

sent and that was effective in reducing challenges to this dominance. Individual actors who did insist on contributing to their own image construction were regarded as a nuisance, but could be dealt with through contract negotiation, suspension, or dismissal. When actors struggled for collective self-representation and challenged exploitative labor practices, however, more severe measures were instituted to deny them a voice as political subjects (see chapter 3). As actors struggled for the right to define and control their own subject identities as laborers, the studios struggled to position actors as passive objects of display, fragmenting their labor power into institutionalized categories of image, performance, and profitability. Given the conflicts over systems of representation and issues of self-representation, the actors' struggle for definition was difficult.

The Union Question

An understanding of actors' subjectivity requires not only an investigation into labor-management relations, but an investigation into actors' shifting perceptions of themselves in relation to their work and to the cinematic institution in general. It requires, in other words, an understanding of the unifying principles around which diverse groups of actors united or formed "unions" (in the broadest sense of the term), and the way in which fragmented aspects of subject identity cohered in relation to these unions. Since the fragmented condition of subjects always tends toward unity, whether by conscious or unconscious means, whether by free consent or active resistance, the significance of subject unity lies in its political utility. For the unifying constructs of subject identity not only determined how actors perceived themselves or were perceived by others; they directly influenced relations of power in the industry and affected actors' strength as a bargaining unit.

In undertaking such an analysis, I tread upon the terrain of the "collective subject," a theoretical concept that has been all but avoided in film studies (and most Marxist criticism as well) due, I think, to its suggestion of a mass consciousness or collective will. Viewed from the perspective of labor, however, the collective subject—or a collective subject identity—takes on more useful and politically specific connotations. As Raymond Williams notes in *Marxism and Literature*, collective subjectivity involves a process of "conscious cooperation" or collaboration. It is a "case of cultural creation by two or more individuals who are in active relations with each other, and whose work cannot be reduced to the mere sum of their separate individual

contributions.”³³ In an attempt to distance Marxist cultural theory from a bourgeois notion of the individual, Williams stresses the “trans-individual” nature of the collective subject whereby we can discover “the truly social in the individual, and the truly individual in the social.”³⁴

In his essay “What is Cultural Studies Anyway?” Richard Johnson argues more forcefully for the need to address the collective dimension of subjectivity. Within poststructuralist theory, he says, “there is no account of . . . *the subjective aspects of struggle*, no account of how there is a moment in subjective flux when social subjects (individual or collective) produce accounts of who they are, as conscious political agents, that is constitute themselves, politically.”³⁵ Thus, what cultural studies must take up is an investigation of how social movements or groups “strive to produce some coherence and continuity.” It must engage, he argues, in a “post-post-structuralist” account of subjectivity that returns to and reformulates questions of struggle, “unity,” and the production of a (collective) political will. This involves, most importantly, a theoretical notion of the “discursive self-production of subjects, especially in the form of histories and memories”³⁶—and, I would add, everyday practices.

Thus, from the theoretical perspective of labor power differences, “collective subjectivity” refers to the process that laboring subjects undergo in forming, maintaining, or protecting a collective sense of identity. Since the social relations involved in this process follow no internal logic nor create inevitable results, the project at hand must “abstract, describe and reconstitute in concrete studies the social forms through which [actors] ‘live,’ become conscious, sustain themselves subjectively.”³⁷ It must locate the specific configurations of actors’ collective subjectivities, which arise out of a history of struggle and labor power differences, and analyze the ways in which knowledge and experience of these collective notions are discursively produced and materially lived within the shifting context of social relations in Hollywood.

The contours and spaces of actors’ subjectivity are often difficult to determine. In the earliest years of cinema, for example, a coherent or unified notion of screen acting did not appear to exist. Actors from vaudeville and the stage became part-time “picture performers” to pick up a few extra dollars during daytime hours. Or, within a motion picture company, employees who performed other duties might be asked also to “pose” for the camera.³⁸ By the 1910s, as the industry sought to legitimate the new entertainment form among the middle and upper classes, screen acting increasingly became defined as a specialized skill, and discourse about the acting profession began

to differentiate between the theater and motion pictures. As Richard deCordova has noted, there emerged “a sort of struggle between photographic and a theatrical conception of the body, between posing and acting.”³⁹ Distinctions were made between the live, vocal performances of stage acting and the type of acting required to create the phantom images of the silent cinema. Although film producers often played up an actor’s stage experience as a way to legitimate his or her professional existence (and the film industry’s existence in general),⁴⁰ actors became part of the ever-widening discursive gap between stage and screen.

Material differences also affected actors’ notions of themselves and their profession. Screen acting, for example, differed not only in terms of craft, but in terms of the institutional context. From the film industry’s beginning, screen actors encountered different working environments and labor power relations in the studios than stage actors encountered in the theater. In the latter, where employee–employer relations were stabilized and ownership was concentrated in the hands of a few, actors suffered a number of abuses. Alfred Harding, a historian of early stage labor, states that, in contrast, motion pictures offered lucrative and relatively stable employment conditions without the accompanying abuse by management: “There was still so much money to be made from the making, booking and exhibiting of motion pictures that the money to be gained by rigging the actors, considerable as that sum would have been, was a mere drop in a capacious bucket.”⁴¹

As the film studios moved their operations to California, stage and screen were separated even further, and the “difference” of screen acting intensified. Once the Hollywood star system became more firmly established and divisions within the talent group were intensified, a greater distinction between high-ranking and low-ranking actors also emerged. Before World War I, screen actors formed their own labor associations, but these groups were primarily social or benevolent organizations and “had little interest in or orientation toward industrial relations.”⁴² Later, high-ranking actors formed the Screen Actors of America, and atmosphere and bit players belonged to the Motion Picture Players Union (MPPU). Although neither group was a radical political body, both had obtained a charter from the American Federation of Labor and established an orientation toward industrial relations.

These labor groups were challenged in 1919 when Actors’ Equity Association, the political body formed by stage actors in 1913, sought jurisdiction over Hollywood.⁴³ Although Equity had hoped to “penetrate Hollywood peacefully,” it was met with resistance, and it took several months of

negotiation before the existing screen actors' unions agreed to acknowledge Equity's jurisdictional rights. By this time most screen actors were bypassing the stage and beginning their careers directly in the cinema. As Murray Ross explains, they did not know the history of labor struggles in the theater and were not interested in the stage actors' problems.⁴⁴ Equity also threatened the screen actors' professional autonomy. Because Equity had moved into Hollywood so shortly after winning a major battle with Broadway theater managers, many actors believed that the union's interest in controlling Hollywood merely stemmed from its desire to strengthen its home bargaining position.⁴⁵

Equity members, however, argued that their actions were motivated by a spirit of collectivity and should not be interpreted as opportunistic or divisive; their goal was to protect Hollywood actors from the sort of exploitative conditions that had occurred in the theater. Although "a general survey of conditions affecting motion picture actors on the Pacific Coast revealed that at that time there were prevalent remarkably few of the abuses which had driven the dramatic actors to organize," members of Equity wanted to offset any advantage that management might gain.⁴⁶ The need for a "strong and watchful organization" was not apparent to Hollywood actors because the motion picture industry was still young and had yet to develop entrenched relations of labor-management power. But, as Equity noted, "The industry was beginning to crystallize." If protective measures were not taken soon, actors would witness "the consolidation of the field in the hands of a few strong men."⁴⁷

During its first few years in Hollywood, Actors' Equity continued to monitor the situation without taking action. Equity felt that "the majority of motion picture actors were not yet ready to be organized" even though abuses against actors were beginning to mount.⁴⁸ In addition, unionization of the sort Equity had achieved in the theater was not yet possible, because no official employer bargaining unit existed. It was not until the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association (MPPDA) was formed in 1922 that Equity sought to negotiate its first standard contract.⁴⁹ Will Hays, head of the MPPDA, "noncommittally agreed to consider the request," but the matter was apparently ignored. When the Association of Motion Picture Producers (AMPP), the labor branch of the MPPDA, was formed in 1924, Equity approached Hays again. But Equity's request for a standard contract, closed shop conditions, and studio recognition of the actors' union was flatly rejected.⁵⁰

Equity members did not push the issue further because they were unable to garner enough support in the screen community. In addition, some of the labor practices that Equity had protested against were temporarily discontinued when Joseph Schenck, president of the AMPP, intervened on the studios' behalf.⁵¹ Thus, although interest in Equity "had been high," many screen actors thought the newly formed AMPP had responded adequately to their needs. Equity backed off, allowing their recruitment drive to come to a "virtual standstill," but it refused to recede into the background.⁵² In a statement issued to the press, the union declared:

Equity wants it understood that it is not abandoning its Los Angeles office and that it is not contemplating any such action. . . . it is in Los Angeles and the motion picture field to stay, and will be there strong and vigorous long after these short-sighted actors and actresses have become dusty shadows on rolls of celluloid in somebody's storage warehouse.⁵³

Equity was clearly becoming impatient with the naive and uncooperative behavior of their fellow actors in Hollywood even though the union was committed to protecting all members of the same profession.

The less than harmonious relationship between stage and screen actors, however, was not simply a matter of naïveté. Equity's attempt to protect and educate Hollywood actors also involved a control over and redefinition of screen actors' subject identity. The identity of "actor" (versus "screen actor") threatened their professional autonomy by denying the specificity of their labor and their relation to Hollywood. Screen actors were, moreover, inclined to view themselves as "picture personalities" or members of a "studio family" rather than as "industrial workers." As producer Milton Sperling observed,

In those days in Hollywood, studio loyalty was a factor of your life. If you were a Warner employee, or a Fox employee, or a Metro employee, that was your home, your country. . . . You played baseball against the other studios. You had T-shirts with your studio's name on them. It was just like being a *subject*, and a patriotic subject at that. People who lived and worked beyond the studio walls just didn't belong, and you were prepared to fight them off, like the Philistines.⁵⁴

But the screen actors' failure to recognize or confront the broader implications of Equity's efforts carried a high price. In their desire for an autonomy and subject identity based on film specificity, screen actors repeatedly sided

with their motion picture employers and rejected the labor history and bargaining experience of their fellow workers in the theater.

The position chosen by screen actors (and fostered by the studios) left them more vulnerable to studio domination. By 1926 the Hollywood labor situation had undergone some fundamental changes. Though the major studios still maintained an open shop policy, they had signed the Studio Basic Agreement with the craft unions and were gradually becoming involved in the process of collective bargaining and collective negotiations. Studio heads realized that similar measures would be necessary if they wished to maintain their control over the creative talent groups. Thus the studios began to make certain concessions in the hopes of appeasing the demands of talent groups while forestalling their unionization. These concessions (e.g., a more equitable distribution of work for extras through the establishment of the Central Casting Corporation) were designed not only to undercut Equity's influence in Hollywood, but to discourage screen actors' identification with (unionized) actors from the stage.

As part of this new managerial approach, the producers created the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. The Academy was made up of five branches representing the major divisions of motion picture production: producers, directors, writers, actors, and technicians. According to the original charter, the branches were to be equally represented on the Academy's board of directors, and each branch would elect an executive committee by democratic process to function as its governing voice in labor negotiations. In an effort to make the Academy a prestige organization above the status of a labor union, membership was by invitation only and based on one's distinguished accomplishments in film production. According to labor historians Louis B. Perry and Richard S. Perry, the Academy's structure was particularly attractive to major screen stars who were growing uncomfortable with Equity's attempts "to organize and control from 3,000 miles away."⁵⁵ Unlike the theater union, the Academy recognized stars as members of a white-collar profession who should be treated on the basis of individual artistry. The Academy's "method of selection, however, kept the control of the organization in the hands of a few, so that it took on many aspects of a company union."⁵⁶

Actors' Equity was suspicious of the Academy's commitment to labor issues and believed that its formation was "calculated to give Equity a final blow."⁵⁷ Thus, when the AMPP announced a 10–25 percent reduction in salary for nonunion labor in 1927, Equity stood ready to challenge the Academy's stated commitment. The screen actors' response to the situation re-

peated a familiar pattern. Feeling betrayed by the producers' association, they turned to Equity for assistance. But when the newly formed Academy protested successfully against the salary reduction (by convincing producers to consider the merits of each individual case), actors placed their allegiance with it. Thus Equity was once again forced into inactivity. Its presence continued to serve as a "deterrent to unlimited aggression on the part of producers,"⁵⁸ but producers still assumed the right to speak for actors through the benevolent auspices of the Academy.

The question of "a voice," of making oneself heard, took on an added significance in the battle between labor and management when the arrival of sound accentuated the voice as a material site of struggle. As Walker notes, the "economic dislocation" caused by the switch-over to sound technology was also accompanied by a "human dislocation."⁵⁹ Articles in the trade press capitalized on "scare stories" and predicted an apocalyptic outcome for even the most well established silent actors. Nervousness about learning new techniques caused some motion picture stars to enroll in voice production schools or to go to Broadway to establish themselves as stage actors. But, according to Walker, "The more insecure the talkies made these highly-priced and troublesome people feel, the better a front office liked it."⁶⁰ Producers learned quickly that while the sound crisis was stirring antagonisms between stage and screen actors, it was also increasing their control over the labor force. Producers used the crisis as an opportunity to cut the escalating salaries of stars. Since it was economically advantageous to purchase talent that was already developed, they also brought in "proven voices" from the stage at a cheaper rate. The competition and feeling of insecurity that this created among Hollywood stars subsequently persuaded them "to take cuts, or resign at a lower figure, in order to hang on to their stardom."⁶¹

But although the employment of stage actors provided a quick fix for the studios, producers were opening the door for the subversive potential of the voice. Of the approximately twelve hundred stage players who migrated to Hollywood to appear in the talkies, nearly all were members of Actors' Equity. These actors were accustomed to an Equity shop policy in New York theaters and had experienced firsthand the sorts of improvements that Equity had been able to obtain from theater managers. By 1929, 70 percent of all actors in talking pictures (including screen actors who joined locally) were Equity members. The membership was active, filing complaints about studio working conditions at Equity headquarters and calling for all-Equity casts.⁶² With such unprecedented support from screen actors, union officials thus decided to make another stand for an Equity shop policy in Hollywood.

During their struggle to obtain the voice of effective self-representation, actors' groups underwent a series of realignments. First and foremost, stage and screen actors developed more harmonious relations. Some film actors, particularly the higher-ranked ones, continued to resent the presence of the theater in Hollywood and were suspicious of the union's attention to the newly arrived stage players. The fact that Equity had suspended several leading actors from the union (for violating Equity regulations) only added to their antagonism.⁶³ But the majority of actors from the lower ranks (character actors and bit players) welcomed the bargaining position that Equity could help them achieve. This vote of confidence and solidarity was forcefully expressed at a rally of Equity's members when, upon adjourning, the crowd of actors sang the song first used in the stage actors' theatrical strike of 1919, "All for One, and One for All."⁶⁴ But while these screen actors forged a unified front, of sorts, the terms of collective subjectivity remained fragmented.

It became increasingly apparent that the major split within the acting profession during this period was no longer based on medium specificity (i.e., stage versus screen), but on a hierarchical notion of actors' labor. Equity's active membership came from the lower ranks; these stage and screen actors defined themselves as workers, and the organization itself was structured along trade union lines. The major motion picture stars resisted the definition of actors as workers. They also feared that the union drive would cost them the status and power they had worked so hard to achieve. A number of them belonged to both Equity and the Academy, but as labor historians Perry and Perry point out, they were "not likely to quit the Academy in favor of a union until they found a lack of good faith in the former and were ready to consider themselves as workers in need of a labor organization rather than members of a professional group who were above organization."⁶⁵

Gaining the loyalty and commitment of prominent actors was essential to Equity's overall success. But the stakes and issues were vastly different for stars than they were for other classes of actors. Whereas the distinguished stars could arrange contracts that guaranteed high wages and specified certain favorable working conditions, most of the industry's actors—especially screen extras—were not in a position to bargain. If they spoke out against abuses they were seldom reemployed at the same studio; and since they were never sure of continuous work, most actors kept quiet. When these actors did obtain work, they were often forced to accept contracts that were "hopelessly vague and inequitable" and essentially amounted to "tak[ing] the casting-director's word."⁶⁶ Union support from their prestigious and steadily

employed colleagues would thus give them a bargaining edge that their mere numbers could not ensure.

According to a report in the *Nation*, however, producers were “resorting to every conceivable device to break the spirit of the actors.”⁶⁷ They tried to undercut the union drive by offering actors tempting non-Equity contracts. Those who refused had their names passed on to other studios, where they would find it difficult to obtain work.⁶⁸ Producers also relied on the local newspapers to further their antiunion crusade. Lists of non-Equity members, for example, were published in the local press to help studios “make their hiring decisions.” Both the *Los Angeles Times*, a notoriously antiunion publication, and the *Los Angeles Examiner*, owned by William Randolph Hearst (a major stockholder with MGM), printed lengthy editorials against Equity. In one, stars were warned that an affiliation with Equity would turn them into blue-collar workers, because Equity had “placed itself in line and agreement with stagehands, ditch-diggers, janitors, iron-molders, and such.”⁶⁹ Meanwhile, the local press printed interviews with several of Hollywood’s top stars (Lionel Barrymore, Louise Dresser, Marie Dressler, John Gilbert, and Norma Talmadge) who praised the producers for attempting to negotiate fair—that is, non-Equity—contracts.⁷⁰ These stars preferred that labor negotiations be handled by the Academy, an organization they had helped to create.

Equity once again miscalculated the unity and strength of screen actors. Although more than two thousand Equity members had turned down non-union contracts, producers had held on to enough of the important actors to maintain continuity in production as well as a bargaining edge. The absence of prominent actors from the bargaining table, and the lack of political support, weakened Equity’s position. Organized labor also retreated from the scene. Although several Hollywood craft unions had pledged their moral support and, in some cases, even their financial support to the actors’ cause, they now refused to call sympathetic strikes.⁷¹ In addition, fighting among the internal ranks of Equity resulted in the union coming up empty-handed. Although the producers, at one point, had consented to 80 percent Equity and 20 percent nonunion labor in all casts, indecision and delay among Equity officials caused producers to withdraw their offer.⁷²

The breakdown in Equity leadership, the conflicting interests between high-ranking and low-ranking actors, and the lack of outside assistance resulted in an overwhelming defeat. The acting profession was now more vulnerable and fragmented than ever. And, left with no other option, actors hurried to accept contracts on producers’ terms. As workers, actors

once again were forced to define themselves individually—rather than collectively—in relation to producers. The political gap between high-ranking and low-ranking actors intensified, and the more harmonious relationship that had developed between stage and screen began to dissolve (or at least it became less consequential). Now that all actors in Hollywood were forced to deal directly with motion picture producers, the issue of “film specificity” reemerged as the organizing principle of actors’ subject identity. But this time the voice of theater was silenced on producers’ terms. This would remain the case until actors were able to forge another, more collective, discourse of labor to define themselves differently.