

# Four Walling Exhibition: Regional Resistance to the Hollywood Film Industry

by Frederick Wasser

Hollywood's domination of the domestic market has shaped film studies from its beginning. The belief that the entire history of the American film industry occurred in Los Angeles has, until recently, not been examined (with the exception of New York filmmaking, particularly before the sound era). I wish to contribute to a growing body of film histories concerned with alternative production practices. This paper is a study of a group of American movie companies, the regional "four wallers," who were totally independent in business location, production themes, and distribution from Hollywood. They emerged in the late 1960s and flourished through the late 1970s. This group constituted a vital regional challenge and their history is an important key to the segmentation and alienation of the movie audience in this time period.

Four walling occurs when a movie company rents an individual movie theater (the four walls of the theater give the technique its name) for a flat fee from the owner for one or two weekends. This company keeps the entire box office from the screenings, the theater owner takes all the popcorn and soda concession money. This is in contrast to the industry norm of splitting the ticket receipts between the theater and the distributor over and above minimum guarantees. Four walling has been a favorite tool of very small companies and has been in sporadic use from the beginning of filmmaking up to today. However, in the early seventies, several marginal companies, located in the far west, achieved tremendous success with the technique and started to earn box office grosses that matched or exceeded the Hollywood majors.

These regional four wallers have received little attention in the academic literature.<sup>1</sup> This neglect stems from several practices of the four wallers. They avoided major cities and their publicity campaigns were local and of short duration, thereby courting critical obscurity. Furthermore, scholars have not been attracted to the typical regressive film style of the movement. No one will pretend that *The Life and Times of Grizzly Adams* (1975) and *The Vanishing Wilderness* (1973), two fairly typical shows, furthered the art of film. The films were slow and simple and relied heavily on kitsch images of the Rocky Mountains and wilderness life.

This regressive antisophisticated style was itself one way of opposing the

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mainstream and discouraging critical notice. But attention must be paid in any case because this film practice, which was marginal in both production and distribution, found viable acceptance. The leading regional producer, Charles Sellier Jr., referred to both his validation by the public and his obscurity when he boasted, "I've done 26 feature length films and made \$15 million a film and you don't even know who I am. If I was in Hollywood now, I'd be Cecil B. DeMille."<sup>2</sup> Although Sellier was exaggerating his successes, they were real enough to be a measure of the extent of resistance to Hollywood's assumptions about the public. The regionals catered to an audience that had been alienated from the mainstream, not the excluded voices of race and gender, but the excluded rural working class with "heartland" values.

Denise Jacobson, in her analysis of the work of Robert Young, John Hanson, Charles Burnett, and others, defines the regional film as "distinguished by its position of identification with the people and place it represents. It is not simply *about*, but comes *from* the region, whether the regional voice is articulated through the agency of an actor, by actual people portraying themselves, or is otherwise incorporated by the filmmaker(s) into the text."<sup>3</sup> She also isolates more material features of regional filmmaking, such as a low budget and a propensity for using documentary formats. She generates these features from a group of filmmakers who would accept the label of left wing. However, these categories of struggle with cultural dominance apply equally well to the regional four wallers even though their politics is of a nostalgia for simpler times and many would label themselves as conservative. Yet we should ask the same questions about their practices as we ask of all alternative cinemas. How far did the resistance go? Did their regionality result in "real" grassroots filmmaking? Or was their anti-Hollywood rhetoric merely an opportune strategy to differentiate their brand name? How accurately did the filmmakers express the alienation of the audience?

The regional four wallers shared many of the same production practices of other marginal filmmakers except that through the use of four walling they found a large enough audience for their films to build a commercial base for their operations. Through a patient and methodical approach they took the profits from one weekend in one market and rolled it over into the next market to build the film slowly across the country, in contrast to the majors, who issued films in either a wide release or in well-timed tiered releases (showcase runs to be followed by wider and wider release patterns). Four walling in the 1970s rarely involved first-run theaters.

Four wallers constituted themselves by avoiding the Los Angeles or New York production communities, staying within their original locale. The most successful ones operated out of Utah (Sunn Classics, American National Enterprises, Doty-Dayton) and Oregon (Pacific International Enterprises). There were also significant operations in Florida, North Carolina, and Texas. I shall concentrate on the former group, and in particular on Sunn Classics, as the most productive and ambitious, because this group focused on movie themes

that were strongly determined by the mountain regions and identified with the people who lived there. The others tended to produce horror and other exploitation shows less specific to their regional setting.

Four walling successes demonstrated that the major studios had allowed several gaps to open up in the national audience. Historically, the Hollywood film industry was the first entertainment medium to build a mass unified audience, cutting across regional and even class lines.<sup>4</sup> But the major studios' very success created a social distance between the movie corporations and their patrons that grew appreciably after World War Two. Would-be movie goers were increasingly fragmented in their interests and distracted by other leisure time alternatives. Executives spoke with less confidence of what the single "American public" wanted. They redirected their efforts to pursue demographic segments such as the global "youth" audience. Local groups, such as small town families, fell off the internal radar screens of studio decision makers. The regional four wallers saw that the studios' feedback mechanism was breaking down because of its global scale. They positioned themselves as storytellers appealing to a sensibility different from that that responded to either the high-class sophisticated adult fare or the low-brow exploitation of violence coming out of Los Angeles and New York.

The regionals' practice was based on the perception that the film industry was run by an out of touch elite. Recently the same complaint has been articulated by Michael Medved in *Hollywood vs. America*,<sup>5</sup> by the Republican attacks against the loose morals of the fictional TV character Murphy Brown, and in the bipartisan investigations of violence in the media. Medved charges that the 80 percent of major films that fails to receive a G rating constitutes a deluge of obscene and violent product. Hollywood draws such outrage and anger because it is seen as a monolith imposing its will on the hapless public. There have been cyclical responses to these moral strictures, from the historic Production Code to the current ratings system. Hollywood seems to be responding yet again to concerns over "violence" by increasing production of G-rated films after the success of *Beauty and the Beast* and by absorbing independent voices into its structure.

Twenty years ago the four wallers made their critiques not to urge or participate in an internal reform of Hollywood but to create a commercial and cultural space for themselves. They were capitalizing on the two decades of instability that the American film industry had suffered since the introduction of television and the divestment of theater ownership. In the late sixties, mainstream film production was still trying to adjust. Admissions plummeted throughout the decade to its lowest point of 820 million tickets sold in 1971.<sup>6</sup> Earlier the studios improvised responses by placing heavy emphasis on big screen spectacular films that were thought to provide a competitive alternative to the small TV screen. However, the chaos of *Cleopatra* (1963) and a series of expensive musical flops undermined this strategy and slowed the rate of production.<sup>7</sup> Another approach was to lower costs and increase profit margins by

shooting overseas or financing European film production, fostering the emergence of new cinematic talents in Italy, France, and Great Britain.

The artistic revival of European films in the fifties and later had a reverse influence on stateside production. Hollywood was emboldened to adopt European themes and to film more adult dramas with sexual dimensions. Jack Warner defended nudity in 1964,<sup>8</sup> Mike Nichols explored explicit themes in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1966) and *The Graduate* (1967), MGM successfully released *Blow-Up* in 1966 without a rating, and *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) won the Best Picture Oscar. All these events reflected and encouraged the mass media promotion of the "sexual revolution," and the industry congratulated itself on using adult fare to differentiate the movie-going experience from television, particularly for baby boomers who were not yet adults. After the run-away success of the counter-culture movie *Easy Rider* (1969), which earned \$19 million, studios became obsessed with catering to the younger side of the generation gap.

Hollywood still continued to produce shows that can be characterized as "Americana" or "wholesome" but there was a perceived abandonment of the traditional family and rural audiences. Even the Disney studio lost its enthusiasm for these audiences after the death of its founding father in 1966. Movie theaters catering to these audiences could not find enough suitable films to fill their screens. Trade papers wrote ominously of a product famine. Many theaters had the additional burden of being located in depopulating areas as Americans moved away from both the cities and the country to the suburbs. They would be open to a four wall deal that relieved them of the headache of booking for an unpredictable audience.

**A Brief History.** Three Utahans, Russel Niehart, Robert Crosier, and Frank Olson, practically reenacted the turn-of-the-century road shows of Thomas Edison, Lyman Howe, and other pioneer film exhibitors when, in the 1960s, they showed 16mm films of their hunting trips to various small-town groups in rented hallrooms in and around the Rocky Mountain states. They saw the increasing popularity of these screenings and decided to pursue this audience on a more systematic and commercial basis. The three men formed American National Enterprises (ANE) in 1965 to exhibit *Alaskan Safari* and similar shows by four walling throughout the rural portions of the country. Over the course of five years, five and a half million people viewed *Alaskan Safari*. By 1969 their after-tax profits were \$907,153.<sup>9</sup> These movies were primitive in their production techniques and content, consisting of little more than a travelogue featuring animals or a simple narrative about the relation between man and the wilderness. But in places where television reception was often poor or nonexistent and there were few excuses to go out for the evening, ANE drew a crowd.

In 1969, Arthur Dubs formed Pacific International Enterprises (PIE) in Oregon to four wall his own outdoor picture *American Wilderness*, produced for \$50,000.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, Victor White emerged as the marketing strategist

at ANE. He conducted extensive research on his audience, spending three times as much on marketing and surveying as the company was spending on production. This ratio had never been used before in the film industry. ANE felt this was necessary because they were trying to attract people who had given up on going to the movies; therefore, their audience's interests and desires could not be known from previous attendance. The audience had to be targeted precisely since the runs in any given market were limited to one or two weeks and favorable word of mouth had no time to develop. Publicity was generated by a television campaign that saturated the local spots for those two weeks. Even though local spots were comparatively cheap in the early seventies, these companies had very slim reserves to fall back on if the campaign failed in two or three markets in a row. Everything was tested beforehand.

These surveys taught the producers that their prime customers were lower-income families with earnings in the ten to twelve thousand dollar range, two or three children, and limited schooling. The fact that the audience was "bimodal," meaning that parents and/or grandparents brought young children with them to the theater, facilitated the four wall deal. The theater owner not only got the rent but also an audience that was guaranteed to spend heavily at the concession stand. ANE learned to operate only from November to February since during the rest of the year they had to compete with outdoor activities for their audiences.

The slow town-by-town approach to distribution had several advantages. It required fewer prints than a typical wide distribution and therefore lowered lab fees. If the film failed in any single market, negative word of mouth did not spread to the next locale. Cinerama Releasing scrapped two disastrous ad campaigns for *Walking Tall* (1973) before hitting on one that succeeded. They managed to finance three attempts because they were showing only in small cities. The four wallers avoided the audiences and the critical media in Los Angeles and New York. Both centers were thought to be too urban and jaded to appreciate these films. The theater rentals and advertising in New York were considered to be far too expensive for the potential take. This view was confirmed when, at the height of four walling's popularity in 1974, *Chariots of the Gods* lost \$225,000 in the New York area,<sup>11</sup> although Pacific International managed to make profits in the same area with their wilderness titles. But no regionally produced film gained much respect from the national media critics in these cities and the four wallers were just as happy to avoid their attention.<sup>12</sup>

By the early seventies this formula had been put into place. ANE claimed that their large investments in surveying the market gave them the ability to predict the gross of a film to within 5 percent, but White had left himself and the company vulnerable by sinking over \$22 million into the operation.<sup>13</sup> Rip Coalsen, a former computer software executive, took over in 1973 and nursed the company back to relative health. Earlier, several people had left ANE after learning how to four wall. Some alumni went on to participate in the triumphant rerelease of *Billy Jack*, the most profitable four walled film of the

time, while some others created Sunn Classics, the biggest regional four walling company.

In 1971 Mel Hardman started his own company with other discontents from ANE in Salt Lake City. He quickly ran into trouble on the production of *Toklat* when his financier, a local brokerage house, suffered setbacks on the stock market. He took the footage of the story of an Alaskan bear down to Hollywood and arranged a screening with Jane Russell, who, at that point, was still working with Howard Hughes. When she passed on the material, her associate, Stewart Raffill Sr., put Hardman in touch with Patrick Frawley.<sup>14</sup>

Patrick Frawley is a businessman who started his career in San Francisco and then relocated to Los Angeles. He had made his first splash in business with PaperMate pens, beating the industry leader by paying close attention to distribution and pioneering new markets. He then acquired Technicolor from the original promoter of color movies, Herbert T. Kalmus.<sup>15</sup> While running this laboratory Frawley became very familiar with stories of producers getting into poor distribution deals with the majors and exhibitors.<sup>16</sup> He never participated in the Hollywood community and resisted invitations to invest in productions until he discovered four wallers operating far from Los Angeles and maintaining absolute control over marketing and receipts. By the time he made the deal with Hardman in 1972, he had sold Technicolor but was in full control of Shadel Hospital and the Eversharp razor company.<sup>17</sup> He renamed Hardman productions after a trademark he owned, Sunn, and later added another trademark to create the name of Sunn Classics.

At this time, the typical plotlines of ANE's and Hardman's wilderness films valorized the self-sufficient individual who wished to escape the corruption and disappointment of human society and rebuild his life in the woods. As the protagonist returns to the pure values of nature, he finds that he can make friends with the animals, who become his new society, self-sufficient in their own innocence. A danger—hunters, developers, or natural disasters—threatens this purity, and the film reaches its conclusion when this danger is overcome and the purity is restored. (Women appear only occasionally and never unattached. To my knowledge, the only exception, where a full-grown woman is on her own in the woods, is the very obscure film *Mountain Charlie* released on video in 1982.)

Frawley “had an agenda that was concerned with sin and positive behavior modification.”<sup>18</sup> He found the content of the films, with their emphasis on withdrawal from the corruption of city life, and the four walling way of doing business congenial to his own streak of independence and disdain for bureaucratic operations. When Hardman left the company, Frawley did not replace him with someone from Hollywood but remained committed to working with local filmmakers.

These companies had managed to create a niche for themselves by the early seventies, but they were still tiny operations. In the next period of 1973 to 1976 the four wallers started to bring in grosses that rivaled and even outper-

formed the rest of the industry. The whole industry was startled by the success of Tom Laughlin. By 1972 he had become disappointed in Warner Bros.' standard release of a film that he had produced and starred in: *Billy Jack*. The story consisted of the title character protecting an alternative school in the Arizona desert from local bigots and was a strange mixture of hippie sloganeering, pop versions of indigenous philosophies, and Zen violence. Warner Bros. allowed him to buy the film from them. He proceeded to rerelease the film, this time through four walling deals that would eventually gross \$32 million. He used the lessons learned by White at ANE with a new thoroughness; heavy cash reserves paid for unprecedented levels of saturated local advertising for the film, particularly on television. Since Laughlin was working in small markets he could afford local spots. At this time, with the exception of ANE, television advertising was used only for the biggest film releases. Therefore, the TV audience's previous awareness of television spots gave *Billy Jack* the positive connotation of being a big-budget spectacular. The film proceeded from TV market to TV market as an event rather than just a show, rolling the profits over into the next phase of a military-style campaign.<sup>19</sup>

The extraordinary income and the aggressive use of television for *Billy Jack* turned four walling into a high-profile event. The industry's use of local television ads increased 80 percent the next year.<sup>20</sup> Hollywood companies started to use the ANE/Laughlin formula for themselves, Universal with *Westworld*, Warner Bros. with *The Exorcist*. Theater owners balked at extending the formula to the majors, and the National Association of Theater Owners (NATO) complained to the Department of Justice that this was a violation of the original Paramount Consent Decree. Warner and the other signatories agreed in 1976 to a ten-year ban on the practice. An interesting irony resulted when Laughlin, who had been so successful with *Billy Jack*, abandoned four walling for his sequel because he could make more money demanding high up-front guarantees from the theater owners. The regional independents, however, continued to bring in high profits from four walling.

At Sunn Classics in 1974, a former lumberjack from Oregon, Dick Robinson, who first got into show business handling animals for the television show "Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom," started working on an idea for *The Life and Times of Grizzly Adams*. Inspired by the success of the Pollock/Redford film *Jeremiah Johnson*, Robinson wanted to make his film about a real mountain man who had become famous by supplying animals for East Coast zoos in the early frontier days of California. He hired Richard Friedenberg to direct, but Robinson's own producing skills were limited. Frawley was reputed to be disappointed by the dailies, and when one of Robinson's own bears injured him, Frawley took the film away and gave it to a new producer, Charles Sellier, Jr.<sup>21</sup> Charles Sellier made Sunn Classics the largest four walling producer/distributor. He commissioned a new script that stripped the story down to a frontier adventure of Grizzly Adams (Dan Haggarty), who escapes from the law into the wilderness. There he discovers his natural affinity with animals. His new "family" consists of a bear

and other “critters” and a recurring relationship with an Indian (Don Shanks). The movie concludes when Adams finds out from his daughter that murder charges have been dropped and that he can return to civilization. He decides not to. Sellier reshot and finished the Grizzly Adams film, with Friedenberg still directing a small crew working in 16mm, for less than \$300,000. The film went on to gross \$22 million.<sup>22</sup>

Sellier built even further upon a company rhetoric that emphasized Hollywood’s “decadence” and its neglect of the audience. He did not hesitate to invoke the moral superiority of the product he was turning out. “I believe God wants me to do the kind of films I do, otherwise He wouldn’t have made me a success.”<sup>23</sup> Of course God helps those who help themselves, and Sellier heeded this time-honored cliché, giving his divine success a boost by computer testing the potential audience about every aspect of filmmaking.

Testing was an important tool to the other four wallers in the market; to Sellier it had been a religion ever since he started his film career in Denver, and he managed to convert others such as Frawley to his way of thinking. NBC’s programmers were also impressed by the figures Sellier could generate and chose to pick up his show. “The Life and Times of Grizzly Adams,” an hour-long series based on the movie, was first aired on February 9, 1977.

It continues to be customary to ask sample respondents about different ad campaigns or to fine-tune the final editing of a film, after previews, to bring out elements that the public seems to care about. But film studios have generally agreed that asking the potential audience what it wants to see before they have made the film is to ask an unanswerable question. Sellier disagreed. He firmly believed that he could elicit reliable information about aesthetic questions even in the preproduction stage. After surveying sample sets of potential viewers in parking lots and over the phone, he would instruct his directors and writers as to which elements had tested well. “One novel result of computer testing was a shooting manual that was designed to aid the director and editor in selecting shot types, settings, props, costumes and characters for each film.”<sup>24</sup> Bears tested higher than other animals and were used accordingly. Horses tested poorly and were replaced by burros.<sup>25</sup> Gary Edgerton puts this method in perspective by noting that in the 1975 to 1977 period a typical studio such as Twentieth Century-Fox released about a dozen films annually and spent only a quarter of a million dollars per year on pretesting. On a vastly different scale Sunn released three to five films and yet spent over \$1 million on pretesting.<sup>26</sup>

The ultimate logic of Sunn’s testing was to make the audience the filmmaker. Hollywood had always resisted this function of testing, relying more on internal consensus procedures and seat-of-the-pants-type guessing. The result was a lack of rigorous “scientific” knowledge of the audience. In 1946, Eric Johnston, then president of the Motion Picture Association of America, said, “The motion picture industry probably knows less about itself than any other major industry in the United States.”<sup>27</sup> A current assessment is that “the powers in Hollywood during its heyday were antagonistic toward and disdainful of au-



dience research. . . . Today Hollywood does conduct audience research, but the feeling about such research may not be too different.”<sup>28</sup> Studio chiefs have ambivalent feelings about testing, cynically paying lip service to it as an objective truth while using it as another weapon in their in-house struggles.<sup>29</sup>

Sellier, of course, employed testing not only for knowledge but also to gain control over his company and to resist both internal and external pressures to conform to industry standards. Sunn was expanding after the success of *The Life and Times of Grizzly Adams* and the 1973 “pickup” *Chariots of the Gods*. They continued to train their labor force, recruited from the local Salt Lake City population, but they were forced to bring in key production and postproduction people from Los Angeles, who protested the low budgets with the inevitable shortcuts of cheap crews and shortened shooting schedules. Networks and other interested parties constantly complained that the shows were lacking in the technical and aesthetic dimensions. The TV episodes were shot in 16mm when the norm was 35mm photography. But by testing, in effect by asking the permission of the American public for such shortcuts, Sellier could resist the pressures to raise standards and budgets (never going above a million dollars with a median of \$750,000). Hollywood sophisticates may have been annoyed at the uninspired lighting and the use of unknown actors, but the audience who went to the movie theater only twice a year did not seem to mind.

Other creative decisions were streamlined by the use of testing. Selecting screenplays in Hollywood is a well-known quagmire with no one person able to choose and with many arbitrary rejections and bidding wars over properties that become mysteriously “hot.” However, submission to Sunn Classics was simplicity itself. Decisions were not shuffled around in development offices; they were tested in shopping malls. On this basis genuine unsolicited amateur scripts were purchased. “Ideas come from every place. One free lance writer who read about Sunn Classics in *Writers Digest* submitted a treatment for *Beyond and Back*. A retired judge living in Texas contributed the concept for the mini-series called *Mark Twain’s America*.”<sup>30</sup>

Sunn even used testing in arguments against NBC executives, experts in the use of ratings to measure the pulse of the people. But when they started to insist that Sellier adopt their more enlightened attitudes by putting women on the “Grizzly Adams” show, he turned the numbers game against them: “I went ahead against my own judgment and shot an episode we called ‘Woman in the Wilderness.’ Then we put it through testing and got a sharply negative reaction—our audience didn’t want any women in the wilderness. I proved my point, but it was expensive. We scrapped half of the show, reshot the scenes involving the women and changed the emphasis to an Indian and a 12-year-old boy.”<sup>31</sup> Many within the company chafed at such severe control of the shooting process through testing. The star, Dan Haggarty, complained, “People change, the testing doesn’t always hold up . . . I’d like more growth. . . . What would be more logical for a mountain man than to have an Indian woman? But they say it wouldn’t test.”<sup>32</sup>

The regional four wallers had initially plunged deeply into testing in order to understand their audience with an accuracy standard in most retailing but rare in the movie industry. Sellier had elaborated the role of testing to a point that raised new questions about the politics of filmmaking. Was he measuring the audience or constructing it? As long as people showed up at the theaters and watched the television show, the testing had the air of telling essential truths about the desires of the audience. But a softening in the market undermined the "science" of Sellier's numbers.

Breaking box office records peaked in the 1976–77 season. Pacific International's *Adventures of the Wilderness Family* (directed by Stewart Raffill) earned almost \$15 million and Sunn's *In Search of Noah's Ark* (directed by James Conway) took in \$24 million.<sup>33</sup> Subsequent releases took in only half those amounts. NBC refused to renew the "Grizzly Adams" TV show, and the last episode ran at the end of July 1978. Wednesday evening ratings had been steady though modest, and Fred Silverman wanted to move on to something more upscale and with more potential. Sunn tried to revive movie-going attendance by switching from the wilderness genre to religious docudramas such as *Noah's Ark* and *In Search of Historical Jesus* (1980) and shows that exploited paranormal phenomena such as *The Bermuda Triangle* (1978) and *Beyond and Back* (1978).

Sellier kept trying different things in order to fulfill his ambitious program for growing even bigger. Pacific International and ANE were willing to continue to release wilderness films that returned modest profits on falling attendance. All the regional operations had to contend with changes that destroyed four walling's profitability. Though these film companies had anxiously kept their profits secret, theater owners now knew enough to demand higher and higher rental fees. However, this was not so serious a problem as the escalation in television advertising rates. By 1977 Clair Farley, executive vice-president of Sunn, was already complaining, "Inflation is killing us all. A television advertising budget of two years ago would cost 26 per cent more today."<sup>34</sup> All the veterans with whom I talked agreed with James Conway, a former Sunn director/producer, when he said in hindsight that television inflation killed the four wallers' margins.<sup>35</sup> This historic rise in TV rates of the late seventies not only undermined four walling but other forms of direct marketing.<sup>36</sup>

In 1980 Frawley sold Sunn Classics to the media conglomerate Taft Broadcasting for \$5 million.<sup>37</sup> Taft moved Sunn productions down to Los Angeles, where it became another television production unit, differentiated from its rivals only by its specialization in western themes. Sellier remained for a while after the sale but by 1982 had left to head up Comworld. In Oregon, Dubs spent the decade quietly exploiting his film library overseas and on video and sporadically producing wilderness films without fanfare.

**Thematic Alternatives.** Professional filmmaking outside of Hollywood had occurred sporadically before 1970. Oscar Micheaux and others made films for the segregated African-American market before the war. There were other ethnic

films financed by local urban neighborhoods, such as *Natalka Poltavka* (1936), produced by Ukrainian-American windowwashers and directed by a man who was in and out of the studio system, Edgar Ulmer.<sup>38</sup> There were Yiddish-American films. Films made by labor groups formed part of a regional resistance to industrial domination.<sup>39</sup> All these were made outside the entertainment centers and had to create their own distribution structures. Their thematic dissatisfactions with Hollywood stem from regional and community concerns. I would argue that this is different from the aesthetic oppositions of the American avant garde<sup>40</sup> or the lifestyle resistances of cult filmmakers such as Ed Wood, Jr.<sup>41</sup>

These dissatisfactions result in an alternative filmmaking that is defined by three factors: genres grounded in the region or community, marginal production practices, and alternative marketing. Wilderness was the preeminent genre for the companies in the mountain states. The wilderness setting could be historical or contemporary; the protagonist could be a mountain man or a family fleeing the city. The key features were the setting and the animals. The world depicted in these films was not centered on human beings and it therefore is appropriate to regard the sensibility as antihumanist. I have already referred to the hostility Sellier displayed toward NBC's suggestions that he place more women in the show. He resisted inserting contemporary social concerns in a wilderness setting. The wilderness film is an escape from social problems, a reassurance that a spiritual life is natural and is not to be found in a preoccupation with the difficulties of human society. The genre treatment of native Americans is also consistent with this antihumanism. The native is romanticized as someone closer to the natural world and someone to shelter from the corruption of a human-oriented civilization.

This sensibility linked the wilderness film with the religious and paranormal phenomenal docudramas that Sunn produced. The entertainment conglomerates have usually avoided religious references that might offend segments of their global audience. The regionals displayed similar tact about denominational references, but their films boldly favored a literal interpretation of the Bible. They emphasized the miraculous, the inspirational, the things that human knowledge cannot encompass. *Beyond and Back* in its documentary format strongly suggested that there was scientific proof for a Christian heaven. Other phenomena films also implied that the inexplicable was proof of divine existence and are marked by a curious narration that often concludes that a sincere scientist should accept the truth of miracles. A typical example is *In Search of Historic Jesus*, which "systematically" debunks every secular explanation of the shroud of Turin, leaving only the divine one intact.

This religious tone is an important aspect of regional opposition to the mainstream. The Mormon Church, centered in Utah, has many of the four wallers, including Sellier, as members. Although other equally important personnel are not Mormon, most share an upbringing and a belief in conservative religions that naturally imbue the imagery they constructed for the shows. Grizzly Adams's wilderness has a pacifist quality that is part of the same American

Protestant visual tradition portrayed in *The Peaceable Kingdom*, painted by nineteenth-century primitive regionalist Edward Hicks. In this Godly wilderness, common to both the painting and the film, “the wolf shall dwell with the lamb” (Isaiah 11:6). Violence always comes from the outside, and sex does not exist at all.<sup>42</sup> Sunn went to great pains to hide the actual predations of real animals. Production notes instructed the writers and directors that mountain men and their “critters” could only be depicted fishing or eating fruits and that only bad guys hunted big game or wore buckskins. (These prettifying touches offended the first wilderness film producers, who had started off in the business by showing their hunting films.)<sup>43</sup>

Edgerton, writing in the immediate aftermath of the cycle and responding to the distinctive ideological values of their product, asked if Sunn had a relationship with the American public different from that of the Hollywood companies. Did its testing work? Were its films a true “mirror” of the audience? Currently the study of culture has focused on the audience. Scholarly concern with the formations of hegemonic values has intensified the debate over the active role of culture consumers and the hypothesis that audience members are not passive but actively participate in the construction of cultural meanings. The regionals also perceived their audience as active and claimed to facilitate their participation through the various practices mentioned above. But in this claim the heavy reliance on testing becomes problematic since it presupposes a distance between the tester and the sample respondent. If Sellier and Dubs were truly of the people, why did they have to test so extensively? The counter-claim is that testing was the only way to break the mainstream domination in order to know the desire of the audience and to market the films efficiently to those who wanted to see them. Hollywood could neglect testing, having effectively monopolized the distribution system for sixty years of “constructing the audience.” It was exercising the power of monopoly. The regionals had to establish a new dialogue in order to open up a space for competition.

But the new dialogue was not sustained. As I have outlined, the market dwindled through the late seventies. To a large degree the downturn in the cycle is the result of changes in the economics of advertising and distribution. Dubs and Coalson adjusted and survived on a slimmer margin, distributing overseas and selling videotapes to new audiences through the eighties. Nonetheless, in real terms, the audience had turned away and true believers at Sunn had to admit that the numbers had lied to them. Part of the problem was that the socially desirable nature of religious and Americana themes had led to a false positive response to the proposed plotlines. Conway said that this was labeled by Sunn insiders as the “God” factor; sample respondents questioned in a shopping center or parking lot said they would go see uplifting or educational stories but then never showed up at the box-office. He remembers that this occurred with *The Lincoln Conspiracy* and another show on the Kennedy assassination. Both tested high and did poorly.

Therefore, in hindsight, the other conclusions that Sellier drew from the

numbers have to be questioned. Sunn veterans have agreed that the audience did not really accept, over time, the low quality of regional films.<sup>44</sup> The politics of testing did not and could not really pick up this source of audience dissatisfaction. In this regard the Hollywood resistance to testing preproduction decisions was justified.<sup>45</sup> The audience cannot tell the filmmaker how to make a film and will give misleading responses if asked. The marketing notion of the “cost of information” comes into play here. If information about the anticipated response to a decision costs more than the potential added profits of a correct decision, the information cost is not justified. Both Victor White at the beginning of the cycle and Charles Sellier at the end may have been better off putting their money on the screen than in the sampling. This, however, does not negate their achievements in creating a film industry outside the existing structures.

The seventies was the last period of increasing heterogeneity in the location and marketing practices of American film companies. The story since that time has been a reconcentration of production and distribution services in the Los Angeles area.<sup>46</sup> Even the very powerful San Francisco filmmakers George Lucas and Francis Ford Coppola have spent more time and money in Los Angeles in their business practices. The home video explosion initially encouraged many marginal producers into thinking that they could accomplish what the four wallers did in the seventies and make films outside the center. But that hope quickly faded as the rentals dropped for unknown titles by the mid-eighties. The home video market concentrated on mainstream titles that had done well in the theater, and the distribution system was recaptured by the majors.

I would argue that the home video market represents another problem for producers trying to reduplicate the commercial achievements of the four wallers. Since tapes are now available from the entire period of American filmmaking, the family audience can always go to the “library” to find titles that satisfy their sensibility even if current productions are too violent or adult oriented or otherwise unsuitable. Independents will have a difficult time marketing against a perceived void in the mainstream offerings. This is a major change in genre filmmaking since revivals of genres will now have to compete directly against earlier cycles of the same genre. This may help explain the hesitant nature of the current western cycle.

Wilderness films found acceptance in both the national and international markets.<sup>47</sup> This was all the more remarkable since the genre was characterized by a cultural specificity that films traded on the global market usually avoid. They were created in the mountain states about mountain life by local business people, animal trainers, and outdoor photographers for their own community. When the cycle ended, many decided to go on to Hollywood but just as many others stayed put. The point is that they did not judge themselves by the standards of the film industry. They were mavericks creating their own opportunities, not “wannabes” waiting for the phone call of acceptance from the established power structure.<sup>48</sup> Their ability to build home movie showings into \$24 million grossers showed that at least through the seventies the audience

wanted to support production and distribution from places other than Los Angeles. The regional four wallers remain the last significant domestic commercial challenge to the geographic and cultural centralization of the American film industry.

## Notes

1. Suzanne Mary Donahue (cited below) has collected a lot of research on regional four wallers in her book, and Gary Edgerton (also cited below) published a useful appraisal of Sunn in 1982.
2. Gary Edgerton, "Charles E. Sellier, Jr. and Sunn Classic Pictures," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 1, no. 3 (1982): 106.
3. Denise Brooke Jacobson, "Regional Film: A Resistance to Cultural Dominance" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Southern California, 1989), 5.
4. Following the earlier small-scale attempts of theatrical road shows at the turn of the century.
5. Michael Medved, *Hollywood vs. America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992).
6. Harold Vogel, *Entertainment Industry Economics: A Guide for Financial Analysis*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 45.
7. Thomas Schatz, "The New Hollywood," in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, ed. Jim Collins et al. (New York: Routledge, 1993), 14.
8. *New York Times*, March 8, 1964.
9. A. D. Murphy, "American National Enterprises Spends Much Time and Energy Testing the Film Market," *Variety*, September 3, 1971, 9.
10. Suzanne Mary Donahue, *American Film Distribution: The Changing Marketplace* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987), 252.
11. Wayne Kabak, "Four Walling," *Film Comment* 11 (November/December 1975): 30–31.
12. A taste of the city-slicker patronizing attitude can be gotten from J. Hoberman's review of *Grizzly Adams* in the *Village Voice*, February 23, 1976, 126.
13. Murphy, "American National Enterprises," 9.
14. Personal conversations with James Bryan, former postproduction supervisor at Sunn, May 1991.
15. Stanley H. Brown, "The Frawley Phenomena," a Times Inc. reprint from *Fortune* (February 1966).
16. Telephone conversation with Patrick Frawley, November 1991.
17. Patrick Frawley continues to be based at Shadel Hospital, which is famous for its aversion therapy approach to alcoholism and other addictions.
18. James Bryan, interview.
19. Brian Rose, "From Outdoors to Outer Space: The Motion Picture Industry in the 1970s," in *Movies as Artifacts: Cultural Criticism of Popular Film*, ed. Michael T. Marsden et al. (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1982), 55.
20. From \$30.8 million to \$55.9 million. Vogel, *Entertainment Industry Economics*, 86.
21. Robinson sued for breach of contract and eventually won a percentage of the runaway profits of *Grizzly Adams*.
22. Donahue, *American Film Distribution*, 279.
23. Don Freeman, "The Computer Labored—And Brought Forth a Bear," *TV Guide*, January 28, 1978, 12.
24. Edgerton, "Charles E. Sellier, Jr.," 114.
25. Freeman, "The Computer Labored," 14.
26. Edgerton, "Charles E. Sellier, Jr.," 115.
27. Leo Handel, *Hollywood Looks at Its Audience: A Report of Film Audience Research* (New York: Arno, 1976), 93.

28. Bruce A. Austin, *Immediate Seating: A Look at Movie Audiences* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing, 1988), 3–4.
29. Opposed parties conduct tests that reach opposite conclusions. Susan Ohmer discusses these struggles over the use of George Gallup's Hollywood work in her article, "Measuring Desire: George Gallup and Audience Research in Hollywood," *Journal of Film and Video* 43, no. 1/2 (Spring/Summer 1991): 3–28.
30. Bob Fisher, "Filmmaking Report from Park City, Utah," *American Cinematographer* (April 1979): 398.
31. Freeman, "The Computer Labored," 14–15.
32. *Ibid.*, 15.
33. Donahue, *American Film Distribution*, 291.
34. "Sunn's 7–8 a Year: TV Blurb Cost up 26% of Late," *Variety*, March 23, 1977, 28.
35. Personal interview, August 1991.
36. To read about a similar disruption by the ad rate inflation in a direct marketing formula, see Clarence W. Thomas, "It Chops, It Slices, It Dices: Television Marketing and the Rise and Fall of Popeil Family Businesses," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1989): 67–73.
37. Edgerton, "Charles E. Sellier, Jr.," 111.
38. George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 200.
39. Steven J. Ross, "Struggles for the Screen: Workers, Radicals, and the Political Uses of Silent Film," *American Historical Review* 96, no. 2 (April 1991): 333–67 recovers the various efforts by labor groups to portray their struggle in dramatic forms.
40. There are many classic texts about American avant-garde filmmakers. David Curtis, *Experimental Cinema* (New York: Dell, 1971) is a concise history of this movement.
41. Rudolph Grey, *Nightmare of Ecstasy: The Life and Art of Edward D. Wood, Jr.* (Los Angeles, Calif.: Feral House, 1992).
42. I cannot help but think that the primordially named Grizzly Adams shunned women to avoid his namesake's mistake.
43. Personal conversation with Dick Robinson, January 1983.
44. Both Bryan and Conway acknowledged that the audience burned out on the low production values of the Sunn product. Stewart Raffill, whose films were generally thought to be superior in execution to Sunn's, did not discuss quality per se, but in a phone interview (January 13, 1994) stated that the audience became tired of the wilderness genre.
45. Are the trend-makers of Los Angeles following the trend-setting findings of the "hyperreal" theorist, Baudrillard? He states: "It [testing] 'produces' it [the masses] in the form of anticipated responses, of circular signals which seem to circumscribe its existence and to bear witness to its will, Floating signs—such are surveys— instantaneous signs, intended for manipulation, and whose conclusions can be interchanged" (Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* [New York: Semiotext, 1983], 31–32).
46. See Michael Storper and Susan Christopherson, "Flexible Specialization and Regional Industrial Agglomerations: The Case of the U.S. Motion Picture Industry," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 77, no. 1 (1987): 104–17.
47. "Sunn Classic Invades Germany," *Variety*, June 22, 1977, 49, 70, reports the successful campaigns in provincial sections of Great Britain. Sunn insiders confirm that many overseas markets had good returns, even after the domestic downturn.
48. I heartily endorse the line Jon Jost took in his article "End of the Indies," *Film Comment* 25 (January 1989): 42–45 about the ties between independents and Hollywood. He lamented that even many films that are made outside the Hollywood system are designed as "tryouts" rather than as films truly outside the mainstream.