it is the repository of that bundle of comforts – peace of mind, security, community – which humanity lost or discarded with its embrace of modernity; that is, truly a paradise lost.

CHAPTER FOUR
THE DAY THEY STOPPED THE MAIL IN MASON CITY:
THE MULTIPLE NOSTALGIAS OF *THE MUSIC MAN*

The pinnacle of Hollywood’s post-war representation of the turn-of-the-century small town – indeed, the quintessential such representation – is *The Music Man*, released in 1962 and based on Meredith Willson’s successful stage play, which ran on Broadway from 1957 to 1961. *The Music Man* can be viewed as the epicenter of late 1950s-early 1960s nostalgia for the American small town of late nineteenth and early twentieth century; it is the product of that nostalgia and perhaps even the impetus for its expression in various memoirs and publications that were released in the decade from the late 1950s through the late 1960s/early 1970s. If nothing else, *The Music Man* was the most visible and well-known of such representations, its entrance on the American scene as ballyhooed an event as “the day that Gilmore, Liberatti, Pat Conway, the Great Creator, W. C. Handy, and John Philip Sousa all came to town on the same historic day”⁵⁰⁹ and its presence injected into American life through such promotional devices as radio play, newspaper and magazine articles, soundtrack albums, comic books, and copies of its novelization. While the basis for its popularity can only be inferred from existing records of critical and public reaction, the film was indisputably *of* a moment in which the image of the turn-of-the-century small town was increasingly held up as a lost ideal. At the same time, it was the film’s status as the antithesis of its content – that is, as an expensive, heavily promoted commodity in mass distribution – that positioned it to serve as a lightning rod not only for that lost ideal but for other “losses” or threats

⁵⁰⁹ “Seventy-Six Trombones” from *The Music Man* by Meredith Willson.

to the white, middle-class experience that had long been the central image of America's identity.

Thus, at the time of its release, *The Music Man* in fact engendered multiple nostalgias: not only for the presumed innocence of the turn-of-the-century small town, but for the "wholesome" America that had somehow been lost with the conclusion of World War II, as well as for the Hollywood studio era itself. *The Music Man* was also the product of a particular nostalgia of a particular generation for a particular lived experience, the last such nostalgia in American popular culture, perhaps, to be grounded primarily in *actual* rather than *mediated* experience; consequently, *The Music Man* offers a case study of the "lifespan" of a specific nostalgia.

From the outset, public discourse on the film of *The Music Man* was two-fold: the movie was simultaneously a "genuine" piece of Americana on one hand and a widely exploited and exploitable commercial product on the other. Thus, *The Music Man*'s "idyllic" portrayal of a simpler time and place – of a small, plain, unpretentious Iowa town in 1912 – was central to Warner Bros.' promotion of the film, even as studio publicity described the film as "the most lavishly-mounted musical in the history of the studio"⁵¹⁰ and even as the studio launched the film with one the most aggressive and extensive promotional campaigns in its history. As a result of this massive promotional effort, the film itself became a national American event. Warners was able to successfully exploit the nostalgic appeal of *The Music Man* by tapping into popular perception of – and affection for – the turn-of-the-century small town as America's moment of lost innocence; the discourse surrounding *The Music Man* and Warners' promotional efforts in particular, however, indicate that by the early 1960s, the turn-of-the-century small town no longer

⁵¹⁰ Warner Bros. Studio press release, undated, Meredith Willson Collection, Mason City, Iowa Public Library.

needed to be disguised as the present but had developed an appeal in its own right in the popular imagination, suggesting a shift in public mood toward the “present-day.”

At the same time, Warners had on its hands a property known, from its Broadway engagement, to be packed with the wholesome Americana of Fourth of July fireworks and brass bands, an Americana purportedly still to be found in small towns even as it was perceived to be disappearing elsewhere, threatened by such urban scourges as crime and juvenile delinquency. In *The Music Man*'s lavishly produced – and extensively publicized – press premiere in Mason City, Iowa, the town on which *The Music Man*'s fictional River City was based, Warner Bros. was able to link the film with the literal embodiment of the wholesomeness it represented: thousands of high school students, participating in a national marching band competition. The resulting discourse, amplifying *The Music Man*'s role as a standard-bearer for lost or threatened values, was lent credence by participants' genuine excitement for this promotional event which, in turn, made that discourse all the more effective a publicity tool for Warner Bros.' exploitation of the film.

Moreover, *The Music Man* was released at a time when its subject matter, and the popular perception of its attendant innocence and wholesomeness, made it something of an anomaly among current Hollywood releases, which, freed from the restrictions of the Hays Office, influenced by European “art” films, and competing with television, presented an ever-increasing range of social topics with an ever-increasing explicitness. While this nostalgic theme was introduced by Warner Bros. in its promotion of the film, it was one taken up and articulated by film-goers themselves in letters of appreciation sent to the studio. For this group of movie-goers at least, *The Music Man* offered something no longer available elsewhere, and it spurred them to express their sense of loss at Hollywood's shift from the “tasteful” family fare of the Classical studio era to the franker style

of film-making of the post-war era. Their letters constitute a unique record of the *experience* of this particular (presumably white, middle-class) nostalgia which *The Music Man* inspired, even as it served, yet again, as fodder for Warner Bros.' promotion of the film.

Finally, *The Music Man* is still the subject of nostalgic exploitation today, although now it is Mason City, rather than Warner Bros., which is attempting to capitalize on the appeal of the turn-of-the-century small town of River City. Indeed, Mason City has essentially adopted the identity of its fictional self in an effort to promote tourism for the town. The effect of Mason City's twenty-first century attempt to market *The Music Man* and its 1912 setting differs significantly from Warner Bros.' efforts in 1962, and not simply because of the great discrepancy in resources and visibility, revealing *The Music Man* to be an example of the potential "lifespan" of a particular pop culture nostalgia. Specifically, in 2007, the sights and sounds of turn-of-the-century America are no longer in popular circulation – in part because the generation who experienced life in the early twentieth century is largely gone – and neither, for the most part, is *The Music Man* itself. It is for this reason that Mason City's effort seems to have come too late; without the familiarity made possible with such cultural circulation, *The Music Man* and River City have outlived their nostalgic range.

The Music Man: From Conception to Stage to Screen to National Phenomenon, with a Celebration in Mason City Along the Way

Meredith Willson, author of *The Music Man*, was born in Mason City on May 18, 1902, to

a comfortably middle-class family, the youngest of three children.⁵¹¹ The Willsons were a musical family, and Willson grew up playing several instruments.⁵¹² After graduating from high school, at the age of eighteen, he left Mason City in 1919 to study music in New York City.⁵¹³ He never lived in Mason City again, although he returned for visits for the rest of his life.

In the years after his departure from Mason City, Willson enjoyed success as a musician and composer. He played first flute for John Phillip Sousa⁵¹⁴ and later spent five years as first flutist with the New York Philharmonic Symphony under Arturo Toscanini. In the late 1920s, he moved to the West Coast, eventually settling in Los Angeles and finding work in radio, film, and television. In 1932, he became director of NBC's west division, and in the years that followed, he also conducted radio, television, and motion picture orchestras, as well as composing symphonic material, popular songs, and the film scores for *The Great Dictator* (1940) and *The Little Foxes* (1941).

In the 1940s and '50s, Willson cultivated a public persona in addition to pursuing his behind-the-scenes roles of composer, conductor, and radio division director. As musical director of *The Burns and Allen Show* and *The Maxwell House Showboat* radio programs, he regularly

⁵¹¹ John C. Skipper, *Meredith Willson: The Unsinkable Music Man* (El Dorado Hills, CA & Mason City, IA: Savas Publishing Co., 2000), 1.

⁵¹² Willson's mother taught all three children the piano, and each played at least one other instrument as well. *Ibid.*, 19-20. In high school, Willson was first flute in the Mason City High School band, while also playing in the school orchestra and singing in the glee club. *Ibid.*, 20, 23. During the summer after his freshman year, he earned his first money as a musician, playing flute and piccolo with a resort town orchestra. *Ibid.*, 21.

⁵¹³ *Ibid.*, 25-26.

⁵¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 27-28.

appeared on air; he was also a guest on various other radio programs, host of several summer replacement programs such as *Meredith Willson's Musical Revue* (1940 and 1942) and *Meredith Willson Show* (1946), and a panelist on the quiz show, *The Name's the Same* (NBC 1951-53). In the late 1940s, he began hosting his own radio programs – *Meredith Willson Show* (ABC 1948-49; NBC 1949-50) and *Meredith Willson Music Room* (NBC 1951-53)⁵¹⁵ – and in 1950, he became co-host with Tallulah Bankhead of *The Big Show*. He even attempted television with a short-lived television program, *The Meredith Willson Show* (July 31, 1949 - August 21, 1949).⁵¹⁶ In addition, in 1948, he published the autobiographical *And There I Stood With My Piccolo*,⁵¹⁷ to be followed in 1955 with *Eggs I Have Laid*.⁵¹⁸

Key to this public persona was Mason City, Iowa, and particularly Willson's memories of his boyhood there in the first two decades of the twentieth century. This persona was very much a small-town boy; as one biographer describes it, Willson “fabricated a caricature of himself, an average fellow from Iowa who simply enjoyed sharing stories about his ‘cousins’ . . . a naïve, dim-witted character whose presence in the script complemented [radio] stars . . . like Frank Morgan and Gracie Allen.”⁵¹⁹ A reviewer of Willson's brief television program “warned her readers that Willson was still a ‘bucolic philosopher.’ He still ‘refers to Mason City, Iowa, at every

⁵¹⁵ Bill Oates, *Meredith Willson – America's Music Man: The Whole Broadway-Symphonic-Radio-Motion Picture Story* (Bloomington, IN: Author House, 2005), 195-98.

⁵¹⁶ Skipper, *Meredith Willson*, 96.

⁵¹⁷ Meredith Willson, *And There I Stood With My Piccolo* (New York: Doubleday, 1948).

⁵¹⁸ Meredith Willson, *Eggs I Have Laid* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1955).

⁵¹⁹ Oates, *Meredith Willson*, 1-2.

opportunity.”⁵²⁰ Similarly, one biographer characterizes *And There I Stood With My Piccolo* as “a stream of consciousness autobiography full of memories about his days growing up in Mason City and his early adventures in professional music and show business.”⁵²¹ The degree to which this “homespun” and “folksy”⁵²² persona was a fictional construction – and Willson’s devotion to self-promotion is evident throughout his career – is of less relevance here than how it positioned him to be perceived by American listeners of his radio appearances and readers of his books.

Unencumbered by other associations, such as that of Disney with increasingly saccharine children’s fare, Willson was situated to serve as an *adult* and vocally *public* representative of his generation, the last to have experienced the American small town before its complete conversion from its pre-modern to its modern form. Certainly, Willson’s many references to – indeed, the association of his public persona with – turn-of-the-century Mason City were the reason that Broadway producers Ernie Martin and Cy Feuer approached him in 1951, suggesting that Willson write a musical comedy; in Willson’s account, they suggested that he write a stage play about his Iowa boyhood, using the “common touch” he had demonstrated, for instance, in writing the song, “May

⁵²⁰ Skipper, *Meredith Willson*, 96. In addition, this biographer describes Willson’s radio appearances in the early 1940s this way:

With all the success showering down on him, [Willson] still took every opportunity on the air to give a plug to his old hometown, Mason City, Iowa. In his homespun, folksy way, he let the rest of the nation see that he treated ole Squiz Hazleton and Mr. Vance at the music store and Marjorie Sale, who lived next door when he was growing up on Superior Avenue, with the same kind of respect that he showed for Clark Gable, Spencer Tracy, and Fanny Brice – and all of the other Hollywood bigwigs who were making appearances on his show.

Ibid., 71.

⁵²¹ Ibid., 101.

⁵²² Ibid., 71.

the Good Lord Bless and Keep You,” and his memoir *And There I Stood With My Piccolo*.⁵²³

After a long and difficult birth – Willson began writing the play, his first, in 1951 – *The Music Man* opened on Broadway on December 19, 1957, and was an immediate hit. It won multiple Tony awards⁵²⁴ and ran for 1375 performances.⁵²⁵ The Broadway cast LP album was a best-seller; in addition, *Time Magazine* reported that by July 1958 “[m]ore than 20 different *Music Man* recordings are selling like pinwheels on the third of July. The marching band arrangement of *Seventy-six Trombones* is already on the music racks of more than 6,000 brass bands across the U.S.”⁵²⁶ In 1959, Willson published “*But He Doesn’t Know the Territory!*,” his autobiographical account of the six years he spent writing and rewriting *The Music Man* and seeing it through the often bewildering process of becoming a Broadway production.⁵²⁷ Willson also released an LP album, *And Then I Wrote the Music Man*, in which he and his wife performed the songs from the

⁵²³ Meredith Willson, “*But He Doesn’t Know the Territory!*,” (New York: G. Putnam’s Sons, 1959), 15.

⁵²⁴ At the 1957-58 12th Annual Tony Awards, *The Music Man* won Best Musical, Best Actor/Musical (Robert Preston), Best Supporting or Featured Actress/Musical (Barbara Cook), Best Supporting or Featured Actor/Musical (David Burns), and Best Conductor and Musical Director (Herbert Greene).

⁵²⁵ Opening “on the heels of *West Side Story* and *My Fair Lady* [it] was often considered the American counterpart in charm and characters to the latter show.” Oates, *Meredith Willson*, 129. The play closed on April 15, 1961.

⁵²⁶ *Time Magazine*, 72 (July 21, 1958): 42.

⁵²⁷ Meredith Willson, “*But He Doesn’t Know the Territory!*,” (New York: G. Putnam’s Sons, 1959). According to an undated Warner Bros. press release, the first edition of this book sold out in three weeks and was immediately reprinted. Warner Bros. Studio press release, undated, *The USC-WB Collection*.

play.⁵²⁸ Thereafter, Warner Bros. Studios purchased the screen rights.⁵²⁹

In doing so, Warner Bros. was acting in the manner dictated by Hollywood industry conditions of the time. The various factors acting upon the film industry throughout the 1950s had resulted in a tightening of the economic risks involved with filmmaking.⁵³⁰ As a result, Jerome Delameter notes that “the major studios all but stopped ‘original’ musical production and began to lean, instead, on the proven popularity of the Broadway show. Adaptations became the major form of musical productions in the Fifties and Sixties.”⁵³¹

The post-war decline in movie attendance and the break-up of the Hollywood studio system in the 1950s has been well-documented elsewhere; suffice it to say that from the record \$1.692 million in 1946, Hollywood’s box office receipts dropped by 43%, to \$955 million, by

⁵²⁸ Warner Bros. described this album as a best-seller. Warner Bros. Studio press release, undated, *The Music Man* files, USC-WB Collection.

⁵²⁹ The Warner Bros. Studio archives maintained at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles contain an undated studio press release announcing Warner Bros.’ purchase of the screen rights to Willson’s play. Warner Bros. Studio press release, undated, USC-WB Collection. The timing of that purchase, however, can be gleaned from published press reports in January 1961 of the studio’s purchase of the property. See, e.g., Bob Thomas, “‘Music Man’ Film/Cameras Ready to Blaze Away,” *New York World Telegram*, January 13, 1961. In addition, studio records indicate that pre-production on *The Music Man* began January 3, 1961, with principal photography beginning on April 3, 1961 and concluding on July 10, 1961, ten days ahead of schedule. Warner Bros. Interoffice Communication from Joel Freeman to Steve Trilling, January 4, 1961, USC-WB Collection; Warner Bros. Interoffice Communication from Charles F. Greenlaw to Eva Germaine, July 11, 1961, USC-WB Collection; Production No. 864, “The Music Man,” Daily Production and Progress Report July 10, 1961, USC-WB Collection. As has been noted, the play’s Broadway engagement ended on April 15, 1961.

⁵³⁰ Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 80.

⁵³¹ Jerome Delameter, “Performing Arts: The Musical,” in *American Film Genres: Approaches to a Critical Theory of Popular Film*, ed. Stuart M. Kaminsky (Dayton: Pflaum Publishing, 1974), 135.

1961.⁵³² Simultaneously, the dismantling of the studios' vertically integrated oligopoly and the reduction of their work force, as one among several cost-cutting measures, resulted in a fundamental change in the nature of film production. Increasingly, in-house production was replaced by the package unit system, a "short-term film-by-film arrangement"⁵³³ whereby an independent producer organized a film project, marshaling the narrative property, personnel, equipment, and production sites, and secured its financing, often from a Hollywood studio.⁵³⁴ The net result of these factors was that, for the studios, each film became a distinct investment risk, in contrast to films during the studio era, where studios' exhibition divisions usually guaranteed profitability across a studio's annual film output regardless of the box office receipts of any particular film. In the 1950s, however, each film was increasingly subject to the imperative of turning a profit.

Moreover, beginning in the early 1950s, motion picture production costs began to rise, in part because of technological innovations and changes designed to lure audiences back into theaters such as 3-D, Cinerama, CinemaScope and VistaVision. By 1961, the average cost of a Hollywood feature was \$2 million. At the same time, a phenomenon that would eventually evolve into the blockbuster hit began to emerge. That is, in the 1950s, individual pictures began to achieve extraordinarily high profits that would have been unheard of a decade earlier. Increasing

⁵³² Wyatt, *High Concept*, 67.

⁵³³ Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction* (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2003), 336.

⁵³⁴ *Ibid.*

production costs, however, resulted in expensive flops as well.⁵³⁵

The extraordinarily high profits that certain big-budget pictures earned may have been attributable in part to another change in the movie industry in the 1950s. Movie audiences began to become segregated in their tastes; for teenagers, the studios produced rock 'n roll, teen problem, science fiction, and car and motorcycle films, often fairly low-budget productions. Older middle-class audiences, however, tended to prefer lavish spectacles, such as musicals (*Show Boat* (1951), *An American in Paris* (1951), *Singin' in the Rain* (1952)) and historical costume pictures (*Samson and Delilah* (1949), *David and Bathseba* (1951), *Quo Vadis?*(1951), *Ivanhoe* (1952)).⁵³⁶

Warner Bros., always a cost-conscious studio, continued to be profitable in the eight years after the end of the war, although in 1953, after it had been forced to sell off its exhibition division, its profits dropped to the 1940 level of \$3,000,000. The studio had never had as many top hits as other major studios, and this continued to be the case through the 1950s. Moreover, the loss of guaranteed venues for its films and its shrunken physical operation meant that now “there were no longer large numbers of cheaply produced features and shorts contributing to the total earnings as in earlier years.”⁵³⁷ In 1958, Warner Bros. recorded annual losses for the first time since 1934.⁵³⁸

What profitability Warners maintained in the post-war and postdivestiture period was achieved by cutting costs, moving into television production (one of the first of the Hollywood

⁵³⁵ Joel W. Finler, *The Hollywood Story* (London and New York: Wallflower Press 2003), 49.

⁵³⁶ Belton, *Wide Screen Cinema*, 83.

⁵³⁷ Finler, *Hollywood Story*, 301.

⁵³⁸ *Ibid.*, 287.

studios to do so), and selling its old movies to television. It enjoyed some success with 3-D and CinemaScope, however, and the studio's most successful films in the late 1950s were two Technirama productions, *Sayonara* (1957) starring Marlon Brando and *Auntie Mame* (1958) starring Rosalind Russell and directed by Morton DaCosta.⁵³⁹

This, then, was the state of industry – and Warner Bros.' position within the industry – at the time Warners acquired the motion picture rights to *The Music Man*. That Warners regarded *The Music Man* as an ideal project, as close to a guaranteed hit as could be found, is reflected in an undated studio press release stating that Warner Bros. had acquired the motion picture rights to *The Music Man* for “the highest price ever paid for any theatrical property,” and quoting Jack Warner as saying “Warner Bros. is proud to be the studio to film “The Music Man” [W]e regard it as a distinct coup to have acquired the most sought after theatrical property in entertainment history. We believe it to be fully representative of the best in American tradition and entertainment,”⁵⁴⁰ as well as “the heaviest pre-sold theatrical property to reach the screen.”⁵⁴¹

Consistent with the studio's view of *The Music Man* as “the most sought after” and “heaviest pre-sold” theatrical property “in entertainment history,” Warner Bros.' strategy for capitalizing on the box office potential of Willson's Broadway success was to make *The Music Man* an event. As reflected in the studio's fifty-page press book, Warners introduced the film with

⁵³⁹ Warners' other big budget films of the 1950s were a mixed bag at the box office. Films such as *The High and the Mighty* (1954), *A Star is Born* (1954), and *Mr. Roberts* (1955) were successful, but films such as *The Silver Chalice* (1954) and *Helen of Troy* (1955) lost millions. *Ibid.*, 301.

⁵⁴⁰ Warner Bros. Studio press release, undated, USC-WB Collection.

⁵⁴¹ *Ibid.*

a massive publicity campaign. This campaign was launched with a nine-team publicity “hand-planting” tour in April and May 1962, “each team travelling in a Chevrolet Impala station wagon emblazoned with the slogan ‘THE MUSIC MAN Is Coming,’” which resulted in “[m]ore than 70,000,000 copies of over 20 magazines [carrying] major treatment of THE MUSIC MAN by the time of the film’s world premiere. . . .”⁵⁴²

Well before this hand-planting tour, however, Warner Bros. had begun whetting the public’s appetite for its film of *The Music Man*. Over a year would pass, after all, between the closing of the Broadway play in April 1961 and the film’s premiere in June 1962. To take advantage of the interest and momentum generated by the stage play, Warner Bros. needed to keep *The Music Man* in the public consciousness during the time it took to produce the film. Thus, in fact, the studio began generating publicity for the film from the moment it acquired the screen rights to the play. For instance, in mid-January 1961, numerous newspapers reported on Warner Bros.’s purchase of the property.⁵⁴³ Throughout filming, which lasted from April to July 1961, periodic “visits to the set” stories appeared in the press.⁵⁴⁴ On October 18, 1961, eight months before the film’s release, the studio issued a press release announcing the Webcor-RMC

⁵⁴² Warner Bros. Studio Pressbook, *The Music Man*.

⁵⁴³ “Trombones Coming to Screen,” *Vancouver Sun*, January 11, 1961; Bob Thomas, “‘Music Man’ Film/Cameras Ready to Blaze Away,” *New York Post*, January 11, 1961; Bob Thomas, “‘Music Man’ Film/Cameras Ready to Blaze Away,” *New York World Telegram*, January 13, 1961; “‘Music Man’ to be Picture,” *The Gazette*, January 13, 1961; “That ‘Music Man’ Goes Hollywood,” *Toronto Telegram*, January 18, 1961.

⁵⁴⁴ E.g., “German Officials Visit Studio,” *Los Angeles Herald & Express*, April 19, 1961; “Jimmy Starr’s Daily Diary,” *Los Angeles Herald & Express*, May 18, 1961. Corbina Wright’s March 30, 1961 column described her visit to *The Music Man* set. Corbina Wright, *Los Angeles Herald & Express*, March 30, 1961.

National Music Man competition for student musicians,⁵⁴⁵ which ran from February through April 1962 and was part of a \$1,000,000 promotional drive on behalf of *The Music Man* undertaken by Webcor, a distributor of tape-recorders, phonographs and radios, and Richards Music Cor, a manufacturer of band instruments.⁵⁴⁶

According to the studio, the “spectacular climax to the tremendous pre-release publicity campaign for THE MUSIC MAN,”⁵⁴⁷ was the film’s press premiere in Meredith Willson’s hometown, Mason City, Iowa, well-known as the inspiration for *The Music Man*’s River City. This was not, in fact, simply a movie premiere; rather, Warners scheduled it to coincide with – and take advantage of – a long-standing Mason City tradition which literally embodied the film’s central motif of the marching band: the North Iowa high school band competition. Since its inception in the 1930s,⁵⁴⁸ this annual competition had always been hosted by Mason City, but in past (and future) years, it was a regional contest, limited to schools located in northern Iowa and Minnesota. When Warner Bros. decided to hold the film’s press premiere in Mason City, however, the two events became linked, and the 24th Annual North Iowa Band Festival was expanded, for 1962 only, into a national competition, believed to be the first national marching band competition

⁵⁴⁵ Warner Bros. press release, 18 October 1931 [sic: 1961], USC-WB Collection.

⁵⁴⁶ In this student music contest, 18,000 prizes were awarded to student musicians across the nation. The competition also included “point of purchase” guessing contests and lucky number drawings, for which exhibitors were invited to provide movie tickets as prizes. Warner Bros. Studio Pressbook, *The Music Man*.

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁸ Oates, *Meredith Willson*, 144.

ever held in the United States.⁵⁴⁹

Warner Bros. began publicizing the newly christened *Music Man* National Marching Band Competition a full year in advance. On June 22, 1961, the studio issued a press release announcing that

[m]ore than 100 high school bands representing all 50 states will converge on Mason City, Iowa next year to participate in “The Music Man” National Band Festival, the biggest and most elaborate event of its kind ever staged.

.....

Of such vast scope is the Band Festival that a full year has been set up for preparations. . . .

.....

In addition to national and foreign press coverage, band contest plans embrace television and radio coverage of key activities in the event-filled day which will include a three-hour parade of bands and “The Music Man” floats, a typical Iowa picnic in Mason City’s East Park, barber shop quartet performances and other entertainment.

A stadium concert will feature massed visiting bands, with competitions for “The Music Man” honors and awards.⁵⁵⁰

Six months later, Warners was able to report to the Hollywood trade papers that 121 bands from 34 states had applied for participation in the competition.⁵⁵¹

For its part, the town of Mason City did indeed spend an entire year planning for and putting on the *Music Man* National Marching Band Competition and World Press Premiere.

⁵⁴⁹ “Cary, N.C. Band Advance Arranges for Appearance,” *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, April 1962 (date unknown).

⁵⁵⁰ Warner Bros. Studio press release, June 22, 1961, USC-WB Collection. In mid-July 1961, Warners issued a trade press release that the *Music Man* National Marching Band Competition would be announced in the August 1961 issues of four music educator magazines: *School Musician*, *Instrumentalist*, *Music Journal*, and *Music Educators Journal*. Carl Combs, July 14, 1961, Warner Bros. Studios press release, USC-WB Collection.

⁵⁵¹ Carl Combs, December 21, 1961, Warner Bro. Studios press release, USC-WB Collection.

Although Warner Bros. provided significant financial support, the event nonetheless required a \$35,000 fund-raising campaign by Mason City's Chamber of Commerce (four times the campaign goal of previous years)⁵⁵² and the cooperation and participation of all the city's downtown merchants. In addition, given the prediction that 8000 band members would be in town for the competition,⁵⁵³ significant citizen involvement was needed to meet the demand for housing.⁵⁵⁴ The festival became an opportunity for municipal celebration of two of the town's greatest sources of pride: its annual band competition and especially Willson, its favorite son. For instance, the annual Iowa State Rose Show, held in the Hotel Hanford, where the city's VIP festival guests were lodged, presented "a floral tribute to Meredith Willson" and sponsored a special sweepstakes for flower arrangements with *Music Man* motifs.⁵⁵⁵ A one-of-a-kind gold medal was struck, to be presented to Willson at the film premiere, and replicate souvenir coins were available for

⁵⁵² Local coverage indicates that municipal funding was needed for revamping the electrical system for the lights of Mason City's Central Park, "City to Revamp Central Park Lighting Before Festival," *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, February 13, 1962, and for erecting promotional billboards posted around the town's perimeter. "City to Revamp Central Park Lighting Before Festival," *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, February 13, 1962.

⁵⁵³ "Expect 8000 High School Musicians for Band Festival," *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, February 17, 1962.

⁵⁵⁴ In March 1962, the *Mason City Globe-Gazette* began publishing articles calling for volunteers to provide band members two nights' housing and two breakfasts. See, e.g., "Who Will House Music Man Bandsmen Until Blast Off?" *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, March 28, 1962; "Mason City Opening Doors for 'Music Man' Visitors," *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, April 16, 1962; "Need Lodging for 755 Band Guests," *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, May 11, 1962; "No Cancellation of Housing Facilities Now, PLEASE!" *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, June 14, 1962.

⁵⁵⁵ "Meredith Willson Tribute in Iowa State Rose Show," *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, June 13, 1962.

purchase.⁵⁵⁶ Sculptor Carl Carlson committed to producing a public statue of Willson,⁵⁵⁷ and the city fathers renamed the Willow Creek footbridge, which in its pre-1940s incarnation served as Willson's inspiration for the one in *The Music Man*, as the "Meredith Willson Footbridge."⁵⁵⁸

This celebratory participation, in fact, went beyond Mason City itself to the state of Iowa as a whole. The city's mayor and the 1961 North Iowa Band Festival queen, serving as welcoming committee, greeted not only Willson and the Hollywood celebrities when they arrived at the Mason City airport but Iowa's senators as well, both of whom attended the band competition and premiere. Moreover, as Warners had predicted, the event received widespread media exposure. The Mason City *Globe-Gazette* reported that Voice of America would cover the festival internationally.⁵⁵⁹ In addition, newspapers throughout the United States reported on the festival and premiere, ranging from such metropolitan organs as the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, and the *Miami News*, to those of smaller cities and towns, such as the *Newark Evening News*, the *Des Moines Register*, and the *Cedar Rapids Gazette*.

The band competition and film premiere took place on Tuesday, June 19, 1962, although the festivities actually began the evening before with such events as a motorcade of the film's

⁵⁵⁶ "Gold Medal Struck for M. Willson," Mason City *Globe-Gazette*, June 15, 1962.

⁵⁵⁷ Cliff Carlson, "Sculptor Gives Details for Proposed Willson Statue," Mason City *Globe-Gazette*, April 9, 1962.

⁵⁵⁸ Resolution No. 4820, "A Resolution Expressing Appreciation to Meredith Willson, and Naming a Certain Footbridge in His Honor in the City of Mason City, Iowa," June 4, 1962; "Footbridge Named for Willson," Mason City *Globe-Gazette*, June 5, 1962; "City Footbridge Honors Willson," Mason City *Globe-Gazette*, June 15, 1962.

⁵⁵⁹ "Voice of America Will Give Band Festival World Coverage," Mason City *Globe-Gazette*, June 7, 1962.

celebrities through town; a dinner “for visiting dignitaries” at the Hotel Hanford; a two-hour downtown open house of local businesses for visiting band personnel⁵⁶⁰; and a reception for out-of-state “bandmasters and wives” and chaperones. Tuesday morning’s events began with the four-hour Grand Parade, consisting of more than one hundred high school marching bands and “queens, floats and personalities.” At noon, a picnic was held in Central Park for the visiting celebrities, other dignitaries, and Iowa and Minnesota bandmasters, with entertainment provided by various barbershop quartets.

The band competition itself occurred Tuesday afternoon at Mason City’s Roosevelt Field, while simultaneously, a program was held in Central Park consisting of concerts by the non-competing bands and the presentation of the band festival queens. At 6:00 m., Roosevelt Field was opened for the “grand entry of all bands,” at which time the competition winner was announced and the band queen crowned. In the evening, the festival concluded with the premiere of *The Music Man* at the Palace Theatre, emceed by Arthur Godfrey and attendance limited primarily to members of the press.⁵⁶¹

In the end, thirty-two bands competed in band competition,⁵⁶² and press estimates of the total number of visitors rose as high as 100,000, although the Mason City newspaper reported

⁵⁶⁰ Each downtown merchant was assigned one of the states represented by a competing band and then dressed its shop window in the “theme” of that state; for the open house, the stores stayed open until 9 m. on Band Festival Day. “Stores to Put on Festive Dress for Music Man Bands,” Mason City *Globe-Gazette*, March 1, 1962.

⁵⁶¹ The Music Man Marching Band Competition Festival Program, Mason City, Iowa, June 19, 1962.

⁵⁶² The band from Rockville, Illinois was the winner.

attendance at 75,000.⁵⁶³ (Not surprisingly, Warner Bros. used the 100,000 figure in its promotional use of the event; the studio may have been, in fact, the source of that number.)

Whatever the true number, it was anticipated that crowds during Tuesday's events would be so great that postmaster Henry Pendergraft stopped downtown mail deliveries for the day.⁵⁶⁴

Warner Bros.' full-court publicity press did not end with *The Music Man*'s Mason City press premiere on June 19, 1962 and the subsequent Denver, Colorado world premiere on July 6, 1962.⁵⁶⁵ The studio press book proclaims July 1962, the month of the film's nationwide release, to be Muzak Corporation's "MUSIC MAN MONTH," in which, each day, Muzak would feature songs from the film, to the certain enjoyment of elevator-riders everywhere. In addition, as part of Warner Records' promotion for the film's soundtrack album, July 25, 1962 was named "'Music Man Day' on 750 radio stations [in 45 states] across the country."⁵⁶⁶

To the extent possible, Warner Bros. encouraged exhibitors to make the public's theater-

⁵⁶³ Phil Currie, "75,000 Jam City for Band Festival/4-Hour Parade is Led by Meredith Willson," *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, June 19, 1962.

⁵⁶⁴ "'Music Man' Festival Stops Mail Delivery," *Post-Advocate*, June 19, 1962; Carl Wright, "'They Stopped the Mails'/U.S. Newspapers Laud 'Music Man' Festival," *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, June 25, 1962.

⁵⁶⁵ Frances Melrose, "'Music Man' to Premiere in Denver," *Rocky Mountain News*, June 3, 1962; "Theaters Inspected for 'Music Man,'" *Denver Post*, June 6, 1962. "'Denver was selected for the world premiere because we believe it to be the best movie town in the country in ratio of audiences to population.'" *Ibid.*

⁵⁶⁶ "'On the Air' with Hank Grant," *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 25, 1962. Warner Records' two-page advertisement in *Billboard Music Week* for National "Music Man Day" boasts of "more than 700 radio stations throughout the U.S. light[ing] a belated firecracker for Meredith Willson's 'The Music Man.'" "Now! Join In and Celebrate National Music Man Day July 25th," *Billboard Music Week*, July 28, 1962. The two-page spread includes a "partial list" of radio stations participating in National Music Man Day, in which list forty-five states are represented. *Ibid.*

going experience at the film's local openings an event in itself. Warners' press book provides contact information for all chapters of the Society for the Preservation and Encouragement of Barber Shop Quartet Singing in America, explaining that the winning quartet in *Music Man* Quartet contests being held in 700 cities in the U.S. and Canada would "perform free-of-charge on the stage or in the lobby of its local theater during the premiere ceremonies." The press book also includes an ad for a "towering animated lobby display" and an invitation for exhibitors to contact their local Warner Bros. Records distributor "to set up co-op displays and promotion campaigns."⁵⁶⁷

In addition, as Warners' most important film of the year, *The Music Man* had been filmed in Super Technirama 70,⁵⁶⁸ a 70 mm wide-screen format developed in 1957 in response to the Todd-AO system,⁵⁶⁹ which had been the format used in the studio's two biggest successes of the late 1950s. *The Music Man* was of course filmed with stereophonic sound as well, and as part of its orchestration of audiences' experience of *The Music Man*, the studio took steps to ensure that the film's exhibitors were equipped to deliver that sound properly. Specifically, Warners' distributors were notified that

[a]ll theaters which run this picture must have the stereo sound equipment checked and serviced prior to the opening of the picture. You must make sure that all three channels are properly balanced and that surrounding speakers are operating at good level. . . . You must check and re-check to make certain that the exhibitor has his

⁵⁶⁷ In addition, the press book contains descriptions of preview trailers and the film's tie-ins: sheet music, the *Music Man* Dell Comic Book, and Pyramid's promotion of its paperback novelization (proclaimed to be the "year's biggest tie-in"). It also includes the usual theater displays and newspaper publicity articles available for exhibitors' use.

⁵⁶⁸ Finler, *Hollywood Story*, 296.

⁵⁶⁹ Belton, *Wide Screen Cinema*, 178-79, 182.

equipment in shape according to the above.⁵⁷⁰

Finally, *The Music Man* was released as a “Special Engagement.”⁵⁷¹ The film opened nationally on July 25, 1962, but only in exclusive, advanced-price runs. In Hollywood, for instance, *The Music Man* opened on an exclusive basis at the Hollywood-Paramount, where instead of the regular matinee admission price of \$1.75, admission price for *The Music Man* was \$2.40, and the evening admission price was \$2.80 rather than the regular \$2.40.⁵⁷² In New York City, *The Music Man*’s initial exclusive run was at the Radio City Music Hall;⁵⁷³ in Chicago, at the Chicago Theatre,⁵⁷⁴ in San Francisco, at the Coronet,⁵⁷⁵ and so on. It was only after a sixteen-week run at the Hollywood-Paramount that *The Music Man* went into broader release in Los

⁵⁷⁰ Warner Bros. Studio Interoffice Communication, Charles Boasberg to All Branch Division Managers in U.S. and Canada, undated, *Music Man* files, USC-WB Collection.

⁵⁷¹ Warner Bros. Interoffice Communication from Charles Boasberg to All Branches in US and Home Office Personnel, attaching Competitive Bid Application and special letter for exhibitors in competitive bid situations, 29 March 1962, USC-WB Collection. Boasberg instructs all branches that in the Competitive Bid Application form, “Special Engagement” is to be written in under “Run or Availability” and that “none” is to be written in under “Clearance.” Studio executives were quoted as saying that the studio had chosen not to give *The Music Man* a road-show release, with audiences limited to reserved seats only, “because of its tremendous appeal for the whole family”; rather, the special engagement, continuous run release would “give a great many more people the opportunity to enjoy the film.” “Theaters Inspected for ‘Music Man,’” *Denver Post*, June 6, 1962.

⁵⁷² *Variety (Daily)*, July 26, 1962.

⁵⁷³ *The Music Man* did not open at the Radio City Music Hall until August 23, 1962 because the prior engagement, *That Touch of Mink*, was held over. “‘Music Man’ Regional Date,” *Box Office*, July 23, 1962; “‘Music Man’ Opens 8-23 at Radio City Music Hall,” *Hollywood Reporter* August 9, 1962.

⁵⁷⁴ “Louder Chi ‘Music,’” *Variety (D)*, July 27, 1962.

⁵⁷⁵ “‘Music’ BO Louder in 2nd Frisco Lap Than in Socko First Week,” *Variety (D)*, July 25, 1962.

Angeles on November 14, 1962⁵⁷⁶; similarly, *The Music Man* opened at neighborhood New York theaters only on November 21, 1962,⁵⁷⁷ in time, nonetheless, to capitalize on the long Thanksgiving weekend. Further, even in these subsequent openings, exhibitors continued to bring in special elements. For instance, in November 1962, *The Hollywood Reporter* claimed that *The Music Man* had “renewed exhibitors’ faith in old-time showmanship,” pointing to recent premieres at the Roxy Theatre in Glendale, where the Glendale High School band played “76 Trombones” outside the theater and two barbershop quartets performed in the lobby, and at the El Miro Theatre in Santa Monica, where the film’s opening included a performance by the Santa Monica High School Band.⁵⁷⁸

In the end, Warners’ extensive efforts to promote the film paid off; *The Music Man* earned \$8 million in rentals in 1962, making it number seven on *Variety*’s List of Big Rental Pictures of 1962.⁵⁷⁹ According to a studio press release, more than 300,000 soundtrack record albums were

⁵⁷⁶ “‘Music Man’ 422G in 16 H’w’d Weeks,” *Variety*, November 14, 1962.

⁵⁷⁷ “‘Music Man’ Opens in 76 NY Neighborhood Houses,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, November 21, 1962. “‘Music Man’ will open today in 76 leading RKO and other neighborhood m. theatres throughout the NY metropolitan area for an extended stay to include the 4-day Thanksgiving holiday weekend. Many theatres will celebrate opening of the Warners release with local bands marching through the neighborhood and barber-shop quartets performing on stage.” *Ibid.*

⁵⁷⁸ *Hollywood Reporter*, November 22, 1962.

⁵⁷⁹ *Variety Anniversary Issue*, January 9, 1963. The Internet Movie Database lists the film’s domestic grosses as \$14,953,846. <http://imdb.com/title/tt0056262/business> Warner Bros. studio records indicate that the projected direct cost for *The Music Man* as of February 28, 1961 was \$4,240,000. Production Budget, *The Music Man*, February 28, 1961, USC-WB Collection. In its first week in its exclusive engagement at the Hollywood-Paramount Theater alone, *The Music Man* grossed \$43,000, out-grossing even *Gone With the Wind*, “‘Music Man’ Fortissimo 43G, Pacing Hot LA 1st-Run Race,” *Variety (D)*, July 31, 1962, and ultimately, its sixteen-week, exclusive engagement at the Hollywood-Paramount Theater “amassed a record-shattering gross

sold in the first week of the album's release, making this the best-selling record in Warner Bros. Records history.⁵⁸⁰ The film was nominated for six Academy Awards and won the Oscar for the best adapted musical score.⁵⁸¹ It also won the Golden Globe award for Best Motion Picture/Musical, Laurel Awards for Top Musical and Top Male Musical Performance (Robert Preston),⁵⁸² and the Writers Guild of America award for Best Written American Musical. On July 5, 1962, *The Hollywood Reporter* announced that seventeen magazines had chosen *The Music Man* as their Picture-of-the-Month for August 1962,⁵⁸³ and in its February 1963 issue, *The Sign*, a national Catholic magazine, named *The Music Man* Best Picture of 1962.⁵⁸⁴

of over \$500,000.” “Wonderful Music,” *Citizen News*, November 19, 1962. It was the top grosser as well in its opening week in Chicago, Detroit, Columbus, Ohio, and San Francisco, “‘Music Man’ Rolled Up Top Grosses,” *Motion Picture Daily*, July 27, 1962, and *Film Daily* reported that *The Music Man* “set a record gross of \$324,153 in 15 regional premieres: Chicago, Detroit, Columbus, San Francisco, Omaha, Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, Des Moines, Milwaukee, Denver, Oakland, Madison, San Jose, Reno, and Fresno.” “‘Music Man’ Sings Sweetly at B.O.,” *Film Daily*, July 27, 1962.

⁵⁸⁰ Friedman, Warner Bros. Studio press release, July 30, 1962, USC-WB Collection.

⁵⁸¹ In addition to the music scoring nomination, *The Music Man* was nominated for Best Picture; Best Sound; Best Art Direction-Set Direction, Color; Best Costume Design-Color; and Best Film Editing.

⁵⁸² Shirley Jones placed third for the Laurel Award for Top Female Musical Performance.

⁵⁸³ “‘Music Man’ Pick of Month,” *Hollywood Reporter*, July 5, 1962.

⁵⁸⁴ “‘Music Man’ Selected as Best Picture,” *Citizen News*, February 8, 1963; “Catholic Mag’s Choice,” *Hollywood Reporter*, February 8, 1963. Similarly, in early 1963, *The Music Man* was the “top winner” in an annual film poll conducted by the California Federation of Women’s Clubs, which had “a membership of over 80,000, according to Motion Picture Chairman Laura F. Curry.” “‘Music Man’ Top Winner in Cal. Women’s Clubs Poll,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, March 12, 1963.

The Music Man: 1962 Nostalgia for 1912 River City

From the outset, certain themes appeared repeatedly in the public discourse about *The Music Man*. Foremost of these themes was *The Music Man*'s "idyllic" portrait of small-town life at the turn of the century and its ability to recreate for audiences, at least to some degree, the *experience* of that prior time and place. If any of the discursive themes surrounding *The Music Man* can be deemed to be central to its identity, it is this one, for the work has always been known and promoted as Willson's affectionate re-creation of – and tribute to – his home town Mason City during his boyhood in the 1910s. In some respects, this discourse reflects the automatic attribution of "nostalgia" to the turn-of-the-century small-town setting as had occurred with earlier films such as *Excuse My Dust* and *Wait Til the Sun Shines, Nellie*. In other respects, this discourse reflects a shift in Hollywood's representation of the turn-of-the-century small town from a forward-looking entity to one blissfully content to remain in its pre-modern state. In both cases, however, the designation of *The Music Man* as "nostalgia" is complicated by the content and the tone of the text itself, even though nostalgia and cultural memory were the cornerstones of Warner Bros.' promotion of the film.

Specifically, in marked contrast to the ambivalence toward the past expressed in the studio's publicity for *On Moonlight Bay* and *By the Light of the Silvery Moon* in the early 1950s, Warner Bros. approach to publicizing *The Music Man* was to foreground and celebrate its period setting as something both distinct from the present day and appealing in its own right; as something appealing, in fact, *because of* its difference from modern-day American life. In an undated press release, Warner Bros. made the case that *The Music Man*'s period setting *was* the basis for its appeal:

Whoever believes there is nothing good about the good old days except they're gone is no judge of the public taste, particularly in movies.

Nothing seems to please moviegoers more than a nostalgic backward glance at the days of yore.

....

For instance, currently in production at Warner Bros. are no less than four top notch pictures set in the early part of the century.

Oldest of the lot in terms of time is Meredith Willson's "The Music Man," with Morton DaCosta producing and directing, which takes place in a small Iowa town in 1912.

....

Perhaps it is because of every man's familiarity with the past and his uncertainty about the future, but *there is apparently no better subject for a good movie than a little journey into the past.*⁵⁸⁵

As with any promotional material, it is impossible to determine if the studio was reacting to and attempting to capitalize on a nostalgic turn in popular taste or simply trying to create a market for its films, and it may in fact have been doing a little of both. The assertion that the past *as past* holds appeal for movie-goers, as well as the reference to the public's "uncertainty about the future," however, mark a distinct change in marketing strategy from that the studio employed for its Doris Day films of the early 1950s; to the extent a film studio such as Warner Bros. can be credited with gauging public taste with any degree of accuracy, this press release suggests that by 1961, some of the perception of confidence underlying the mid-century boosterism informing Hollywood's immediate post-war representation of the turn-of-the-century small town has begun to ebb. In this, this press release reflects a milder version of the same sentiment advanced so strongly by Rod Serling in 1960's "A Stop at Willoughby."

Warners' strategy in marketing *The Music Man* as "a little journey into the past" took the form of promoting *The Music Man* as offering a pleasurable immersion into its period setting; one

⁵⁸⁵ Undated Warner Bros. press release, *Music Man* files, USC-WB Collection (emphasis added).

of the studio's tactics in this promotion was to emphasize the film's period authenticity. A year and a half before the film's release, the studio prepared a press release in the form of a letter from the film's director, Morton DaCosta, to nationally syndicated columnist Dorothy Kilgallen, with the intention that, on a particular day, Kilgallen would print the letter instead of her regular column. In the press release, DaCosta claimed that the studio's goal was to make *The Music Man* as authentic to its period as possible, noting that

[i]n putting River City on the screen at Warner Bros., we have plunged . . . deeply into the customs, appliances and attitudes of the period: the high-button shoes, peach-basket hats, bloomers and bosoms, corsets, knickerbockers and pongee dust coats . . . antimacassars on the sofa, fringed lampshades, upright pianos, hat racks in the hall, swings on the front porch, Teddy Roosevelt campaign buttons, ice boxes, flowered wallpaper, pink ice cream . . .⁵⁸⁶

Similarly, in a press release issued six months before the film's premiere, Warners Bros.' publicists describe Dorothy Jeakins, the film's costume designer, as "a specialist in Americana" who "knows more about bustles, bloomers and high-button shoes than probably anybody else in show business." Pointing to Grant Wood's "American Gothic" as exemplifying "the period and the type we are trying to bring nostalgic life to on the screen," she is reportedly engaged in

sketching knee-britches, overalls and belted-back suits for the male dancers, frilly calico skirts, Mary Jane shoes and flowered bonnets for the girls. She'll put Robert Preston in the city slicker suits of a Midwestern salesman, and she'll put Shirley Jones in the drab costume of the town librarian until she blossoms as the belle of River City, Iowa.

. . . .

Morton DaCosta, producer-director of "The Music Man," wants to make the film look and feel like the period, Miss Jeakins explained. "*It will be like looking back to 1912 through a misty mirror.* It won't be stylized. *It will be*

⁵⁸⁶ "For Dorothy Kilgallen's column," Warner Bros. Studio press release, June 21, 1961, *Music Man* files, USC-WB Collection. .

*authentic, but also gay and happy and even amusing.*⁵⁸⁷

Another press release describes de Costa as relying on turn-of-the-century Sears-Roebuck and Montgomery Ward catalogues and on 1900s issues of *Vanity Fair*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, and *Captain Billy's Whiz Bang* to come up with Jones' period hairstyle for the film, which needed to be what "a librarian might have worn back in Iowa in 1912"⁵⁸⁸

In Warners' publicity, part of the film's claim to authenticity stems from its being based not on the general idea of the turn-of-century small town but on a *specific* small town in the *specific* year of 1912:

It isn't very often that a man is privileged to stand around and watch his hometown being rebuilt in Hollywood. But this is exactly the experience which is engaging the happy attention of Meredith Willson at Warner Bros., where the store fronts and signs went up on River City, Iowa.

River City is, to be sure, the fictional name for the very real town of Mason City, the background for Willson's fabulous show, "The Music Man. . . .

. . . .

It's Iowa in 1912, and as on the stage, the screen version will concentrate heartily on the authentic Iowa flavor of 50 years ago. . . .⁵⁸⁹

⁵⁸⁷ Carl Combs, Warner Bros. press release, January 12, 1962, USC-WB Collection (emphasis added).

⁵⁸⁸ Carl Combs, Warner Bros. Studios press release for H. Heffernan, January 30, 1962, *Music Man* files, USB-WB Collection.

⁵⁸⁹ "For Phil Scheuer," Carl Combs, Warner Bros. press release, May 5, 1961, USC-WB Collection (emphasis added). Another studio press release from May 1961 reports that [f]rom the frantic action of the stage and the blare of those famous trombones, [columnist Neil Rau joins] Meredith Willson on a tour of the backlot, where Warners has turned three and a half acres into River City. Meredith points out that the town as re-created for the film is very much as he remembers his hometown of Mason City, Iowa, when he was a youngster there. Mason City is the inspiration for "The Music Man." Even the names on the stores fronts belong to people whom Meredith remembers back in Mason City. The town is equipped with the library, high school, livery stable, depot, lumber yard, ice cream parlor, and pool hall. Not to mention the statue in the town square of the richest man in

Moreover, when a studio press release reports Willson's confirmation that Warners' River City "as re-created for the film is very much as he remembers his hometown of Mason City, Iowa, when he was a youngster there"⁵⁹⁰ or describes Willson as "strid[ing] through the [River City] streets on Warner Bros.' backlot, bowing and nodding at the store windows and giving the listener an anecdote bearing on almost every one,"⁵⁹¹ the authenticity conferred by the specificity of River City's origins is enhanced by Willson's bona fides as long-standing raconteur of his hometown's history; similar reassurance of the film's authenticity is offered by Warners' quoting Willson as saying that "[t]he attitudes and the ideas in 'The Music Man' are exactly as I remember them from my childhood."⁵⁹² Of course, on both counts, what is being promised audiences is not, in fact, "authenticity" but rather Willson's memory; the latter, however, is positioned as the guarantor of the former.

Warners employs a certain associational memory as well in its promotion of *The Music Man*. Just as Warners' press releases are replete with references to the accouterments of life at the turn of the last century such as high button shoes, knickerbockers, flowered wallpaper, bloomers,

town.

"I invited my brother out from Dallas," Meredith said. "I told him I wanted him to watch the shooting, but actually, I wanted to take him back here for an eerie revisit to the town of our boyhood. He thought he was dreaming!" "For Neil Rau . . . with art," Carl Combs, Warner Bros. Studio press release, May 1, 1961, USC-WB Collection.

⁵⁹⁰ "For Neil Rau . . . with art," Carl Combs, Warner Bros. Studio press release, May 1, 1961, USC-WB Collection.

⁵⁹¹ "For Phil Scheuer," Carl Combs, Warner Bros. press release, May 5, 1961, USC-WB Collection (emphasis added).

⁵⁹² Ibid. (emphasis added).

and *Captain Billy's Whiz Bang*, this publicity also repeatedly refer to persons, events, or practices of the early twentieth century that have nothing to do with *The Music Man* itself. Thus, after establishing that *The Music Man* will “authentically” recreate Iowa of 1912, a studio press release reminds readers that “[t]he first Buffalo nickel was coined in 1912, and Carrie Nation was smashing saloon doors all over the Midwest. . . .”⁵⁹³; da Costa’s choice of Jones’ hairstyle ““is the kind of hair styling . . . that young women wore just after the Gibson Girl period and a few years before Irene Castle introduced the shingle bob and launched the era of the flapper”; it is thus appropriate for 1912, which, incidentally, was “the year the Titanic went down, and gambler Herman Rosenthal was shot dead, and President Taft sported a big fat mustache.”⁵⁹⁴ These litanies of “time markers” – of the artefacts of the material world being recreated in *The Music Man* (some of which don’t actually appear in the film) and of “real life” personages and events contemporary to (or framing) the film’s fictional time setting but unmentioned in the film – conjure up a series of explicit images in the reader’s mind, all potential – and I would argue intended – triggers of “memory” of *The Music Man*’s period setting. This tactic engages the reader in an imaginative creation of *The Music Man* before actually seeing the movie – or at least invites such an engagement – where such an imaginative creation is, in certain respects, fuller and more complete than the film will prove to be. It is indisputable that the imaginary invoked by this publicity is grounded in “reality” and history – that is, in the known and/or documented experience of life in 1912 America – and hence seems designed to guarantee the film’s “authenticity,” or at a

⁵⁹³ Ibid. (emphasis added).

⁵⁹⁴ Carl Combs, Warner Bros. Studios press release for H. Heffernan, January 30, 1962, *Music Man* files, USB-WB Collection.

minimum, to predispose viewers – by planting these images in their minds – to perceive that authenticity, much as the reader of a novel unconsciously fill in details omitted from its film adaptation and thus “sees” a more “complete” film than does someone who has not read the book.

At the same time, these lists and reminders seem designed to provoke a pleasurable response; otherwise, they would not have been part of the film’s promotion. In the value this publicity implicitly accords both period authenticity and pleasurable immersion in period details, the studio capitalizes on the long-standing nostalgia for the turn-of-the-century small town that had colored response to earlier post-war films with similar settings even where the films themselves celebrate future urbanization and mechanization more than their own time and place. However, the greater emphasis on period authenticity and detail – and the community of shared pleasure implicitly created among those recognizing the publicity’s many references – suggests a coming-forward of the turn-of-the-century small town to a place of greater legitimacy, or at least value, in popular discourse, reflecting the trend begun, as has been suggested, with the opening of Disneyland in 1955. Certainly, as a text, *The Music Man* offers viewers a playful, light-hearted *immersion* in its diegetic time and place in which, rather than requiring that its period setting be undercut with overt accommodations to modern-day taste, the pleasure consists of the pretense of returning to and reliving the period setting, albeit in a highly idealized form whose accommodation to modern tastes takes the more covert form of hiding or smoothing away aspects of that setting that incongruously interfere with the pretty, harmonious myth these cultural products both rely on and perpetuate.

As for the film’s reception, like that of earlier films such as *Summer Holiday* and *By the Light of the Silvery Moon*, critics consistently characterized *The Music Man*’s period setting as

“innocent,” both with respect to the stage play and the film. For instance, the *New York Herald-Tribune* praised the stage play for its “ebullient good humor, the eternally infectious footwork, the inventive scoring and the rich and racy gaiety that erupts *in an innocent world*,”⁵⁹⁵ while *Music World* applauded the film for having brought “the *innocence of Iowa in 1912 . . .* to an enduring and rewarding screen life.”⁵⁹⁶ As had been the case with the stage play, most critical response to the film was couched in terms that affectionately – at times lyrically – recalled its period setting. In its July 21, 1958 cover story on the Broadway play, *Time Magazine* describes the audience’s departure after the play’s curtain calls, which had been accompanied by the orchestra’s playing “Seventy-six Trombones”:

At last the house lights come on, and the customers shoulder their way to the door, hands burning and hearts still tinging with a rediscovery of a bygone Fourth of July – a time when the franks were fat and hot and the firecrackers spat showers of sparks and the drum major’s spinning baton flashed in the sun, and the grass in the park felt as soft as corn silk underfoot. . . .⁵⁹⁷

Similarly, the *Hollywood Reporter* declared *The Music Man* to be a “box office bonanza” because

[w]hat Meredith Willson tried to do, and so admirably succeeded in doing . . . was to create through music a whole era and atmosphere of American life, *the Midwest at its first surge of vitality, a period (1912) of nostalgia and affection, a nostalgic, pastoral way of life now irrevocably gone*. . . .⁵⁹⁸

Other critics described *The Music Man*’s period setting as “the friendly days before world wars

⁵⁹⁵ Walter Kerr, *The New York Herald-Tribune*, quoted in Millstein, “The Music Man” LP liner notes (emphasis added).

⁵⁹⁶ “The Music Man – A Preview,” *Music Journal* 20 (May 1962): 5 (emphasis added).

⁵⁹⁷ *Time Magazine*, 72 (July 21, 1958): 42.

⁵⁹⁸ “The Music Man,” *Hollywood Reporter*, April 12, 1962 (emphasis added).

shattered [Mason City's] tranquility,"⁵⁹⁹ "an age now past but fondly remembered,"⁶⁰⁰ and "the days when rural America was delightfully naive and small towns had a personality of their own."⁶⁰¹ Significantly, to a greater degree than reviews of earlier turn-of-the-century small-town films, *The Music Man*'s reviews pitted its period setting against the present day in an explicit expression of nostalgia's opposition of "good past/bad present": In his substitute column for Kilgallen, DaCosta states that the conclusion of shooting will be "a sad-leaving" for those who had been associated with *The Music Man* since its Broadway opening: "Meredith Willson's innocent Iowa of 1912 has become so much a part of our lives that *it is likely to be a traumatic experience to pull ourselves back into the not-so-innocent space age of 1961.*"⁶⁰² Similarly, one reviewer states that *The Music Man* "reminds us that the America of several generations ago could find pleasure in a relaxing park stroll or community dance on a moonlit Summer's evening. The Jet Age of the Soaring Sixties can too easily forget such modest-paced recreation."⁶⁰³ Here *speed* and *space travel* are shorthand

⁵⁹⁹ "Melodies from American's Middle West," *Herald Examiners*, August 9, 1962 (emphasis added).

⁶⁰⁰ "With 76 Trombones," *New York Mirror Magazine*, July 15, 1962.

⁶⁰¹ George Bourke, "Family Will Enjoy Weekend Film Bill," *The Miami Herald*, July 28, 1962.

⁶⁰² "For Dorothy Kilgallen's column," Warner Bros. Studio press release, June 21, 1961, USC-WB Collection (emphasis added).

⁶⁰³ Allen M. Widem, "Coast-to-Coast: 'The Music Man' Bright Screen Entertainment," *Hartford Examiner*, June 23, 1962. Similarly, the original treatment by Marion Hargrove, the film's screenwriter, indicates Hargrove's initial intention was that from the Ice Cream Sociable forward, the film would "play as ONE UNINTERRUPTED PERIOD OF TIME: A small-town summer's evening *in the wonderful golden years before World War I*. No more dissolves/wipes/etc. The camera will meander from one scene to the next, one set to the next, letting the mood and the story build and flow without encumbrance." Marion Hargrove, "The Music Man" Story Treatment, November 3, 1960, *Music Man* files, USC-WB Collection (emphasis added). After the "Lida Rose" number, Hargrove calls for the camera to follow the

suggestions of qualities of mid-century life as – such as time pressure and relentless deadlines, or a certain alienation associated with increasing mechanization – to which 1912 River City’s slow-paced, earthbound existence is seen to offer a pleasant – even superior – alternative.

Some reviewers, however, were immune to *The Music Man*’s period charm:

The Music Man is overacted, overcute, overloud and overlong. . . . With [its] spindle-thin plot, *Music Man* needs every available prop of period nostalgia, from Fourth of July fireworks to Wells Fargo wagons. The trouble is that the movie wobbles continually between sentiment, satire and satiety; one barbershop-quartet number is a treat; half a dozen are a trial.⁶⁰⁴

More telling, perhaps, than reviews lauding *The Music Man* as pleasurable nostalgia and those disparaging it as brash, tiresome sentimentality were those by critics who found themselves captivated by the film in spite of themselves. In these reviews, *The Music Man* is described again and again as “corn” – as a sort of unabashed hokum or a deliberate, self-conscious naivete. Thus, one such reviewer wrote, “There’s a lot of corny Americana in River City, Iowa, in the year of 1912, but with it all there’s a freshness, a zest for living, and a thrill of anticipation, too, that will have you eagerly awaiting the next scene;”⁶⁰⁵ another opined that “[*The Music Man*] is the purest corn, but wondrous corn, and therein lies its charm.”⁶⁰⁶ While criticizing *The Music Man* as too slavish an adaptation of the Broadway play, Arthur Knight admits that “Meredith Willson’s

barbershop quartet, “looking at the vignettes they pass: leisurely, flavorful shots: people in period gliders, kids turning the handles of the ice cream freezer, and such.” Ibid. Hargrove’s suggestion was not followed in the finished film, however, where this sequence is punctuated with conventional cuts and dissolves.

⁶⁰⁴ *Time Magazine*, 53 (20 July 1962): 79.

⁶⁰⁵ Eugene A. Hoeffman, “What’s Flickin’,” *Time Out* (August 1962): 25.

⁶⁰⁶ “Happiest Bandwagon to Roll into Fort Worth Thursday,” *Fort Worth Press*, July 29, 1962.

show is virtually indestructible. He has converted a cornfield into a gold mine,” and one element of its appeal is “[i]ts setting (Iowa, 1912) [which] holds a nostalgic charm – a rustic American *as we would like it to have been.*”⁶⁰⁷ Thus, rather than the “authenticity” touted by Warner Bros. – studio publicity quotes Willson as saying that “if [*The Music Man*] had been overly romanticized, or there were notes in it not in keeping with the times and the place, I don’t think people would have responded so warmly to it”⁶⁰⁸ – these reviews suggest that the nostalgic appeal of *The Music Man* includes the recognition of its falseness.

Here the relationship between *authenticity* and *realism* comes into play; to the extent that perception of “authenticity” depends on “realistic” presentation, *The Music Man*’s promised “authenticity” is both idealized and false, and in this, presumably exactly what viewers were looking for when they went to see the film. Certainly, Warners’ claims to authenticity were made

⁶⁰⁷ Arthur Knight, “SR Goes to the Movies,” *Saturday Review*, July 30, 1962 (emphasis added).

⁶⁰⁸ “For Phil Scheuer,” Carl Combs, Warner Bros. press release, May 5, 1961, USC-WB Collection (emphasis added). Another studio press release from May 1961 reports that [f]rom the frantic action of the stage and the blare of those famous trombones, [columnist Neil Rau joins] Meredith Willson on a tour of the backlot, where Warners has turned three and a half acres into River City. Meredith points out that the town as re-created for the film is very much as he remembers his hometown of Mason City, Iowa, when he was a youngster there. Mason City is the inspiration for “The Music Man.” Even the names on the stores fronts belong to people whom Meredith remembers back in Mason City. The town is equipped with the library, high school, livery stable, depot, lumber yard, ice cream parlor, and pool hall. Not to mention the statue in the town square of the richest man in town.

“I invited my brother out from Dallas,” Meredith said. “I told him I wanted him to watch the shooting, but actually, I wanted to take him back here for an eerie revisit to the town of our boyhood. He thought he was dreaming!” “For Neil Rau . . . with art,” Carl Combs, Warner Bros. Studio press release, May 1, 1961, USC-WB Collection.

within the context of the generic conventions of the Hollywood musical, whereby – certain location shooting in *On the Town* (1949), *Oklahoma!* (1955), and *West Side Story* (1961) notwithstanding – “realism” was neither promised nor expected. Moreover, criticisms of *The Music Man* as a filmed stage play have merit⁶⁰⁹; except for occasional moments such as Harold Hill’s arrival in River City and the spectacular parade through town in the finale, the majority of the film obviously plays out on a sound stage, which is particularly evident in DaCosta’s iris effect, achieved through darkening the stage and leaving only the central character in a pool of light, such as at the conclusion of the “Good-night My Someone” number. This staged quality caused one review to complain that “[*The Music Man*] is synthetic in the worst sense. Nothing looks real.”⁶¹⁰ In addition, while set designs and costuming do seem true to the period for the most part, there is nonetheless a distinctly 1960s look to the film, a product perhaps of the artificial quality of the bright, even lighting and the sound stage settings (both of which call to mind other comedies and musicals of the period), Shirley Jones’ 1960s makeup, and the occasional anachronistic 1960s headband or electric-blue chiffon hat; as a nostalgic object, *The Music Man* in 1962 was generically ill-suited to and long pre-dates the meticulous re-creation of period detail that will characterize the “heritage” film of the 1980s and ‘90s, whose goal – and promise – is to try to eliminate from the text any visual reminder whatsoever of the time of its production. This, then, is “authenticity” with an asterisk: “authenticity” to the degree promised and tolerated in Hollywood’s

⁶⁰⁹ See, e.g., Arthur Knight, “SR Goes the the Movies,” *Saturday Review*, June 30, 1962 (“[*The Music Man* is] an overliteral, overslavish adherence to the stage version. . . . DaCosta tends to photograph everything in long, static shots that only serve to underscore the sense of theatre.”).

⁶¹⁰ Joseph Morgenstern, *New York Herald-Review*, August 24, 1962

mid-century musical comedies; that is to say, “authenticity” whose artificiality is foregrounded and even necessary to the suspension of disbelief upon which the pleasure of the Hollywood musical had long depended.

Similarly, *The Music Man* is not an overtly nostalgic film. It is true that River City, unlike Seville in *Wait Til the Sun Shines Nellie*, is not positioned as a town eager to leave its present self behind; it is also true that, somewhat like *Meet Me in St. Louis*, *The Music Man* anachronistically presents River City as a town in which modern technology is curiously absent. No one uses a telephone. The automobile appears only once in the film, when Marcellus arrives in his flivver to try to spirit Hill out of town before the angry mob captures him, and the town’s livery stable appears to be flourishing. Nonetheless, nothing in the film explicitly positions 1912 River City as something lost, such as the “darkening” town in *The Magnificent Ambersons*, or as the object of nostalgic yearning, such as Serling’s Willoughby. Indeed, as a narrative of redemption and rejuvenation, the film is not even particularly sentimental, for the best parts of its characters’ lives are only just beginning as the film ends. The sole scene which suggests a fond or wistful looking backward is the “Lida Rose/”Will I Ever Tell You” musical number. Taking place on a summer evening, this number consists of a split screen in which, on the left, the Buffalo Bills barbershop quartet sings “Lida Rose” while simultaneously on the right, Paroo sings “Will I Ever Tell You” as she sits on her front porch with her mother:

Dream of now, dream of then.
 Dream of a love song that might have been.
 Do I love you? Oh yes, I love you.
 And I’ll bravely tell you, but only when
 We dream again.

Sweet and low, sweet and low,
 How sweet that mem’ry, how long ago.

Forever? Oh yes, forever.
Will I ever tell you? Ah – no.

Not diegetically motivated by what is occurring in the film’s narrative, this song actually reflects the lost opportunities, the “unlived life” that had been Paroo’s lot before Hill came to River City. Later in the evening she is to rendezvous with him, experience her first kiss on the town’s “lover’s footbridge,” and bring about Hill’s redemption – as well as securing River City’s rejuvenation – in the film’s triumphant finale. Thus, despite its yearning tone, the song symbolizes a letting-go of a former time, place, or self, rather than a longing to return to it.

Even more fundamentally, the common description of *The Music Man*’s 1912 small-town setting as nostalgically “idyllic” is belied by the text itself. Admittedly, the film’s happy ending, in which Hill is redeemed and reconciled with the town by the boys’ and Paroo’s faith in him, and the film’s fantastic finale, in which night becomes day⁶¹¹ and Hill’s rag-tag boys’ band is magically transformed into a huge, magnificent marching band that parades through the town performing “Seventy-six Trombones,” leave the viewer with a sense of joyful community, as well as what Dyer has identified as the utopian feeling inherent in the Hollywood musical number. It is understandable, then, that the dominant impression of the film’s setting communicated by those writing about the film would be a positive one; one in fact in which this satisfying and uplifting happy ending – in the context of 1912 River City’s representation via well-established Hollywood conventions as an “unreal” place – would cast a decidedly idyllic quality upon the town’s temporal distance and geographical distinction from urban and suburban mid-century America.

⁶¹¹ The classroom showdown between Hill and the townspeople of River City occurs at night, but when the boys band leaves the school, followed by the rest of the town, it is a bright sunny day.

Nonetheless, like Harrington in Disney's *Pollyanna*, River City in *The Music Man* is a character in its own right; both films follow the same narrative arc, whereby a dysfunctional town is "healed" through the introduction and intervention of an outsider. Thus, River City as Harold Hill first finds it is a narrow-minded, repressive place, unwelcoming to strangers.⁶¹² Municipal government consists of a buffoonish mayor and a feuding, ineffectual school board; the town's middle-class women, dominated by the mayor's overbearing wife, are self-righteous gossip-mongers. They dismiss such authors as Balzac and Chaucer as "smut," while ostracizing the librarian, Marion Paroo, on the basis of their unfounded belief in her promiscuity. Tommy Djilas, the teenager who is courting the mayor's daughter, is an unacceptable suitor not only because he is a "troublemaker" but because he comes from the wrong side of the tracks,⁶¹³ while even Paroo's mother endorses, to some degree, the town's sexist marginalization of her daughter: "But darlin'— when a woman has a husband/And you have none/Why should she take advice from you?"⁶¹⁴ Of course, by the end of the film, River City has been transformed into a town that is literally harmonious, as exemplified by the transformation of the now-inseparable four-man school board into a barbershop quartet; it is now a place, as Paroo reminds the townfolk intent on tarring and feathering Hill for his chicanery,

⁶¹² When Hill arrives in River City, the townspeople greet him with the song, "Iowa Stubborn," which concludes with the suggestion that Hill "ought to give Iowa a try" only after expressing a more dominant image of distrustful standoffishness: "Oh, there's nothing halfway/About the Iowa way to treat you,/When we treat you/Which we may not do at all./There's an Iowan kind of special/Chip-on-the-shoulder attitude/We've never been without/That we recall/We can be cold/As our falling thermometers in December/If you ask about our weather in JulyBut what the heck, you're welcome,/Join us at the picnic/You can eat your fill/Of all the food you bring yourself." "Iowa Stubborn" from *The Music Man* by Meredith Willson.

⁶¹³ Of Tommy, the Mayor says, "His father's one o' them Nith-u-layians South o' town."

⁶¹⁴ "Piano Lesson" from *The Music Man* by Meredith Willson.

where, in contrast to “what this town was like before Harold Hill came . . . [s]uddenly, there [are] things to do and things to be proud of and people to go out of your way for.” As this dialogue establishes, however, it is only through the machinations of the city slicker⁶¹⁵ con-man Hill that this transformation takes place; key to the happy ending of *The Music Man*, in fact, is the clear understanding that River City in its “natural” – i.e., pre-Hill – state lacks the neighborly sense of community at the heart of the myth of the “idyllic” turn-of-the-century small town.

To be sure, River City’s dysfunction is presented comedically and, from Willson’s standpoint at least, affectionately,⁶¹⁶ which renders it less toxic than it would otherwise appear; indeed, as with all comedy, that dysfunction is part of the pleasure the film offers. This dysfunction is undercut as well by the number of occasions – beginning with Hill’s first moments in town – that the town engages in group song, suggesting on an affective level a greater sense of community than the narrative presents. And certainly, by the end of the film, narrative and form converge in a splendid demonstration of community pride and celebration. Thus, the film’s construction, like

⁶¹⁵ Although Hill claims Gary, Indiana as his home town, Paroo’s discovery that the town was founded only in 1906 suggests that this claim of small-town roots is part of his confidence scheme.

⁶¹⁶ The Sunday before *The Music Man* opened on Broadway, Willson wrote for the *New York Herald Tribune* that

I remember my childhood so well that each character in the show is not one, but a composite of three or four different people. One possible exception could be Marian Paroo . . . who is pretty exactly my mother

Harold Hill . . . is so many people that I remember different ones every time I see the show. The period is 1912 when I was ten years old, so I suppose some of my points of view are reflected in the ten-year-old role of Winthrop

Some Iowans who have seen *The Music Man* in rehearsal have called it an Iowan’s attempt to pay tribute to his home state. I’m glad they feel that way because that’s what I meant it to be even though I didn’t try to rose-color up our Iowa-stubborn ways.

Willson, *But He Doesn’t Know the Territory*, 183-84.

that of Disney's *Pollyanna*, suggests that the ideal, while not necessarily inherent in this particular time and place, was nevertheless *achievable*. Even in the film's finale, however – and indeed, in all the film's musical numbers – the tone is celebratory, sunny, joyful. River City in 1912, in short, looks like a *fun* place in which to live; *The Music Man* is a text that works nostalgically, if at all, only via the “superiority” of its obviously “unreal” content over the viewer's modern-day life.

Thus, to some degree, this discursive theme of “nostalgia” appears to reflect the pre-existing, well-established popular construction of small-town, turn-of-the-century America as an idealized moment of innocence more so than anything particular to *The Music Man* itself. The presumptive belief in that innocence reflected in this discourse suggests that by 1962, the concept itself had been largely internalized in American culture as a historical, unquestioned “given.” Indeed, reviewers' range of descriptors of what *The Music Man* had to offer – from “corn” to “heart-warming nostalgia” – reflect varying attitudes toward the film's diegetic content but nonetheless universally mark it off as unsophisticated and *unmodern*. On one hand, this discourse reflects a popular willingness to embrace *The Music Man*'s period setting as appealing for its *differences* from the present day, suggesting anxieties about modern life not present a decade earlier when such films as *On Moonlight Bay* were released. On the other hand, the film's playful immersion in the past was obviously false and idealized, and was not presented within the text itself as something *lost* or *missed*. Certain reviewers described the film's appeal as a sort of guilty pleasure – something one enjoyed while fully conscious of being “hoodwinked” by its obvious hokum. In this, *The Music Man* is not a *nostalgic* text in the sense of a text *expressing* a longing for a prior place and time, although it is a text that, through its idealized presentation of that period setting, may have had a nostalgic *effect* on some of its viewers; even so, that “nostalgic” effect

appears to have had more degrees of mood and self-consciousness than a simple yearning for the past.

The Music Man: 1962 Nostalgia for “Wholesome America”

A second nostalgic theme in the contemporaneous, popular discourse about *The Music Man* was its fresh wholesomeness and robust American-ness. To some degree, this wholesome Americana is perceived as inherent in the property itself; it is a characteristic, however, that Warner Bros. also actively “borrowed” from middle America itself – that is, from Mason City – and aggressively utilized in its promotion of the film. In so doing, Warners’ converted its publicity campaign into the film’s *content* – that is, into the stuff of small-town American life – in a wonderful circularity that allowed the studio to congratulate itself on its contribution to Americana, where that contribution consisted of an expensive, polished commodity whose existence was attributable solely to the studio’s belief in its potential to become a commercial behemoth.

To be sure, *The Music Man* had been deemed “wholesome” from its first public performance. Brooke Atkinson of the *New York Times* calls Broadway’s *The Music Man* “a marvelous show, rooted in wholesome and comic tradition,”⁶¹⁷ suggesting that “[i]f Mark Twain could have collaborated with Vachel Lindsay, they might have devised a rhythmic lark like *The Music Man*, which is as American as apple pie and a Fourth of July oration.”⁶¹⁸ Similarly, the art

⁶¹⁷ Brooke Atkinson, *The New York Times*, quoted in Millstein, “The Music Man” LP liner notes.

⁶¹⁸ Brooke Atkinson, *The New York Times*, quoted in *Time Magazine*, 72 (July 21, 1958): 42.

for *Time Magazine*'s July 21, 1958 cover story on the play visually equates *The Music Man* with America by intermingling icons of the play – a shiny brass trombone – and of America – Grant Wood's *American Gothic* and an American bald eagle clutching an American flag. Inside, the three-page article, "Pied Piper of Broadway," praises the play, "[i]n a fat Broadway season whose successes deal so clinically with such subjects as marital frustration, alcoholism, dope addiction, juvenile delinquency and abortion," as "a monument to golden unpretentiousness and wholesome fun."⁶¹⁹ Band industry and band director publications often praised *The Music Man* for its theme of "the salvation of wayward youth through music."⁶²⁰

Reviews of the film also noted its "feel-good" quality, which they often equated with American optimism itself. For example, *Variety* christened *The Music Man* "the big one for '62 It is a motion picture event, supercharged with Americana – as irresistibly corny as an Iowa landscape, but as stirring and thrilling as winning touchdown or a homer with the bases loaded."⁶²¹ Similarly, a studio press release states that Arthur Godfrey had decided to devote his radio program entirely to *The Music Man* during the week of July 2, 1962 because Godfrey felt *The Music Man* "is as true a bit of Americana as the Fourth of July itself."⁶²²

General press coverage of the event also took up this theme of the Band Festival – and *The Music Man* itself – as representing "the best tradition of America." Ann Marstars of the *Chicago American* wrote that "these happenings in Mason City are a cheering example of the joyous spirit,

⁶¹⁹ "Pied Piper of Broadway," *Time Magazine* 72 (July 21, 1948): 46.

⁶²⁰ Oates, *Meredith Willson*, 137.

⁶²¹ "The Music Man," *Variety*, April 12, 1962.

⁶²² Warner Bros. Studio press release, June 29, 1962, USC-WB Collection.

the warmth and vigor of a typical American community in action. . . .”⁶²³ Another columnist suggested the parallel between *The Music Man* and the Mason City press premiere: “How this city of 30,000 opened its heart and purse strings . . . for local boy Meredith and his film would be a fitting sequel to the movie. . . . All pure corn – the same kind of corn Willson poured into ‘The Music Man.’ But it’s also pure Americana.”⁶²⁴

As would be expected, The Mason City *Globe-Gazette* coverage of the band festival and premiere was extensive, consisting of reportage of events (including the specific and anticipated arrival times of the premiere’s honored guests, as well as an accounting of the arrivals of various out-of-town and out-of-state high school bands); numerous photographs of celebrity arrivals at the airport and of the parade, the band competition, the picnic, the various receptions and concerts, and the premiere itself; stories about Willson, his career, his family, and his boyhood home; articles about Mason City’s history, particularly at the turn of the century; “planted” stories on the film’s cast provided by Warner Bros.; and articles about the history of the North Iowa band competition, accompanied by photos of decades of prior parades. On June 15, 1962, the Friday before the band competition and press premiere in Mason City, the *Globe-Gazette* published a special section devoted exclusively to the press premiere. Warner Bros. bought a full-page advertisement in that section in which Jack Warner expresses his appreciation to Mason City and states that

[t]he Festival is in the best tradition of America, heart-warming, spirited and forward-looking. It is a happy tribute to the musical youth of the nation and solid evidence of the good fellowship and good citizenship of Iowa. Warner Bros. is

⁶²³ Ann Marsters, *Chicago American*, quoted in *Motion Picture Herald*, July 11, 1962.

⁶²⁴ “Kup’s Column,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, June 21, 1962. Similarly, Hedda Hopper wrote to Jack Warner that the Mason City press premiere and band festival constituted “America at its greatest.” Hedda Hopper to Jack L. Warner, June 21, 1962, USC-WB Collection.

especially proud to have our production of . . . “The Music Man” . . . play an important part in the Festival”⁶²⁵

In a telegram to Jack Warner (who did not attend the press premiere), Willson himself echoed Warner’s sentiments: “Think of show business going thus hand in hand with our youth to the betterment of the future of all America . . . Opinion unanimous that nothing like this has ever happened before.”⁶²⁶

What is striking about much of this discourse, despite its often self-congratulatory tone, is the note of *sincerity, pride, and hope* that simultaneously runs through it. Throughout is the sense of participating in an extraordinary event – something so glorious and wonderful, in fact, that its participants seem to have forgotten (or in the case of Warners, are trying to disguise) that it was all part of a marketing campaign for a commercial product, a campaign whose success depended on the *lack* of small-town isolation and distinction, but rather on a common, nationwide consumption. Thus, Warner Bros.’ decision to link its press premiere with Mason City’s annual marching band competition seems a stroke of promotional genius, given that the “genuine” wholesomeness of the event renders it particularly resistant to perceptions of artifice, contrivance, or manipulation – that is, to being the stuff of publicity.⁶²⁷

Further, in much of this discourse, *The Music Man*’s association with actual high school bands and an actual small town seems to represent the revival or return of something lost – or at

⁶²⁵ Jack L. Warner, “Thank you, ‘River City,’” *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, June 15, 1962.

⁶²⁶ Meredith Willson to Jack L. Warner, June 19, 1962.

⁶²⁷ That the film’s association with the high school band competition is *not* resistant to perceptions of “corniness” or hokum would not have been of particular concern to Warners, given that *The Music Man*’s “corn” had long been recognized as central to its appeal, as noted previously.

least threatened. Implicitly and at times explicitly, *The Music Man* press premiere and the accompanying band competition is set up as a counterpoint to a rival discourse of the late 1950s and 1960s: the juvenile delinquent, as the object of social and Congressional concern and of popular exploitation in such films as *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), *The Blackboard Jungle* (1955) and *West Side Story* (1961). *The Music Man* itself thus becomes something to be valued not simply for its content but for its extradiegetic merit as a symbol of what America once was and could – or should – be again; alternatively, it is the symbol of what America *truly is*, surviving and shining through despite forces that threaten to lead it astray.

The equation of *The Music Man* with the best of “wholesome” America is given credence by the fact that, for Mason City, the band festival and world press premiere were *not* simply publicity stunts, as they were for Warner Bros. It takes very little imagination to perceive in the events’ press accounts, photographs, and film footage a *genuine* excitement on the part of Mason City residents and the competing high school band members. Whatever fiscal benefits the city fathers hoped to reap from the attention Mason City received in June 1962, the press premiere was also a moment of *personal* glory for the town, and one well-suited to serve as a highlight in the town’s history. At the same time, however, the film’s widespread success as a mass-produced, commercial product gave Mason City an established, widely recognized cultural icon to use for self-promotion in the years after 1962.

As for Warner Bros., its exploitation of Mason City gave *The Music Man* credibility as an exemplar of ordinary, wholesome American life. Indeed, the movie’s promotional campaign *became* the movie: film from the Mason City band festival parade shows high school bands marching through Mason City’s streets, following Willson as he waves to the crowds from his seat

in an open convertible, in much the same manner that Harold Hill leads his marching band through the streets of River City in the film's triumphant finale. In the documentary, *Right Here in River City: The Making of the Music Man*, which Warners included in its VHS and DVD Special Edition of *The Music Man*, the parallel is made even more explicit as this footage concludes the documentary and is accompanied by Robert Preston's rendition of "Seventy-Six Trombones" from *The Music Man* soundtrack. Momentarily at least, the act of selling *The Music Man* became the best part of small-town life with all its positive connotations, an association which Warners recognized to be rendered even more irresistible by its rarity and perceived vulnerability, and which Warners exploited accordingly.

It goes without saying, however, that this "wholesome America" is exclusively white and middle-class, as is strikingly evident in footage of the band festival parade; it is thus well-represented by *The Music Man* and its venue of the turn-of-the-century small town, which in all the Hollywood films considered here is a lily-white community located in either New England or the Midwest. Indeed, this equation of *The Music Man* with the wholesome core of "genuine" America is another iteration of Disney's promoting *So Dear to My Heart* as America's universally experienced childhood, and of the turn-of-the-century "home town" myth itself, which at its heart is a white, middle-class ideal whose persistent claim to "universality" made it particularly effective at fostering a laudable national self-image without acknowledging how much – and how many – it excluded.

The Music Man: 1962 Nostalgia for "Hollywood of Old"

A third nostalgia in this contemporary discourse surrounding *The Music Man* is that for

Classic Hollywood itself. At times, this nostalgia becomes almost active with the hope that *The Music Man* might herald or inspire a return to the kind of movie-making – and film-going experience – of the Hollywood studio era. At other times, this nostalgic response to *The Music Man* merely throws into sharp relief certain film-goers' dissatisfaction with recent cinematic trends and, in particular, with Hollywood's increasing deviation from the middle-class ideal of "tasteful" family entertainment which Hollywood itself had fostered and sold for so long. Whatever form this dissatisfaction took, however, it was for Warner Bros. yet another marketing tool, enabling it to position *The Music Man* as a "throwback" of the most admirable – and hence profitable – kind. At the same time, this nostalgic response to *The Music Man* is a different phenomenon altogether from that for 1912 River City or even for American wholesomeness, both of which were, in effect, vicarious experiences of celebratory moments. While largely initiated as a studio promotional strategy, the nostalgia for a lost Hollywood that *The Music Man* triggered was one often expressed as an *individual* experience, and an experience of loss rather than celebration. Thus, this particular reaction to *The Music Man* most closely approximates nostalgia in the sense of a longing for a lost object, although that lost object is not the film's specific content but the *form* its content took, and thus the type of movie-going experience the film offered.

In the Warner Bros. publicity and in some of the film's reviews, the success of *The Music Man* takes on a broader importance than making money for its studio; at certain moments, the film was positioned as a sort of Great White Hope, a potential savior of Hollywood's troubled film industry, an idea first expressed in trade papers' response to preview screenings. The *Hollywood Reporter's* review concludes with the observation that

"The Music Man" is the third important musical we have had in recent months, along with 'West Side Story' and 'Flower Drum Song.' It is hard to imagine any

three shows more unlike, yet each is distinctly American. None could be duplicated anywhere else. Can an industry be moribund and produce such as these?"⁶²⁸

Similarly, *Variety* claims that

People everywhere have been waiting impatiently for a long time for just such a film experience. The Morton DaCosta production will make not only oodles of money for its investors, but will reactivate a lot of misplaced customer friendships for the motion picture industry. . . . "76 Trombones" led the big parade, and so will "Music Man" – back to motion picture theatres.⁶²⁹

The first page of *The Music Man* studio press book reproduces an advertisement over Jack Warner's signature that had been published in the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, and the *Wall Street Journal* on June 19, 1962, the day of the film's Mason City press premiere. In this ad, Warner uses the equation of *The Music Man* with the "best of America" to establish the film's bona fides as the "best of what Hollywood should be":

In recent weeks the motion picture industry, to which I have devoted my life, has been getting more than its share of what is politely termed "unfavorable publicity." Lots of sensational headlines and editorial disapproval. Scandal in Rome. Waste in Tahiti. Fiasco in Hollywood.⁶³⁰

⁶²⁸ "The Music Man," *Hollywood Reporter*, April 12, 1962.

⁶²⁹ "The Music Man," *Variety*, April 12, 1962. In like fashion, the *Canadian Film Weekly* stated that "[*The Music Man*] has tears, laughter, romance, and everything you think a picture ought to have. Warners has created its own Fort Knox and this film will do a great deal to restore much of the health and affection our industry has lost in the last decade." Hye Bossin, "On The Square with Hye Bossin," *Canadian Film Weekly*, April 25, 1962.

⁶³⁰ One columnist identified "scandal in Rome" as referring to Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, "waste in Tahiti" as referring to Marlon Brando, and the "fiasco in Hollywood" as referring to Marilyn Monroe. "Kup's Column," *Chicago Sun-Times*, June 21, 1962. Specifically, the "scandal in Rome" would have been a reference to tabloid stories of Elizabeth Taylor's having "stolen" Richard Burton from his wife Sybil during the filming of *Cleopatra*; "waste in Tahiti" to Marlon Brando's having caused a mid-shoot change of directors and budgetary overruns during production of *Mutiny on the Bounty*; and "fiasco in Hollywood" to Marilyn Monroe's June 8, 1962 firing by Twentieth Century Fox during filming of *Something's Got to Give*.

I personally would like to show you the other side of the coin. . . . So instead of Rome or Tahiti or Hollywood, for the moment let's talk about Mason City, Iowa, in the heart of America.

This week, thousands of American boys and girls will converge on Mason City to engage in a gala National High School Marching Band Contest. They'll be lugging their tubas and trombones from 34 states in every corner of the Union at no small expense and with the usual trouble and confusion that attends these junkets. But when they march in review before the assembled judges, with trombones blaring and drums pounding, a good hunk of what's wonderful about our country goes marching with them.

I think it pertinent that a new motion picture has inspired and is at the grass root of this heart-warming activity. It is Meredith Willson's *THE MUSIC MAN* and a special showing of the picture will crown the three day festivities at Mason City. We at Warner Bros. have never been so pleased with a motion picture. Not simply because those who have seen it hail it as superb entertainment but, with its over-all theme, its great and rousing spirit and all the things it sings and says, it is gratifying evidence of how healthy and vigorous and triumphant our industry – and our country – can be. At this moment, everybody – not just Warner Bros. – can be proud of *THE MUSIC MAN*.

When published in June 1962, Warner's ad apparently touched a nerve with many, both within and without the film industry. Some commentators made it the subject of columns or newspaper articles.⁶³¹ Industry insiders wrote Jack Warner to applaud and thank him for the ad. For instance, former producer Sol Lesser, now serving as Chairman of the County of Los Angeles Hollywood Museum Commission, wrote Warner that "[i]t indicates not only 'what's wonderful about our country' but about our industry that will produce a picture like *The Music Man* and advertise it in the educational and patriotic form you used."⁶³² Other current or former members

⁶³¹ E.g., Don Carle Gillette, "Trade View," *The Hollywood Reporter*, June 21, 1962 ("It took courage to express the outspoken views voiced by Jack Warner, and one result is that a lot of important persons and some millions of newspaper readers are going to feel reassured by this expression from the head of the company that long has prided itself on its policy of combining good citizenship with good film-making.")

⁶³² Sol Lesser to Jack Warner, June 20, 1962, USC-WB Collection. Warner also received congratulatory letters from Pat R. Notaro of Stanley Warner Management Co., Pat R. Notaro to Jack Warner, June 20, 1962, and Frank Cooper of Frank Cooper Associates Agency, Inc. ("We

of the industry also accompanied their congratulations for Warner's defense of the industry with kudos for his shrewd marketing of *The Music Man*:

Not only is this clever advertising for the Music Man but it is a grand slam at the shenanigans that have been going on in an industry in which I once labored with respect for those who were running it. As an on-looker, I have been amazed at what has been going on during the past few years. And have wondered how long these ridiculous goings-on would be tolerated.⁶³³

Warner's ad and *The Music Man* even drew Congressional attention: "Senator Thomas W. Kuchel made [Warner's ad] the subject of a speech on the Senate floor, citing the good works of Hollywood and urging the legislators to do something to help the industry in its difficult times, especially in connection with the 'runaway' production problem."⁶³⁴ The advertisement was

need more of your leadership in making the industry healthy again.") Frank Cooper to Jack L. Warner, June 20, 1962, USC-WB Collection. In thanking Warner for his ad, one writer stated that she had been in the movie industry for sixteen years but that "[i]n the last four years a terrible change has been taking place and we are losing a good industry." Mrs. Ann Mack to Jack L. Warner, June 19, 1962, USC-WB Collection.

⁶³³ Pete Smith (Beverly Hills, CA) to Jack L. Warner, June 19, 1962, USC-WB Collection. Others noted that the success of the Mason City press premiere itself would ultimately generate good will for the film industry, as well as publicity for *The Music Man*. "There is no question in my mind that the people of in our area [Iowa] have gained a new respect for your business because of your conduct in Mason City and fine motion picture. This feeling will mushroom as the public is exposed to the Music Man through your tremendous medium. Douglas F. Sherwin, Program Director, KGLO-Radio-TV, Mason City to Jack L. Warner, June 25, 1962, USC-WB Collection. Because of the good treatment the press received in Mason City, Margaret Ettinger of Ettinger-Mapes & Co., Technicolor Cor's representative, assured Warner that the studio was sure to get "enormous space as well as great good will as a result of [studio representatives'] untiring efforts [in Mason City]." Margaret Ettinger to Jack L. Warner, June 21, 1962, USC-WB Collection.

⁶³⁴ "'Music Man' Makes Congressional Record," *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 23, 1962. Another aspect of *The Music Man* which Hollywood applauded was its having been filmed locally. In proclaiming July 25, 1962 to be *Music Man Day*, Los Angeles Mayor Samuel Yorty commended the production for having been "filmed on the Warners lot in Burbank rather than an overseas location." "'Music Man Day' Set By Mayor," *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, July 25, 1962. *Variety* reported that "[s]everal LATSE locals are so exultant that "The Music Man" . . .

reprinted in full in the Congressional Record, together with a description of the Mason City press premiere.

Reading the ad also moved some members of the public to write the studio. One complained that “[t]o-night I open the newspaper, and what do I see? I have enclosed two ‘marked-up’ tear sheets of the Movie Section, as grim evidence of the deplorable film fare that is being offered to the ‘Boxoffice’ customers.”⁶³⁵ On the enclosed page from the movie section of the *Los Angeles Herald* for June 20, 1962, the writer circled ads for films currently playing: *Night Creatures* (“New Heights of Horror in a Masterpiece of the Macabre!”), *Lisa*, *Lolita*, *All Fall Down*, and *Sweet Bird of Youth*, as well as such “provocative adult entertainment” as *Shameless*, *Night of Passion*, *The Immoral West*, *The Immoral Mr. Teas*, and *This is My Body*.⁶³⁶

On the same page, other films advertised in current release are the dramas *A Taste of Honey*, *The Miracle Worker*, *Judgment at Nuremberg*, *Advise & Consent*, *The Counterfeit Traitor*, and *Lonely Are the Brave*; the epic *The Vikings*; the spectacle *Trapeze*; the comedy *Mr. Hobbs Takes a Vacation*; and the musical *West Side Story*.⁶³⁷ It goes without saying that the tone of *West Side Story* – an example of what Robert Ray calls the stylistically inflated musical⁶³⁸ – differs significantly from that of *The Music Man*. In short, only one film in current release – the

was made right in Hollywood and employed so many hundreds of crafts and guilds here, that they yesterday hired a sound truck and sent it on a tour of the city, telling about the many employed here in the Warner Bros. pic and urged the public to see the musical.” “Happy ‘Music’ to LA,” *Variety (D)*, July 24, 1962.

⁶³⁵ D. H. Harzell to Jack Warner, June 20, 1962, USC-WB Collection.

⁶³⁶ *Los Angeles Herald*, June 20, 1962.

⁶³⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶³⁸ Ray, *A Certain Tendency*, 149-50.

comedy, *Mr. Hobbs Takes a Vacation* – seems light-hearted fare comparable to *The Music Man*. Indeed, examination of other newspaper movie pages and of trade papers' box office reports during the second half of 1962 and the first half of 1963 reveal that, on the whole, *The Music Man* was indeed something of an anomaly among the films in release at the time.⁶³⁹ A sense of the Hollywood “filmscape” at the time *The Music Man* was released can also be gleaned from the 1962 Academy Award nominees. Nominated for Best Picture along with *The Music Man* were *Lawrence of Arabia*, *The Longest Day*, *Mutiny on the Bounty*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*;⁶⁴⁰ the nominees for Best Actor were Peter O'Toole for *Lawrence of Arabia*; Gregory Peck for *To Kill a Mockingbird*; Jack Lemmon for *The Days of Wine and Roses*; Burt Lancaster for *The Birdman of Alcatraz*; and Marcello Mastroianni for *Divorce – Italian Style*. Gregory Peck won the award, while Robert Preston, as Harold Hill, was not even nominated.

Indeed, another result of the changes and upheavals in the Hollywood film-making industry in the 1950s had been changes in the *types* of films Hollywood made. Ray argues that Hollywood's response in the 1950s and early 1960s to the growing popularity of the art film – and indeed, the splintering off from Hollywood's “mass” audience of the “art cinema audience” – included attempts to incorporate the style or subject matter of European art films into long-

⁶³⁹ Other films in release during *The Music Man*'s run in 1962-63 were *Lawrence of Arabia*, *Jumbo*, *El Cid*, *The Longest Day*, *A Very Private Affair*, *The Five Day Lover*, *Rules of the Game*, *Gigot*, *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*, *The Manchurian Candidate*, *Billy Budd*, *Period of Adjustment*, *Mutiny on the Bounty*, *Psycho*, *Hatari*, *3 Coins in a Fountain*, *Love is a Many-Splendored Thing*, and *The Wonderful World of the Brothers Grimm*..

⁶⁴⁰ *Lawrence of Arabia* won the Oscar.

standing Hollywood genres and narrative techniques, such as in the problem picture,⁶⁴¹ the epic, and the stylistically or thematically inflated genre film.⁶⁴² At the same time, the breakdown of the studio system (and in particular, the studios' divestiture of their exhibition divisions), together with the influence of imported European films, began to bring about the collapse of the Production Code in the early to mid-1950s. The 1953 release of *The Moon is Blue* without code approval was the beginning of the end, and it is probably not insignificant to viewers' reactions to *The Music Man* that Stanley Kubrick's *Lolita* was also released in 1962. In any event, as Hollywood's self-censorship system began to come apart in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Hollywood began to fall "back more and more on elements moviemakers had known from the first would draw a crowd when every other attraction failed: sex and violence."⁶⁴³

In short, *The Music Man* was, indeed, something of a throwback to the Hollywood studio era. One aspect of *The Music Man* which was seen as representing an older Hollywood tradition was its subject matter, and the consequent joyful pleasure it gave its audiences, which was perceived to contrast sharply with the serious, "downbeat" content of many Hollywood films in recent years. For instance, after an October 1961 preview screening of the film, the theater

⁶⁴¹ E.g., *The Best Years of Our Lives*, *The Men*, *Gentlemen's Agreement*, *The Snake Pit*, *The Defiant Ones*, *Come Back, Little Sheba*, *The Man with the Golden Arm*, *Blackboard Jungle*, *On the Beach*.

⁶⁴² One example of the stylistically inflated genre film is the "pseudodocumentary 'street film,' such as *Call Northside 777* and *The Asphalt Jungle*, that typically dealt with big-city crime," which Ray characterizes as a stylistic inflation of the melodrama with the "realistic look borrowed from the Italian neorealists." Ray, *A Certain Tendency*, 149. Examples of the thematically inflated genre film, in which standard plots were overlaid with "serious" themes, are *Duel in the Sun*, *The Misfits*, *Bad Day at Black Rock*, and *Twelve Angry Men*. Ibid., 151.

⁶⁴³ Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 296.

manager wired Warner, describing the audience's reaction in terms similar to Brooke Atkinson's description of the play's Broadway opening: "In all my years of previews have never seen and heard an ovation such as that given Music Man last night. Applause after every number throughout picture."⁶⁴⁴ A studio press release quotes an undated editorial from the *New York Daily News* as advising that "[i]f you're in a mood to take on a movie one of these days – a movie that's just sheer sparkling entertainment, involving positively no grim social problems, no dope or alcoholic agonies, no cannibalism, no nothing but Hollywood's show magic at its best – we can and do recommend "The Music Man."⁶⁴⁵ In letters to the studio, film-goers expressed similar sentiments. In a typical example, one movie-goer wrote to Jack Warner,

Do you have any idea how few times the American public has gone to a movie and come out of it with a smile on its face?

. . . .

The feeling of love, happiness, and joy pours from the film into the audience. . . .

. . . . Joy is a commodity hard to come by today. *The film industry would have little competition from television if it produced more films of this character.*⁶⁴⁶

Another thanked Warner Bros. for "an entertaining movie for a change" and asked for more of the same: "I hate all those depressing ugly movies that they have been coming out with in the last few years."⁶⁴⁷

⁶⁴⁴ Telegram from David Lackie (Fox Theatre) to Jack L. Warner, October 13, 1961, USC-WB Collection

⁶⁴⁵ Carl Combs, Warner Bros. Studio press release, August 31, 1962, USC-WB Collection. .

⁶⁴⁶ Betty Nichols to Warner Bros, undated, USC-WB Collection (emphasis added).

⁶⁴⁷ Maria Hogan (West Hartford, CT) to Jack Warner, August 14, 1962, USC-WB Collection. See also Allison Gibbons to Warner Bros., undated, USC-WB Collection ("It is

A second theme reflected in the discourse equating *The Music Man* with “old” Hollywood is the perception that the film is appropriate – and increasingly rare – family entertainment. As *Variety* reported:

Paramount Theatre today boosts BO scales as it begins an open end run of Warner Bros.’ “Music Man.”

“We anticipate breaking every record on the block,” [Bob] Stein, [vice-president of Statewide Theatres] asserted yesterday. “*We feel there is a great demand for this kind of clean-cut film, something we haven’t had in long time.*”⁶⁴⁸

Ben Shlyen of *BoxOffice*, in notifying Jack Warner that *The Music Man* had received *BoxOffice*’s Blue Ribbon Award for August 1962, added,

My congratulations for having been the executive producer of such fine family entertainment! And its boxoffice success is gratifying for it shows there is still a public which wants wholesome motion picture entertainment the family can enjoy together. . . . I hope you will continue to produce pictures at Warner Bros. for family audiences.⁶⁴⁹

In a similar vein, *California Girl* Magazine proclaimed *The Music Man* to be “a refreshingly rare treat to the American movie-goer of today in that here is a film that he not only can take his entire

wonderful to have some *talent* and *good* music in a movie for once in stead [sic] of the combination of death ritual and baby faced croakers that flood so much of today’s [sic] cinema and television.”); Shirley Elaine Sandloff (Saginaw, MI) to Warner Bros., August 12, 1962, USC-WB Collection (“This is the first movie since ‘The Parent Trap’ by Disney I’ve enjoyed so much! We are tired of movies about drunks, drug addicts, etc.”); Mrs. R. L. Burrison to the President of Warner Bros. Studios, September 14, 1962, USC-WB Collection (“Thank you personally for ‘The Music Man.’ Please give us more of its kind. It gives us a lift.”); Olive M. Lawless (El Paso, TX) to Warner Bros., August 28, 1962, USC-WB Collection. (“I haven’t felt so good after watching a movie in a long time. With so many sordid themes and violence on TV and in the movies these days, it’s a pleasure leaving a theater feeling ‘happy’”).

⁶⁴⁸ “Par Theatre Boosts Admish for ‘Music,’” *Variety*, July 25, 1962 (emphasis added).

⁶⁴⁹ Ben Shlyen to Jack L. Warner, September 21, 1962, USC-WB Collection.

family to see, but what is most important, enjoy it as well.”⁶⁵⁰ As “one of the all-time great film musicals,” *The Music Man* was given the *Parents Magazine* Family Medal for June 1962, a medal awarded to “the best film of the month for the whole family to see.”⁶⁵¹

Film-goers writing to Warners similarly applaud *The Music Man* as welcome family entertainment. The fan who wrote of the “love, happiness, and joy” that poured from the film went on ask Warners,

And do you realize the type of public this movie is attracting? It isn't just the children, teenagers, young adults, mature men & women, or older people, it is a combination of all these. I have seen older people, who seldom go to a film, come back again & again to the theater.

The subject matter is such that no age group is excluded. Any family can safely bring their children to this picture without fear of any “smutty” subjects being introduced, as Hermione Gingold might say in her role. It is quite a feat, it seems, to produce a decent picture that is also entertaining. Or is this just a falacy [sic]?⁶⁵²

A mother told the studio that “in Troy [Michigan] your production of ‘The Music Man’ is one of the nicest things that happened for our family this year. . . . [A]s a mother of four growing girls and one boy, it's a picture like this that I allow them to see.”⁶⁵³

A third, and closely related, theme in this discourse is the *good taste* demonstrated in *The Music Man*, which again is perceived to be lacking in many contemporaneous Hollywood films. Los Angeles Mayor Samuel Yorty proclaimed July 25, 1962 – the day *The Music Man* opened nationally – to be *Music Man* Day, praising the film for “not rely[ing] on themes or situations of

⁶⁵⁰ “The Music Man,” *California Girl* (November 1962): 29.

⁶⁵¹ *Parents Magazine*, June 1962.

⁶⁵² Betty Nichols to Warner Bros., undated, USC-WB Collection.

⁶⁵³ Mrs. Edward W. Ryans (Troy, NY) to Warner Bros., August 15, 1962, USC-WB Collection.

questionable taste, but represent[ing] family entertainment.”⁶⁵⁴ One movie-goer asked the studio, “Why can’t more people put such good taste in a motion picture like you have done?”⁶⁵⁵ Another opined that “[*The Music Man*] provided the very best of entertainment and was in such good taste. This is quite in contrast to the general run of movies now available.”⁶⁵⁶ Responding to Warner’s full-page ad, a former movie theater owner from Iowa expressed his dissatisfaction with Hollywood’s current output in stronger terms: “‘The Music Man’ is a fine story [but] I feel compelled to agree with thousands of civic minded individuals that the current film fare, in all too many instances, is ‘filthy’ and not suitable for either family or adult entertainment.”⁶⁵⁷

With its typical opportunistic flare, Warners took advantage of this reaction in its post-

⁶⁵⁴ “‘Music Man Day’ Set by Mayor,” *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, July 25, 1962. On July 26, 1962, in a special ceremony, the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce honored Meredith Willson for “his achievement on the occasion of the Hollywood premiere of Warner Bros.’ production of *The Music Man*.” “Hollywood Honors the Music Man,” *Citizen News*, July 27, 1962; “Meredith Willson Paid Unique Honor at Hollywood Fete,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 27, 1962.

⁶⁵⁵ Mrs. Gaylene McCarty (Los Gatos, CA) to Warner Bros., August 31, 1962, USC-WB Collection.

⁶⁵⁶ Richard H. Smith (La Canada, CA) to Warner Bros. Studios, January 2, 1963, USC-WB Collection. See also Mrs. Carol M. Frazier (El Paso, TX) to Warner Bros. Studios, August 30, 1962, USC-WB Collection (“[*The Music Man* is] a credit to the movie industry. Along with my thanks comes a wish for more of the same type of movies as *The Music Man*, a very refreshing contribution to the entertainment world.”).

⁶⁵⁷ D.H. Harzell to Jack Warner, June 20, 1962, USC-WB Collection. See also Mabel L. Gossett (Bell Gardens, CA) to Jack Warner, June 19, 1962, USC-WB Collection (“After seeing some of the recent and not so recent pictures appearing these past years, the *Music Man* will be a pleasure. Last Saturday a picture entitled *Air Borne* was slipped in with one of Hollywood’s latest ‘garbage detail.’ *Air Borne* was so clearly decent after the sordid major picture that it stood out from all I’ve seen.”); Mrs. W. O. Hunter (La Canada, CA) to Warner Bros. Studios, July 5, 1962, USC-WB Collection; Telegram from Anna M. Rosenberg to Jack L. Warner, June 19, 1962, USC-WB Collection.

release publicity for the film. Capitalizing on the perception of *The Music Man* as something *other than* the current Hollywood film, the studio stated in a September 1962 press release that

“Wholesome” is not considered a very sophisticated word, and at one time the motion picture industry would have shuddered to think that any of its product would be so labeled.

But it’s beginning to look as though times are changing – even in Hollywood – and one of the nicest things to happen is “The Music Man,” the current Warner Bros. picture . . . which . . . is wholesome in the best and liveliest sense of the word.

There’s no Freudian symbolism, no deviation, no hateful vengeance, nor even any violence in “The Music Man”

The other day on his 80th birthday, Samuel Goldwyn proposed that the film industry formulate a code of ethics which, he believes, “must be done if we are to regain the confidence of the public and our position of world leadership”

Well, “The Music Man” has not only established a new and fine code of ethics for itself. It’s also a whopping piece of magical entertainment.⁶⁵⁸

For all of these assessments of *The Music Man*’s virtues – its joyful quality, its suitability for families, and its good taste – some credit must be laid at the feet of its period setting, the turn-of-the-century small town which, in its popular construction as an “innocent,” family- and community-oriented time and place, was a locale where such qualities could be displayed more or less unselfconsciously, particularly at a moment in Hollywood history where most film fare was darker, more serious, more sexually explicit, or more violent. A parallel exists between the “innocence” of *The Music Man*’s period setting and a comparable perceived innocence or purity in Hollywood’s product during the studio era when the Production Code Administration served a repressive function similar to that of (middle-class) social convention in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as to that of the turn-of-the-century small town myth itself, in which only certain aspects of the “real” town are allowed to be seen. *The Music Man* also evokes

⁶⁵⁸ Warner Bros. press release to Lew Young, *Herald Examiner*, September 4, 1962, USC-WB collection.

prior film-making conventions in its uplifting, redemptive narrative, its happy ending, its engaging music, comedic elements, endearing characters, and sanitized physical setting; in short, in its overall *attractiveness* and the encompassing good nature with which it regards human nature in general – that is, in all the ways in which in it idealizes the turn-of-the-century small town – *The Music Man* offers the cinematic experience of a world cleaner, nicer, happier, and safer than anything to be found in real life. Thus *The Music Man*'s setting evokes the aura of the pleurably enhanced and predictably contained fiction that ultimately made the Classic Hollywood film so satisfying – all threats diffused, all truths revealed, all promises kept, all efforts appropriately rewarded, all outcomes just, and life itself confirmed as both beautiful and happy. Richard Dyer argues that this utopian quality is inherent in all film musicals, a product of the emotional effect of their “not of this world” musical numbers,⁶⁵⁹ but of course the restrictions of the Production Code infused all studio-era Hollywood films with varying degrees of utopia; in both its status as a musical and its promotion of the turn-of-the-century small town myth, *The Music Man* replicates the utopian that was once a key component in many Hollywood films.

Of course, itself a manifestation of a myth of an idyllic time and place in which America's “true” roots lay, 1912 River City embodies the same blocking-out of the non-white and the non-middle-class from the nation's cultural heritage and self-image that the Production Code accomplished in studio-era films. Implicit in the individual responses to *The Music Man* quoted above – whether from film industry insiders or audience members – is what Stephanie Boym deems a *restorative nostalgia*, a regressive yearning for a mythical “original state” representing absolute

⁶⁵⁹ Richard Dyer, “Entertainment and Utopia,” in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).

truth – or, in this case, “real” movies the way they were “meant” to be. In these expressions of absolutes we hear the unmistakable voice of the middle-class – that is, viewers socially entitled to advocate standards of taste – articulating a conception of the “correct” movie-going experience as one pleasurable and acceptable to “all” audiences via its exclusion of groups, interests, or concerns falling outside the dominant’s construction of “decency.”

Nonetheless, while no less regressive than a celebratory nostalgic embrace of *The Music Man* turn-of-the-century small-town setting, this individual nostalgia for Classic Hollywood filmmaking is a different phenomenon altogether. Here is the good past/bad present construction of the conventional notion of nostalgia; here as well is the sense of loss or wistful longing: “I haven’t felt so good after watching a movie in a long time”[;]⁶⁶⁰ “We are tired of movies about drunks, drug addicts, etc”[;]⁶⁶¹ “Thank you personally for ‘The Music Man.’ Please give us more of its kind.”⁶⁶² Thus, here *The Music Man* serves as a vehicle for communicating the *experience* of a particular nostalgia for a particular lost object. In 1962, adult filmgoers would have had expectations for the movie-going experience that had been established in the Classic Hollywood sound era; indeed, these were expectations that Hollywood had invented and encouraged. Thus, these reactions to *The Music Man* reflect a sort of breach of contract on the part of Hollywood studios, whose self-serving complicity with the Production Code Administration during the studio

⁶⁶⁰ Olive M. Lawless (El Paso, TX) to Warner Bros., August 28, 1962, USC-WB Collection.

⁶⁶¹ Shirley Elaine Sandloff (Saginaw, MI) to Warner Bros., August 12, 1962, USC-WB Collection

⁶⁶² Mrs. R. L. Burrison to the President of Warner Bros. Studios, September 14, 1962, USC-WB Collection

era was largely responsible for establishing the parameters of what came to be viewed as “tasteful” movie entertainment – and what the studios themselves trained audiences to expect and enjoy in a Hollywood film. For the Hollywood studios, the Production Code was an expediency, a means to ensuring control over their industry and to maximizing profits; despite such examples as Warners’ ostensible embrace of the “wholesome” throwback in promoting *The Music Man*, Hollywood as a whole has never hesitated to move in whatever potentially profitable direction industrial conditions dictated or allowed. For audiences, however, the Production Code resulted in a product to which many became emotionally attached (an unsurprising result, of course, given that emotional engagement was largely what Hollywood films had to sell). Thus, this particular response to *The Music Man* provides insight into the way post-war changes in Hollywood film-making were *experienced*, at least by some viewers: Although the studios were driven by shrinking audiences to innovate, those innovations, particularly experiments with subject matter, tone, and explicitness, came at the cost of the familiar, the comfortable, and the cheering that, for these filmgoers at least, had long *been* the experience of the Hollywood film

The Music Man: 2007 Nostalgia for 1912 River City

Biographer Bill Oates points out that in the early developmental stages of *The Music Man*, Willson usually denied that River City was modeled on Mason City, presumably out of concern that the show would be a flop. Once the play was a hit, however, then Willson “affectionately and deliberately affiliated Mason City as the original home of the ‘Iowa stubborn,’”⁶⁶³ and the affiliation has continued to the present day. In fact, in 2007 – with the exception of DVD sales – it

⁶⁶³ Oates, *Meredith Willson*, 135.

is no longer Warner Bros. who seeks to market *The Music Man*'s nostalgia for 1912 America. Rather, the entity seeking to do so is Mason City, which has effectively adopted the identity of its fictional self – River City – as a means of promoting itself to tourists. Here again is the effort to recreate – and sell – the pleasures of simpler times, but the effect of that effort is very different now from what it was in 1962, when visual and aural reminders of those times were still very much in cultural circulation. Rather, today Mason City is attempting to sell a nostalgic product increasingly unfamiliar to potential buyers, as River City in particular and the turn-of-the-century small town in general, as part of popular culture, slip more and more outside of nostalgic range.

The idea of capitalizing on *The Music Man* and River City to promote tourism was first broached before the Warner Bros. film went into production. When he sold Warner Bros. the motion picture rights to *The Music Man*, Willson approached the governor of Iowa to suggest that a 1912 River City motion picture set be built near Mason City, with the idea that after filming was completed, the set could be “turned into a representation of bygone Iowa, a tourist attraction like Michigan’s Greenfield Village or Virginia’s Colonial Williamsburg.”⁶⁶⁴ When the state legislature did not act quickly enough on this expensive proposition to meet Warners’ production schedule, the studio decided to shoot the film on its back lot instead.⁶⁶⁵

The Mason City press premiere generated a similar suggestion. In the midst of its June 15, 1962 coverage of the event, the Mason City *Globe-Gazette* published a large drawing of a city block of *Music Man*-style buildings, enclosing within the center of the block what appears to be a carousel and a small circular train track, with 1960s vehicles parked in front of the buildings or

⁶⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁵ Ibid.

passing by on the street. Above the drawing, the headline reads, “Dream Envisions Real River City.” In the accompanying article, Luvern J. Hansen, a Mason City businessman, proposes that the city build a “River Cityland.”⁶⁶⁶

What would “River Cityland be like? With a little imagination, it could be Disneyland, the World’s Fair, and an introduction to the space age, all in one thrilling development.

What would “River Cityland” feature? . . . As a starter, I could suggest an authentic “River City” main street, planned after the Warner Brothers sets for Meredith Willson’s *The Music Man*. The show windows in these replicas of by-gone days could serve as a museum of early century Mason City and trade area. . . . The possibilities of such a “River Cityland” are enormous. . . . The more people we can get to come to Mason City . . . , the better for all who are a part of this fine city.⁶⁶⁷

Such a re-creation of River City did not come into existence, however, until Mason City’s Music Man Square opened its doors in 2002. Housed within the Music Man Square building are the Meredith Willson Museum, the Conservatory of ‘05,⁶⁶⁸ the 1912 River City Streetscape, Reunion Hall,⁶⁶⁹ Mrs. Paroo’s Gift Shop,⁶⁷⁰ and the Exploratorium for early childhood music education. A glossy, four-color booklet promoting Music Man Square states that future plans include a 500-seat Performing Arts Center (eventually to house a summer stock theater) and the

⁶⁶⁶ Luvern J. Hansen, “Official Proposes Tourist Attraction,” *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, June 15, 1962.

⁶⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶⁸ The Conservatory of ‘05, devoted to music education, houses the River City Barbershop Chorus, the Music City Chorus, and a Summer Band Camp; it also includes a recording studio, a music library, and a number of practice rooms.

⁶⁶⁹ Reunion Hall is an events venue available for rental for occasions such as weddings and parties.

⁶⁷⁰ As might be expected, Mrs. Paroo’s Gift Shop sells *Music Man*, Meredith Willson, and Mason City memorabilia, such as “Trombone” T-shirts, baseball caps, and baby clothes, as well as an appreciative biography of Willson by a local author: John C. Skipper, *Meredith Willson: The Unsinkable Music Man* (El Dorado Hills, CA & Mason City, IA: Savas Publishing Co., 2000).

conversion of “the old Mason City Bakery building, originally developed in 1917 and once owned by Meredith Willson’s father, . . . into a village-type bakery.” Across the street from the Music Man Square building stands the Meredith Willson Boyhood Home, which has been restored – with some of the Willson family’s original furniture – to its appearance in the late 1910s. Related establishments are Marjorie’s Teahouse (named for one of Willson’s childhood friends) next door to Willson’s boyhood home and the nearby Decker House Bed and Breakfast.

Both the Music Man Square website and the promotional brochure ask,

Have you ever fantasized what it would be like to step into an actual motion picture? That’s how many people feel when they visit the River City Streetscape in “The Music Man Square.” It’s always July 3, 1912 in the Streetscape, and Professor Hill is about to get off the train. Do the storefronts look familiar? That’s because they are based on the sets used in the Warner Brothers 1962 film version of *The Music Man*.⁶⁷¹ From Mrs. Paroo’s front porch to Madison Park to the Pleez-All pool hall, you’ll feel as if you’d rented a video of the movie.⁶⁷²

The Music Man Square website explains that

Mason City’s rich musical heritage inspired Meredith Willson to use his hometown as the setting for one of America’s favorite musicals, *The Music Man*. So it seemed only natural to celebrate the life and music of Meredith Willson by developing this multi-million dollar complex adjoining his boyhood home, not only to honor him but to sustain the spirit of “River City, Iowa.”

Within this website, the Meredith Willson Boyhood Home webpage promises visitors “turn-of-the-century nostalgia,” while *The Musical* webpage points out that “Meredith Willson’s Iowa home

⁶⁷¹ Whether deliberately or coincidentally, the River City Streetscape, although constructed inside the Music Man Square building rather than as a row of buildings on an actual city block, is otherwise nearly identical to that imagined in Hansen’s original plan.

⁶⁷² <http://www.themusicmansquare.org/streetscape.htm> This switch from imagery of “step[ping] into an actual motion picture” to feeling as if you’d “rented a video of the movie” reflects a curious melding of the actual and the mediated in a visitor’s experience of the fictional River City and of the River City Streetscape; they are simultaneously something to physically enter and to watch on screen.

town of Mason City, with its pool hall, footbridge, and annual Band Festival, is unmistakable as the inspiration for the fictional ‘River City.’ All the spirit and flair of this classic Americana is being captured in ‘The Music Man Square’ – right here in River City!”

One of the items for sale in Mrs. Paroo’s Gift Shop is a videotape entitled, *It’s Yesterday Once More! The History of Mason City, Iowa 1853 - 1962*. The video unabashedly promotes itself as nostalgia – video box copy reads, “*It’s Yesterday Once More* is a nostalgic 80 minute video program that captures the essence of the 140-year history of a small county seat town in northern Iowa” – while simultaneously positioning Mason City as an Anytown, as the embodiment or representative of all small Midwestern towns, and thus possessing a familiarity that can offer a universal nostalgic pleasure:

In Mason City, Iowa there were . . . all the activities of a grass roots community that gave meaning to the midwestern American experience.

. . . .

[This] is the story of Mason City, Iowa, no different from a hundred other small agrarian towns in Midwestern America. . . This program is a historical document that may be unique to northern Iowa, but also serves as a prism through which the history and evolution of many other small midwestern towns radiates. Seeing this program will rekindle anyone’s memories of their own particular hometown and they will be reminded of the nostalgic and warm feeling they perhaps have for their own childhood.

The video program itself begins in a manner that could hardly draw more heavily on memory and nostalgia. The tape begins with a series of vintage black and white photographs of various scenes and personages in Mason City. The soundtrack plays a solo harp rendition of “Try to Remember” from the off-Broadway play *The Fantasticks*. As the successive images continue to appear on the screen – city streets, trolley cars, farmland, parades, trains, schools, firemen, and other scenes of Mason City life from the 1880s to the 1930s – a narrator quotes Carl Sandburg: “The land and the people hold memories; they *keep old things that never grow old*,” and continues

by saying, “There are as many memories of a small town as there are people to recall them. All of us have some lingering ideas of how it was, what it was all like so many years ago.”

The video then goes on to present how it was “actually” like for and in Mason City, Iowa. By means of still photographs, music, occasional sound effects, and voice-over narration, the film relates Mason City’s story: from its founding as a traders’ camp in 1853, through the industrial growth and prosperity of the 1910s, to World War I and the Depression. At this point in the city’s history, however, external events seem to end. Instead, the video moves into the life histories of two of its favorite sons. First it relates the life story of puppeteer Bil Baird, and then the film concludes with Willson’s story, culminating in the press premiere of *The Music Man* in 1962. Preston’s Broadway recording of “Seventy-six Trombones” plays on the soundtrack; over a photograph of Willson exuberantly leading the 1962 parade, the narrator concludes, “His constant referrals to his Mason City childhood had endeared [Willson] forever to his old hometown.” “Seventy-six Trombones” continues to play under a series of more contemporary color photographs of high school marching bands – which appear to date from the 1970s – and then under the film’s credits, which crawl over more black-and-white, early-twentieth-century photographs of Mason City and its residents.

In fact, however, despite Willson’s oft-repeated statement that he based River City on his memories of the Mason City of his boyhood – a connection repeated endlessly in the media coverage of the 1962 press premiere – *It’s Yesterday Once More!* reveals that Mason City in 1912 was a very different place from the 1912 River City depicted in Warner Bros.’ film. According to the videotape, Mason City enjoyed its “most prosperous period of growth” in the first decade of the twentieth century (during which an influx of South and East European immigrants introduced a

new diversity into the town's population of predominantly West European stock). River City had a population of 2000 in 1912; in contrast, between 1895 and 1907, Mason City's population grew from 6000 to 16,000, at which time it was the twelfth-largest city in Iowa. By 1912, Mason City had a fifteen-year-old streetcar system, five banks, four vaudeville houses, four newspapers, numerous schools, and at least two hospitals. The first automobile had appeared in Mason City in 1903, and the city's first motor company was established in 1906; in 1913, Mason City passed its first traffic laws for automobiles and constructed the first mile of concrete highway in Iowa. One of Mason City's major industries, a cement plant on the outskirts of town, had been built before the turn of the century; the narrator describes the town's new immigrants as finding work not only in the cement factory but in brickyards and packing plants. The video's photographs of early-twentieth-century Mason City present a town of many large brick buildings, with a well-populated business district, a very different kind of municipality from the very small town portrayed in *The Music Man* or replicated in Music Man Square.

Nonetheless, the industry conditions that spurred Warner Bros. to promote *The Music Man* so aggressively put Mason City in the position to capitalize on the success of its favorite son. As has been seen, Warner Bros. had its own agenda in making *The Music Man* as great a sensation as possible, which in many respects did not coincide with Mason City's investment in the press premiere. To achieve its goal, however, Warner Bros. found it useful to market *The Music Man* – and Mason City – as representing the best of America. Moreover, Warner Bros. not only worked to ensure *The Music Man*'s success, but it literally brought that success home to Mason City, making the town, like the studio itself, both a factor in and a beneficiary of that success. Warner Bros.' greatest contribution to Mason City was the attention it drew to *The Music Man* itself

which ultimately, through the film's popularity with audiences, gave River City stature and public presence sufficient to make it a useful promotional tool for Mason City. In addition, the Warner Bros. film itself taught Mason City that the past could be both a pleasurable experience and a marketable product, and further, that a fictional past is most likely to be successful at both.

The result is a curious circularity of identity, consumption, exploitation, and promotion, with Mason City posing as the fictional version of itself: Willson created River City from Mason City, which now recreates Mason City from River City. Like a mind-teasing puzzle, the overlays and doublings of images and identity become confusing and seem almost impossible to untangle, like an unraveling ball of yarn that seems to have no end or the *mise-en-abîme* construction of the cereal box with the picture of a sports star holding a cereal box with a picture of the sports star holding a cereal box – For example, *The Music Man* melds Mason City's long-standing pride in the marching band with the film's triumphant finale, in which River City's suddenly immense marching band fills the city's streets. Indeed, the 1962 Band Festival parade, with Willson at its head, seems itself a parallel or replication of the ending of the movie. Both are exuberant celebrations of the marching band and of the small town. For that matter, both are spectacles of gratitude to the man who has brought joy and excitement to the town.

At the same time, however, Mason City's twenty-first-century effort to capitalize on *The Music Man* seems somewhat ill-conceived. Music Man Square is an obvious attempt to inspire a form of what Roger Riley, Dwayne Baker, and Carlton S. Van Doren identify as "movie induced tourism," whereby "[t]hrough movies, people are sometimes induced to visit what they have seen

on the silver screen.”⁶⁷³ The authors have conducted empirical studies of tourist visitation levels at such locations as Devils Tower National Monument, Historic Fort Hays, the Dallas Book Depository, and the Dyersville, Iowa cornfield baseball diamond, as affected by the release of the popular movies filmed in those locations: *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), *Dances With Wolves* (1990), *JFK* (1991), and *Field of Dreams* (1989), respectively. These studies confirm a significant, measurable increase in tourism (between 40% and 50%) at such sites following the films’ release and for at least four years afterward. The authors report as well that, among other examples, locations such as the Chicago home featured in *Home Alone* (1990) and the high school gymnasium from *Hoosiers* (1986) have become unlikely tourist destinations; counties and municipalities have developed and marketed movie-related tours, such as the *Driving Miss Daisy* tour of the Druid Hills neighborhood in Atlanta, Georgia, and the Madison County, Iowa *Bridges of Madison County* tour, and “[i]n at least one case, a movie has made a small town into a boutique of movie memorabilia (*Fried Green Tomatoes* [1991]).”⁶⁷⁴ Ultimately, Riley et al determine that

the visual media of today appear to construct anticipation and allure that induces people to travel. In the case of major motion pictures, the constructed gaze is not a sales strategy for tourism promotion but an entertainment ploy where storylines, underlying themes, exciting events, spectacular scenery, and characters create hallmark events. These events create exotic worlds that do not exist in reality but can be recreated through a visit to the location(s) where they were filmed.⁶⁷⁵

Their research also indicates, however, that “the pulling power of movies tend to fade as other

⁶⁷³ Roger Riley, Dwayne Baker, and Carlton S. Van Doren, “Movie Induced Tourism,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 25 (1998): 919.

⁶⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 930-31.

⁶⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 932.

events capture the viewing public's eye."⁶⁷⁶

In addition to such movie-related tourist destinations, Music Man Square reflects as well the phenomenon of the "theme town" which Mira Engler reports has become "an unparalleled force in Iowa"⁶⁷⁷ since the early 1980s. By marketing themselves as themed tourist attractions, Iowa towns attempt to "alleviate the pain of desertion by youngsters, by industry, and by retailers; to repopulate the empty stores on Main Street; to overcome a sense of placelessness and geographical anonymity; and to regain a sense of worth and pride."⁶⁷⁸ Indeed, tourism is now Iowa's third leading industry, following agriculture and manufacture, and is crucial to the survival of many small rural towns.⁶⁷⁹ While some towns develop a theme from an aspect of their population or history, others create one from whole cloth, imposing on themselves "a foreign reality"[:]"⁶⁸⁰ in all cases, however, "promoting a theme involves a desire to make the imaginary real" ⁶⁸¹ because "the key to understanding the manufactured images of the new tourism lie in the relationship to the past, in which reality is inferior to its image, and our longing for reassurance from an imagined past is greater than our desire to shape the future."⁶⁸² Engler identifies four categories of Iowa theme towns: Old World, Frontier America, Old Town, and Agrarian America

⁶⁷⁶ Ibid., 931.

⁶⁷⁷ Mira Engler, "Drive-Thru History: Theme Towns in Iowa," *Landscape* 32 (1993): 8.

⁶⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁹ Ibid., 17.

⁶⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁸¹ Ibid.

⁶⁸² Ibid., 9.

(or Country Charm); of these, Music Man Square most closely approximates the Old Town model, in which “prosperous Main Street businesses and the public life of the 1920s are captured in the ‘good-old-town’ experience. . . .”⁶⁸³

In fact, of course, Music Man Square is not an example of movie induced tourism as Riley et al. define it, and neither does its presence make Mason City a theme town; its curious hybridity of elements of these two types of tourist sites mirrors a certain weakness in its attempt to sell nostalgia for *The Music Man*. Rather than the film’s *creating* the tourist site – as occurred most famously with the Dyersville, Iowa cornfield baseball diamond, which became a tourist destination only after droves of movie fans began to visit it – or drawing viewers’ interest to an existing tourist attraction, here *The Music Man* is the excuse offered for tourism; that is, rather than *The Music Man*’s sending visitors to Mason City, Mason City dangles *The Music Man* as bait, hoping to draw visitors in. Movie induced tourism, as defined by Riley et al., is a spontaneous phenomenon, whereby film-goers are inspired by a film to try to “enter” or “experience” it by visiting one of its shooting locations; not only is *The Music Man*, over forty years old, unlikely to have such an effect on someone who might watch it today, but what Mason City offers is not *The Music Man*’s shooting location but a *replica* of the back lot set on which it was filmed. Moreover, Music Man Square is *simply* a stage set, whereas the Iowa theme town, although often a modern-day fabrication, is nonetheless a collection of functioning establishments approximating its “real life,” historical model. While Engler contends such theme towns offer a reassuring, fictional past, Music Man Square offers a replica of a fictional version of Mason City’s past; indeed, not even the chance to inhabit the fictional world of 1912 River City but rather the Hollywood construction of

⁶⁸³ Ibid.

that fictional world, in a sort of museum version of a Universal Studios theme ride.

Further, *The Music Man* itself is a cultural product that itself seems to have largely fallen outside nostalgic range. It is true, as *The Hollywood Reporter* noted in 1962, that “[t]he rocketing success of the stage musical in New York and London proves it isn’t necessary to have been part of that period [1912] to enjoy [*The Music Man*].”⁶⁸⁴ Sociologist Fred Davis acknowledges that a person can experience a “secondary” nostalgia for times and places that have been represented so frequently in mass media that he or she has the illusion of having lived through them.⁶⁸⁵ If those frequent representations disappear from popular culture, however, such nostalgia eventually becomes impossible. The twin, albeit somewhat contradictory, requirements for pop culture nostalgia are *distance* and *familiarity*, which must exist in the proper balance for collective nostalgia to exist; too much distance and too little familiarity in the public consciousness will cause the nostalgic object to fade from sight. That is, it will fade from sight *unless* it continues to serve its psychic role, but the greater the temporal distance between the present-day and the nostalgic object, the greater the chances that changed circumstances will have eliminated the object’s psychic role altogether or that another, more recent nostalgic object will have taken its place. Familiarity, in turn, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is increasingly the product of mediation, as Jameson and others have noted in their critiques and examinations of postmodernity; a period film set in the 1940s or ‘50s today is as likely to evoke a 1940s Hollywood film or 1950s television program as the lived experience of those decades – and indeed, such was literally the case in *Pleasantville* (1998), where the fantasy of Tobey Maguire’s

⁶⁸⁴ “The Music Man,” *Hollywood Reporter*, April 12, 1962.

⁶⁸⁵ Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, 121.

character's was to inhabit a 1950s TV sitcom and not 1950s society. The nostalgia engendered for the turn-of-the-century small town in *The Music Man*, however, like that sparked by 1950s films such as *Excuse My Dust* and *By the Light of the Silvery Moon*, was one brought into being by the reaction between the idealized River City on screen and currently circulating cultural memory among audience members of the *lived experience* of the turn-of-the-century small town, personally known or if not, received as firsthand accounts of that lived experience. In short, what late-1950s/early 1960s audiences had which the public today largely lacks is this familiarity with life in a small town at the turn of the last century. In the mid-twentieth century, that familiarity was provided to those without firsthand experience of it by their co-existence with those who did, whose living presence, as cultural producers and consumers, kept its artifacts in cultural circulation. As such, nostalgia for the turn-of-the-century small town was dependent at least in part on a circulation of cultural artefacts that had a built-in time limit – that is, the lifespan of its generation – and was in fact increasingly supplanted from the late 1970s forward by nostalgia for a more recent time and place, representations of which had been in uninterrupted circulation in American movies and television since the time of its actual existence: the 1950s/1960s small town or suburb.

Indeed, in the decades since 1962, turn-of-the-century America has lost its position within America's autobiography as the country's lost moment of innocence. Stuart Tannock conceives of nostalgia as having a three-part structure of a pre-lapsarian world; a definite break (a fall, a cut, a separation); and a postlapsarian present. World War I, followed as it was by the 1920s' Lost Generation and Jazz Age, serves as a convenient and obvious dividing line between the

predominantly rural life that had characterized America since its inception⁶⁸⁶ and the modernity of the twentieth century. A comparable “break” – this time in the continuity of America’s apparent progress toward ever-increasing success, power, and “greatness” – occurred in the 1960s with such sociocultural disruptions as the Kennedy assassinations, Vietnam War, Watergate, and the Civil Rights movement. For instance, Paul Monaco perceives 1962 as America’s last year of “innocence”; he attributes the popular turn to nostalgia in the late 1960s and the 1970s in part to American society’s collective sense of disorientation resulting from the upheavals and transitions generated by these sociocultural disruptions.⁶⁸⁷ With this new break, the pre-lapsarian world was shifted from pre-World War I to pre-1965, and the object of this postlapsarian turn to nostalgia was no longer the turn of the last century but later moments in the twentieth century such as the Depression (*Bonnie and Clyde* (1967)) and, increasingly after *American Graffiti* (1973), the 1950s and early 1960s.

As for *The Music Man* itself, a recent biographer of Willson points out that

Before Willson’s play finished its initial run, it placed in the top ten most attended Broadway musicals, outdistancing *The King and I* and *Guys and Dolls*. Although its position slipped before later musicals that drew more patrons, none can compare to the popularity of this musical’s life in community theater and on high school and college stages, a distinction that has never diminished. Because its inherent values and because the musical still delights audiences of all ages, *The Music Man* endures as Meredith Willson intended it, a salute to a bygone era, his hometown, and band music. During the 1999-2000 Broadway season, *The Music Man* played alongside several important revivals (including Cole Porter’s *Kiss Me Kate . . .* and *Jesus*

⁶⁸⁶ The 1920 census recorded that, for the first time in the nation’s history, the majority of Americans lived in urban rather than rural areas.

⁶⁸⁷ Paul Monaco, *Ribbons in Time: Movies and Society Since 1945* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988).

Christ Superstar) and continued to entertain audiences into the 21st century.⁶⁸⁸

Today *The Music Man* lives on in a form closer to what Rick Altman deems “folk” rather than “mass” art as a stage play often performed by community, college, and high school theater groups. For instance, the Music Theatre International website lists 87 productions scheduled for the summer and fall of 2007 throughout the country at summer theaters, community theaters, and children’s, high school, and college theater programs, with performances to be held at summer camps, churches, local opera houses, high schools, festivals, and parks.⁶⁸⁹

Postings on the online *The Music Man* forum hosted by the website Musicals.net (“The Resource for Musicals”), however, indicate certain limitations in *The Music Man*’s penetration into today’s popular culture. All of the individuals posting questions or responses on the forum are involved in theatrical production; many are young people, some in high school, who are auditioning for or performing in productions of *The Music Man*. And many – especially those who produced or performed in *The Music Man* – praise the play. At the same time, however, occasional posters express a certain disdain for it: “Here in Wyoming not many people enjoy cheesy musicals like The Music Man”[;]⁶⁹⁰ “Old ladies like *The Music Man*. When I was in it, we did a lot of matinees and lots of blue hairs came”[;]⁶⁹¹ “Oh my gosh, I never thought this play would come together. Mainly because, the majority of us hate the Music Man. Even the director

⁶⁸⁸ Oates, *Meredith Willson*, 129.

⁶⁸⁹ http://www.mtisows.com/show_home.asp?ID=000053 Collectively, these performances are scheduled from to run from May 28, 2007 to November 18, 2007.

⁶⁹⁰ <http://musicals.net/forums/viewtopic.php?t=38141&view=next> (posted 7 April 2006).

⁶⁹¹ <http://musicals.net/forums/viewtopic.php?t=38141&view=next> (posted 7 April 2006).

hates the Music Man.”⁶⁹² More significantly, those who have been cast in the play pose questions about costuming, hairstyles, and props that reveal a complete ignorance of the period setting; in fact, postings are sometimes premised with such disclaimers as, “I know absolutely nothing about the setting for this play.”⁶⁹³

Thus the presence of *The Music Man* itself in cultural circulation today is a different sort of thing from other “vintage” cultural products of its era, such as 1950s and 60s television shows that have been in continuous circulation in intervening decades through syndication and cable networks such as TV Land and Nickelodeon. That *The Music Man* is a known quantity is reflected in references made to it in other pop culture: a character on NBC’s *West Wing*⁶⁹⁴ refers to “Marion the Librarian”; Ally McBeal sits on a piano bench and sings a song from the score.⁶⁹⁵ Conan O’Brien performed a parody of “Ya Got Trouble” as host of the 2006 Primetime Emmy Awards, while *The Simpsons* spoofed *The Music Man* in an episode entitled “Marge vs. The Monorail.”⁶⁹⁶ The *Gilmore Girls*, filmed on the film’s back lot set, often referred to *The Music Man*.⁶⁹⁷ Further, the Broadway play has been revived twice, once in 1980 with Dick Van Dyke in the role of Harold Hill and much more successfully in 2000. It won the Tony that year for Best Revival of a Musical,

⁶⁹² <http://musicals.net/forums/viewtopic.php?t=38141&view=next> (posted 3 July 2006).

⁶⁹³ <http://musicals.net/forums/viewtopic.php?t=38141&view=next> (posted 14 May 2005).

⁶⁹⁴ *The West Wing* (NBC 1999- 2006)

⁶⁹⁵ *Ally McBeal* (Fox 1997-2002).

⁶⁹⁶ “Marge vs. The Monrail,” *The Simpsons* (Fox), Fourth Season, Episode 71, (aired January 14, 1993).

⁶⁹⁷ *Gilmore Girls* (WB/CW 2000-2007)

and a made-for-TV version, starring Matthew Broderick as Harold Hill, aired in 2003⁶⁹⁸ and is now available on DVD. Despite its critical success, however, the 2000 Broadway show was simply one of many revivals of former Broadway hits in the last several years, part of a current producing strategy of relying on “known” hits, and the 2003 broadcast of the made-for-TV version was an event that appears to have drawn very little public attention. In short, while *The Music Man* is present in the American consciousness, it seems to lurk in the background of American pop culture, something many may have encountered in a high school theater production while never having watched the film. It is undeniable then that *The Music Man*’s cultural presence today in no way approaches the national phenomenon that the film was in 1962.

It is true that the Mason City Foundation reports that over 300,000 people have visited Music Man Square since the Meredith Willson Museum opened in May 2002.⁶⁹⁹ Even so, Mason City’s erection of the River City Streetscape seems a questionable gesture in the town’s overall project of encouraging outsiders to come spend their money there, an appeal likely to attract only die-hard fans of Hollywood musicals. By contrast, one might picture Mason City’s River Cityland, had it been constructed in the early 1960s and in continuous operation since. It is likely that the mere existence of River Cityland would have altered *The Music Man*’s place in American cultural consciousness. Another fruitful comparison – despite widely divergent financial resources, size, and skill in execution – is with Disneyland’s Main Street U.S.A, the obvious model for the proposed River Cityland. Both tourist attractions purport to replicate a small-town street at the

⁶⁹⁸ ABC aired the made-for-TV version of *The Music Man*, an episode of *The Wonderful World of Disney*, on February 16, 2003. Oates, *Meredith Willson*, 134.

⁶⁹⁹ “The Music Man Square History and Information,” The Mason City Foundation, undated.

turn of the last century. Both do so in a manner that is blatantly idealized and sanitized. And yet both reveal the limits of nostalgic range, even though one does so by its failure and the other by its success.

That is, in 2005 the public flocked to Disneyland to celebrate its 50th anniversary, a celebration Disney has given the theme of “homecoming.” Structurally, Main Street is the retail corridor through which visitors to Disneyland must pass on their way to its various “lands” and their rides and attractions. Today, certainly for younger visitors, the time and place it represents has been lost because the aural and visual references it contains (the horse-drawn trolley, Model-T, nickelodeon, barbershop quartet, piped-in period music, and gingerbread building styles) are no longer in cultural circulation as they were in the 1950s and 60s.⁷⁰⁰ Thus, this Main Street U.S.A. facade has taken on a secondary – and now dominant – meaning as the Entrance to Disneyland, the result of its continuous exposure to the public in this role for five decades.

In contrast, *The Music Man* has had no such continuous public exposure, and of course

⁷⁰⁰ When visiting Disneyland in the summer of 2005, I was accompanied by a thirty-something fellow graduate student who, in her capacity as a resident advisor for an undergraduate dormitory, had visited Disneyland often during the five years she had spent at the University of Southern California pursuing her doctorate. As I pointed out the various period – or period-inspired – details in Main Street, she told me that I was educating her about both turn-of-the-century culture and Disney’s exploitation and idealization of that culture. When we stopped to listen to live barbershop quartet perform, she had never heard of the song they sang and did not know it was period song, dating back to the turn of the century; further, she had never consciously thought about the fact that the quartet was intended to represent any particular period in time. In fact, she had never paid any attention to how Main Street looked or what it contained; for her, it had always been “just that part of Disneyland you walk through to get to the rides.” Similarly, the visual representation of turn-of-the-century life in *Meet Me in St. Louis* and *Summer Holiday* was meaningless to the undergraduate students I taught during the academic year 2003 - 04; after I showed them clips of comparable scenes in both films and asked them to state approximately when the films were set, none of the students were able to do so. In fact, none of them was able to hazard a guess.

neither has the newly constructed River City Streetscape. Rather, the film itself, and the time and place it depicts, have largely fallen out of *nostalgic range*. Ultimately, then, in attempting to sell nostalgia for 1912 River City, Mason City finds itself trying to sell a nostalgia that to a great extent no longer exists.

Conclusion

On its face, then, *The Music Man* appears to be merely one of a number of Hollywood films of the post-war period capitalizing on what was then a relatively popular object of nostalgia: the American small town at the turn of the last century. As has been seen, however, *The Music Man* appeared at a moment that positioned it to activate other nostalgic responses. A “happy” film set in a time represented as lacking the anxieties of modernity, *The Music Man* called to mind Classic Hollywood’s implicit agreement with its audience to provide untroubling, escapist fare within the bounds of middle-class “good taste” that Hollywood itself had helped to define. For some members of the movie-going public, then, *The Music Man* engendered nostalgia for what had once been their movie-going experience. Moreover, capitalizing on *The Music Man*’s inherent small-town “wholesomeness” by staging its promotion as a glorious moment of “real” small-time life, Warners made *The Music Man* the object of nostalgia for American values increasingly threatened or even absent from American life. Finally, today *The Music Man* is being marketed as a nostalgic tourist destination in the form of Mason City’s Music Man Square, a replicate of River City’s Main Street. This is marketing of *The Music Man*’s initial and most obvious nostalgia – that for small-town, turn-of-the-century America – but it is marketing directed toward a population, unlike 1962 audiences, for whom *The Music Man* and the 1912 small town has little resonance, both having largely disappeared from cultural circulation. Thus, the case study of *The Music Man*

bespeaks not only the possibility of multiple nostalgic responses to a single cultural product but provides an illustration of the expiration of those responses, and thereby highlights some of the conditions necessary for such nostalgia to exist.

CHAPTER FIVE
CONCLUSION

While the turn-of-the-century small town continued to maintain its place in American culture as “America’s home town” through the 1970s and beyond, its central role in America’s self-image began to fade as the twentieth century drew to a close; indeed, in some quarters, efforts were made in the mid-1970s to “correct” the idealized image of the turn of the century as the “Good Old Days.” After 1970, America at the turn of the last century was rarely the subject of Hollywood films until its return in the rare “heritage cinema”-style production such as *Legends of the Fall* (1994) or the mid-1980s television mini-series *Story of a Marriage*, the first screen depiction of a turn-of-the-century small town since 1963. As a representational ideal of the turn-of-the-century small town, Disneyland’s Main Street U.S.A. influenced both 1970s urban preservationist efforts and the shopping mall that drained the lifeblood from small-town business districts, but when the New Urbanism movement was founded in the 1980s, calling for a return to traditional urban elements in city planning, it drew its inspiration from the small town of World War II and not that of the pre-World War I “golden age,” indicating a forward shift in perception of America’s moment of “ideal” community. With the turn of the twenty-first century, it is for the most part only Christian groups and publishers who retain – or have taken up – the 1900s small town as an object of nostalgia; in this pre-modern version of America are perceived to reside the “core” American values that have been eroded by modernity. This is a reading of the turn-of-the-century small town that differs as much from the various Hollywood representations as those representations differ from each other but that has its roots in the long-standing popular notion of the idyllic turn-of-the-century small town. In their reception, those Hollywood representations

reflect a general consistency in that popular conception existing alongside the Hollywood films and influencing their nostalgic effect. At the same time, the differences in Hollywood's representation of a common nostalgic object – the turn-of-the-century small town – over the post-war period and into the 1980s reveal a variety in the form a “nostalgic” product can take; they suggest, as a starting point for further analysis, a more general typology of cinematic or televisual nostalgia.

That the “myth of the small town” remained a part of American popular culture into the 1970s is reflected by the 1974 publication of a sequel to Roderick Turnbull's *Maple Hill Stories*, his 1961 collection of reminiscences about growing up in Maple Hill, Kansas. This second book, *More Maple Hill Stories*, was dedicated to

all those older folks who like to reminisce about the days on the farm and the little country town when this country was progressing from the horse and buggy to the motor car, from mud roads to paved highways, from the binder to the combine and from the coal oil lamp to the electric light.

And, to those younger folks who enjoy reading about how their parents and grandparents lived in those *good old days*.⁷⁰¹

In that same year, however, and in apparent response to works such as *Maple Hill Stories*, Otis Bettman published *The Good Old Days – They Were Terrible!*⁷⁰², in which he asks,

The Good Old Days – were they really good? On the surface they appear to be so – especially the period to which this term is most often applied, the years from the end of the Civil War to the early 1900's. This period of history has receded into a benevolent haze, leaving us with the image of an ebullient, carefree America, the

⁷⁰¹ Roderick Turnbull, *More Maple Hill Stories* (Kansas City: Roderick Turnbull, 1974), vi (emphasis added).

⁷⁰² Otto L. Bettmann, *The Good Old Days – They Were Terrible!* (New York: Random House, 1974).

fun and charm of the Gilded Age, the Gay Nineties.⁷⁰³

Noting that in fact the “good old days” were good only for the privileged few, Bettmann argues that “nostalgia books,” which paint “a glowing picture of the past, of blue-skied meadows where children play and millionaires sip tea,” necessarily create discontent with the present-day and turn the future into “an abyss filled with apocalyptic nightmares.”⁷⁰⁴ He therefore sees the need “to revise the idealized picture of the past and turn the spotlight on its grimmer aspects,” and characterizes his book as being

missionary . . . , a modest personal attempt to redeem our times from the aspersions cast upon them by nostalgic comparisons. . . . Even if we cast but a cursory glance at the not so good old days and bring them into alignment with our own, we will find much to be grateful for. We are going forward, if but slowly. This fact should move us to view the future in less cataclysmic terms . . .⁷⁰⁵

Indeed, Bettmann’s quick survey through such topics as “Air,” “Traffic,” “Work,” “Crime,” “Food and Drink,” “Housing,” and “Health” reveals the astonishingly deplorable conditions in which the rural farmer and the urban poor and working class lived in the years leading up to and immediately following the turn of the twentieth century.

While Bettmann’s book describes the hardships and deprivation of turn-of-the-century farming and the hellish conditions of urban tenement and working-class life, it has little to say about life in the turn-of-the-century small town. This gap was filled with historian Michael Lesy’s

⁷⁰³ Ibid., xi.

⁷⁰⁴ Ibid., xii-xiii.

⁷⁰⁵ Ibid., xiii.

Wisconsin Death Trip,⁷⁰⁶ published in 1973, which consists of photographs of and newspaper stories published in small Wisconsin communities in the years from 1890 to 1910. The newspaper stories recount dozens of instances of murder, suicide, and insanity, often tied to economic devastation, isolation, and loneliness, in these towns and surrounding rural areas. While this isolation and loneliness was most often the product of farm rather than town life, these newspaper articles paint a general portrait of desolation throughout the region, including among its small-town residents.⁷⁰⁷

By no means did Hollywood take up this bleak view. Nonetheless, by the 1970s, the Hollywood turn-of-the-century small-town film – or television program – had by and large itself become a thing of the past. *All the Way Home*, the film adaptation of James Agee's autobiographical novel, *A Death in the Family* (1956),⁷⁰⁸ and *Papa's Delicate Condition*, a Jackie Gleason vehicle based on Corinne Griffith's 1952 memoir of her small-town Texas childhood,⁷⁰⁹ were both released in 1963; thereafter, the turn-of-the-century small town largely disappeared from the Hollywood screen. In the next four decades, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries

⁷⁰⁶ Michael Lesy, *Wisconsin Death Trip* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973).

⁷⁰⁷ *Wisconsin Death Trip* was later adapted into a film documentary directed by James Marsh, *Wisconsin Death Trip* (1999).

⁷⁰⁸ *All the Way Home* starred Robert Preston, returning again to 1910s small-town America, this time as the doomed father of the six-year-old protagonist in Agee's fictionalized version of his father's death in 1915 Knoxville.

⁷⁰⁹ Its Texas setting results in a film more distinctly regional than archetypical of the American small town; at the same time, it resembles Warner Bros.' Doris Day films in that, as a Jackie Gleason vehicle, its humor is entirely contemporary in tone; Gleason's character is essentially a reiteration of his persona on his weekly television variety programs: *The Jackie Gleason Show* (CBS 1952-55, 1957-60), *Jackie Gleason and His American Scene Magazine* (CBS 1962-66), and *The Jackie Gleason Show* (CBS 1966-70).

appeared only occasionally as the setting for theatrical releases. Adopting the multi-star cast and comical, cross-country journey that had proved successful in *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1963), *Those Magnificent Men in Their Flying Machines* (1965) and *The Great Race* (1965) move their action to the 1910s, where early bi-planes and Model Ts, respectively, engage in transnational races. In 1969, the film adaptation of the Broadway play *Hello, Dolly!* was released; its action is split between 1890s New York City and Yonkers, New York, but as a Barbra Streisand vehicle, its Gay Nineties setting – like nearly everything else in the film – comes across as secondary to its star. *Somewhere in Time*, a time-travel romance in which Christopher Reeve travels to an elegant 1912 hotel and back again, was produced in 1980; *Ragtime* (1981), the film adaptation of E. L. Doctorow's novel, takes place in New York City in the 1910s. It was not until the mid-1980s, however, that the turn-of-the-century small town reappears onscreen, and then on television rather than film: a series of plays by Horton Foote (1916-), all set in a small Texas town in the late 1910s, were broadcast on the PBS American Playhouse as a mini-series entitled *Story of a Marriage*.⁷¹⁰ Ten years later, another Foote play, *Lily Dale* (1996), was produced for the Showtime cable network; the made-for-TV version of the Broadway revival of *The Music Man* was broadcast on ABC in 2003.⁷¹¹

Otherwise, however, Hollywood and television producers appear to have concluded that the market for turn-of-the-century America had dried up, for they produced no more movies with

⁷¹⁰ The series has marketed and sold on VHS as three separate films, *1918* (1985), *On Valentine's Day* (1986), and *Courtship* (1987).

⁷¹¹ In addition, the television mini-series, *Anne of Green Gables*, set on Prince Edward Island, Canada, was produced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in 1986, and a British remake of *Pollyanna*, produced for the BBC's Masterpiece Theater, was broadcast in 2003. In this remake, the story is moved to England.

that setting except for the occasional nostalgic Western, such as *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) and *The Shootist* (1976); in these films, of course, the modernity introduced at the turn of the century (e.g., as exemplified in a town such as *Pollyanna*'s Harrington) signals the demise of the films' true nostalgic object: the Wild West of the mid- to late-nineteenth century (or at least Hollywood's construction of it). During the latter decades of the twentieth century, the 1920s were represented in such films as *The Great Gatsby* (1974), *The Untouchables* (1987), and *A River Runs Through It* (1992); the 1930s in *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *The Sting* (1973), *The Whole Wide World* (1996), and *Seabiscuit* (2003); the 1940s in *The Summer of '42* (1971), *The Godfather* (1972), *Radio Days* (1987), *Barton Fink* (1991), and *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1995); the 1950s and '60s in *American Graffiti* (1973), *Grease* (1978), *Stand By Me* (1986), *L. A. Confidential* (1997), *Far From Heaven* (2002), and *Down With Love* (2003); and the 1970s in *Dazed and Confused* (1993), *Boogie Nights* (1997), and *Almost Famous* (2000), but 1962's *The Music Man* was Hollywood's last full-blown, big box office theatrical release set in the turn-of-the-century small town.

The efforts of Messrs. Bettman and Lesy and its absence from American screens notwithstanding, the mythic appeal of the turn-of-the-century small town that had colored response to the Hollywood films considered here nonetheless remained in cultural circulation beyond the 1970s, although with an increasingly diminished "public" presence as decades passed. Memoirs continued to be published in the 1970s: In 1972, historian Bruce Catton (1899-1978) published *Waiting for the Morning Train: An American Boyhood*, describing his childhood in a small

Michigan town,⁷¹² and in 1978, Loren Reid (1905-) published *Hurry Home Wednesday: Growing Up in a Small Missouri Town, 1905-1921*.⁷¹³ More significantly, perhaps, in 1975 American Heritage Publishing put out *Hometown U.S.A.*⁷¹⁴ This is a book “about a way of life that no longer exists” but that “from about 1880 to the First World War . . . reached its apogee, and . . . left a permanent imprint on our national character”; illustrated with photographs produced by the “small-town commercial photographer” during these decades and organized in such chapters as “Main Street,” “All Around the Town,” “Home and Family,” and “Life’s Small Pleasures,” the book purports to describe small-town America in the decades surrounding the turn of the century, which the authors perceive as “the spiritual if not the actual hometown of modern-day Americans.”⁷¹⁵ While Bettman’s *The Good Old Days – They Were Terrible!* was an apparent reaction to the nostalgic memoirs being published in the 1960s and early 1970s, *Hometown U.S.A.* appears to have been, in part, a recuperation of the turn-of-the-century small town, or at least of its myth, undertaken in response to Bettman’s book. While acknowledging the truths Bettman revealed, the authors argue that the turn-of-the-century small town nonetheless had certain “appealing and enduring qualities”: friendliness and kindness, a confidence that America was “just the country [small-town residents] wanted,” and “a simplicity and directness to life that has become

⁷¹² Bruce Catton, *Waiting for the Morning Train: An American Boyhood* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972).

⁷¹³ Loren Reid, *Hurry Home Wednesday: Growing Up in a Small Missouri Town, 1905-1921* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1978).

⁷¹⁴ Stephen W. Sears, Murray Belsky, and Douglas Tunstall, *Homestead U.S.A.* (New York: American Heritage Publishing, 1975).

⁷¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

exceedingly rare in this complex, faster-paced era.”⁷¹⁶ Thus, the authors espouse a belief in and an affection for the myth *despite* knowledge of its probable falsity:

It is probably true that figments of wishful thinking have embellished the Good Old Days; still, if they ever did exist, if they marked a time when tranquility, individuality, decency, and peace of mind were the common currency of daily living – when . . . the chief product of life was joy rather than ease – then one place they were surely found was in the small towns of America seven or eight decades ago.⁷¹⁷

Similarly, in his 1982 study of “the prevailing social stereotypes which Americans use[] to picture the small town as a distinctive kind of place . . .,”⁷¹⁸ John A. Jakle concludes that the stereotypical view of small-town life before the automobile is that

[t]here was security in the recurrent patterns of small-town life. . . Life did not change so rapidly as to be threatening to the established social order of things, nor to the individual’s place in that order. The scale of the small town was easily understood. Life did not proceed under pressure, nor was it mystifyingly complex, as some people in the cities complained. Life appeared to be comfortable for most small towners.⁷¹⁹

While this “myth of the small town” as idealized community is “inseparably tied to preautomobile circumstances, where small populations focused inwardly within small spaces” and is in constant struggle with the countervailing stereotype of “the revolt from the village” born as the “automobile and the highway loosened the bonds of self-containment and more substantially pointed small towners outward in the direction of the big city,” Jakle notes that both myths still hold sway,

⁷¹⁶ Ibid., 7.

⁷¹⁷ Ibid.

⁷¹⁸ John A. Jakle, *The American Small Town: Twentieth-Century Place Images* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1982), 1.

⁷¹⁹ Ibid., 94.

meaning that “[m]ost Americans still feel themselves rooted somehow in a ‘Main Street’ America of an idealized past, where elm trees arched over streets lined with comfortable houses – landscapes cleanly punctuated with businesses, churches, schools, and other landmarks.”⁷²⁰ Expressing a preservationist impulse, Pat Ross’s 1994 essayistic exploration of ten small towns, *Remembering Main Street: An American Album*,⁷²¹ was prompted in part by her belief that “Main Street is a familiar icon of American life”⁷²² which “is more than a line on a map. It’s a sense of place, a reflection on a simpler past, a connection to a heritage. In our heart of hearts, Main Street means coming home.”⁷²³ Thus the 1970s decline of the small-town business district “meant a loss of history and its visible landmarks, a loss of roots and emotional connections. As contemporary America struggled with the impersonal nature of malls, computers, and fax machines, it *needed a way back to the values that Main Street stood for.*”⁷²⁴ For Ross, the preservationist movement, as most explicitly exemplified by the National Main Street Center established by the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 1980, is that “way back”; illustrating her essays on each of these ten small towns are turn-of-the-century photographs, postcards, and stereographs alongside – and often dominating – more contemporary images, establishing in effect the “standard” image to which the small town seeking to preserve its “history” and “heritage” aspires – or should aspire.

⁷²⁰ Ibid., 167.

⁷²¹ Pat Ross, *Remembering Main Street: An American Album* (New York: Viking Studio Books, 1994). The towns examined are Chestertown, Maryland; Lexington, Virginia; Great Barrington, Massachusetts; Wickford, Rhode Island; Oberlin, Ohio; Cedarburg, Wisconsin; Sheridan, Wyoming; Livingston, Montana; Van Buren, Arkansas; and Grass Valley, California.

⁷²² Ibid., xiv.

⁷²³ Ibid., xvii.

⁷²⁴ Ibid., xv (emphasis added).

David Plowden's photographic collection, *Small Town America*⁷²⁵ was also published in 1994; in his travels to small towns throughout the country, he photographed where he could find them such vestiges of pre-interstate, pre-shopping mall, pre-Walmart small-town life as barbershops, soda fountains, opera houses, firehouses, general stores, downtown post offices, hotels, bank buildings, courthouses, and depots, as well as living rooms and kitchens featuring pot-belly stoves and lace curtains and tablecloths, roll-top desks and braided rugs. Born in 1932, Plowden admits that he never knew the "heyday" of the small town: "I was not alive in the time when livery stables, the general store personified its character. . . nor when the village hotel close by the depot was filled with 'drummers,' as traveling salesmen were once called."⁷²⁶ Nonetheless, having lived in the hamlet of Plymouth, Vermont, through the 1940s, he believes that "[a]t mid-century there were still enough vestiges of the way America used to be to understand a little of what it had been like[,]"⁷²⁷ whereas "[t]oday the old order, which began to crumble before the tides of change after World War II, has been almost swept away[,]"⁷²⁸ resulting in "a discontinuity of historic development and lack of the cultural diversity that was once an integral part of our cities and towns."⁷²⁹ Thus, Plowden's goal is to capture wherever he can the traces of "what used to constitute the essence of small town life," given that all such traces seem destined to disappear

⁷²⁵ David Plowden, *Small Town America* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994).

⁷²⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁷²⁷ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

⁷²⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷²⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

when “the last of the present generation decides to retire, or passes on.”⁷³⁰

America’s continued attachment to the ideal of the turn-of-the-century small town is evident as well in the effect Disneyland’s Main Street, U.S.A. had on subsequent suburban and urban environments. Richard Francaviglia argues, in fact, that Main Street, U.S.A. has inevitably colored America’s collective conception of the turn-of-the-century small town,⁷³¹ and he and others point out how it has influenced downtown restoration projects⁷³² and city planning proposals. Steve Mannheim concludes that “the entertaining/reassuring values of Disneyland’s nostalgia” contributed to the historic preservation movement born in the 1970s, evident in such urban renewal projects as the Third Street Promenade in Santa Monica and Old Town Pasadena; he notes that even into the new millennium, “the [Disney] company still receives telephone calls from small towns across the country asking for assistance in rehabilitating Main Streets.”⁷³³ At the same time, as William Kowinski⁷³⁴ and others have argued, the mid- to late-twentieth century saw the shopping mall replace the downtown business district and town square as the American “public square.” It did so, however, not by creating a new type of space but by replicating the “essential

⁷³⁰ Ibid., 7-8.

⁷³¹ Richard V. Francaviglia, “Main Street U.S.A.: A Comparison/Contrast of Streetscapes In Disneyland and Walt Disney World,” *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 15, no. 1 (Summer 1981): 142.

⁷³² “[T]he Disney effect in [the complementary] exterior painting [of Main Street, U.S.A.] has . . . worked its way back into numerous small towns such as Medina and Georgetown in Ohio, and perhaps also Columbus, Indiana.” Ibid., 149.

⁷³³ Mannheim, *Walt Disney and the Quest for Community*, 62.

⁷³⁴ William Severini Kowinski, *The Malling of America: An Inside Look at the Great Consumer Paradise* (New York: W. Morrow, 1985).

elements of nodality, linearity and landscape design”⁷³⁵ of the generic small-town Main Street; moreover, Francaviglia contends that the “good pedestrian-oriented design[s]” of these malls “can be attributed, in part at least, to the inspiration of Disney’s original Main Street complex in Disneyland.”⁷³⁶ And indeed, recent trends in shopping mall design – evident in outdoor shopping malls such as The Grove in Los Angeles and Walden’s Landing Old Town Square in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee⁷³⁷ – is to emulate not simply the pedestrian-friendly design of Main Street U.S.A. but the period style and color-coordination of its turn-of-the-century pseudo-store fronts as well.⁷³⁸ Thus, while several commentators have remarked on the irony that Disneyland’s view of the

⁷³⁵ Francaviglia, “Main Street U.S.A.,” 146.

⁷³⁶ Ibid.

⁷³⁷ A Smoky Mountains tourist website reads: “WALDEN’S LANDING OLD TOWN SQUARE is a nostalgic downtown experience featuring a 70 foot tall courthouse, tree-lined sidewalks, with benches & water fountains. Featuring 26 specialty shops, restaurants, The Firehouse Golf 36-hole interactive miniature golf course, free live performances, plenty of parking, and fun, fun . . . FUN!”
http://thegreatsmokeymountainsparkway.com/_shoppi/pf/waldens_landing_pigeon_forge_tn.htm
 Despite its paved walkways, curved street lamps, park benches, and wrought iron fencing, this “town square” is entirely new construction, situated on U.S. 441, the parkway alongside of which Pigeon Forge has formed itself as miles of tourist attractions. Walden’s Landing’s “village green” takes the form of the Firehouse Golf miniature golf course.

⁷³⁸ Thomas Hine notes that the Eero Saarinen-inspired Willow Grove bowling alley in Willow Grove, Pennsylvania, which he characterizes as the “ultimate” example of the fantastic, futuristic “populuxe” architectural style of the post-war era, is “sadly” no longer functioning as a bowling alley, “and a huge regional shopping mall which is designed to evoke a turn-of-the-century amusement park has been built next door. [Willow Grove’s] almost precariously soaring grand entrance . . . , embodying as it does an overwhelming faith in the future, appears an affront to the far more expensive exercise in nostalgia next door” Thomas Hine, *Populuxe* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), 165.

future, Tomorrowland, has needed constant updating,⁷³⁹ it was Main Street U.S.A.'s charming evocation of America's "age of innocence" that in fact embodied and foretold the sociocultural future Americans would experience in the fifty years after the park opened its doors in 1955.

Even so, the 1980s saw the a waning of the influence of the Good Old Days, and the turn-of-the-century small town in particular, on the nation's consciousness and self-identity. Founded in the 1980s, New Urbanism or neotraditionalism is a city planning movement developed in reaction to what was perceived as the alienating effect of the automobile orientation of suburban design. New Urbanism advocates instead urban design based on principles derived from the typical small town;⁷⁴⁰ given that New Urbanism is intended as a corrective to the post-war suburb, its advocates needed to look no further back than World War II to develop alternative design strategies. It is true that Main Street, U.S.A. was not unrelated to New Urbanism; for instance, James Rouse (1914-1996), a leading figure in New Urbanism who developed Baltimore's

⁷³⁹ Marling reports, for instance, that Disneyland's Tomorrowland in fact consisted of several Tomorrowlands constructed in the 1950s and '60s; the first New Tomorrowland debuted in June 1959 and featured "the first working monorail in the United States"; the second New Tomorrowland opened in 1967 and added "a people-mover system suitable for business districts." Marling, *Designing Disney's Theme Parks*, 146. Orlando's Disneyworld unveiled the newest Tomorrowland in 1995 and this time through in the towel; this Tomorrowland is a retro 1920s or 1930s version of the future. Ibid., 140.

⁷⁴⁰ See Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, "The Second Coming of the American Small Town," *Wilson Quarterly* 16 (Winter 1992): 19-49. The principles of New Urbanism are walkability; connectivity (interconnected street grid networks that disperse traffic and ease walking); mixed use and diversity of buildings within neighborhoods; mixed housing; quality architecture and urban design; a traditional neighborhood structure consisting of a discernible center, consisting of public space, and a distinct surrounding "edge" of residential space; increased density; "smart" transportation in the form of trains connecting cities, towns, and neighborhoods and pedestrian-friendly design that encourages walking and biking; and sustainability (energy efficient and eco-friendly technologies), all resulting in an enhanced quality of life.

Harborplace and Boston's Faneuil Hall Marketplace and designed the planned community of Columbia, Maryland, has explicitly acknowledged being inspired by Disneyland's Main Street,⁷⁴¹ and like Disney, he claims "to be trying to recapture the sense of America [he] had developed growing up in a small town."⁷⁴² Nonetheless, Rouse's having been born in 1914, that "sense of America" would not have been one of America at the turn of the century. Rather, Rouse's personal, conscious knowledge of the American small town would have dated back only to the post-World War I era, suggesting a blurring of the iconic ideal into the future from which it was originally and distinctly marked off.

More significantly, the Disney corporation's venture into city planning, Celebration, Florida, reflects a similar shift forward in time of the community ideal, from the turn-of-the-twentieth-century model memorialized in Main Street, U.S.A. and enshrined in so many other Disney products to the New Urbanist ideal of the pre-World War II small town. The first corporate-owned and -planned community in the United States and influenced by the principles of New Urbanism, Celebration is a town of mixed residential housing, its single-family homes limited to six house styles from the "Celebration Pattern Book," all of which recreate, to varying degrees of "authenticity," home styles of the past.⁷⁴³ The homes are positioned on narrow lots, bringing

⁷⁴¹ Judith A. Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills* (Boston: Twayne Publishers 1991), 97; Hine, *Populuxe*, 152.

⁷⁴² Hine, *Populuxe*, 152-53. Rouse would later become one of the designers involved in the early planning of Celebration, Florida, the Disney corporation's 1990s implementation of Disney's "deepest dream" to build an actual town. Joe Flower, "Celebration: Technostalgia," The Change Project: Celebration, <http://www.well.com/user/bbear/celebration.html> (reprinted from *New Scientist*, January 1996).

⁷⁴³ These home styles are Coastal, Classical, Colonial Revival, French Normandy, Mediterranean, and Victorian. Douglas Franz and Catherine Collins, *Celebration U.S.A.: Living*

them into closer proximity than is the norm in current suburbs, and every home style in the Pattern Book includes a front porch, despite the humidity and mosquito population of central Florida; these design elements are intended to encourage interaction among residents. Most crucial to this effort, however, is the promotion of a pedestrian lifestyle. Celebration is laid out around a town center consisting of a shopping district (with residential apartments located above the shops), a town hall, post office, cinema, office buildings, health center, hotel, and K-1 through K-12 school, all within walking distance of the town's residences. At the same time, the houses are wired with the state-of-the-art communication technology, and Celebration's promoters promised a progressive education system and the latest in health-care facilities. Thus, Celebration is touted as the best of the old and the innovative, "a traditional American town built anew"⁷⁴⁴; one reporter quotes the "Disneyspeak" with which the project was announced: "Celebration takes the best of what made small towns great in our past and adds a vision of the future."⁷⁴⁵

It is "what made small towns great in our past" that was featured most prominently in the Celebration's 1994 sales pitch, however, and in sales brochures, that "past" was described in terms that evoke a mythical America of a former indeterminate time, a blend of both the turn-of-the-century small town and that of later decades:

There once was a place where neighbors greeted neighbors in the quiet of summer twilight. Where children chased fireflies. And porch swings provided easy refuge from the care of the day. . . . Remember that place? *Perhaps from your childhood.*

in Disney's Brave New Town (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1999), 31.

⁷⁴⁴ Jaquelin T. Robertson and Robert A. M. Stern, "Introduction," in Michael Lassell, *Celebration: The Story of a Town* (New York: Disney Enterprises, Inc., 2004), 15.

⁷⁴⁵ "It's a Small Town, After All: Celebration, Florida," *Economist* 337 (November 25, 1995): 27.

Or maybe just from stories. It held a magic all its own. The special magic of an American home town. Now, the people at Disney – itself an American family tradition – are creating a place that celebrates this legacy. A place that recalls the timeless traditions and boundless spirit that are the best parts of who we are.⁷⁴⁶

There is a place that takes you back to that time of innocence. A place where the biggest decision is whether to play Kick the Can or King of the Hill. A place of caramel apples and cotton candy, secret forts, and hopscotch on the streets. That place is here again, in a new town called Celebration A new American town of block parties and Fourth of July parades. Of spaghetti dinners and school bake sales, lollipops, and fireflies in a jar. And *while we can't return to these times we can arrive at a place that embraces all of these things*. Someday, 20,000 people will live in Celebration, and for each and every one of them, it will be home.⁷⁴⁷

In fact, Celebration's planners modeled Celebration on an imaginary New Jersey town of the early 1940s.⁷⁴⁸ Similarly, despite the obvious debt to Disneyland's Main Street, U.S.A. in the brick-faced, turn-of-the-century architecture of the Walden's Landing Old Square Mall in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, the online Stone Oak Web Travel Guide describes Walden's Landing this way:

Have you ever wondered what it might be like to go back to the simpler life? *Perhaps a visit back to Main Street in the 1950's?* Well, come and see what the new attraction in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee is all about. This unique shopping experience is patterned after some lovely small towns in East Tennessee and Western North Carolina. The nostalgia is great with a collection of shops you won't necessarily find just anywhere. You can spend hours at Walden's Landing shopping, dining, playing Putt-Putt, or just resting on the park bench eating your favorite ice-cream cone!⁷⁴⁹

⁷⁴⁶ Andrew Ross, *The Celebration Chronicles: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Property Values in Disney's New Town* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1999), 18 (emphasis added).

⁷⁴⁷ Ibid. (emphasis added).

⁷⁴⁸ Frantz and Collins, *Celebration U.S.A.*, 62.

⁷⁴⁹ <http://www.stoneoakweb.com/smoky-mountain-news-info/waldens-landing.html>

Similarly, Allen Churchill's coffee table book, *Remember When*,⁷⁵⁰ is a nostalgic, informal, and largely pictorial history of popular culture in the United States from 1900 to 1940, of which nearly two-thirds is taken up with the twenty years from 1900 to 1920. Churchill makes such claims as "The years between 1910 and 1915 were the pleasantest this country has ever known."⁷⁵¹ In contrast, a second coffee-table book also titled *Remember When*,⁷⁵² published in 1991, is another glossy-paged exercise in nostalgia, but this time the object of remembrance, pictured in soft-focus is American life in the 1930s and '40s; the chapter entitled "Remembrances of Hometown" includes anecdotes about the 1940s movie house⁷⁵³ and Saturday night trips to town in the family's "shiny black Buick."⁷⁵⁴

In short, just as Raymond Williams has demonstrated that the moment of England's loss of its pastoral "golden age" moved progressively forward in time over the six centuries from the Middle Ages to the late twentieth century, with that country ideal serving a progression of mythical roles along the way,⁷⁵⁵ the loss of America's former "ideal" small-town community, now attributed in the 1980s to the post-war development of suburbia rather than the shift from a horse-based to an automobile-based society and post-World War I urbanization, is now a post-World War II event; the idealized lost object – in which the endangered characteristics of community and

⁷⁵⁰ Allen Churchill, *Remember When* (New York: Golden Press, Inc., 1967).

⁷⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁷⁵² *Remember When* (Nashville, TN: Ideals Publishing Co., 1997).

⁷⁵³ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁷⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁷⁵⁵ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 9-12.

neighborliness are situated just as surely as they once had been exclusively located in the turn-of-the-century small town – is now the pre-World War II American small town. This shift may be attributable in part to the dying out of the generation with firsthand knowledge of the turn-of-the-century small town, whose presence in the general population and cultural production kept the idealized image of that small town in cultural circulation, or it may have simply resulted from the increasing temporal distance between the turn of the century and the present day, which rendered the physical environment and social mores of the former increasingly different from and foreign to modern-day life. Both explanations are suggested in a 1998 *New York Times* article on the relationship between Disneyland’s Main Street U.S.A. and the two towns that were its inspiration – Marceline, Missouri and Fort Collins, Colorado – which reports that a senior vice president at Walt Disney Imagineering

worries that Disneyland’s ‘Meet Me in St. Louis’-era imagery has become obsolete.

“It was the creation of a generation that grew up in a certain period and were nostalgic about it and wanted to share their memories with their grandchildren,” he said. . . . [T]he challenge is “to find new experiences as nostalgia loses its edge and becomes a curiosity.”⁷⁵⁶

Where nostalgia for the turn of the century continues to be expressed, it is most often at the level of the private – as in gentrification of Victorian, Edwardian, and Craftsmen-era neighborhoods by individual homeowners, where that “nostalgia” is often accompanied with the latest in kitchen and bathroom design and state-of-the-art electronic technology – or in semi-private niche groups, such as the online Victorian Ladies Society, a “Victorian themed online ladies

⁷⁵⁶ Julie V. Iovine, “Tale of Two Main Streets’ Search for Magic,” *New York Times*, October 15, 1998.

group” that was formed in 2000 “to bring together ladies who share a love of Victoriana”⁷⁵⁷

Further, in some quarters twenty-first-century nostalgia for the turn of the twentieth century has become infused with certain (often Christian-based) values which are given enhanced legitimacy from the assumption of their unquestioned existence in America’s “innocent” and “unsullied” pre-modern self. For example, the Gibson Girl Online, “an online group for young ladies who prefer a gentler place in time when manners and morals rules the day and ladies and gentlemen behaved as such,” has adopted the Gibson Girl and her milieu – the early twentieth century – as the exemplar for the young woman’s Christian life: Gibson Girl Online was “founded by Christians,” and as “a Christian organization,” its “membership is limited to Christian ladies.”⁷⁵⁸ Similarly, self-proclaimed “author, dramatic artist, seminar speaker and singer” Judi Brandow developed her one-woman musical and dramatic program, *Visits With a Victorian Lady* ® – which she performs for “museums, service organizations, corporate functions, conventions, churches, shops, state fairs and the Federal Women’s Program”⁷⁵⁹ – to address the hunger of “numerous readers and audiences members” who, “[f]ragmented and frazzled . . . longed for something akin to ‘the good old days’ of yesteryear. Through the vehicle of drama, we could step back in time [for] a touch of romance

⁷⁵⁷ <http://www.victorianladiessociety.com/index.html>

⁷⁵⁸ <http://www.geocities.com/gibsongirls2001/index2.html> (emphasis in original). The irony of this choice – in her time, the Gibson Girl was a singularly secular icon who functioned, in effect, as an early-twentieth-century pin-up girl – is apparently lost on online group members; at the same time, the decision to emulate the Gibson Girl illustrates the relativity of cultural mores over time, rendering that which was once slightly worldly and sexually provocative now fresh and virginal in comparison to her early-twenty-first-century counterpart.

⁷⁵⁹ <http://www.victorianvisits.com/html/meet.htm>

with the past – an hour’s worth of entertainment and inspiration”⁷⁶⁰ Her second business as a life coach, “Fine Tune Your Life,” was an outgrowth of *Visits With a Victorian Lady*®; she promotes “Fine Tune Your Life” by asking, “Do you hunger for a home that is a haven from the intensity of the rest of the world – a slower pace of life where *you can live your values?*” and by promising, “No more sighing, ‘Don’t you wish you could have lived back in the genteel Victorian era?’”⁷⁶¹ Through her Fine Tune Your Life program of “Coaching for Optimal Energy and Effectiveness[.]”⁷⁶² she teaches her clients how to “return to the *tried and true virtues of those who have gone on before us*” with one-on-one life coaching “in personal growth or career issues” based on “the *virtues of the past.*”⁷⁶³

In like fashion, two twenty-first-century “gift books” published by Harvest House Publishers, a publishing house “committed to providing high quality books and products that affirm biblical values, help people grow spiritually strong, and proclaim Jesus Christ as the answer to every human need,”⁷⁶⁴ are *Remember When: Reflections of Simple Times and Happy Memories*⁷⁶⁵ and *The Good Ol’ Days*⁷⁶⁶; in both books, interspersed with Jim Daly’s paintings of children and families in turn-of-the-century attire and Charles Wysocki’s Americana primitives, respectively, are

⁷⁶⁰ <http://www.victorianvisits.com/html/kindred.htm>

⁷⁶¹ <http://www.victorianvisits.com/html/kindred.htm> (emphasis added).

⁷⁶² <http://www.finetuneyourlife.com/>

⁷⁶³ <http://www.victorianvisits.com/html/kindred.htm> (emphasis added).

⁷⁶⁴ <http://www.harvesthousepublishers.com/>

⁷⁶⁵ Jim Daly, *Remember When: Reflections of Simple Times and Happy Memories* (Eugene OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2002).

⁷⁶⁶ Charles Wysocki, *The Good Ol’ Days* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2003).

unattributed memories of long ago life, quotations from writers ranging from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow to Charles Dickens to James Whitcomb Riley, and numerous Bible verses. *The Good Ol' Days* is divided into sections with such names as “Memories of Faith,” “Memories of Tradition,” and “Memories of Country Pride,” but Wysocki’s primitives depict small-town or rural settings peopled by individuals dressed in turn-of-the-century styles, relying on horse-drawn transportation, whose memories could not correspond with those of the book’s reader. On the other hand, for the section entitled “Memories of Main Street,” Wysocki’s painting is a fantasy turn-of-the-century Main Street that is literally candy-colored, as the pink or lavender establishments fronting the street sell nothing but treats: pancakes, watermelon, chocolates, and peanuts, as well as the incongruous pizza, tutti frutti, and peanut butter and jelly. The text reads in part,

Country folk understand Main Street is one large front porch – a gathering place for neighbors and newcomers. Children, parents, and grandparents nod to one another warmly. Conversations floating above the street like balloons are all about news from kin, the child on the way, and the Sunday social. Family talk.⁷⁶⁷

Going on to describe both courting and white-haired couples strolling on this “cobblestone path,” the text concludes that Main Street is “a place where the town’s history and its future walk side by side”⁷⁶⁸; hence, in the marriage of its visual depiction as a fantastic, mall-like 1900s version of consumerism and its verbal description as a venue for neighborly socializing passed down from generation to generation, the turn-of-the-century small town is held up as both America’s heritage and its (ideal) future, the implication being that America’s “true” or “right” path takes it to where it

⁷⁶⁷ Ibid., 47.

⁷⁶⁸ Ibid.

has already been – or for the truly “visionary,” where it has always been. Similarly, *Remember When* constructs a patriotic, Christian communal past consisting of memories such as “I remember when an evening on the tire swing felt a bit like going to church”⁷⁶⁹ or “I remember when family time was a part of everyday life,”⁷⁷⁰ accompanied by Daly’s paintings of children, their parents, and their teachers in turn-of-the-century clothing and settings; little girls walk to school, jump rope, or fly kites wearing pinafores and high-button shoes, while boys in overalls carry fishing poles over their shoulders, play marbles, or suck on hunks of ice from the local ice-wagon. These are all images of “happy memories,” of course, pre-dating the memory of anyone likely to read the book despite the book’s suggestion, through its first person headings, that the book presents experiences the reader has shared. In this, we have a clear example of the use of nostalgia as a rhetorical strategy to inscribe conservative values with the naturalizing power of tradition, in the manner identified and described by Janice Doane and Devon Hodges in their analysis of *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*.⁷⁷¹ In these Harvest House publications, Christianity and patriotism are explicitly aligned with images of a particular white, middle American past that has long been associated with such qualities as community, industry, and self-sufficiency, as well as having been held out as a (falsely) universal American heritage. In this manner, this exclusionary tradition, with all its emotional force, defines, for this particular audience at least, the very concept of being American; that such a distant model of reassurance – one represented in these books with virtually no hint of

⁷⁶⁹ Daly, *Remember When*, 4.

⁷⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁷⁷¹ Janice Doane and Devon Hodges, *Nostalgia and Sexual Difference: The Resistance to Contemporary Feminism* (New York: Methuen, 1987).

modernity – should have been called upon for this purpose suggests significant anxiety about its readers' place in twenty-first-century American life.

This latest iteration of the “small town myth” differs in focus and scope but not significantly in kind, however, from that which enjoyed more widespread embrace during the mid-century decades of the 1940s, ‘50s, and ‘60s. This imaginary embodiment of the ideals of community and sufficiency of time existed alongside Hollywood’s representation of the turn-of-the-century small town and was necessarily read into it; thus, the generalized notion of the idyllic turn-of-the-century small town both influenced the nostalgic effect of Hollywood’s representation and allowed it great flexibility in the manner by which it reassured American audiences about present-day concerns. The relationship of Hollywood’s representation of the turn-of-the-century small town to the cultural myth of “the good old days” and the “myth of the small town” thus suggests that analysis of pop culture nostalgia cannot be limited to examination of the nostalgic object itself or even of the sociocultural conditions of its production but must consider, to the extent possible, how the object was read and most particularly, how the cultural myths it references color and inform the “nostalgia” it produces for audiences. The variety in tone and construction of the Hollywood films and television programs considered here reveals as well the need for a typology of nostalgic pop culture; in this instance, rather than any consistency in presentation of their common subject matter, it was the broader American culture’s infusing that subject matter with certain notions of a picturesque neighborliness and slow-paced living which caused these films all to be labeled “nostalgic.” Consideration of Hollywood’s post-war representation of the turn-of-the-century small town in the context of more recent “nostalgic” works suggests at least three categories of the visual nostalgic text: expressed nostalgia; an idealized inauthentic past; and a meticulously re-

created past.

Expressed nostalgia – The overtly nostalgic text is one in which nostalgia itself features in the text’s narrative or in its narrative structure; it is a text in which, to some degree, both the past and the present are represented, with the past being explicitly marked off and elevated above the text’s diegetic present. Expressed nostalgia may be manifested by several different narrative devices and cinematic techniques, which may be employed singly or in various combinations within the film or television program. The first of these is the nostalgic character – i.e., a character remembering or looking back wistfully on the past or expressing a preference for the past over the present – such as Serling’s Gart Williams in “A Stop at Willoughby” or Tobey Maguire’s character in *Pleasantville* (1998). Second is the use of flashbacks to a remembered past, particularly by means of a present-day framing story and a framed flashback which makes up the bulk of the film. This is the structure that *So Dear to My Heart* takes in its transition from the dusty scrapbook in the attic to a summer in the life of the boy who kept the scrapbook; it is also utilized, for instance, in the 1981 BBC adaptation of Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited*, where most of the series’ episodes consist of the older Charles Ryder’s memories of his youth and in particular, the time he spent at Brideshead. In the case of *Wait Til the Sun Shines, Nellie*, however, the framing story/framed flashback construction fails to suggest a like nostalgia since, for the most part, the narrative thrust of the flashback looks forward toward the moment of the framed story rather than the other way around. Third is the use of voiceover narration where the narrator is implicitly or explicitly positioned in the present-day (such as by the use of the past tense) but describes or refers to onscreen events that occur in the past. The nostalgic effect of this offscreen narrator is most immediate when he or she is a character in the film, often speaking as an adult about his or her

youth or childhood as portrayed in the film, such as the narrators in *So Dear to My Heart*, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962), *Summer of '42* (1971), or *Radio Days* (1987). In other cases, however, the offscreen narrator is an omniscient outsider, as in *The Magnificent Ambersons*, whose knowledge of the characters' past and future allows comment on the changes between the two, as has been discussed previously. A fourth possibility is the narrative device of time travel, such as in "A Stop at Willoughby" or *Somewhere in Time*, where the journey is from the present to the past and where the past (or in the case of *Pleasantville*, its fictional televised version) is positioned as a desirable or yearned-for destination. Thus, a film such as *Back to the Future*, while perhaps fitting into a different category of nostalgic film, does not qualify as a film of expressed nostalgia despite Marty McFly's time-travel from the 1980s to the 1950s because the 1950s Hill Valley is positioned as a curiosity, a venue Marty is desperate to escape

A less easily definable element of the expressed nostalgia film is a mood or tone of loss, where that loss has been caused by the passage of time or events occurring between the film's diegetic past and present. This element in turn can be created by any number of techniques. One of the most direct is language, such as in the "prologue" that scrolls down the screen at the beginning of *Gone With the Wind* (1939):

There was a land of Cavaliers and Cotton Fields called the Old South . . .
 Here in this pretty world Gallantry took its last bow . . .
 Here was the last ever to be seen of Knights and their Ladies Fair, of Master and of
 Slave . . .
 Look for it only in books, for it is no more than a dream remembered . . .
 A Civilization gone with the wind

Alternatively, a sense of loss may be expressed in dialogue, as in Eugene's speech at dinner in *The Magnificent Ambersons* in which he acknowledges reservations about the changes to be caused by the automobile, or, as has been noted, in voiceover narration. Concluding narrative events such as

the loss or death of a lover or the dispersion of families, or the positioning of the story at an obviously telegraphed “pre-lapsarian” moment such as Germany before the rise of Hitler, resulting in a narrative that consists of encounters or gatherings that can literally never occur again, are also means by which this sense of loss may be communicated. One of the most effective devices in creating a mood of loss and yearning, however, is one of the most difficult to describe or to categorize: music. Generally speaking, music has this effect when it is perceived as “melancholy,” a quality perhaps easily recognized when heard but beyond the scope of this analysis (or my expertise as a musician or musicologist) to define; it suggests such characteristics as a particularly lyrical melody, a slow tempo, simple orchestration, and possibly but not necessarily a minor key. Sarah Caldwell’s description of the use of music in *Brideshead Revisited* to communicate a sense of loss is instructive. Noting that *Brideshead Revisited* is “for the most part a sustained flashback,” Caldwell reports that the series opens with Ryder as an older man “recounting his feelings of loss, ennui and resignation” in his “characteristically sober voice-over.”

His words emphasise the importance of his past over his present: when asked by a senior officer what job he had before the war, his reply ‘I was a painter, sir’ is underscored by the introduction of ‘the mournful notes of a plangent, romantic theme tune’ . . . with the result that particular emotional significance is attached to his past . . .

. . . .

When Charles is finally told that the place at which the squadron is encamped is Brideshead, the emotional focus of his nostalgia is specified . . . [and] the house becomes a concrete emblem of his loss. The name of the house and its significance in Charles’s past life are not just emphasised through his speech: ‘I had been here before’ . . . ; again the serial’s melancholy theme tune resounds at the mention of Brideshead, linking the house with the theme, and reinforcing the theme as an emotion cue.⁷⁷²

⁷⁷² Sarah Caldwell, *Adaptation Revisited: Television and the Class Novel* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), 123-24, quoting R. Hewison, *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline* (London: Methuen, 1987), 51.

Period music, such as romantic ballads or folk songs, can also be used to this effect. In *The Magnificent Ambersons*, however, the slightly dissonant music accompanying George Minafer's "last walk home" communicates his estrangement with the city his town has become and his discomfort with his unfamiliar place in it; together with the voiceover narration describing George's feelings about this transition in his life and the succession of low angle shots of the unattractive clutter of modern urbanity, this music communicates a sense of loss in part through its contrast to the lilting music with which the film opened and which played throughout the lengthy ball scene early in the film, and which is associated with the way of life now lost to George forever.

An inauthentic but idealized past – Nearly all of the films analyzed here fall within this category of the "nostalgia" film that presents an idealized but "inauthentic" past. As has been discussed, to a large degree, these films reflect a particular Hollywood practice of the World War II and post-war era, arising from studio concerns that period films would alienate modern-day or younger audiences, by which representation of the past is tempered with modern elements and sensibilities so as to appeal to modern tastes. Further, in the case of the Doris Day vehicles *On Moonlight Bay* and *By the Light of the Silvery Moon*, these "nostalgic" films were intended in part as marketing devices for modern renditions of old turn-of-the-century or Tin Pan Alley songs; thus, even as the songs themselves are perhaps the most truly nostalgic element of these films because they could – and probably did – trigger memories for audience members who had known the songs in their youth (just as, for example, Beatles songs do for a subsequent generation), they were performed in a modern idiom and in nearly every case by a young woman embodying mid-century tastes and styles in female beauty.

In general, period music is one of several "shorthand" methods of conveying the films'

setting in time and place, and is commonly used to orient films in time; Hollywood's shorthand for its post-war representation of the turn of the century and of the turn-of-the-century small town in particular in fact consists of an entire collection of known and instantly recognizable elements in addition to period music, such as barbershop harmony; men sporting strawboaters, striped jackets, armbands, and handle-bar mustaches; women dressed in leg o' mutton sleeves and bustles or peach basket hats and hobble skirts; gingerbread trim and front porches; Model Ts and penny farthing or tandem bicycles; silent picture shows and horse-drawn ice wagons; early crank-style phonographs and Tiffany-style table lamps. Jakle notes that small towns were convenient settings for novelists because

[t]owns not only proved of manageable scale for plot and character development, but, because they were so stereotyped in the American consciousness, the novelist was able to use them as a kind of shorthand in developing a book's setting. The American reading public knew what small towns were all about, and could read into the symbolism of a novel's landscape much which the novelist left unsaid....⁷⁷³

Hollywood "shorthand" for the turn-of-the-century small town worked similarly; in addition, in the films examined here, that shorthand was overlaid with additional sets of generic conventions which contributed to both the films' idealization of their period setting and to its "inauthenticity." That is, taking most often the form of musical comedy, Hollywood's mid-century representation of the turn-of-the-century small town was governed by the cinematic practices of even, high-key lighting, sound stage shooting, meticulous cleanliness, visually harmonized art direction, and minimal narrative conflict, all considered necessary to create a diegetic world sufficiently removed from "real life" so as to both tolerate and support the film's "unrealistic" song and dance numbers without their disrupting the viewer's suspension of disbelief. Thus, the

⁷⁷³Jakle, *The American Small Town*, 172.

representation of the period setting in these films is idealized in the way that all environments are idealized in mid-century Hollywood musicals and comedies, with no serious claim to “realism” and none looked for. The generic conventions of a Disney film are similar and work in a like fashion; much like Disneyland, U.S.A., *Pollyanna*’s Harrington is brighter, cleaner, more colorful, and more picturesque – and its residents more amusingly and harmlessly eccentric – than any real town of its era ever hoped to be. This sanitized presentation was, in fact, guaranteed by the Disney trademark, and thus exactly what audiences had been conditioned to expect when they went to see a Disney film.

Moreover, as these films as a group make no serious claim to any sort of objectively “accurate” or “realistic” re-creation of their period settings, the idealization of their period setting can acceptably take the form of modern aesthetic and performance styles, such as in the modern dance number inserted into *Excuse My Dust* or Day’s presentation in the Warner Bros. films, which are known – or at least expected – to be pleasing to contemporary eyes. Given this elasticity in their presentation of their period setting, these films were able as well to give their characters modern-day tastes and sensibilities – to allow Red Skelton’s character, for instance, to eagerly anticipate the American future he visualized so unerringly – and to shape the turn-of-the-century small town into an enthusiastic proponent of mid-century technology and consumerism.

In sum, films such as *Sainted Sisters*, *Summer Holiday*, *Excuse My Dust*, *On Moonlight Bay*, *By the Light of the Silvery Moon*, *So Dear to My Heart*, *Pollyanna*, *Summer Holiday*, and *The Music Man* were not designed or expected to truly immerse the audience in their prior time and place; rather, they planted idealized period “suggestions” – of varying degrees of detail and “authenticity” – for viewers to take up and complete themselves to the degree necessary to create

the appropriate fabled or fairy-tale setting for the films' fantastic (i.e., musical or comedic) generic elements, knowing all along, however, that what they were watching *was* a fairy tale. In addition, these are films that take place entirely in the past, which is not looked-back-upon within the text itself as in the case of a film of expressed nostalgia such as *The Magnificent Ambersons*. Within the films themselves, the past has a perpetual existence; it is represented solely as a *present* or *current* experience for its characters. Thus, the "looking backward" occurs outside the film, as the viewer perceives the distance between his or her own time and that represented in the film. In films such as *Excuse My Dust* and *By the Light of the Silvery Moon*, that distance is deliberately shortened by the film's representation of its period setting, but in all these films, the nature of that "looking backward" is largely determined by the viewer him- or herself.

Most notably, these are films in which the past is *celebrated*, whether as itself, as in *The Music Man*, or as a disguised version of the present, as in *Excuse My Dust*. Without any internal textual contrast between that celebrated past and a diminished present, these films offer only a pleasurable excursion into their period setting with no sense of its loss whatsoever. It is a lack of a *sustained* sense of loss – despite the sentiments explicitly conveyed in the lyrics of the song with which the film opens – that causes *So Dear to My Heart*, for example, to straddle the categories of expressed nostalgia and idealized inauthentic past. Its celebratory representation of its turn-of-the-century rural setting contrasted with the sense of loss pervading *The Magnificent Ambersons*, for instance, illustrates the degree to which any nostalgia *So Dear to My Heart* generates depends (or depended) at least to some degree on the manner in which it was read. This "reading in" is especially crucial to the nostalgia created by 1950s films such as *On Moonlight Bay* and *Excuse My Dust*, whose content discounts and undermines the pastness of their period setting, but is also

necessary to the more “authentic” 1960s films such as *The Music Man* and *Pollyanna*, given that their very presentation of the past – dictated by generic conventions, including those associated with Disney products – telegraphs its own artifice. These films constitute *consciously fantastic* journeys into the past; they are, in truth, the cinematic equivalent of Main Street, U.S.A. which visitors can find delightful even though they are *never unaware* of its falsity. To the extent these films produce a nostalgia in the sense of a yearning for a lost past, it is through audience reaction to the films and not the films’ content; if no such reaction on the viewer’s part occurs, the film’s “nostalgia” is actually a playful and conscious make-believe romp in a “pretend” past.

A meticulously re-created past – With the introduction of the “heritage film” in the 1980s, cinematic representation of the past took a turn toward a meticulously realized material “realism,” which is the dominant approach to all American and British period films today. “Heritage cinema” was a cycle of films which began in the 1980s with such successful European period films as *Chariots of Fire* (1981), *Jean de Florette* (1986), and *Babette’s Feast* (1987), followed by a number of films based on British novels, such as the Merchant-Ivory adaptations of the works of E. M. Forster. A second source of the cycle were the 1980s British “quality” television adaptations such as *Brideshead Revisited* (1981), *The Jewel in the Crown* (1984), and the two productions of *Pride and Prejudice* (1980, 1995). Usually based on “popular classics” such as Forster’s novels, they were notable for their “careful display of historically accurate dress and decor, producing what one might call a ‘museum aesthetic.’”⁷⁷⁴ Among other criticisms, these films are often derided for this essentially empty visual splendor, this uncritical celebration of the (often

⁷⁷⁴ Caldwell, *Adaptation Revisited*, xviii.

imperialist) past in what has been termed a ““Laura Ashley school of film-making.””⁷⁷⁵ These are the films whose nostalgia Tana Wollen characterizes as “respite in the burrow,” a hiding away in an idealized past to escape the present, and which offered 1980s British audiences a reassuring, positive – but fictional – alternative identity to that of the nation in its current turbulent state.

Although it was first manifested in heritage cinema, this “careful display of historically accurate dress and decor” has become the norm in all American period films. Thus, producers’ apparent concern in the studio era and post-war years that period authenticity would alienate viewers has been replaced with its opposite: an apparent drive to make the physical representation of prior times and places as “accurate” as possible; one need only consider the visual representation of 1930s rural America in *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) on one hand and *The Whole Wide World* (1996), *The Road to Perdition* (2002), and *Seabiscuit* (2003) on the other to perceive the difference in presentation and effect. This “authenticity” or “realism” is achieved through such techniques as location shooting (such as in the actual British manor houses in which *Sense and Sensibility* (1995) was filmed), historically accurate costuming and hairstyling (or at any event, costuming and hairstyling that in their details, fabrics, textures, and arrangements *appear* to be historically accurate), “natural” lighting (that is, lighting that appears to be true to the film’s diegetic setting), “invisible” makeup that makes female characters appear to be clean-faced, and such consistently “authentic” set dressing – replete with what come across as “genuine” articles from the represented time – that no breach in the illusion of this perfectly re-created past is allowed – or possible. Cinematically, this illusion depends as well on the conventional cinematic techniques of Hollywood continuity editing, so that the “invisibility” of the cinematic presentation supports

⁷⁷⁵ Ibid., 118, quoting Alan Parker.

the illusion that the viewer is being treated to a glimpse of the past *as it really was*, with the mediated nature of that glimpse (usually made recognizable only in the film's musical score) downplayed as much as possible.

It perhaps goes without saying that in addition to being (or appearing to be) painstakingly historically correct, this post-1980 cinematic representation of the past is nearly always also extremely picturesque, often including long shots of verdant countryside and lingering takes of the accouterments of the represented past. As Caldwell notes, Andrew Higson has concluded in his analysis of 1980s British heritage cinema that

the diegetically unnecessary (or at least excessive) lingering shots of various parts of English “heritage” – landscapes, houses, furnishings, even ornaments – work not to further the narrative, build a discourse, etc., but to beautify and romanticise the objects portrayed thus, and infuse the audience with a sense of appreciation of and pleasure in these articles and a *longing for the days for which they are referents*; [Higson] characterises this emotional response as “nostalgia” for a long-lost past.⁷⁷⁶

With respect to heritage cinema, scholars agree that such nostalgia is idealistic and unrealistic because it is a yearning for a sanitized version of the past that fails to recognize its shortcomings – “restrictive, oppressive class structures, unquestioned nationalism and colonisation, and expected and enforced modes of gendered behaviour”⁷⁷⁷ – and reactionary because “the audience not only fails to recognise the social problems of the past, but also succeeds in forgetting the social problems of the present.”⁷⁷⁸ Further, the desire for escape is perceived as a symptom of postmodernity itself, the product of a present-day cultural malaise that sends us searching “for

⁷⁷⁶ Ibid., 119 (emphasis added).

⁷⁷⁷ Ibid., 150-51.

⁷⁷⁸ Ibid.

roots in the past (and yet determines that this search is unsuccessful).”⁷⁷⁹

In many of these films and television programs, however, no nostalgia is *expressed* in the text itself; rather, as was the case with films of the idealized, inauthentic past, the characters are content with their time, their attention directed toward their present situation or future hopes and endeavors. Moreover, in many cases these films, also like those presenting an idealized inauthentic past, represent only a *single* time – that in which the narrative takes place – so that no bracketing off of or looking-back-at the past occurs within the text itself. In these instances, the pleasure of the films or television programs is the imaginative return to a “real” albeit lovely past whose incompleteness – i.e., its limitation in British heritage cinema, for instance, to representation of middle and upper classes – is largely hidden, if only by the illusion that the world it does present is so fully fleshed out. While it is true that these films of a meticulously re-created past operate similarly to films of an idealized, inauthentic past by *inviting a nostalgic response* rather than by *telling a nostalgic story*, the invitation to immerse oneself in the past as it “really” existed, enhanced in ways that don’t “show” or call attention to themselves, is a different call to nostalgia – and a call to a different nostalgia – from the theme-park romp offered by *The Music Man*’s idealized but patently artificial representation of its period setting.⁷⁸⁰

⁷⁷⁹ Ibid., 151.

⁷⁸⁰ Moreover, it is this perfect illusion of stepping into the past that is both the pleasure these films offer and the basis for any nostalgic response they generate; therefore, in Martin Scorsese’s *Age of Innocence* (1993), despite its 1870s New York City setting and near-obsessive attention to period details, viewers cannot “lose” themselves in the film’s diegetic world because they are too conscious of the mediation being performed by the film – for instance, in characters’ direct address to the camera, in stylized slow-motion shots, or in the self-conscious nod to *Battleship Potemkin* in the elliptical editing of Winona Ryder’s rise from her chair to announce her pregnancy to her husband, Daniel Day-Lewis. Similarly, it is not simply its grim and byzantine subject matter that renders Oliver Stone’s *JFK* (1991) a non-nostalgic film, despite Kevin

As “authenticity” has become the hallmark of the modern period film, two sub-types of the meticulous past re-creation “nostalgia” film have developed; or perhaps it is more accurate to say that differing time periods, when so scrupulously recreated, project two different moods or modes of being. One type (or represented time period) is the picturesque, still replicating the aesthetics of the heritage cinema from which it descended, such as in *A River Runs Through It* (1992) or *Legends of the Fall* (1994); the other, however, is an archer, more stylized representation of the past whose very “authenticity” includes a touch of humor or even of camp, such as in the spot-on replication of the 1960s in *Catch Me If You Can* (2002) and *Down With Love* (2003). (It should be noted as well that the past these films re-create so meticulously is no longer limited to “actual” lived experience but includes mediated experience as well; thus the lush art direction of *Far From Heaven* (2002) re-creates not only 1950s suburbia but the aesthetics of Douglas Sirk’s 1950s melodramas; the brilliant primary colors of *Dick Tracy* (1990) invite nostalgia not for its ostensible time period (the 1930s) but for the experience of reading comic strips, and the pitch-perfect re-creation of the past in *Pleasantville* (1998) is that of the 1950s sitcom rather than of “real life” during that decade.) This stylized prong of the meticulously re-created past period film, like nostalgic kitsch such as reproductions of *I Love Lucy* lunchboxes, invites engagement with the past as a knowing, self-conscious, or ironic joke, or a playful masquerade, rather than as a desire to “enter” the film’s diegetic world or a longing for its represented time.

It is unsurprising that given the associations still attributed to turn-of-the-century life,

Costner’s lament during his closing argument to the jury for the devastating national loss occasioned by John F. Kennedy’s assassination; the film’s violent foregrounding of the cinematic process in its jump cuts and quick editing, split-second flashbacks, and feverish mix of film stock, film speed, and film styles makes it impossible to imaginatively “inhabit” its period setting.

recent American films set at or around the turn of the last century fall into the picturesque sub-category of the meticulously re-created past nostalgia film. These are not films set in turn-of-the-century small towns, however; the setting of *Legends of the Fall* (1994) is a Montana ranch, while *Songcatcher* (2000) takes place amidst the hardscrabble poverty of Appalachia. The PBS and Showtime television productions of Horton Foote's plays, *1918* (1985), *On Valentine's Day* (1987), *Courtship* (1987), and *Lily Dale* (1996), constitute the single instance of post-1960s films (actually telefilms) representing the turn-of-the-century small town. Their narratives of family tension and dysfunction (and in *1918*, the constant presence of death, both of local boys fighting in Europe and of neighbors falling prey to the 1918 flu) undercut these telefilms' claim to nostalgia, but their visual presentation is precisely that of contemporaneous heritage films: location shooting featuring shots of bucolic countryside, traversed by boys on bicycles or parties in buggies; establishing shots of Queen Anne style homes with rocking chairs on wide front porches; authentic costuming which, in close-ups, reveals meticulous details of eyelet, embroidery, and lace; and most picturesque of all, cinematography effecting a sort of dusty sunlight in rooms furnished with what appear to be genuine antique furniture, the late-slanting light warming the golden oak of a rolltop desk, for instance, in a perfect evocation of gracious serenity on a summer afternoon.

It is easy enough to see that the idealized, inauthentic nostalgic film – represented here by Hollywood's 1950s and '60s film set in the turn-of-the-century small town, a commercial product of modernity – functions as nostalgia quite differently from the manner in which theorists contend the postmodern 1980s and '90s heritage film does. As has been noted, the artifice of these 1950s and '60s films was foregrounded, and thus they do not operate as Caldwell argues that BBC's *Pride and Prejudice* (1995) does, by “combin[ing] an apparent realism, justifying a cognitive

response that assumes veracity, with a romanticism and simplification of the past, casting a favourable light over these symbols of days gone by. . . .”⁷⁸¹ Moreover, the turn-of-the-century small town as a nostalgic object was one whose exploited source of appeal in these films – its naiveté, its lack of modern sophistication, its status as America’s “age of innocence” – was at odds with both the negative *and* the positive connotations of the country’s mid-century self-image: while the “space age” was perceived as increasing the speed and pressure of daily life, the nation’s success in overcoming the humiliation of Sputnik was the source of national pride; suburbia represented alienation and conformity but also home ownership for hundreds of thousands for whom it had never been possible before the post-war benefits of the G.I. Bill. Hence the decided ambivalence in some of the critical response to these films, a characterization of their appeal as “corn” or “hokum,” a surplus of sentimentality whose appeal is a sort of guilty pleasure one might enjoy on an emotional level but reject intellectually as inconsistent with one’s self-image. In short, as much as other discourses in circulation in the late 1950s, throughout the 1960s, and even into the ‘70s might have posited the turn-of-the-century small town as “the spiritual if not the actual hometown of modern-day Americans,”⁷⁸² this was an identity that, in its largely comedic and/or sentimentalized presentation in these films could not always be wholly embraced, despite its genuine and acknowledged appeal; as was explicitly the case in its representation in such 1950s films as *Excuse My Dust*, the turn-of-the-century small town was the nation’s childhood self, and whatever the stresses and anxieties of the post-war era, the nation’s self-identity was based at least in part on the sure knowledge that, such as in its position as a world power or in the technological

⁷⁸¹ Caldwell, *Adaptation Revisited*, 148.

⁷⁸² Sears et al., *Hometown U.S.A.*, 6.

developments that had eliminated so many of the physical hardships of life fifty or sixty years earlier, America had “progressed” beyond childhood.

Neither does the post-modern film of the meticulously re-created past necessarily foreclose an ambivalent reading. Analyzing original heritage cinema within its specific historical context of 1980s Thatcherism, scholars interpret it as essentially *requiring* the single response of nostalgia, of the uncritical embrace of England’s imperial past as a placebo “cure” for the nation’s loss of international stature and internal stability. Once the aesthetic of painstaking authenticity became the norm for all period films, of course, there is no particular reason to suppose that the rationale underlying this interpretation of British heritage cinema applies to films set at other times and places. In the first instance, it goes without saying that to the extent that the stylized sub-category of the meticulously recreated-past film is read as playfully foregrounding its constructed-ness as an archly knowing re-creation of its represented time, it invites a reading or readings far afield from the wistful longing of heritage cinema nostalgia. Even assuming, however, with respect to the picturesque sub-category of the meticulously recreated-past film that the generic conventions established in the British heritage film had become such well established “cues” for nostalgic response that *any* film constructed by means of these techniques would be positioned to invite such an “uncritical embrace” of its period setting, the assumption that this invitation would be inevitably taken up – even if justified in the case of British heritage cinema by the particular circumstances of its introduction into 1980s Great Britain – fails to take into account the more general capacity of audiences to simultaneously maintain more than one position toward a particular text. Philip Rosen’s recognition that visitors tour museum and museum villages with simultaneous knowledge of their falsity and belief in their truth applies equally well to the meticulously re-created past

period film. It is true that 1910s Harriston, Texas in *Story of a Marriage* seems much more “real” than 1912 River City, Iowa in *The Music Man*; it is true as well that that greater realism is a significant component of the pleasure *Story of a Marriage* offers. That pleasure, however, has many facets, one of which is the possibility for imaginative engagement with the past; while such films’ slavish devotion to period “authenticity” subjects them to criticism for making false claims to “absolute” truth, that devotion necessarily results in *some* considered approximation of what the past could have looked and sounded like. Moreover, as with any fiction, the suspension of disbelief does not foreclose the ability to see beneath or behind the imagined; even the nostalgically minded viewer can relish the delicate textures and intricate design of a female character’s afternoon frock while simultaneously rejoicing at never having to wear such a thing – with its elaborate undergarments – in a Texas summer before the days of air conditioning, or to be subjected to the absolute will of one’s father, or to look forward to married life without access to effective birth control and to childbirth without the benefits of modern medicine; one can watch the congenial cemetery conversation between a young white man looking for his father’s grave and the older black man employed there as gravedigger and appreciate the young man’s – and possibly the screenwriter’s – belief in the mutual respect of that relationship without buying into the fiction that the black man shares that belief.

Finally, it must be noted that this typology is not made up of rigid categorizations; rather, any given film may contain elements of more than one category. Nonetheless, with the exception of a film such as *Chicago* (2002), a deliberate (postmodern) mix of the fantastic (in the musical numbers) and the authentically re-created past (in the film’s straight narrative), most films’ essential construction will fit more completely or appropriately in one category than in the other

two. This potential fluidity in make-up is, however, another permutation of the nostalgic pop culture object,

In sum, Hollywood's presentation of the turn-of-the-century small town between *Our Town* in 1940 and *The Music Man* and *The Twilight Zone*'s "A Stop at Willoughby" in the early 1960s reflects, in the way it was received and read, a broad and essentially unchanged cultural construction of that particular time and place. It was America's universal "home town," its "age of innocence"; it was characterized by the twin virtues of *community* and *sufficiency of time* that were increasingly found to be missing from American mid-century life. On the other hand, Hollywood's actual representation of the turn-of-the-century small town fluctuated in construction and effect; from overt nostalgia for the losses caused by modernity in *The Magnificent Ambersons* to a celebration of modernity in *Excuse My Dust* and *Wait Til the Sun Shines, Nellie* and a recasting *as* modernity in *On Moonlight Bay* and *By the Light of the Silvery Moon*, to fairy tale holiday in *Pollyanna*, *The Music Man*, and *Main Street, U.S.A.*, to lost utopia in *The Twilight Zone*'s "A Stop at Willoughby." These fluctuations reflect standard Hollywood practice and generic conventions, as well as anxieties about the shape post-war America was going to take, assuaged by valorization of mid-century America, and later on, anxieties about post-war urbanization and technology, which were either soothed with joyful, fanciful excursions to the turn-of-the-century small town or given voice in frustrated fantasies of time-traveling there. When the turn-of-the-century small town did reappear on screen in the made-for-TV mini-series *Story of a Marriage* in the mid-1980s, it had become, among other possible interpretations, an "authentic" historical destination. In the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries, as the turn-of-the-century small town became a more distant cultural memory, it was gradually replaced by or

subsumed into the pre-World War II or 1950s small town, which became the new idealized “home town,” except where the 1900s small town was taken up by religious groups as the exemplar of the ideal Christian existence, far enough removed from modern-day life to be completely out of reach of its contaminating effects. As it faded from popular culture generally in the 1980s and ‘90s, the turn-of-the-century small town became a less frequent subject of Hollywood or television production. Even so, the variety in tone and effect of Hollywood’s representations of the same nostalgic object during the post-war period – and in its rare onscreen appearance in the postmodern era – demonstrates a heretofore largely ignored variety in the nature of popular culture’s nostalgic products; that is, it illustrates the need for recognition and categorization of the *types* of nostalgic texts, and suggest at a minimum the admittedly porous categories of *expressed nostalgia*, *idealized inauthentic past*, and *meticulously re-created past*. In short, examination of twenty-plus years’ of onscreen representation of a single “nostalgic” moment reveals intriguing complexities to the phenomenon of pop culture nostalgia itself, exploration of which has begun here but which warrant further examination and study.

APPENDIX
VITA

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 School of Communication
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Spring 2004 Teaching Assistant for undergraduate course: *History of Film 1940 - Present*. Conducted bi-weekly discussion sections; graded papers and final exam; contributed exam questions

Winter 2004 Teaching Assistant for undergraduate course: *History of Film Through 1939*. Conducted weekly discussion sections; graded quizzes and multiple papers

Fall 2003 Teaching Assistant for undergraduate course: *Introduction to Film*. Conducted weekly discussion sections; graded multiple papers and final exam

University of Southern California; Los Angeles, CA
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Spring 2002 Teaching Assistant for undergraduate course: *Hollywood Film 1930 – 1945*. Conducted weekly discussion section; graded term papers and multiple exams

Spring 2002 Reader for undergraduate course: *Hip Hop Culture*. Graded multiple exams

TEACHING EXPERIENCE (con't):

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Fall 2001 Teaching Assistant for undergraduate course: *Wide Screen Cinema*
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Fall 2000 Reader for undergraduate course: *Hollywood on Hollywood*
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Georgia State University College of Law; Atlanta, GA

Director of *Research, Writing and Advocacy* program: Created and coordinated implementation of course syllabus; oversaw choice and creation of students' writing assignments; guided RWA instructors in class instruction and management; administered all aspects of the program.

Instructor of first-year law course: *Research, Writing and Advocacy*; taught students legal writing, research, and oral advocacy, with emphasis on legal writing and analytical skills.

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Creator and teacher of upper-level law course: *Advanced Legal Writing*; emphasis on students' refining of writing skills beyond RWA.

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Invited Lecture:

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"Playground or Lost Utopia: The Nostalgia of Walt Disney and Rod Serling for America's Turn-of-the-Century Small Town," Society for Cinema and Media Studies 2006 Conference, Vancouver, Canada, March 2-5, 2006.

“The Day They Stopped the Mail in Mason City: Mason City, Iowa’s Nostalgic Exploitation of *The Music Man*,” *The American Village in a Global Setting: An Interdisciplinary Conference*, St. Cloud University, St. Cloud, MN, Oct. 6-7, 2005.

“Looking Backward to Look Forward to Today: Post-War Hollywood’s Turn-of-the-Century Small Town,” National Popular Culture/American Culture/SW Texas Popular Cultural Associations Joint Meeting, San Antonio, TX, April 7-10, 2004.

“Bridge to the Age of Innocence: The Female Form in Classic Hollywood’s Turn-of-the-Century Musicals,” Society for Cinema and Media Studies 2004 Conference, Atlanta, GA, March 3-7, 2004.

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“Cinema of Reassurance: The Turn-of-the-Century Musical of Post-World War II Hollywood,” Society for Cinema and Media Studies 2003 Conference, Minneapolis, MN, March 4-8, 2003.

“Bing on a Binge: Casting Against Type in *The Country Girl*,” Bing! Crosby and American Culture Conference, Hofstra Cultural Center, Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY, November 14-16, 2002.

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