Preston Sturges has long been a study in contrast, inspiring highly divergent characterizations such as genius and fluke, artist and entertainer, auteur and sellout. These extremes seem warranted when considering his startlingly eclectic life. A groundbreaking writer-director, Sturges was also a songwriter, inventor, restaurateur, and engineer. He created some of the most witty, acerbic, and hilarious comedies of the 1940s, yet his forays into dramatic genres resulted in several dull and saccharine on-screen moments. He was considered the most “American” of Hollywood filmmakers, yet he lived in Europe between the ages of eight and fifteen, and spent the final years of his life in France. He was devoted to his globetrotting socialite mother, Mary Desti, yet he had an abiding love and respect for his pragmatic, stockbroker stepfather, Solomon Sturges. He was one of the highest-paid people in the USA in the mid-1940s, yet he was consumed by debt and failure upon his death in 1959.

Antinomies like “auteur” and “sellout” are therefore useful for making sense of Sturges; however, they also cast him as an ambivalent character in his own story. This in turn has a narrowing effect, as all of the events and details of his life are reduced to two extremes. Perhaps most famous are James Agee’s movie reviews for The Nation, in which he plays up Sturges’s ambivalent personality and finds, not surprisingly, that he suffers from a neurosis. Agee contrasts Sturges’s “retching, permanently incurable loathing for everything that stank of ‘culture,’ of ‘art’” with his “desperate respect and hunger for success”; he argues that these twin drives resulted in films that are “paradoxical marvels of self-perpetuation and self-destruction.” Although these characterizations smack of pseudo-psychoanalysis, Agee was not alone in spinning such narratives. Andrew Sarris would rehearse (and tacitly endorse) this view in 1968 when referring to Sturges’s ambivalence, which derived from “the incongruity of continental sophistication being challenged by American pragmatism.” Richard Corliss would rehash a similar argument in Talking
These critical constructs, as G. Tom Poe’s chapter reminds us, often tell us as much about the critics as they do about the object of study. The habit of seeing Sturges in terms of binary opposites was very much in tune with the pop-Freudianism of the mid-century, and it received additional fuel from structuralism, one of the most fashionable modes of film studies in the 1960s and 1970s. Foundational texts such as Peter Wollen’s *Signs and Meanings in the Cinema* (1969) modeled the use of antinomies, often referred to as “structuring oppositions,” as a way to “comprehend the system of differences and oppositions” in cinema, especially in the works of auteurs such as John Ford and Howard Hawks. Sturges’s ambivalent personality, as promulgated by Agee and others, was therefore ready-made for this form of interpretation. Yet not everyone endorsed this orthodoxy.

Brian Henderson lamented the lasting influence of this critical approach in his introduction to a 1985 collection of Sturges’s screenplays, a seminal contribution to scholarship on the filmmaker both then and now. Finding Agee’s reviews to be the most pernicious, Henderson observed: “no mere statement of facts or counter-argument is likely to prevail against it. It has become that most insidious of critical phenomena—an interpretation that is later taken as fact.” He concluded by expressing a hope that access to the screenplays, as well as future biographical and critical scholarship, might unsettle this perspective and “break the exclusivity of a reigning single explanation.”

Indeed, the last thirty years have done much to enlarge and deepen our understanding of Sturges. Unlike Agee, who readily admitted to relying on a scant amount of evidence, current scholars and enthusiasts have a wealth of information at their disposal. The publication of three biographies, several critical studies, fourteen screenplays, a seven-DVD box set, and Sturges’s own memoirs have afforded numerous insights into Sturges’s films, career, and personal life. Much of this work has been made possible through access to the Preston Sturges Papers, an archive of production materials, inter-office memos, letters, and miscellany at the UCLA Charles E. Young library. These documents have enabled us to verify, correct, or complicate the dominant narratives about Sturges with a degree of scrutiny unavailable to early critics.

And yet, despite these advancements in scholarship on Sturges, the Agee model retains some allure, partly because it is so convenient but also because, like many clichés, it does contain some elements of truth—mother vs. father, USA vs. Europe, art vs. commerce, etc. We still see this binary model in passing remarks about Sturges in newspapers, magazines, and online forums, and we’ve witnessed it in our classrooms from students eager for a conceptual model to explain the man and his work. Following Henderson’s lead, we aim to break the tidy, reining explanations, and so we propose new descriptive
clusters or patterns that cut across every aspect of Sturges’s life: creator; businessman; wordsmith; skeptic; optimist. We believe these terms provide a good sense of the personality, vitality, and talents that made Sturges such a compelling figure and such an excellent subject for the ReFocus series. The first three speak to Sturges’s aptitudes and endeavors, while the latter two attempt to characterize his attitudes and worldview. Rather than set these terms in opposition, we put them in conversation to illustrate the complexities of Sturges’s remarkable life.

Moreover, we do not see these terms as the only lenses through which to understand and appreciate Sturges; rather, they are entry points for the essays that follow, each of which combines primary documents from the UCLA archive, detailed analyses of the screenplays and films, deep engagement with previous scholarship, and thorough historical and cultural contexts. If we’ve done our jobs well, these terms and essays will shed light on why Sturges was, and continues to be, such a pivotal figure in Hollywood cinema and American culture.

STURGES THE CREATOR: A VOLCANO OF INTERESTS AND PROJECTS

In the introduction to his collection of Sturges’s early screenplays, Andrew Horton attempts to capture the sheer breadth of Sturges’s creative talents:

Before turning to Sturges the storyteller and screenwriter, we should consider the volcano of interests and projects that he indulged in beyond those related to writing and the silver screen. We are not speaking of a single-minded focused writer who gave all to his craft . . . There is also Sturges the inventor who delighted in devising new gizmos of all kinds. Listed in his archives at UCLA are patents registered for new planes, cars, a helicopter, a laugh meter (1934), and exercise machines, among more than thirty inventions.7

Sturges’s aptitude for invention would begin early in life, when he found himself assisting his mother in launching her cosmetics company, Maison Desti, which he would go on to manage (first in Deauville and, later, New York), starting at age fifteen.

It was here, as biographer Diane Jacobs explains, that the young Preston began to tap into his creative potential: “Here he discovered how good he was with his hands and how, particularly when it came to solving practical conundrums, his mind was so much more agile than most people’s.”8 In addition to designing boxes and posters, he improved the products themselves,
most notably by inventing a kiss-proof lipstick, Desti’s Red Red Rouge. After his mother resumed full control of the company in 1924, essentially forcing him out of the business, Sturges would shift his focus to mechanical inventions, including a photo-etching process, the “sturgephone” hearing aid, and a vertical—takeoff plane.

One of his central creative outlets was the Sturges Engineering Company, founded in 1937 to design diesel engines and yachting components; another was The Players, a supper club on Sunset Boulevard that also allowed him to try his hand at inventing, including tables mounted on tracks, revolving bandstands, and booths that mechanically ejected obnoxious customers. Although few of these inventions would bear fruit, Sturges would persist in his efforts. As Jacobs notes, “he wrote letter after letter to the patent office, and would continue to do so—and to conceive of instruments to make life easier and more interesting—all his life.”

Given his limited success in these areas, we might be tempted to view Sturges the inventor as distinct from Sturges the writer-director, yet these creative impulses spewed forth from the same volcano of ideas. An obvious connection between inventor and filmmaker is the appearance of mechanical devices in the films themselves, often in the form of tongue-in-cheek demonstrations of impractical technologies. For instance, the opening scene of *Christmas in July* (1940) is a conversation between Jimmy (Dick Powell) and Betty (Ellen Drew) about an apartment with revolving floors and walls (reminiscent of the tables and stages at The Players). Betty explains, “Then the sideboard turns around and turns into the bathroom . . . then another time it turns into a kitchenette, another time into a fireplace . . . it makes one room into four rooms.” The next day, when the characters go on a shopping spree, they purchase the “Davenola,” a couch that with the touch of a button springs open into a bed, complete with radio, reading lamp, telephone, and ashtray.

In *The Palm Beach Story* (1942), Tom Jeffers (Joel McCrea) tries repeatedly to sell his invention for a suspended airport, an impractically large square of mesh stretched over a cityscape like a tennis racket; meanwhile, the film’s fairy godfather, the Wienie King, explains to Gerry (Claudette Colbert) that he made his millions by inventing the addictive “Texas wienie.” Much later in Sturges’s filmmaking career, in *Unfaithfully Yours* (1948), he would subject his protagonist Sir Alfred de Carter (Rex Harrison) to a series of technological humiliations. Eager to frame his assistant for the murder of his wife, Sir Alfred attempts to impersonate her screams using the “Simplicitas” home recording machine, only to find his efforts thwarted by a devilish invention with the deceptive slogan, “so simple it operates itself!”

Of course, Sturges’s most famous inventions are the films themselves, especially his creation of unconventional, genre-breaking stories and fast-paced, highly articulate dialogue. Just as he wrote patent letter after patent letter,
Sturges also churned out story after story. In all, he wrote, adapted, or collaborated on 45 plays and screenplays between 1929 and 1957; yet even this is a fraction of his output, as many fascinating plays and scripts remain unproduced (see the chapters by Wexman, Karnick, and Jaeckle for examples). Part of Sturges’s success derived from his sheer physical capacity—sometimes after weeks or months of procrastination—to dictate stories at length while acting out every part and performing every line of dialogue. His pace of creation was breathtaking; he was able to draft a full play or script in a matter of days or weeks. For instance, he completed his second produced play and breakout hit Strictly Dishonorable (1929) in six days.

Sturges was especially skilled at generating dialogue. As he famously boasted to Fox producer Darryl Zanuck, he could “spritz dialogue like Seltzer water. My trouble has never been in inventing it but rather throwing three-quarters of it away.”11 This talent brought him fame early in his screenwriting career, on The Power and the Glory (1933), when he invented “narratage,” a dialogue device that combines flashbacks and voiceover in which the narrator speaks for the characters while also relaying the story. Success would come again in 1941, when Sturges won the first Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay for The Great McGinty; in 1945 he would be nominated twice for his screenplays for Hail the Conquering Hero and The Miracle of Morgan’s Creek. Sturges often attributed these successes to what he called his “hook system,” a writing style in which a word or concept in one character’s speech is picked up, or hooked onto, by the next character, resulting in an elegant (and potentially endless) daisy chain of language. We hear this technique at work in Sullivan’s Travels during Sully’s rapid-fire three-way exchange with the studio heads about making O Brother, Where Art Thou?, and again in The Sin of Harold Diddlebock as the teetotaler Harold and a drunk named Wormy engage in a verbal fencing match using only aphorisms. In these and other memorable exchanges, the dialogue twists and turns, often breathlessly. “The problem,” as Alva Johnston noted in a 1941 profile for the Saturday Review, “becomes that of making the dialogue end instead of keeping it going.”12

This aptitude for brisk and voluminous composition directly impacted Sturges’s approach to screenwriting, particularly when he was collaborating on or adapting existing stories. Rather than conserve the original plot, setting, or characterizations, he tended to toss out most of the material, saving only tidbits upon which to quickly and elegantly invent a new story. On his first assignment for Paramount, Sturges was to adapt the Vera Caspary story “Easy Living,” about a working-class woman so eager to appear wealthy that she steals a fur coat, only to be caught and ostracized. Other than using the fur coat, which remains a central prop, Sturges radically reconceived the story, transforming the thief into an honest and affable woman, and abandoning the story’s social message for a farcical and romantic romp. (See Kozloff’s chapter
“To Write and Not Direct” for a thorough account of the adaptation and collaboration processes behind this film.

When adapting the Monckton Hoffe story “Two Bad Hats” into what would become The Lady Eve (1941), Sturges once again entirely reworked the plot, most notably by shifting the balance of power from the male to the female protagonist. Even toward the end of his career, after he had suffered tremendously in terms of finances and reputation, Sturges’s predilection for invention (and reinvention) remained undaunted, perhaps stubbornly so. In a famous anecdote about his collaboration on Ben Hecht’s script of Roman Holiday (1953) for William Wyler, who wanted to send some work his friend’s way, Sturges sneered, “There’s one good line in it.” Jacobs recounts the rest of the story this way:

Sturges came back with a script substantively the same as Hecht’s, but with every single line rewritten and elongated.

After reading Preston’s revisions, Wyler inquired: “Preston, remember you said there was one good line. Where is it?”

“I decided not to use it,” Preston replied.

Not surprisingly, Wyler went with Hecht’s script and Sturges received no screenwriting credit.

As with his engineering company and restaurant innovations, Sturges’s boundless capacity for story invention did not always serve him well. The vitality and energy coursing through his scriptwriting process could, at times, be excessive or uncontrollable, as was the case with Roman Holiday, resulting in lots of stalled and unrealized projects. The same could be said of his tendencies as a businessman: never at a loss for a new venture idea, Sturges occasionally lacked the pragmatic skills of moderation and implementation to see it through or sustain it.

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STURGES THE BUSINESSMAN:
THE ITCH TO MAKE GOOD AND MAKE MONEY

Sturges donned a number of professional hats during his lifetime, including head of Maison Desti, founder of Sturges Engineering Company, and restaurateur at The Players. We could add to this list the Sturges Music Publishing Company, Synder’s restaurant, and the import/export venture Sturges & Company. The fact that all of these businesses ended in insolvency suggests that Sturges was ultimately a better creator—an “ideas man”—than he was a businessman. Nevertheless, he fought hard to develop and maintain this portion of his identity, once insisting in an interview: “I wanted to be a
good businessman—like my father.” This insistence would find its way into his filmmaking career, both on- and off-screen, as Sturges’s stories evince a fascination with business, while his observations on moviemaking and correspondence with studio executives speak to his desire to be taken seriously as a financially savvy filmmaker.

Sturges was especially concerned with audience enjoyment as an indicator of a film’s potential success. Not content to rely on comment cards during pre-release previews, he often used a laugh meter to quantify a film’s hilarity in terms of decibels, with four decibels denoting a winning moment. Sturges also quantified his scriptwriting process by drafting his eleven rules for box-office appeal. These rules build upon each other, each offering a better option to ensure audience enjoyment, such as “3. A bedroom is better than a living room” and “6. A chase is better than a chat,” culminating in rule 11: “A prat-fall is better than anything.” These audience-focused practices were meant to boost a film’s grosses and, by extension, showcase Sturges’s talent for producing winning investments.

This pragmatic approach to filmmaking comes through as well in Sturges’s correspondence with studio executives, to whom he stresses his dual capacities as writer and businessman. In an undated letter to Fox producer Jesse Lasky (likely from early 1933), Sturges provides an impassioned cost–benefit analysis of script doctoring:

I cannot re-dialogue a picture for two thousand dollars. It seems to me that the essence of good business is to put the deal through so this is my effort: I will re-dialogue the whole picture, however long it may take me, for 1% of the gross up to 500,000.00 and 2% on anything over that. As against this percentage you will give me an advance of $2000.00.

Notable here is his emphasis on the mechanics and economics of his craft, not on his artistry. In signing off, he offers a series of maxims to reinforce these sentiments, including: “Whatever the story, a talking picture is only as good as it’s [sic] dialogue. I believe good dialogue is the cheapest insurance a producer can buy: it makes good material magnificent and average material at least presentable. It is like good tailoring.”

This no-nonsense approach with Jesse Lasky arguably helped Sturges secure an unprecedented contract for the purchase of his script for The Power and the Glory (1933): a $17,500 advance as well as a percentage of the grosses; this deal included a provision for Sturges to be present on the set to oversee any script changes, an unheard-of arrangement at the time. Henderson points out, “Indeed, several performers averred they had never seen a writer before.” Sturges would once again break precedent and assert his business savvy when insisting that he direct The Vagrant, a 1933 script that would become The
Great McGinty (1940). As early as 1935, he pitched this writing-directing arrangement, once again taking a pragmatic approach. In a letter to Universal’s general manager Fred Meyer of August 14, 1935, Sturges stresses that he is determined to make “Class A pictures for a great deal less than is expended upon them now.” When Paramount’s William LeBaron finally gave him the opportunity to direct in 1939, remarkable for granting him the novel screen credit “Written and Directed By,” Sturges maintained a businesslike approach to his craft, completing production three days ahead of schedule and $1,000 under budget, despite his contracting pneumonia in the middle of shooting.

Sturges maintained this workmanlike approach with his next few movies, Christmas in July, The Lady Eve (1941), Sullivan’s Travels (1941), and The Palm Beach Story, bringing them in at or close to budget and within a few days of schedule. This feat is especially impressive considering that these four films were written, revised, shot, edited, and released in just over two years, between November 1940 and December 1942. He achieved this pace, in part, by balancing long bouts of stalling with intense periods of creation. This schedule, unsurprisingly, could make him irascible and intolerant of criticism, such as when he snidely replied to Darryl Zanuck, “I normally work seventeen hours a day but will try to do more in the future,” when the producer questioned his shooting schedule for Unfaithfully Yours.

Perhaps the greatest exception to this rule was The Sin of Harold Diddlebock (1947), which came in months late and $600,000 over budget. (See McElhaney’s chapter for an extended account of the production woes.) The ample budget and unprecedented autonomy at California Pictures proved a detriment to Sturges, overwhelming his business sense with a hubris that sprang from unquestioned freedom and control. As Jacobs tells it, “He may have seen Cal Pix as an extension of The Players, a sort of fiefdom where he could play lord of the manor, lover, friend, sometime father, and filmmaker at once.” Yet no account of the troubles on set suggest that Sturges was anything other than the creative dynamo he had been on previous projects, or would be with any business venture he undertook until the end of his life.

Given the zeal with which Sturges pursued these ventures and cultivated his identity as an entrepreneur, it should come as no surprise that businessmen would figure prominently in his scripts and films. As Geoff Brown notes, “His characters had the Horatio Alger itch to make good and make money.” (See Beach’s chapter for a fuller treatment of money and class; see McElhaney’s chapter for a discussion of failure in business.) Indeed, businessmen characters are the rule, not the exception, in his stories, most notably Tom Garner (The Power and the Glory), J. B. Ball (Easy Living), The Boss (The Great McGinty), John D. Hackensacker (The Palm Beach Story), and Harold Diddlebock (The Sin of Harold Diddlebock). Even characters not explicitly in the role of “businessman” find themselves caught up in matters of finance. The director John
L. Sullivan (Joel McCrea) in *Sullivan’s Travels* is proud of making profitable films, balking “Not from me, you haven’t!” when the studio heads fret about losing money on his next venture. Sturges also binds business to sex and marriage, perhaps most explicitly in *The Lady Eve* when Eve (Barbara Stanwyck) comments to a smitten Charles (Henry Fonda): “They say a moonlit deck is a woman’s business office.” Moreover, for as much as Sturges ridicules businessmen in his films—whether by pelting them with tomatoes in *Christmas in July* or making them tongue-tied in *Hail the Conquering Hero* (1944)—he does not vilify business itself, especially the drive for success and financial gain. Audiences root for Dan (Brian Donlevy) to ascend the political ladder in *The Great McGinty* just as they hope Jimmy will win the slogan contest in *Christmas in July*.

This enthusiasm spurred Sturges’s own business ventures, be they engineering contracts, real estate investments, or partnerships with Howard Hughes. Ultimately, however, Sturges was better at generating business ideas than he was at realizing and growing the profits made from them. Yet even if he had managed to retain the fortunes he made and lost throughout the years, his entrepreneurial spirit would likely not have waned but, like his predilection for creation, would have continued apace.

**STURGES THE WORDSMITH: A CACOPHONY OF VERNACULARISMS AND UTTERANCES**

Sturges’s restless, boundless energy no doubt fueled his unparalleled achievements as a writer. Indeed, no account of his life would be complete without an acknowledgment of his genius for crafting language. He has, of course, been likened to other great screenwriters—Ben Hecht, Billy Wilder, Orson Welles—but his facility with words is so impressive as to invite comparisons with some of the greatest writers in history, among them Voltaire, Racine, Swift, and Twain.

Having left school at age fifteen to run Maison Desti, Sturges did not perfect these writing skills inside the classroom; rather, as an autodidact, he proved a quick study and a keen observer. He learned the basics of playwriting, for instance, by consulting Brander Matthews’s *A Study of the Drama* (1910), which he read in 1928 during a six-week convalescence from peritonitis; while in the hospital, he wrote the operetta *Speaking of Operations*, which he ultimately discarded for being unfunny. However, by 1930, he had completed and produced numerous plays, including *The Guinea Pig* (1929) and the highly successful *Strictly Dishonorable* (1929). When he wanted to write music and lyrics, he started by teaching himself composition. Dan Pinck explains that he purchased a course from the back pages of *Popular Mechanics* and “learned
about passing chords, rolling bass, waltz bass, and ragtime bass—all in the key of G.”26 After founding his music publishing company, he eventually completed around sixty songs, often writing several per day. His nimble lyricism ranged from sentimental to sardonic, including the heartwarming “Home to the Arms of Mother” used in *Hail the Conquering Hero*, and the tongue-in-cheek “For You Alone” from the unproduced 1935 script *Song of Joy*, which includes the lyrics: “This is not a love song in the popular vein/Cause it’s meant for you alone/I don’t give a hang.” (See Karnick’s chapter for a detailed discussion of “Home to the Arms of Mother”; see Jaeckle’s chapter for an in-depth analysis of *Song of Joy*; see Marks’s chapter for a broader discussion of Sturges’s uses of film scores.)27

Sturges’s career move from playwright to screenwriter also proved quite easy, in part because he saw cinema as an extension of the theater, claiming that “the motion picture was theater in its modern form, being handy and cheap and necessary and used constantly by hundreds of millions of people worldwide.”28 If he seemed unperturbed by leaving behind the theater scene in New York for Hollywood in 1932, it’s likely because he didn’t perceive this move as a separation so much as a continuation. Biographer James Curtis recounts this exchange: “Asked when he was going to write another play for the theater, he replied, ‘I have never stopped writing plays. This is the theater.’”29 This connection between stage and screen no doubt influenced Sturges’s approach to film dialogue, which is noteworthy for being highly literate, lengthy, and articulate.

Eschewing the dictum, common both then and now, that cinema is a visual medium, Sturges crammed his scripts and films with words, imbuing the language with a striking and unconventional density more akin to stage productions. As Geoffrey O’Brien explains, “The magnificence of his dialogue resides in what makes it difficult to excerpt. There are few one-liners or punchlines: the words careen off each other with manic expansiveness.”30 However, Sturges’s dialogue is by no means “theatrical” in the sense of being stuffy or stagey. His characters may speak at length, but their speech is an energetic hodgepodge of erudition and slang, verses and vulgarities. *The Lady Eve*, for instance, shows an impressive range of verbal registers, from archaic (“meet me in yonder window embrasure”) to aphoristic (“let us be crooked but never common”) to goofy (“cock-eyed cookie puss”). *The Palm Beach Story* has its own sophisticated blend of poetry, speechifying, and outright gibberish, including Toto’s (Sig Arno) three-word vocabulary of “vitz,” “nitz,” and “grittniks.” Andrew Dickos captures this eclecticism well, claiming that it “establishes the standard of eloquence of poetry, a cacophony of Euro–American vernacularisms and utterances, peculiarly—and appropriately—spoken with scandalous indifference.”31

Sturges added to this eclecticism by placing eloquent utterances in the mouths of both major and minor characters, so that a barman or butler is as
likely to deliver a memorable speech as a banker or baron. As Manny Farber and W. S. Poster observe, “All of this liberated talk turns a picture into a kind of open forum where everyone down to the cross-eyed bit player gets a chance to try out his oratorical ability.” In *The Palm Beach Story*, for instance, the doddering Wienie King (Robert Dudley) delivers an eloquent speech on aging that begins, “Cold are the hands of time that keep along relentlessly, destroying slowly, but without pity, that which yesterday was young.” In *Sullivan’s Travels*, Sully’s butler Burroughs (Robert Greig) corrects his employer’s misguided views on poverty: “You see, sir, rich people and theorists—who are usually rich people—think of poverty in the negative, as the lack of riches—as disease might be called the lack of health. But it isn’t, sir. Poverty is not the lack of anything, but a positive plague, virulent in itself, contagious as cholera, with filth, criminality, vice and despair as only a few of its symptoms.” Minor players also get in good one-liners, often in the form of catchphrases that resonate throughout the films, such as the valet Muggsy’s (William Demarest) insistence that Eve and the Lady Sidwich are “the same dame,” or the studio executive LeBrand’s (Robert Warwick) request in *Sullivan’s Travels* that Sully make his social drama *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* “with a little sex in it.”

These witty rejoinders can give the dialogue a feeling of spontaneity, as if tossed off in the moment, yet close analyses have repeatedly pointed up its thoughtful and painstaking construction. Timothy Paul Garrand’s thorough study of screenplay design reveals Sturges’s strategic reliance on a number of literary devices, among them epigrams, non-sequiturs, understatement, irony, and wordplay, while Sarah Kozloff has analyzed elements of delivery and pacing, including the employment of repetition and overlapping speech. My own research has uncovered Sturges’s calculated use of misspeaking, especially malapropisms, mispronunciation, and exaggerated accents. These verbal and vocal patterns illustrate that Sturges’s genius came by the sweat of his brow. As Henderson notes, “the best-known features of Sturges’s films—brilliant dialogue, break-neck pace, vivid characters—were in fact the result of tireless revision at every stage of production.”

Because Sturges often acted as both writer and director (and sometimes producer), he was able to extend and deepen this revision process up to the time of a picture’s release. Henderson explains that he “had the opportunity to alter his dialogue, even to omit scenes or to change the order of scenes if he chose to, during shooting or in the editing.” On the set, Sturges was explicit about how a line should sound in terms of volume, pacing, and pitch. Sandy Sturges recounts this practice, saying that he “would tell the actors exactly and precisely how to say the line, how to deliver it . . . and every gesture to go with it.” (See Carson’s chapter on Sturges’s collaborations with actors.) However, this level of creative control brought with it a responsibility, since Sturges was thrust into the spotlight as the person to praise or to blame for what appeared on-screen.
The same goes for critical responses to his films. Since his characters deliver well-crafted and moving speeches on controversial topics ranging from gender inequality to patriotism to corporate greed, we look to Sturges the wordsmith to explain his films’ themes or messages, be they progressive, regressive, or contradictory. (See Karnick’s chapter on his treatments of gender, especially mothers; see Gabbard’s chapter on his representations of people of color.) Yet Sturges’s personal views have proven difficult to pin down, in part because he remained a slippery and self-contradictory commentator on his own work, establishing his reputation as an ideological agnostic.

STURGES THE SKEPTIC: 
AN UNCOMMITTED OBSERVER

In recounting the familiar story of Mary Desti dragging the young Preston back and forth from Paris to Chicago and New York, critic Richard Schickel contends that these experiences engendered in Sturges a “partial alienation [that] shaped his sensibility.” This alienation, he argues, is why Sturges was such a talented wordsmith, especially when it came to appreciating American colloquialisms. It also developed in him a sense of skepticism: the ability to observe without judging, to mock without criticizing. While reviewers such as Agee cited this quality as evidence of Sturges’s lack of moral seriousness, Schickel considers it a rare talent: “He was not, and never meant to be, a critic of society. Rather, he was an uncommitted observer, bemused and compassionate, but without any cures in mind for the conditions he observed.”

Sturges’s observer status pervaded his personal and professional relationships. While his mother dabbled in various faiths and his first wife Estelle was a committed Catholic, Sturges remained steadfastly uncommitted to organized religion. In an undated letter to Estelle, presumably near the start of their marriage in 1923, Sturges explains, “Though I believe in God I don’t believe in religion for everybody . . . I think a powerful conscience is worth all the religions put together.” This same detachment is evident in Sturges’s stance on patriotism, particularly in the context of war. Although he scrambled to enlist for the Air Service during World War I, Sturges adopted a relatively neutral stance toward US involvement in World War II. In a 1943 letter to a friend, he admits, “The peculiar thing is that I have absolutely no desire to get in. Either this war has not been as well advertised as the last one or else there is a great difference between eighteen and forty-four, or else you don’t fall for the same guff twice or something.” Jacobs hypothesizes that this detachment stemmed in part from Sturges’s belief that all political movements, as with all religions, commit more evil than good, and are therefore best avoided altogether. (See Kozloff’s chapter “To Write and Not Direct” for examples of how this stance
This unwillingness to join a group or subscribe to a cause cropped up repeatedly during Sturges’s time in Hollywood. He famously refused to join the Directors Guild, being the only recognized director not to do so. He also refused to aid the unionizing efforts of the Screen Writers Guild and the Screen Playwrights Guild. “Preston joined nothing and sided with no one,” Jacob remarks about this period. However, he was openly critical when others pursued causes he considered faddish. When filmmakers, for instance, advocated for political change, especially on screen, Sturges chastised them in print. In a 1942 *New York Times* article on *Sullivan’s Travels*, he criticizes them for “wasting their talents in comstockery, demagogy, and plain dull preachment” and then proclaims his own democratic take on cinema and art in general: “I don’t believe that now is the time for comedies or tragedies or spy pictures or pictures without spies or historical dramas or musicals or pictures without music. I believe that now is the time for all forms of art and that now is always with us.”

This avoidance of popular trends and movements often meant that Sturges adopted a relatively independent stance, both on- and off-screen. He consistently pursued any storyline or genre he thought best, even if that meant being unpopular or risking professional failure; indeed, this habit often came at the expense of his cultivated reputation for being business savvy. For instance, after the success of *Strictly Dishonorable* in 1929, Sturges was advised to take his time and then pursue another comedy. “Presenting two plays in a year was unwise,” his friends cautioned, and “following a comedy with a drama was foolhardy.” And yet he did exactly that by producing *Recapture* (1930), a critical and commercial flop about a divorced couple’s tragically failed attempt to rekindle their relationship. Much the same occurred twelve years later when, after the success of his early written-directed comedies, Sturges set out to make the drama *Triumph Over Pain* (also known as *Great Without Glory*) about the inventor of ether-based anesthesia, W. T. G. Morton. Rather than abandon the unpopular project early on, he persisted, Henderson explains, “even though it cost him the enmity of his studio and finally undid him, simply because he believed in the project.” Ultimately, Sturges lost control of the film, which languished for two years until Paramount’s Buddy DeSylva had it recut and retitled *The Great Moment*. Released in 1944, it became one of Sturges’s most dismal failures, both critically and commercially. (See Poe’s and Viviani’s chapters for broader discussions of Sturges’s reception in the USA and France respectively.) Sturges would endure a similar disappointment years later during his vexed partnership with Howard Hughes, who recut, retitled, and even reshoted portions of *The Sin of Harold Diddlebock*, releasing it as *Mad Wednesday* in 1950. (See Wexman’s chapter on Sturges’s fascinating
yet vexed experiences with the studio system; see Bernstein’s chapter on his equally vexed relationships with the Production Code Administration.)

Sturges’s films embody his skeptical attitude in that they explore numerous and contradictory positions on a given subject, ultimately embracing a multiplicity of opinions over and above a single perspective or solution. For instance, the majority of The Palm Beach Story—originally titled “Is Marriage Necessary?”—seems to ridicule marriage and monogamy, as audiences see that Gerry, showered with financial and material support from a host of suitors, can get by just fine without Tom; meanwhile Maude’s (Mary Astor) five marriages, all ending in divorce or annulment, suggest that marriage is outdated and love largely an afterthought. Yet the characters all find that marriage is, if not necessary, then at least preferable, as the film ends with two weddings and the “remarriage” of Tom and Gerry, who reluctantly admits, “You realize this is costing us millions,” before embracing her estranged husband. Rather than answer the question about the necessity of marriage, Sturges takes audiences on an adventure that considers several hypothetical (and hilarious) scenarios.

Sturges’s most famous satire, Sullivan’s Travels, appears to skewer the shallowness and pomposity of Hollywood, with studio heads driven by profit motives and directors ruled by misguided notions of themselves as saviors. Yet the film also validates Hollywood on at least two fronts: Sturges renders scenes of poverty in ways that effectively illustrate the dramatic power of socially conscious cinema; he also underscores the value of film comedy, not because it is fashionable or politically popular, but because people sincerely benefit from it. Ultimately, then, he refrains from making any damning criticism of Hollywood. This decision stemmed, I would argue, not from a lack of conviction or fear of reprisal, but arguably from a desire to project (and protect) his reputation as an individualist and iconoclast who embodied what Penelope Houston calls “the notion of the film-maker as a universal man (if only on a Hollywood scale)”; however, this decision seems also to have come from an awareness of, and respect for, the sheer complexities of the Hollywood system, which render it both uniquely difficult and praiseworthy.

Sturges takes a similar stance when assessing the intertwined worlds of theater and cinema in a 1943 letter to author and journalist Emily Kimbrough:

Hollywood is a medium, an invention, open to all. Anyone who can hold the attention of the selfish, vulgar, fearful, brave, learned and generous individuals who make up the theater-going public is welcome in the selfish, vulgar, fearful, brave, learned, generous and very much alive town of Hollywood.48

Once again, Sturges exposes the virtues as well as vices of an institution, and ultimately renders not a judgment so much as a sophisticated observation.
This capacity to perceive and appreciate the unresolved complexities of institutions (as well as people and events) was key to Sturges staving off the tides of cynicism that surrounded him, especially toward the end of his life; rather than give in to these pressures and transform himself into a defeatist or crank, he remained a cautious optimist.

**STURGES THE OPTIMIST: TRIUMPH OVER PAIN**

Sturges was anything but a wide-eyed romantic. He worked hard, knew the huge risks involved in his ventures, and experienced enough loss and failure for two lifetimes. And yet, his films and commentaries exude a resilient hope. For all of his skepticisms about ideologies and institutions, Sturges was nevertheless an optimist, though of a peculiar bent, as he readily admits in his memoirs:

I am, always was, and always will be violently optimistic. I knew at twenty I was going to be a millionaire. I know it today. In between times, I have been.49

Striking here is the adverb “violently,” a jarring descriptor that tempers the unalloyed connotations of “optimist.” Agee’s focus on ambivalence is apt here, as Sturges’s optimism is itself pessimistic in that it accepts the necessity of pain for achieving triumph.

This violent optimism played out time and again in Sturges’s life, up to and including his final months in 1959. At the time he started writing his memoirs, in February of that year, he had not made a film in Hollywood for a decade; Twentieth Century–Fox’s *The Beautiful Blonde from Bashful Bend* (1949) was a box-office and critical flop; his cinematic forays in France had resulted in the mildly successful *Les Carnets du Major Thompson* (1955), which would turn out be his final film as a director; and his attempt to reenter Broadway, through directing a production of *The Golden Fleecing*, proved disastrous. Now living in the Algonquin hotel in New York, with much of his property in Los Angeles sold or repossessed, he was far behind on his mortgages and taxes. He was estranged from Sandy and his children and his health had also started to decline. He was, as Jacobs describes, “physically, as well as financially and emotionally, debilitated.”50 And yet we see in his memoirs here a glimmer of hope—“I know it today”—the absolute confidence that he would regain his position and fortune. He expressed a similar hope that April in a letter to his ex-wife Louise, insisting, “luck does turn, and the dice will come up the right way sooner or later. That you can be certain of.”51

This sense of certainty reverberates throughout Sturges’s films, typically during the final minutes, when the abused and downtrodden characters
glimpse some hope that their luck is about to turn. This habit led Schickel to quip about Sturges, “How determined he was to permit his American Dreamers to preserve their dreams unvexed.” Indeed, in *The Great McGinty*, Dan loses his family and position as governor but is saved from jail and allowed to tell his fascinating story. Jimmy endures shame and ignominy in *Christmas in July*, but the last seconds of the film reveal that he has in fact won the slogan contest and will soon be back on top. In *Hail the Conquering Hero*, Woodrow Truesmith (Eddie Bracken) is tormented by his lies about being a Marine veteran, yet the town embraces him after he confesses to the masquerade. Charles and Eve psychologically abuse each other throughout *The Lady Eve*, only to survive and find each other again. Sully endures poverty, prison, and torture in *Sullivan’s Travels*, but manages to learn a lesson about filmmaking, divorce his loathsome wife, and win the heart of The Girl (Veronica Lake). Norval (Eddie Bracken) is manipulated and mocked throughout *The Miracle of Morgan’s Creek* (1944) yet ultimately receives everything he wants: a marriage with Trudy (Betty Grable) and the respect of the town. Even in Sturges’s darkest film, *Unfaithfully Yours*, audiences are spared a tragic ending. After the jealous and crazed Sir Alfred schemes to murder his wife, or commit suicide, he discovers her to be faithful and proclaims, “A thousand poets dreamed a thousand years, and you were born, my love.”

Since these endings blatantly employ a *deus ex machina*, they tend to be both unexpected and unsettling, leading Penelope Houston to liken them to the suspicious grin of the Cheshire cat. Ray Cywinski goes further, suggesting that these endings, “far from being the standard commercial cop-outs as some critics aver, may actually testify to the opposite—a part of Sturges that believes ultimate success is impossible.” However, given all we know about Sturges’s violent optimism as a creator, businessman, and wordsmith, Cywinski’s argument about Sturges’s cynicism doesn’t hold up.

This is perhaps the most difficult aspect of Sturges’s filmmaking career to grapple with: despite his predilections for satire, irony, and cynical *bon mots*, Sturges was a guarded optimist. Able to puncture the pieties of America’s most beloved institutions, he was unwilling to destroy them, preferring to maim with style rather than kill with vengeance. Audiences could therefore entertain the complexities of his observations while leaving theaters with a smile. Apropos here is Sully’s closing speech in *Sullivan’s Travels*: “There’s a lot to be said for making people laugh. Did you know that’s all some people have? It isn’t much, but it’s better than nothing in this cockeyed caravan. Boy!” Corny as this line may sound—and it certainly does—it nonetheless characterizes Sturges’s boundless store of optimism, which he would draw from his entire life. Despite finding that his creative triumphs were countered by financial flops, and despite seeing his verbal genius tarnished by entrepreneurial errors, Sturges pressed on ahead with confidence until his death.
Over half a century later, in sifting through scripts, films, letters, and other documents, what endures are numerous and conflicting portraits of a complicated man—the fascinating products of an agile mind. In the chapters that follow, contributors to this volume have analyzed selected aspects of Sturges’s films, and the collection as a whole places these analyses in conversation with one another. As scholars well aware that we are embedded in our own cultural milieu, we adopt an approach that follows Robert Stam’s advice that it be dialogic and marked by pluralization. We have therefore interwoven primary research with textual analysis, sensitivity to many of the codes of filmmaking, and a detached historical understanding of the workings of Hollywood amid the social influences of the mid-twentieth century. More tolerant of ambiguity, and less moved to force Sturges into tidy binaries, we refocus attention on Sturges’s complicated and enduring legacies.

Part 1, “Contexts: Genre, Studio, Authorship,” locates and assesses Sturges’s place in the Hollywood studio system, specifically his evolution from fledgling screenwriter in the 1930s to top-grossing writer-director in the 1940s, pausing along the way to consider questions of collaboration, censorship, and contribution.

In “Preston Sturges and Screwball Comedy,” Leger Grindon summarizes the key traits of the screwball comedy cycle and assesses Sturges’s contributions to its late developments. Through careful examinations of *The Lady Eve* and *The Palm Beach Story*, Grindon considers how these films participate in the established traits of the cycle and how they develop fresh aspects of screwball.

Virginia Wright Wexman’s “Preston Sturges, *Sullivan’s Travels*, and Film Authorship in Hollywood, 1941” draws on archival materials housed at UCLA to examine the ways in which the film’s production context sheds light on the discourses about Hollywood during this pivotal and transformational year. She reads the film as a critique not just of Hollywood moviemaking at this time, but also as an elevation of the status of the director at the expense of studios, producers, or stars.

In “To Write and Not Direct,” Sarah Kozloff analyzes three of the scripts Sturges wrote and handed off to other Hollywood directors: *The Good Fairy* (Wyler, 1935), *Easy Living* (Leisen, 1937), and *Remember the Night* (Leisen, 1940). Although Sturges famously complained that others ruined his work, these sparkling comedies demonstrate the themes of the films that Sturges directed himself in the 1940s, and point to what others added to his vision.

Finally, Matthew Bernstein poses one of the most fascinating questions about Sturges’s career in his chapter, “‘The Edge of Unacceptability’: Preston Sturges and the PCA.” How did Sturges manage to insert so much sexual innuendo in his comedies of the 1940s, given the notorious vigilance of Joseph Breen and other members of the Production Code Administration? Through
close examinations of script drafts and correspondence with the PCA, Bernstein explores how Sturges deftly negotiated with the censors to satisfy their demands while ensuring that his satires of war and sexuality made their way to the screen.

In Part 2, “Cultural Commentary: History and Identity,” the contributors consider the current status of Sturges’s films, including how they fare with respect to their complicated and somewhat fraught representations of gender, social class, race, and aging and decline.

Kristine Karnick begins her chapter, “Sturges’s Many Mothers,” by pointing out the relative rarity of mothers in Hollywood films, populated instead by aunts and grandmothers, whereas mothers abound in Sturges’s films. Karnick’s analyses of these representations reveal that his constructions of motherhood evolved during his career, progressing from cold and manipulative mothers in his early screenplays (which nod to Philip Wylie’s notorious theories) and films to benevolent and sentimental characters that embody the outmoded Victorian ideal of “mother love.”

Christopher Beach, in “‘These Are Troublous Times’: Social Class in the Comedies of Preston Sturges,” argues that Sturges’s romantic comedies of the early 1940s go much further in their treatments of class than the 1930s screwball comedies of Frank Capra, Gregory La Cava, and Mitchell Leisen. Sturges’s films are more self-conscious about social conventions and more willing to comment on materialism, greed, and the desire for social status. Yet, like his views on motherhood, these representations evolved during his career, from straightforward class-based satires to parodic social fantasies.

In “‘They Always Get the Best of You Somehow’: Preston Sturges in Black and White,” Krin Gabbard takes on Sturges’s troubling reliance on racist stereotypes and finds that his black characters are both indicative of this historical period and often quite nuanced, expressing a wry suspicion of white characters through their scene-stealing dialogue. Gabbard also demonstrates the ways in which African American actors functioned as respected professionals in Sturges’s repertory company, using their skills to transform one-dimensional bit parts on the page into memorable and compelling characters on-screen.

In “Falling Hard: The Sin of Harold Diddlebock,” Joe McElhaney conducts an extended reading of this maligned and neglected film to understand its representations of aging and decline. McElhaney argues that Sturges’s dramatizing of the ravages of time in the person of the film’s star, Harold Lloyd, connects with the ossification of language and a thorough critique of the predations of capitalism and the American Dream of advancement.

In Part 3, “Technique: Scripting, Performance, Music,” the contributors turn to questions of style and form, paying close attention to patterns of screenwriting, acting, and scoring that give Sturges’s films their signature look and sound.
In “The Unheard Song of Joy,” Jeff Jaeckle provides an in-depth account of the little-known script for Song of Joy, a backstage Hollywood musical that Sturges conceived, revised, and unsuccessfully pitched to four major studios between 1935 and 1941. In tracing the script’s composition and controversies, he shows how its achievements in plotting, dialogue, and meta-cinema are actually more daring than those of Sturges’s well-known films.

Diane Carson, in “The Eye of the Storm: Preston Sturges and Performance,” demonstrates that Sturges’s actors frequently present diverse facades and dramatically alter personality traits as they navigate elaborate and highly contrived plots. While these varied roles and shifting guises honor the acting conventions of the 1940s studio system, Caron finds that Sturges urged his actors to push the boundaries of performance in order to enliven the films’ whip-smart dialogue and showcase acting itself.

In “Presto(n) con Spirito: Comedies with Music, Sturges-Style,” Martin Marks begins by noting that audiences often forget about musical contributions in classical Hollywood films, since studios favored a relatively anonymous house style. Not so with Preston Sturges, who turned the studio’s system to his advantage and developed a controlling musical consciousness of his own: planning films with musical enhancements in mind, so that they make strong contributions to the narrative form of his films.

The final Part, “Impact: Reception/Reputation,” considers Sturges’s legacy and influence as a filmmaker in the USA and France, both then and now, including his reception by critics and impact on contemporary filmmakers.

G. Tom Poe, in “Thrust with a Rapier and Run: The Critics and Preston Sturges,” contends that Sturges’s public persona as a “madcap” character in the history of the Hollywood studio system created a master narrative centering on his personal biography that influenced the critical reception of his films, serving as an early precursor to what would later be deemed “auteur criticism.” Poe also finds that the theme of public spectacle in Sturges’s life and films incited debates with regard not only to his place in American film history, but also to the purposes of film comedy.

In “Hail the Conquering Auteur: Preston Sturges in La Revue du cinéma (1946–1949),” Christian Viviani argues that Sturges was highly appreciated among French film critics, especially those writing for the short-lived but influential journal La Revue du cinéma (1946–9). Through detailed examinations of the journal’s articles and reviews on Sturges, Viviani traces the filmmaker’s critical reception in France while demonstrating how these debates served as an incubator for the major theoretical and critical angles that would come to characterize the highly influential publications Cahiers du cinéma and Positif.

Sarah Kozloff closes the volume with “O Preston, Where Art Thou?,” which considers Sturges’s ongoing influence in Hollywood and abroad. She suggests that while Sturges has not enjoyed the constant attention and adulation of
Hitchcock, Hawks, or Ford among film scholars, his themes, tone, and style lurk everywhere in contemporary films, especially in the works of Joel and Ethan Coen, Wes Anderson, Aaron Sorkin, and Pascal Caumeil. One reason we must bring him back into focus, she argues, is that so many modern filmmakers can be counted as his offspring.

Indeed, Sturges is still very much with us, which is why this entry in the *ReFocus* series is so timely and relevant, but also why we hope it may prove an enjoyable and engaging read for scholars, students, and the Sturges fan in all of us.

**NOTES**

11. Jacobs, 143.
13. Henderson says of this revision, an adaptation of an adaptation by Jeanne Bartlett, “As had often been his practice as a screenwriter in the thirties whenever he ‘rewrote’ the work of others, Sturges in effect threw out the Hoffe and Bartlett stories and began again from scratch.” Henderson, *Five Screenplays*, 329.
17. Preston Sturges Papers (Collection 1114). Department of Special Collections, University Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles, Box 74, Folder 22.
18. Preston Sturges Papers, Box 72, Folder 22.
19. See Jacobs, 126, for a full breakdown of the contract terms.
INTRODUCTION: AN AGILE MIND

21 Preston Sturges Papers, Box 37, Folder 16.
22 Quoted in Jacobs, 258.
23 Jacobs, 344.
24 Brown, 276.
28 Pirolini, 8.
31 Dickos, 56.
37 Henderson, 6.
38 Pirolini, 127.
40 Schickel, 33.
41 Jacobs, 51–2.
42 Jacobs, 264.
43 Jacobs, 183.
45 Jacobs, 88.
46 Henderson, 23.
48 Preston Sturges Papers, Box 73, Folder 39.
50 Jacobs, 443.
51 Jacobs, 448.
52 Schickel, 34.
53 Houston, 990.