

The Making of Regional Film Economies

Why La. Is Not L.A.

Whether we imagine new local film economies as runaways, satellites, or growing nodes in a global network, their creation and growth trace back to a genesis story of Hollywood. In this oft-told tale, a group of plucky entrepreneurs made their way from New York or Chicago to the promised land for film. Wooed by sunny weather, a diversity of filmic locations, and plenty of open land, they set up small shops that would, within a decade, become the grand studio system. Once clustered in the region, the efficiencies of sharing labor, land, and infrastructure made Hollywood *the* industrial production hub, to the exclusion of all others. It is a very compelling history, one that draws on narratives of individual innovation, environmental determinism, and the invisible hand of the market. It has been the dominant history that today guides cities vying for a film economy that, once planted, will germinate and grow into a self-sustaining industry.

This history is both true and false. While the beginnings of a film economy are no doubt rooted in these elements—the efforts of entrepreneurs, the conditions in a geographic region, and the economic principles of mass production—they are not in themselves sufficient. This history does not take into account the roles of government officials or other economic and cultural elites in cities. Most importantly, it cannot explain the ways that these social interactions drive speculation by reducing or increasing risks for film investors. In effect, the focus on the special case of Hollywood as the model story of a film economy directs our attention away from other histories, ones in which the film economy started, floundered, and failed, not once but repeatedly, over its own time scale. It is with these aims in mind that I turn to an alternative timeline of a film economy, one that begins and ends in the early twentieth century, only to be revived a century later in current film policies.

If we apply the basic principles that guided early moviemakers to what would become Hollywood, we could easily imagine that New Orleans would become a movie capital at some point around 1910. New Orleans had bright sunshine and mild winters, an enviable diversity of locations, and a massive real-estate inventory attributed to the drainage of the swampy surrounds. Indeed, most of the major producers of the time came through the city, announcing their plans to make their new home base there. By the end of 1915, these men had made their way to Los Angeles, leaving in their wake a local film industry that survived in fits and starts until 1920. The reasons why the former pioneers left, and why the latter locals failed, tell us about the ways in which political economy and culture are mutually imbricated. The perceptions of risks and benefits in speculative behavior are human, just as culture mediates the political and economic conditions for its own reproduction. This sense of the way a film economy is made of cultural perceptions that drive otherwise rational rent seeking should be part of a dialogue about film economies today.

NEW ORLEANS HISTORY AS MISE-EN-SCÈNE

This history takes place between 1909 and 1919 in two distinct and interrelated settings. Canal Street, the first setting, was located at the boundary between the historic but decrepit French Quarter and a new, modern business district. It was the economic heart of New Orleans, the Crescent City. Teeming with immigrants and sailors, native-born creoles, Anglos, and African-Americans, the street brought together people from around the world, even as its shops, hotels, and services would be segregated by race and social class. On the street, “Jewish, Italian, Chinese, and Negro working class children played, and their mothers conversed.”¹ During Carnival season, Canal Street was the ceremonial promenade of the public spectacle. On hot summer days, patrons of all backgrounds went to catch a fifteen-minute film at one of the many movie theaters that lined the boulevard, including the very first Vitagraph theater in 1896.² Capital flowed to this area of the city in anticipation of an economic boom that would return New Orleans to its antebellum status as a world port. The eradication of yellow fever and public health campaigns were particularly important. Disease risked the decimation of the city’s labor force and consumer base without notice. A predicted real estate boom led by theater investors evaporated after the rumors of the 1905 epidemic reached the North.³ It would be the last outbreak. Further, the recent completion of the Public Belt railway, based on an efficient and centrally controlled ship-to-rail transport system, promised to attract new workers and visitors. Public officials and commercial elites prepared for the future population with plans to drain and develop some 25,000 acres that separated Canal Street downtown from the lake.⁴



FIGURE 2. Area targeted for neighborhood development in Bayou St. John in 1917. In Diamond Film Company, *Filmland: The Kingdom of Fabulous Fortunes* (New Orleans: Schumert-Warfield-Watson, 1917). Public domain. From Louisiana Research Collection, Special Collections Division, Tulane University Libraries.

Among this land was Bayou St. John, our second setting. This area was a narrow lake outlet connected to the Mississippi River via a sliver of raised land in an otherwise swampy area. Providing natural protection for boats, the bayou had been important to the early development of New Orleans. Now, however, the area was both underutilized and filthy. On the riverside bank, light industry connected to a freight railroad line and cargo holds on the water. Dumping and drainage polluted the waterway so badly that it would have to be closed for an environmental cleanup less than a decade later. Beyond this, development was sparse. Next to a marble yard sat a church, its orphanage, and horse stables. On the lakeside bank there were a few old plantation homes that owned the surrounding land, a rowing club, and a rifle range.⁵ The area was known to many gentlemen a generation earlier as a secluded place to conduct duels. At this juncture, though, it was among the beacons for a widespread metamorphosis of the urban landscape. Land values soared as realtors predicted a housing boom that would extend from the busy downtown to the lakefront.⁶ Farms parceled their land to eager developers. Planners had outlined a grid of streets extending up to City Park, a preeminent example of urban green space both in New Orleans and nationally. The redesign of

the park's entrance and the addition of a neoclassical, marble peristyle and a Mission Revival-style casino exuded the elegance of urban leisure options for white elites. Lumber companies in the region mobilized for the incipient demand, which extended to a number of other, similarly positioned tracts around the city. The construction of the City Park neighborhood as an exclusive suburban enclave was complete by 1920.

Mayor Martin Behrman (1904–20) presided over the beginnings of these transformations. The longest-standing mayor in the city's history, Behrman oversaw the crucial infrastructural changes that enabled rapid development in the face of the staggering debts left by Reconstruction after the U.S. Civil War. Although his party operated as a political machine, Behrman's public works, including hospitals, schools, and public parks, could be associated with the civic aims of the Progressive Era. Known as "the good roads mayor," he embarked on the drainage plan so that, in his words, "Land, before worthless, became at once available for agriculture and city development."⁷ Behrman oversaw the doubling of New Orleans in both space and population. His ability to mediate between elite factions and a working-class voter base paid off, both politically and directly into the city's coffers, as the assessed value of land doubled in the city between 1904 and 1920.⁸ It was in this setting and in the context of these changes that the first filmmakers flocked to the city to find a new home.

FILM ECONOMY TAKE 1: SELIG

It was January 1909 when the famed film producer William Selig dispatched his best cameraman, Francis Boggs, and a "moving tableau army" composed of "twelve competent artists, several carloads of scenery, half a dozen improved and up-to-date machines, electrical appliances, to produce storm effects, etc." to New Orleans. According to a trade report at the time, the Chicagoan Selig had every intention of maintaining a "very strong producing organization" there.⁹

Selig was no stranger to the city. His company had made a series of shorts about Carnival events in 1902. Marking what may have been the first public concession to filmmakers, Selig received "special permits from the Mayor of New Orleans" to go behind the scenes of the spectacle.¹⁰ In the interlude between the first visit in 1902 and the journey to make a studio in 1909, Selig had seeded the first major film distributor for his films in the South. The Dixie Film Company opened in New Orleans in 1907 when the owner William H. Swanson, a fellow Chicagoan, got his first loan from Selig. In an early effort to create a vertical monopoly, Dixie signed distribution contracts with a growing chain of exhibitors. In New Orleans, Dixie's local manager Herman Fichtenberg opened three movie theaters on Canal Street, seemingly ensuring that Selig's movies would always find a public screening. In 1908 Dixie became the southern hub of the Consolidated Supply Company, an exclusive licensor



FIGURE 3. Architect's photo of White City Amusement Park illuminated. From Emile Weil, H. A. Benson, and Albert Bendernagel, *Illustrations of Selected Work of Emile Weil, Architect, New Orleans, La., 1908–1928* (New York: Architectural Catalog, 1928). Permission granted by Southeastern Architectural Archive, Special Collections Division, Tulane University Libraries.

of films made by members of the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC). Even though Selig was included in the exclusive group of producers, the relationship with Swanson and Fichtenberg seems to have soured quickly.

The local newspaper reported that Josiah Pearce & Sons, Fichtenberg's biggest movie-theater rival, received Boggs and the rest of Selig's crew in the city in 1909. The crew immediately got to work, producing reels and establishing a local movie-industry infrastructure. Boggs borrowed office space in a Pearce theater near Canal Street. They made at least four ten-minute shorts (or four 650-foot reels). All would premiere in a Pearce theater. He leased stage space from White City Amusement Park, a public attraction in its own right. Opened in 1907, the park was designed by the noted architect Emile Weil and featured both opera and theater performances. The park's headliner attraction, its 1,500 electric lights, would undoubtedly give Boggs both an excellent setting for evening shoots and an audience already excited for his presence.¹¹ Boggs had created for Selig a perfect synergy between film production, exhibition, and urban leisure.

Yet within a few short months, Selig's best man closed the New Orleans studio and fled to Los Angeles, never to return. One report stated that Boggs was "not quite satisfied with the results of his stay in New Orleans and wrote to Mr. Selig

about returning to Chicago.” Another article attributes the California move to Selig but likewise relates that Boggs found New Orleans “not entirely satisfactory.” Later accounts are more conflicted as to who made the decision, though most point to Boggs. Indeed, after Boggs’s death, Selig asserted that he saw New Orleans as his “Winter quarters,” and that his relocation to Hollywood came only after Boggs found the Crescent City unsatisfactory.¹²

While there is no definitive answer to the question of why Selig and Boggs decided to leave New Orleans so fast and so assuredly, after so many investments and plans, it seems probable that the answer encompasses a combination of economic and cultural reasons. From a purely industrial standpoint, Selig seems to have embroiled himself in a clash of distribution and exhibition titans in the most important southern hub for film consumption. In less than two years, Selig had allied with Swanson and Fichtenberg only to betray them. Swanson, for his part, turned on MPPC producers, attacking the cartel’s membership as evidence of anti-Semitism in the industry. Selig then pursued Swanson as “one of the worst offenders in the business” in defrauding MPPC manufacturers of royalties. Swanson eventually challenged the trust in court, eventually leading to the MPPC’s downfall. Meanwhile, Selig’s former collaborator Fichtenberg cried foul over new MPPC licensing fees. In March 1909, the theater owner canceled Dixie’s contract and organized over 250 regional theaters into the National Independent Moving Picture Alliance—a group that did not do business with Selig. By the time Boggs left New Orleans, his competitor Pearce had assumed regional management of the General Film Company and was the new national distributor for MPPC films.¹³ Leaving New Orleans may simply have been an outcome of the chaos introduced by Selig himself when he had founded Dixie two years earlier. Los Angeles seemed relatively easy, even if remote, in comparison.¹⁴

Beyond the wars of distribution, however, there may have been other reasons that New Orleans was less “suitable” as a home for the film industry than Los Angeles. As discussed in the Introduction, Los Angeles was hardly a mecca for the labor-intensive production of a highly flammable technology. There were no self-perpetuating clusters of studios or centrifugal forces of industrial agglomeration. Selig moved operations into a defunct saloon in an isolated farming town where unpredictable earthquakes and dry, windy fire conditions tempered local boosters’ claims of perfect conditions year round. All the same, Boggs may have felt more at home in his native home state of California than he did in Louisiana—and this cultural affinity for the *place* may have made the key difference.

The fact that Selig’s brief but failed sojourn to establish a New Orleans film studio, and dominate distribution and exhibition in the process, escapes any cold calculus of costs and benefits suggests that cultural contexts are also important to the making of a film economy. Although it would be hard for researchers to measure film producers’ level of comfort with the local scene, particularly a century

later, we know that management's perception of risk is the intangible and irrational force behind all modern industrial markets.¹⁵ For emerging cultural industries, which rely on the ability to consolidate financial support for a high-risk investment such as a film, entrepreneurs' subjective perceptions may be paramount in deciding where the home base should be located. The economic geographer Michael Storper places a high premium on face-to-face interactions and human relationships for "learning, building trust, and reducing risk" in the development of new economies based on innovations.¹⁶ He argues that individuals' experiences of local contexts, including the price valuing of production resources and social hierarchies among the workforce, are the reasons why new industries ultimately cluster in one city but not in another. Culture, in other words, mediates business leaders' experiences of situations: "where we are matters to what we know and what we choose."¹⁷

Local context was surely on the minds of many filmmaking entrepreneurs other than Selig. During the entire period, from about 1909 to 1914, producers were scouring North America looking for locations to move their production operations. These manufacturers needed to expand geographically to satisfy year-round demands for increased filler films, especially between MPPC Trust members, as well as the competing needs of exhibitors in their own unique markets. The "director-unit system of production" was a mobile response to these conditions. Trust members moved *simultaneously* between Los Angeles, New Orleans, Jacksonville, San Francisco, Denver, and even Havana in search of the optimal production places. In this way, they could spread their risks around, while taking advantage of various local contexts.¹⁸ Eventually, though, they had to make a decision in order to reap the efficiencies of proximity to each other, and then their perceptions of local contexts could be the deal breakers. At least on the surface, New Orleans and Los Angeles, as well as other cities in the South and West, offered the same economic potential for a new film economy. Each had varied locations, predictable and usually mild weather, abundant land, cheap labor, and municipal services. Each city also had its enthusiastic boosters, eager to promote the competitive advantages of the place and downplay the disadvantages. Boggs's affinity for the local context in Los Angeles over New Orleans thus had real implications—not just in seeding an economic cluster for film production, but in making Hollywood the preeminent signifier of a film economy.

When the Los Angeles boosters won out over competing cities, they succeeded in dominating the subsequent narrative of how film economies form. The region lacked people, infrastructure, and any interest from Wall Street speculators. Within five short years, business leaders went from doubting that the region was even viable for any large-scale manufacturing in 1908 to championing the region's destiny as a world business center in 1913.¹⁹ The consolidation of a narrative that Hollywood was a natural hub for the film industry became a self-fulfilling prophecy, attracting

future entrepreneurs and a workforce for an industrial cluster while marginalizing native-born populations that did not become part of the new film gentry.²⁰ Also perpetuated in the various films Hollywood has made about itself, the merger of Hollywood as place and industry became so totalizing as to erase the histories of other cities eligible to be film capitals in the early period, including New Orleans. There, the local context—with a cultural politics that Boggs likely found strange if not intolerable—may have been the deciding factor in why so many film crews left the city for a more “suitable” location in Southern California.

FILM ECONOMY TAKE 2: RISKS AND THE RISQUÉ

By 1912 the New Orleans film economy seemed ascendant. In addition to Selig’s brief encounter, several other film producers sojourned to the city, including Howe, Lubin, Lasky, and Kalem. Each company, led by a director and crew, saw the potential in making New Orleans their future home base. Mayor Behrman welcomed them, providing public concessions to the parks and “passports” behind the police lines at parades. The *Daily Picayune* effusively praised each of the traveling companies, covering their activities with the same fanfare it gave other dignitaries who stayed in the best hotels on Canal Street. Such was the case, in particular, of Kalem president Frank Marion and his theater-actor-turned-director George LeSoir.

From his post at the upscale Hotel Grunewald, LeSoir turned a spotlight on the New Orleans waterway Bayou St. John as the perfect place for a production studio. Imagining himself moving to the site of privateer Jean Lafitte’s colonial headquarters, LeSoir added that the area had everything to turn “a Lexington Avenue antique dealer . . . green with envy.”²¹ LeSoir met with Behrman at Pearce’s opulent Trianon Theater to discuss the deal, and soon after, Marion announced the company’s expansion plans. Kalem had already been producing shorts in the city before his decision. In Marion’s estimation, the ideal weather, the antediluvian houses, the easy access to exhibitors and distributors, the experienced theater and thespian community, including Mary Pickford’s sister, as well as “the most seductive tippie he has discovered anywhere,” made New Orleans an easy choice.²²

Yet, like Selig Polyscope before them, Kalem and the other prominent manufacturers made many films but never relocated. Lasky merged with Zukor’s Famous Players, dividing their operations ultimately between Los Angeles and New York. Lubin Manufacturing returned to its original home base in Philadelphia, where it opened a massive lot and facilities in the nearby countryside. Kalem’s Jacksonville and Santa Monica studios would continue to operate through the decade. And, just like Boggs before him, LeSoir left New Orleans within months of his arrival. Despite a “very profitable” experience in the city, he left the film business, returning to work in New York City theater.²³ LeSoir and others left a considerable oeuvre

of films in their stead. All were shot in New Orleans but advertised and exhibited internationally. In this regard, the filmmakers who came to New Orleans found a place that was eminently filmic but industrially unreceptive.

To understand the gap between the well-publicized desires of these entrepreneurial film migrants and their inability to actualize them involves a deeper understanding of the local context for creative production. In general terms, cultural geographer Allen Scott explains that *creative production* refers less to specific industries or roles in them than to the milieu that workers share across arts-and-entertainment sectors in particular urban areas. It is through the milieu—the social environment for training and experience—that workers gain public recognition and recognize each other as *creatives*. Recognition allows access to both the resources and the pathways established through the prevailing business culture. For Scott, these pathways are most important for those trying to launch a new creative industry, as its founders will depend on the paths of established creatives in the network.²⁴ In other words, the development of a new film economy depends on the cultural politics of a location. In this regard, Los Angeles and New Orleans, despite sharing other external factors in favor of a film economy, could not have been more different.

While Los Angeles city leaders despaired for the lack of any industry, New Orleans city leaders saw film as a complement to more central industries and their economic agendas. Despite opposition to many of Behrman's proposals and tactics, the political consensus was that New Orleans could be a modern metropolis only by reinvesting in its traditional industrial assets. This included the technocratic development of the port and railroads to better serve what had always been leading regional industries: cotton, timber, sugar, and coffee. The vision, which required expensive infrastructural upgrades, also relied on the city expanding its tax base. The city had become heavily leveraged and embattled with local banks, which refused to supply interest on the city's liquid holdings and to extend new lines of credit.²⁵ Bankruptcy loomed if the city could not transform its marshy surrounds into valuable—and thus taxable—properties. Business elites valued local film production and exhibition only to the extent that it assisted these other aims.

Media campaigns for the city, as articulated by the newly formed Association of Commerce, included buying newspaper ads, seeding magazine stories, and “developing several plans for making motion pictures of New Orleans.”²⁶ An inaugural member of the association, Pearce was both a close ally of the Behrman administration and a proponent of more locally focused film production. He had made arrangements for the filming, processing, and exhibition of industrial documentary shorts to boost Behrman's portrayal of the “progressive little city” in charge of the port.²⁷ The Association of Commerce organized numerous film events, such as the centennial celebration of the Battle of New Orleans, and vowed to streamline the

permitting of public space for visiting film crews.²⁸ The association also contracted with the short-lived and Denver-based Paragon Feature Film Company (1914–16) to make several pictures intended primarily to show northern and eastern audiences of “a certain class . . . the real reconstruction that is in progress. . . . All phases of the commercial and industrial activity of the city will be brought out in the pictures. Scenes along the riverfront, at the factories, and in the parks, playgrounds, and schools, all will tell the story of the new New Orleans.”²⁹ The fact that the company went bankrupt a year later could have impressed on some city boosters, and certainly Pearce, the importance of seeding a film-production company located in the city’s bounds.

Elite New Orleanians’ perspectives on the role of filmmakers as propagandists in their political economy could be deduced from local coverage of their productions in the *Daily Picayune*. Headlines of Boggs’s arrival stressed that the company would add “to the Fame of the Metropolis” with pictures of the city’s “historical points of interest” as well as “the City Hall, several of the big bank buildings, the Courthouse, the Parish Prison, other structures known to fame.” Scenes of cotton and sugar loading at the port and views along the levee would be “calculated to give the people in the North, who know New Orleans *only by reputation*, an idea of the city’s commercial importance.”³⁰ Stressing that “all interests” would be mobilized to assist filmmakers, the paper collaborated in Behrman’s opinion that film could rebrand the place by advertising the city to “thousands without access to magazines and circulars.” In the same article, another traveling film exhibitor reportedly sent his director to film the 1912 Carnival as part of a campaign “advertising the South and inducing our own people to visit portions of the United States, instead of going to Europe.”³¹ The paper promised that the filmmakers, for their part, would be sensitive to local expectations. The *Daily Picayune* wrote that Boggs’s films would be “intensely realistic and true to life in this city as the older citizens knew it before the war.”³²

The actual films that the visiting producers made, however, played into a different agenda from the ones their hosts envisioned. The city’s investments in shipping and rail ironically made the location less filmic. A film-industry commentator later reminisced that “the [Selig] company was somewhat disappointed in what was offered for filming” in New Orleans. Boggs, who hoped to shoot “river-front scenes,” found that the railroads now blocked any open views of the “ship loading at the port.”³³ Instead, Boggs shot the stories of New Orleans he could already envision. In them, New Orleans was a place to party for the moment, not to produce durable goods for the long run. Film reels included *The Shriners’ Pilgrimage to New Orleans* (1909), *Mr. Mix at the Mardi Gras* (1909), and *Four Wise Men* (1909), a comedy about four hen-pecked husbands who are “caught by their wives as they were sight-seeing through the wild revels of the 1908 Mardi Gras Carnival.”³⁴ All of Boggs’s films reproduced, in a sense, the city’s burgeoning image as a tourist

destination—the reputation, as noted in the Introduction, that the city itself had been promoting since the 1890s.

Similarly, LeSoir's film subjects quickly demonstrated his taste for representing New Orleans more as a cultural exception to the United States than as a vital industrial center. At first LeSoir seemed to be the perfect political propagandist. His reels of the Behrman administration's public works were screened throughout the city and were credited with the mayor's reelection, despite the opposition of "nearly all of the newspapers of New Orleans."³⁵ Yet his fictional works became increasingly bawdy. These titles included *The Belle of New Orleans* (1912), about a woman who elopes with a gambling French count; *Girl Strikers* (1912), staged in a tobacco factory; and *Into the Jungle* (1912), in which New Orleans was a proxy for Africa. Worse, LeSoir used the relative isolation of the bayou-based studio to complete *A Bucktown Romance* (1912), reportedly the first film in which "all of the characters being negroes" would be in blackface.³⁶ The sequel, *A Gent from Honduras* (1912), featured a biracial romance when the main blackface character introduces his "dusky gal" to a "Latin" lover and "now he's looking for another gal."³⁷ Fascinated by his idea of the place, LeSoir seemed tone deaf to his local patrons' needs or self-image, repeating instead the city's reputation in the North as a place that "stirred" desire with scandalous mixtures, from cocktails to peoples.³⁸ Even after their releases in exhibition venues outside the city, there are no records that any of the Pearce theaters, which held the distribution agreement with Kalem, showed these controversial films by LeSoir.

The cultural politics of film production in New Orleans had to be complicated by the inconsistencies between the internal commercial aims of the city's establishment and the external cultural meanings associated with the city, even if these contradictory messages were derived from some of the same sources. White elites drew visitors to the exotic processions of Carnival, manufactured to memorialize their own authority, long before the earliest filmmakers flocked there. Northern publications circulated tales of voodoo and Storyville, creolism and cocktails, courtesy of their local correspondents and a fledgling industry dedicated to luring outsiders by marketing New Orleans nationally as "the city care forgot."³⁹ Numerous stories in the film trade magazine *Moving Picture World* stressed to readers the city's hospitality, not its hierarchies, and promised the filmmakers a warm reception, despite incipient battles of censorship elsewhere. Throughout the period, some of the same businessmen who built up the port and cultivated film producers safeguarded urban places for frivolity and vice from the onslaughts of moral reformers.⁴⁰ Given the tight networks between the civic boosters for commerce and the profiteers of libertine lifestyle consumption, the film economy was path-dependent on creatives involved in producing a cultural exceptionalism that early filmmakers could neither ignore nor embrace. During his stay on Canal Street, LeSoir was exposed to these mixed messages sent by his business hosts and the

hospitality and leisure industries. He may have mistaken New Orleans's cultural marketing for the attitudes of its merchandizers, who rejected the reputation they peddled.

As if to echo the film producers' dilemmas, the Sunday literary commentator in the *Daily Picayune*, Will Branán, regularly articulated the complicated cultural politics of making a film economy in New Orleans. In often lengthy exegeses, Branán questioned whether the commercial successes of Pearce, Fichtenberg, and the other Canal Street exhibitors did not come at the expense of the culture that elite New Orleanians wanted. He regularly praised the efficiencies of the exhibitors, while dismissing "movies" as the "little sister" of theater both "legit" and "vodvil" (vaudeville).⁴¹ With their exaggerated budgets and inflated payrolls for public relations, the film industry exploited both the culture and the cultural labor in its production locations, according to Branán. The average citizen, whom Branán named "Mr. Jones," then had no choice but to reproduce his exploitation because, as underpaid as he was, he couldn't afford the ticket for a more respectable theater production. He chided, "Is it not significant then that there has been no 'legit' theater on Canal Street since the passing of the old Grand Opera House in 1906?"⁴² Combining the kind of class critique with elitist cultural mores that would do a vulgar Marxist proud, Branán attacked film production as a shell game that doubly exploited workers and consumers.

Addressed to a well-to-do audience, Branán's comments also unwittingly emphasized the ambivalence elite New Orleanians might have felt in making New Orleans a film-production hub. On one hand, the film industry had much in common with the other dominant creative sectors in the city, such as theater and performance arts. Like film, these latter industries were built on entrepreneurial ambition, hired a local workforce, and occupied a central place, both in terms of physical location and appeal to consumers. Film was one of the many amusements drawing people to spend money and time downtown. On the other hand, the film industry was a threat to these complementary sectors. Built on speculative finance and manufacturing for the lowest cost, film production could put theatrical stock companies out of business and drove down the cost of competing cultural events. Beyond this, Branán's opinions had distinctly racial undertones. In arguing that the film industry catered to the lowest common denominator, he wrote how "the lowest class of movie houses" served primarily New Orleans's large "negro population."⁴³ This point would be reiterated later and much more directly by Pearce himself in distinguishing between his high-class movie palaces for the city's relatively small white population and the shabby and substandard houses for everyone else.⁴⁴ In either case, the consensus of the city's elites implied that a film economy was only valuable if it focused on the cultural needs of white patrons.

The role of race relations in shaping the development of film economies has been understudied, if not completely overlooked, by historians and geographers

alike; yet it is also clear that early film producers negotiated their perceptions of risk through their own sets of racial assumptions. It is unknown how the filmmakers who came to New Orleans would have reconciled their myth of an Africanized culture with the complicated racial politics there. Early-twentieth-century New Orleans saw the rise of lynchings and the increased segregation of public services at the same time that the city promoted its multiracial mingling on the street.⁴⁵ Increased production models and tight shooting schedules meant that film directors had little time after arrival to decode everyday negotiations of class, color, and bloodline.

In considering local conditions, film directors seemed to have misread the racial codes of New Orleans. Boggs, whose film scripts “were given to racial and ethnic epithets,” was a racist who believed in paying his only nonwhite employee only half the wages of the lowest-paid white person. This man, whom he physically abused in public, killed Boggs in 1911, only two years after Boggs left, having found New Orleans so distasteful.⁴⁶ Could it be that Boggs was uncomfortable settling in a city with not only a nonwhite majority, but also a history of biracial unity among striking labor unions? Was it that local politicians often appeased these workers through informal and non-interventionist policies?⁴⁷ Although it may be impossible to know the answers to these questions, other directors had similar difficulties in navigating cultural differences. LeSoir’s films all but ignored the race and class sensibilities of the New Orleans white elite whom Pearce sought for his clientele. Instead he created movies predominantly for a northern audience who clamored for “Negro plays” at a time when New Orleanians threatened race riots over narratives perceived as anti-southern.⁴⁸

In perhaps the worst misjudgment of the local racial landscape, another director who arrived in New Orleans with much public acclaim, René Plaissetty of France, was reportedly the darling of the local high society until he decided to make a feature with an all-black cast. The *Moving Picture World* related the scandal of Plaissetty’s disastrous plans to make a series of voodoo films using “hoodoo niggers” he procured from the city prison.⁴⁹ His refined hosts reportedly were horrified because, first, New Orleans would be the proxy setting for the Congo in the films; but also because Plaissetty planned to use forced labor. This complicated reaction to the film director, who then either ran or was run out of town, speaks to the difficulties outsiders had in fitting the local milieu for creative production. While New Orleans was officially segregated, more informal considerations of workers may have trumped certain racial divides or cast a pall over certain injustices. While elites praised the creative abilities of their esteemed guests, they wanted control over the content of their productions. Film directors had to deduce which messages local elites would like and which ones would be offensive, which must have created uncertainty for the early film crews looking to invest in the location.

Accounting for these intangibilities may also explain why Behrman and his cohort began seeking an indigenous film-production company, one that could better assist the city's path toward modernity.

FILM ECONOMY TAKE 3: A LANDED PRODUCER

The dismantling of the MPPC, beginning in 1915, opened new opportunities for local film-economy capitalization. The local exhibition circuit was now well established. National distributors had made New Orleans a regional capital for licensing content. Pearce and Fichtenberg continued to operate the most prominent movie palaces, which were supported by local merchants advertising in their own weekly circulars. Both also had expanded into the suburbs, securing a local place to dominate leisure in the new neighborhoods. Two daily newspapers, the *Times-Picayune* and the *New Orleans Item*, each dedicated column space to motion picture news supported by the exhibitors who advertised their screening schedules. Word of the film industry's success in developing an arid and faraway Southern California spurred the wishful thinking that New Orleans could recapture what it had lost merely a few years earlier.

Prior to the Hollywood boom, few local business leaders may have fathomed that film producers could do more for New Orleans than work as propagandists of the agenda du jour. Yet it took little time before they concurred that a local film studio might boost property values in the new neighborhoods of the rapidly expanding metropolis, hence expanding the tax base for other reforms. In this respect, Pearce may have been prescient. The city's mogul of film distribution, theater exhibition, and the promoter of film production in the Association of Commerce, Pearce likely sought to land a production studio to better integrate his own film, amusement, and real estate interests. After all, he had personally brought Boggs to the White City location. Pearce also had a personal stake in Kalem's studio on the bayou, which Marion reportedly selected after an unnamed native explained the "local conditions" to him.⁵⁰ When his efforts to lure established filmmakers failed, Pearce joined an array of locals interested in developing more homegrown strategies.

In early 1915, the general manager for the Association of Commerce announced the city's first indigenous film company "composed of New Orleans men entirely and the list of stockholders includes the names of some very wealthy men."⁵¹ A full-page story in the newspaper disabused readers of the misconception that local film production was purely publicity: "It is distinctly a business—a serious, manufacturing, money-making business. A small group of New Orleans men were shrewd enough to see it, and a close corporation was formed."⁵² Company leaders estimated that their New York connections would generate \$2,000 weekly in film licensing sales to theaters nationally, but 75 percent of the revenues would remain

The image consists of two black and white photographs of theatrical performances, likely from a Japanese theatrical troupe. The top photograph shows a group of performers in traditional costumes on a stage. A large, ornate backdrop is visible behind them. The bottom photograph shows a group of performers in traditional costumes on a stage, with a large, ornate backdrop. The performers are in various poses, and the stage is decorated with traditional elements. The entire image is framed by a decorative border.

Picture Attractions Are Being Produced in New Orleans—Beginnings of Great Enterprise

in New Orleans, City Park, near by, being a favorite and wonderful setting for movie action. And does not "Nola" sound like a pretty Creole girl?

rectors, owners, are in the trenches at the front. Hence the United States must supply the demand, and the American film-producing houses are working night and day to keep up with frantic orders from the agencies. The New Orleans group saw the big opportunity and took it. They also saw the peculiar advantages of New Orleans for all-year-around picture making. Here (as of Dec. 1)

Workshop Where Dramas Are Produced With New Orleans Settings. Far Greater Studio Will Be Built

the light while excluding the light rays per cent of their revenues will come from other parts of the United States, while

FIGURE 4. From the *Times Picayune Magazine*, December 20, 1914, p. 3. Public domain. From Louisiana Research Collection, Special Collections Division, Tulane University Libraries.

in the city. The association boasted that the studio would lure investors from New York and Europe to the only “purely-local motion-picture manufacturing corporation in the South,” becoming a valuable asset for “advertising the city and the state” and generating salaries and purchases that rank with “some of the largest manufacturing plants in the city.”⁵³ In a subsequent headline, New Orleans would be a “Motion Picture Paradise.”⁵⁴

The company began as the Coquille Film Company, but “a week later, the company said it would release films made in the Coquille studio under the name Nola Film.”⁵⁵ The unfortunate incident with the French director Plaissetty, together with a bit of legal wrangling with the backers, may have led to the sudden name change. Transferring ownership from the high-profile manager to a relatively less known member of the local elite, William J. Hannon, the company’s name change was advertised as fortuitous for promoting the new film economy. Explaining to readers that Nola stood for New Orleans [N.O.], La., boosters were not too subtle in stating the allure of merging the industry with the city as a place: “The heads of business figured long on the best way to announce to the world that New Orleans is making picture films. . . . And does not ‘Nola’ sound like a pretty Creole girl?”⁵⁶ Within six months, the Nola Film Company had finished its studio at Bayou St. John on a tract of land owned by Dr. Louis Morey Holmes.

By the time the dream of a film economy really took hold, land speculators had already begun to cash in around Bayou St. John. The recent allocation of 1,300 acres to City Park, one of the largest urban greenways in the United States, spurred housing developers seeking white, middle-class families to relocate to a neighborhood protected by racial covenant and connected to downtown via a new streetcar line that replaced the old freight rail. Lot sales in the area across the waterway were booming in 1904 when Holmes bought an old plantation house as part of 1.8 undeveloped acres for \$6,000. Nearby, planners eyed the area around Holmes’s house as an upscale leisure destination, announcing the construction of a \$15,000 Country Club House to connect City Park, two boating clubs, and another neighboring park. When the clubhouse plan tanked, the liquidating agents hoped the purchaser might find a new use for the structure, perhaps as a “moving picture studio.” After LeSoir abandoned his dreams of a film studio next door, Holmes began leasing the plantation house and its adjacent grazing land to the Nola Film Company for \$100 a month; he announced publicly that he would sell the entire plot for the inflated price of \$20,000.⁵⁷

While Holmes focused on his local property, Hannon promoted the value of the film studio’s place nationally. Trade-magazine reports claimed that New Orleans residents could take “much civic pride” in the fact that Nola Film would be advertising “that picturesque location to the world.”⁵⁸ Nola contracted two cameramen from established film studios Pathé and William Fox and gathered a cast of seasoned thespians from well-regarded stock companies. National ads promoted Nola’s rental facilities and production capacities, including a 4,320-square-foot

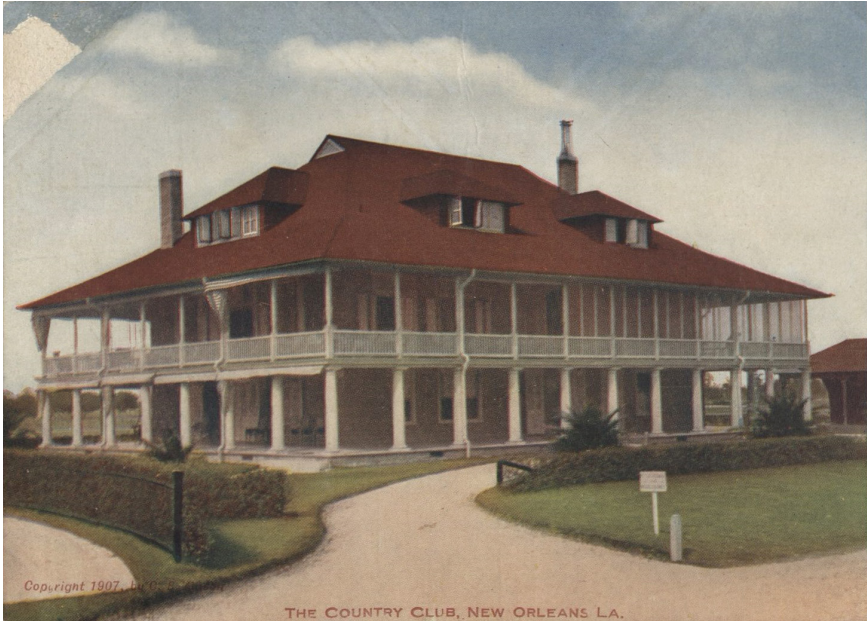


FIGURE 5. Postcard of the Country Club at City Park, 1907. From Louisiana Research Collection, Special Collections Division, Tulane University Libraries.

An advertisement for the Southern Studio for Rent. On the left is a black and white photograph of the interior of a large, glass-covered studio. The space is filled with various pieces of equipment, including cameras on tripods and other production gear. The ceiling is high with visible structural beams. On the right is a text box with the following content:

SOUTHERN STUDIO FOR RENT

One half of NOLA studio, 90x50 feet, glass covered throughout, for rent. Short or long term. Complete laboratory equipment, dressing rooms, etc. Also a complete and up-to-date carpenter shop 70x40 feet. \$800. per month.

New Orleans, in addition to oaks, palms and tropical foliage of Florida and California, has famous Latin Quarters and picturesque bayous regions found nowhere else.

As second port in the United States New Orleans offers wonderful natural settings for exteriors, also of steamships, docks, etc.

For full particulars, address

NOLA FILM COMPANY

Bayou St. John, near City Park New Orleans, La.

FIGURE 6. Advertisement in the *Moving Picture World*, vol. 30, October 21, 1916, p. 456. Public domain. Retrieved from the Media History Digital Library, <http://mediahistoryproject.org/>.

ventilated glass studio to let in natural light while protecting the production from the natural elements. The public relations campaign seemed to work to the degree that film producers continued to flock to the city, including representatives for Fox, Essanay, and Lasky. Selig even expressed renewed interest in a New Orleans studio. With a familiar set of entreaties, Nola and the city repeatedly stressed to outsiders New Orleans's diverse shooting locations, Old World charm, and New World

amenities. Behrman relayed that his city was the most hospitable for studios and would be offering incentives to create mutual advantages for filmmakers and for New Orleans.⁵⁹ In theory, Nola represented everything local elites could ask for in terms of propaganda, industrial development, and expanding the tax base with highly valued properties.

Nola also seemed to fit easily into the city's political and economic culture. In his role at the Association of Commerce, Coquille's original leader was the main representative for local commercial leaders and between the city and the labor unions. A former newspaper reporter himself, he also knew the writers and publishers who would report on the company's evolution. Nola's founding member Hannon shared his predecessor's milieu as an association member, lawyer, real estate investor, and esteemed yacht-club member. Working as insiders in the local context, Nola Film worked hard to respond to Branan's claims that the film industry was not as respectable as other creative arts. Hannon's father stepped out of his law practice both to become the scenario editor for Nola Film and to lend more credibility to the entire industry by publishing an extended essay titled "The Photodrama: Its Place among the Fine Arts" (1915).⁶⁰ Reproduced in the local newspaper, the essay anticipated auteurist film criticism and studies of the industry for an accepting middle-class consumer: "Ultimately, he [Hannon Sr.] understood that film is art as well as commerce."⁶¹

Unlike the visiting film directors who frequented the city, Nola Film pursued a path to cultivate its growth through local synergies with newspapers, local businesses, and labor. The *Times-Picayune* was particularly enthusiastic about the film economy, reprinting a company press release stating the need for interindustry ties between film and newspapers. Adding their stamp of approval, the *Times-Picayune* opined:

There is no disguising the fact there is an air of subdued excitement in all sections of the local motion picture field, and those who watch the signs closest are preparing for a break of any sort. They are about in the position of a man who lives along the Mississippi levees at the present time. They are not possessed of any particular fear, yet they are not absolutely comfortable [...] not because business is bad, but because it has been so good, that it is all balled up.⁶²

In subsequent articles, the *Times-Picayune* and competing daily the *Item* touted the high quality both of Nola's films and of the local entertainment professionals and residents who donated their time, talent, and homes for film production.

Nola Film also became a poster child for the short-lived M-I-N-O campaign to choose products "Made-in-New-Orleans." The company stressed their investment in the local economy, both in terms of the studio and in their weekly payroll expenditures, which they estimated to be \$700 for a budding film labor force. The company further availed itself to local businesses to advertise their "plant, factory or store" with their "expert cameramen" and "highly trained artists." In return for



PEOPLE OF GOOD OLD NEW ORLEANS

Here, at last, is your opportunity to see

Photoplays Made in New Orleans

Local Capital, Local Talent Have Made

NOLA FILMS

Which Are Produced in the Nola Studio on Bayou St. John

You've seen thousands of California-made photoplays, thousands of New York, New Jersey and Florida-made photoplays. Once in a while you've seen photoplays with a few scenes taken in New Orleans. But never before have you had a chance to see produced and finished wholly in New Orleans—real honest-to-goodness

M-I-N-O PRODUCTS

The photoplay industry is the Fifth in volume in the world. It pays enormous salaries. The photoplay industry put Los Angeles on the map—after New Orleans had thrown away the opportunity to get the pioneer Western studio, Selig.

Consider what this means to New Orleans.

Now New Orleans has a first-class film studio—and is making first-class film plays. If you want these to continue—if you want other big producers to come here to stay—then foster the productions of our own home town—Encourage M-I-N-O products. See NOLA FILMS and tell your friends to see them at

COLUMBIA THEATER

CANAL AND BURGUNDY

Where they will be shown for the first time for
BEGINNING EASTER SUNDAY

APRIL 23rd

Big Features and Comedies Will Be Shown

NOLA FILM COMPANY

1347 MOSS STREET

FIGURE 7. Advertisement from the *Times Picayune*, April 16, 1916, p. C-13. Public domain.
From Louisiana Research Collection, Special Collections Division, Tulane University Libraries.

Nola's investment in the city, the M-I-N-O campaign asked residents to see their films, because "Ninety percent of [Nola's] expenditures go to New Orleans people and only two percent of its income comes from the same source."⁶³ From production to consumption, the campaigners argued that Nola was to anchor a chain of other film and amusement businesses in the city, and chided those who "had thrown away the opportunity to get the pioneer Western studio Selig" before "the photoplay industry put Los Angeles on the map."⁶⁴

In the end, however, Nola Film was not durable as the keystone for a local film-economy cluster. Selig came and left once again, as did the rest of the interested parties. As would become evident in other cities that were trying to seed a film economy at this time, civic boosterism may have incentivized local production and driven up property values, but it could never sustain an entire industrial sector. Even if the location of the first entrepreneur is completely random, other entrepreneurs must follow, along with their financial investors, technology suppliers, and connectors to other support networks.⁶⁵ By 1915 the owners of New York's nickelodeons, such as Zukor, Laemmle, Fox, Mayer, and Warner Brothers, had already migrated to Los Angeles. New producers also came from theater and newspapers in the Big Apple, and Lasky started the first American film education program at Columbia University. Together, these people took with them and maintained their organic ties to big-city money, resources, and personnel. Location mattered in creating a film economy in Southern California, but not in helping directors choose scenic studio sites or finding local business partners. Instead, Hollywood built a powerful publicity machine that, through its connections to the New York newspapers, universities, and creative sectors, drove Wall Street speculation and bank credit lines.⁶⁶ While Los Angeles reveled in hosting an American industry to invest in, New Orleans doubled down in making sure the film industry would keep its networks local and its culture provincial.

In the process of building its local stature among businesses, Nola Film lost its connections to national distributors and financiers that would invest in a film cluster, which led, eventually, to local failure. Although Coquille had initially strong ties to Pearce, Nola's films ended up screening at minor independent theaters around town. Ultimately, Hannon was unable to ink a deal for national exhibition, or even for regional distribution through the exchanges based in New Orleans. Without preorders for guaranteed distribution, the company was wholly dependent on its local stockholders to foot the bills. Only eighteen months after their premiere movie, the company made society films, capturing weddings and special events. Desperate for outside recognition, Hannon signed what would appear to be a mock distribution contract with a fly-by-night company in New York City, just before declaring bankruptcy in 1916.⁶⁷ In short, Nola Film had become too dependent on local conditions.

Even bankruptcy did not break New Orleans's dreams of creating a film economy and envisioning itself as a future movie center. In seeking to boost tourism as a local industry for the first time, a newly reorganized Association of Commerce reported in 1918 that the organization "has also been very active in exploiting New Orleans and in attracting moving picture producers to this city."⁶⁸ Association representatives returned from New York with illusions that producers there would relocate to New Orleans for its "lighting, setting, as well as labor."⁶⁹ No longer on the periphery of the city's strategic aims, Hannon made one last attempt to leverage the film studio as a tool for economic development.

FILM ECONOMY TAKE 4: A DIAMOND IN THE ROUGH

Like Coquille and Nola Film before it, the Diamond Film Company promised to make New Orleans a film-production capital. This time, however, Hannon's appeal to local investors rested solely on film commerce and not on film art. With an initial stock offering of \$200,000 at \$10 a share, the Diamond Film Company promised buyers it would be a cash cow. Hannon claimed that the company had already contracted its principal employees and signed a distribution deal with the General Film Company worth \$250,000 annually. Echoing the Progressive vision of the Behrman administration and a M-I-N-O plea for goods made at home, Diamond's success would be "of advantage to the city from a business as well as a sentimental point of view, for the outlays of salaries and supplies would all go into the coffers of local people."⁷⁰ The company's investor handbook reprinted Horatio Alger stories about those in New York and Chicago who had made their fortune in film manufacturing. Diamond repurposed stories in the *Times-Picayune* about Nola Film to evidence its sure future and the ability of New Orleans to rival Los Angeles, which, according to Diamond, had become *overcrowded* with studios. These rationales aside, the majority of the handbook's pages were dedicated to glossy photos of the Bayou St. John studio facilities that Nola Film had already constructed: "Here we have one of the best equipped plants in all America, ON WHICH WE DO NOT OWE A DOLLAR."⁷¹

In fact, Hannon probably began Diamond already in the red, and the production facilities were far from finished. The former Nola Film had boasted that its laboratories were "the best equipped in the South" but then had to send its film stock north; a newspaper report at the time waffled that the studio "*could* be turned into a splendid and complete producing plant."⁷² Further, the photos printed in the Diamond investor handbook did not display any actual equipment for filmmaking or film processing. When a building contractor sued Hannon personally for not settling his bills, Hannon countersued—first the contractor, for libel; and second the Diamond board of directors, for nonpayment of debt. The amount of the contractor's debt was approximately the same amount Nola Film was said to have

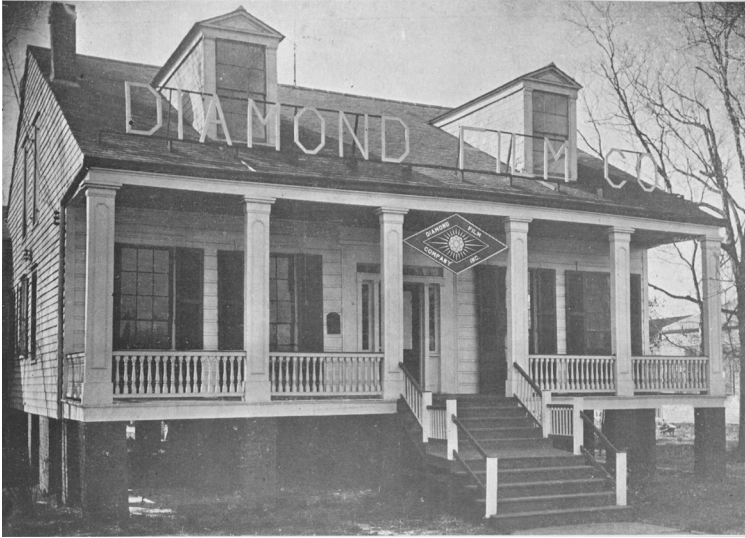


FIGURE 8. Photograph in Diamond Film Company, *Filmland: The Kingdom of Fabulous Fortunes* (New Orleans: Schumert-Warfield-Watson, 1917). Public domain. From Louisiana Research Collection, Special Collections Division, Tulane University Libraries.

invested in its studio years earlier. Whatever material assets Diamond Film had were liquidated at a bankruptcy auction a year after its well-promoted launch. The studio was to be demolished and sold for scrap lumber.⁷³

This is not to say that Diamond never intended to be profitable, but that their margins would not be tied to film production. Rather, Diamond likely was developed to leverage aid to a variety of regional property schemes. Diamond's publicly named board of directors comprised a group of business and real estate speculators. The board president launched the Diamond Theater, a suburban exhibitor in another nearby and growing neighborhood. Together with his theater co-owner and four of the seven remaining board members, the men founded the Interstate Oil, Gas, and Development Company, a sham drilling operation located in the swamps southeast of the city. They drove up Interstate's value by purchasing the surrounding, useless land—probably using the funds of Diamond stock buyers—and reselling them back to the company at an inflated price. Board members essentially manipulated stock investors and then paid themselves through real estate deals. Interstate's stock purchasers eventually won more than \$100,000 in a court case against the con artists with Diamond.⁷⁴

The receivership hearings and liquidation of Diamond's assets coincided with Interstate's expansion and indictment. In what would seem an effort to avoid

linking the two companies publicly, Diamond reshuffled its board at the last minute. The remaining members profited handsomely again on land value. The soon-to-be demolished studio was appraised at \$20,000, no doubt based on the land's sale price nearly five years earlier. Diamond's penny-stock buyers never received a dime back on their investment. The lawyer and notary who oversaw the proceedings opened his own real estate firm soon after.⁷⁵

Holmes also profited from Diamond's failure by contributing to a property bubble in the neighborhood. Stories in the newspaper had already characterized the bayou as a "favorite and wonderful setting for movie action," but the film studio was built to communicate the power of a new film economy.⁷⁶ The glass building loomed over the well-traversed waterway in front, and Diamond erected a sign on the house so large that it was unmistakably advertising the industry. From the summer of 1915 through the spring of 1916, realty ads for the studio-adjacent land prominently promoted the studio next door. When Diamond succeeded Nola Film, the area became even more marketable. The negotiated sale of the Country Club property to a suburban developer boosted land values for all of Bayou St. John. "There is dollars-and-cents value in beauty," said the developer. Although he never got the full asking price, Holmes parceled and sold his lots, including the transformed plantation house, for three times their original value in 1919. He moved to Baton Rouge as developers quickly settled the once fallow land.⁷⁷

While Diamond was not the only fraudulent film company during the silent era, its tragic trajectory should be instructive as to the real commodities in a film economy. First, land speculation was ultimately more profitable than the films themselves. It is questionable whether Diamond even planned to release their films beyond the theater owned by the board president. Hannon had promised to complete one picture a week but in fact never managed a true feature. The "Big Weekly News" reels of "interesting events and travel from all over the universe" offered such small-scale attractions as a women's war-registration drive and a Tulane football game, and these screened only at the Diamond Theater. The company announced a comedy series, but no record survives of its completion. Diamond's schedule actually cited producers who had been dispatched from other companies, had already made their films, and had left the city.⁷⁸

The seeming lack of profitable production points to a second lesson about film economies: the real beneficiaries of the local film companies, from Coquille to Diamond, were the studio owners, not the film workers. The fledgling film economy did not create generous payrolls or revive the floundering theater stock companies. Local exhibitors were already marked as shoddy employers; projectionists complained publicly and led strikes for better conditions.⁷⁹ On the production side, Plaissetty and Hannon managed to contract only one actor of national repute and to train only one veritable film star. While the former actor had been reduced to playing vaudeville in New Orleans, the latter actress left town to become the

acclaimed starlet Leatrice Joy. Beyond this, the directors frequently used their family as talent. Hannon's father, the defender of film art listed as Nola Film's scenario editor, played a female lead in drag in the company's first release. Plaissetty's three-year-old daughter played children's parts. Those most qualified to become part of a local creative network for film felt they had to either make their names in Los Angeles first or maintain their real career in New Orleans's independent theater scene. All along, the local newspapers continued to relay to their readers the dream of being discovered; one even hosted a popularity contest to identify the paper's "prettiest" subscribers for a local movie shoot. The winner of the vote was guaranteed to become a star, in Hollywood.⁸⁰ These two lessons about property and labor in making a film economy seem relevant today.

AND SCENE? RESTAGING THE TEMPORAL IMPACTS OF FILM ECONOMIES

The history of New Orleans's early film production is allegorical to the extent that cities and film studios are still involved in a dance of mutual attraction. The independents working for small- and medium-size firms that comprise the vast majority of Hollywood film production in the past thirty years hold much in common with the mobile and itinerant filmmakers of a century ago.⁸¹ Both groups seek to reduce their risks in deciding where to produce for the short term and where to locate for the long run. Those risk perceptions are as much personal and political as rational and economic. To succeed, film producers must weigh the importance of direct incentives alongside cheap resources, such as land and labor, which can be made more cost efficient when they are shared with other creative sectors. Their dance partners, the government and business officials who have sought film production since the silent era, also share common cause with those of today. Beyond city branding and the seeming synergies with tourism, city leaders must decide who are meant to be the biggest beneficiaries of the film economy. While the creation of local circuits of production, distribution, and consumption may generate good will and stimulate a temporary market, creating a sustainable film economy ultimately lies in satisfying the needs of financiers and venture capitalists first. At the local level, city representatives must wrestle with the thorny moral questions of resourcing a film economy that so easily benefits the most propertied elites. Wrapped in the cold cost-benefit analyses of what makes film economies run, then, are the stories of real people navigating these difficult ethical choices.

These intangible factors help explain why New Orleans's film economy so frequently failed to replace Hollywood's, and why so many runaway film regions continue to run after the Hollywood dream. Much has already been made of the success of Los Angeles's boosters, but that success is more symbolic of film

production than a direct index to it. Even in Hollywood's earliest stages, its boosters protected their place's brand as studios meanwhile sought cheaper rents in nearby Culver City and Burbank. In doing so, they propped up real estate values and safeguarded the glamorous consumer lifestyle associated with the place. The real work of film production happened elsewhere. To this day, Culver City has not reaped the benefits of an iconic name, even though it is now where more studios are headquartered and where more film and television workers go to earn their wages.⁸²

Today, New Orleans uses the moniker "Hollywood South," having forgotten the history of its own ignominious efforts, first to lure filmmakers and then to seed an entire industry. The name also has its allure, conjuring the aura of glitz and glamour around a place more easily recognized as the "birthplace of jazz," the "city care forgot," and "the Big Easy." These traditional titles have had their merit in attracting film producers looking to pursue their own pleasures, which was the main idea behind those who heralded the need for each city to chase down "the creative class."⁸³ Like LeSoir, however, they may find that the perfect cocktail does not make a sustainable new creative sector; and just like the M-I-N-O boosters of yesteryear, the city may find that the price of achieving the temporary local symbolic capital is not worth the cost. "It was cruel irony that the urban boosters' very striving for economic success [in the early 1900s] only deepened their region's economic inferiority," writes the urban historian David Goldfield about a number of short-term competitive strategies that southern cities, including New Orleans, have pursued in order to achieve more recognition.⁸⁴ Whether by promoting the cheapest labor, the malleability of the urban environment, or tax incentives that favor the rich and steal services from the poor, boosters have unwittingly helped concentrate wealth at the top of the social hierarchy and exploit those at the bottom. Worse, the strategies are inherently risky. Some cities will lose to others in their race to the bottom.

And Hollywood as an industry and a place continues to be relatively durable. Fewer films are shot on location there, but the creation of new wealth and the maintenance of some of the highest property values in the world have continued unabated in the center for the film industry. New Orleans business schemers, from the respected exhibitor Pearce to the sleazy exploiter Hannon, knew this in their efforts to use the film industry to expand the city's boundaries and its property values. In time, each of the new neighborhoods created in New Orleans in the 1910s and 1920s had its own cinema and linked to the Canal Street leisure district via streetcar. What the planners failed to achieve, however, was an equitable way to distribute their profits among city residents, particularly those redlined out of the neighborhoods on the march. In this way, Diamond's backers did not just prey on those who dreamt of a film economy, but they also validated the racist and classist property divides that the film industry itself embraced and marketed to

middle-class whites. The recurrent scandals around the current film tax policy shine a light on the greed and fraud potential that surrounds a policy based on government nonintervention, spiking land values, and naive investors who believe that if they help build it, Hollywood will not only come, but stay and flourish.⁸⁵ Yet the sensational coverage of insider trading, sham productions, and embezzlement are only minor elements in a long-term strategy that further stratifies the haves and have-nots.