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“Selling America to the World”? The Rise and Fall of an International Film Distributor in its Largest Foreign Market: United Artists in Britain, 1927–1947

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Few industries are as widely associated with the spread of American values, ideas, and products as the film industry. U.S. firms certainly dominated the global market for feature films, but did they do so simply by “selling America to the world” or was there more to be gained by catering to the diverse tastes of international audiences? This article examines the operations of a leading U.S. film distributor in its largest foreign market. United Artists, like other U.S. firms, was forced to offer a minimum proportion of British films for distribution in the United Kingdom in the 1930s and 1940s. Was this requirement a burden, or were the firm’s British films actually at the heart of its success in the U.K. market?

Collectively, U.S. firms dominated the international film industry in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Hollywood firms certainly

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faced strong competition from local producers in many of their overseas markets, but by the 1920s, none of these foreign competitors was able to regularly make and distribute pictures that could rival American products in terms of international sales. The international success of Hollywood films in the interwar decades was, for many contemporary journalists, academics, and politicians, one of the most visible symbols of the spread of American business, and American culture, on a global basis.¹ But as some of the shrewder observers pointed out at the time, the striking feature of the U.S. film industry was not just the extent to which it dominated world markets but the degree to which it was also dependent on them.² Put simply, although the typical Hollywood film could expect to recoup its production costs in its domestic market, most (if not all) of its profits came from overseas sales. The more popular a film was with international audiences, the more profitable it was likely to be. As such, there was an obvious incentive for U.S. firms to be sensitive to the tastes and cultural values of audiences in their largest foreign markets when deciding which films to produce and distribute. But exactly how culturally sensitive did U.S. film companies actually need to be in the 1930s and 1940s? Can we identify certain films that were developed specifically to appeal to audiences in Hollywood's foreign markets, and if so, how important were such films for the international success of U.S. firms?

The question of whether multinational enterprises should centralize activities such as production, marketing, or research and development to achieve global economies of scale or to decentralize these functions to enable greater responsiveness to the needs of local markets is

1. The "Americanizing" influence of Hollywood films is a much-discussed theme in the literature of the history of the film industry. See, for example, Howard T. Lewis, *The Motion Picture Industry* (New York, 1933), 393–433; Thomas Guback, "Hollywood's International Market," in *The American Film Industry*, ed. Tino Balio (Madison, Wis., 1976), 387–409; Kristin Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market, 1907–1934* (London, 1985); Richard Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema* (Oxford, U.K., 2003); Ian Jarvie, *Hollywood's Overseas Campaign: The North Atlantic Movie Trade, 1920–1950* (Cambridge, U.K., 1992); John Trumbour, *Selling Hollywood to the World: U.S. and European Struggles for Mastery of the Global Film Industry, 1920–1950* (Cambridge, U.K., 2002). For discussions of the impact of American films on Britain, see Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace* (London, 1984); John Sedgwick, *Popular Filmgoing in 1930s Britain* (Exeter, U.K., 2000); Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England, 1918–1951* (Oxford, U.K., 1998), 419–56.

2. For example, William Victor Strauss, "Foreign Distribution of American Motion Pictures," *Harvard Business Review* 8 (April 1930): 307–15, also cited in Mira Wilkins, *The Maturing of Multinational Enterprise: American Business Abroad from 1914 to 1970* (Cambridge, Mass., 1974), 136.

a central issue in international management research.³ For manufacturers of branded consumer products, in particular, the question of whether to concentrate resources behind a few global brands or to develop different brands for different national markets has been a particularly vexed one.⁴ Films, by the 1920s, could also be regarded as branded products.⁵ The global–local dilemma was particularly acute in the case of the film industry, where powerful forces pulled in opposite directions.

On the supply side, the economic logic of the industry pointed clearly toward a strategy of centralization. Almost the whole cost of film production went into manufacturing the initial film negative. Once this was produced, numerous additional prints could be made at little extra cost. There was relatively little difference in cost for a film company whether just one print of film was made and distributed or a thousand, but the difference in terms of (potential) revenue was enormous. From the perspective of the producer, once made, a film needed to be distributed as widely as possible, which meant selling the same (essentially standardized) product in as many countries around the world as possible.⁶ A decentralized strategy, in which a multinational firm used locally based film studios to conceive and develop product portfolios for national or regional audiences, was prohibitively expensive and uneconomic. (Hollywood studios were known to produce films in foreign markets, for example, in Britain in the 1930s, but only when government legislation required them to do so. The films made in Britain by U.S. firms in the 1930s, far from being developed to appeal specifically to local audiences, were actually much ridiculed, at the time and since, as “quota quickies.”) After the arrival of sound films in the late 1920s,

3. Christopher A. Bartlett and Sumantra Ghoshal, *Managing Across Borders* (Boston, Mass., 1989); C. K. Prahalad and Y. Doz, *The Multinational Mission: Balancing Local Demands and Global Vision* (New York, 1987); S. Humes, *Managing the Multinational: Confronting the Global–Local Dilemma* (New York and London, 1993); Y. Doz, J. Santos, and P. Williamson, *From Global to Metanational* (Boston, Mass., 2001); Peter Dicken, *Global Shift* (London, 2003).

4. Geoffrey Jones, *Renewing Unilever: Transformation and Tradition* (Oxford, U.K., 2005); Davis Dyer, Frederick Dalzell, and Rowena Olegario, *Rising Tide: Lessons From 165 Years of Brand Building at Procter and Gamble* (Boston, 2004); Geoffrey Jones and Peter Miskell, “European Integration and Corporate Restructuring: The Strategy of Unilever, c. 1957–1990,” *Economic History Review* 58 (Feb. 2005): 113–39.

5. Gerben Bakker, “Stars and Stories: How Films Became Branded Products,” *Enterprise & Society* 2 (Sept. 2001): 461–502.

6. Strauss, “Foreign Distribution,” 307–08; Bakker, “Selling French Films on Foreign Markets: The International Strategy of a Medium Sized Film Company,” *Enterprise & Society* 5 (March 2004): 45–76.

Hollywood studios quickly discovered that even producing foreign language versions of their films for non-English-speaking markets was uneconomic. The cost of producing a foreign language version of a film was between \$30,000 and \$40,000, whereas it cost only around \$2,500 to provide subtitles. As Ruth Vasey has put it: “where its foreign-language versions were concerned, Hollywood was, ironically, caught in the same set of circumstances that had frustrated its foreign competitors since World War I: high capitalization was impossible, since the movies’ intended markets were too small to recoup large investments, but less expensive productions did not have sufficient drawing power to justify their relatively modest costs.”⁷

The economic imperative to centralize film production was certainly a powerful one, but did this mean that film companies could simply ignore national or local differences in consumer tastes? Films are, after all, cultural products. Successful pictures tend to be those which make some emotional connection with audiences, and audiences in different parts of the world bring with them very different sets of values and assumptions that influence their degree of emotional attachment to any given film. Basic economic theory explains why a U.S. film company should want to distribute its pictures in Britain, Germany, and Japan, but less so why British, German, or Japanese audiences should want to watch American films. Research into the international distribution of television programs has revealed that a significant “cultural discount” exists when products of this type are traded across borders.⁸ The cultural discount is arguably less important in feature films than in television programs, because movie audiences are more likely than TV viewers to accept foreignness as part of a general desire for escapist fantasy, but the concept is still a useful and important one.⁹ American films do suffer a greater “burden of foreignness,” for example, in non-English-speaking markets. The existence of a cultural discount enables producers in the largest markets to operate on the basis of higher production budgets than those whose domestic markets are very much smaller.¹⁰ This goes some way toward explaining the considerable asymmetry in the functioning of the concept of cultural discount, with, for example,

7. Ruth Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood, 1918–1939* (Exeter, U.K., 1997), 91–6.

8. C. Hoskins and R. Mirus, “Reason for the US Dominance of the International Trade in Television Programmes,” *Media, Culture and Society* 10 (Oct. 1988): 499–515.

9. C. Hoskins, S. McFadyen, and A. Finn, *Global Television and Film: An Introduction to the Economics of the Business* (Oxford, U.K., 1997): 34–35.

10. Hoskins et al., *Global Television and Film*, 37–50.

U.S. films apparently far more popular among British audiences in the 1930s than British pictures were in the United States.¹¹

By the 1930s, the leading international film companies were in a position whereby (1) they needed to centralize production and seek as wide an international distribution for their products as possible, (2) they relied heavily on international sales to generate profits, and (3) the appeal of their products was diminished as they entered more culturally distant foreign markets. How did they respond to this situation? Was there any value to be gained from pursuing a strategy in which some films were developed to appeal to the specific cultural tastes or values of different national markets?

The United Kingdom was by far the largest foreign market for U.S. firms in this period, both because of the overall size of its cinema audience and because of its relative “cultural closeness” to the United States. The research of Mark Glancy and others has shown just how important the British market was for the leading American film producers and demonstrates not only that these firms were extremely careful to ensure that their pictures did not offend British audiences or censors but that, in fact, some of the most successful Hollywood films of the period were developed specifically with British audiences in mind. Glancy identifies a genre of “British” films of the 1930s and 1940s, made by Hollywood studios but based on British themes, characters, or traditions. These often proved both commercially and critically successful.¹²

This article focuses not on a film production company, but on a distributor. United Artists (UA) did not produce its own films but handled the selling and distribution of those made by independent producers. How did such a company operate on an international basis: did it distribute only American-made pictures, or did it rely heavily on locally produced ones as well? The focus here is on the period from 1927, which was when the British Government introduced quota legislation to ensure that a minimum proportion of all the films distributed and exhibited in the country were of British origin. UA, like other companies, was forced to offer British films for distribution, but unlike its vertically integrated competitors, it was unable to locally manufacture its own films to satisfy quota requirements (the infamous quota quickies). To operate in Britain, UA had to distribute a minimum number of films each year made by independent

11. John Sedgwick and Michael Pokorny, “The Film Business in the United States and Britain During the 1930s,” *Economic History Review* 58 (Feb. 2005): 79–112.

12. H. Mark Glancy, *When Hollywood Loved Britain: The Hollywood ‘British’ Film, 1939–1945* (Manchester, U.K., 1999).

British producers. How important were these films to its performance in the British market: were they essentially “quota quickies”—films made to satisfy legal requirements rather than to make money in their own right—or did they in fact perform a function more like that of Glancy’s Hollywood “British” films?

The Structure of the Industry

The dominance of the international film industry by U.S.-based firms has fascinated social, cultural, and business/economic historians. Scholars have observed that for the first two decades of the industry’s existence, European firms were actually more successful than their American competitors in international markets.¹³ The collapse of European film industries during the First World War, however, coincided with the emergence in the United States of large, vertically integrated “Chandlerian” organizations that were able to invest heavily in film production and distribution at a time when the industry was experiencing a crucial growth phase.¹⁴ The firms which emerged out of this process by the early 1920s formed a global oligopoly that was to dominate the industry throughout its so-called classical period up to 1960 and beyond.¹⁵

Recent studies of the film industry in the United States and Britain in the 1930s have provided a clear economic rationale that explains why the industry was structured in the way it was.¹⁶ The distribution of film popularity was extremely uneven, with the most successful film in any given year usually taking around ten times as much money at the box office as the average picture. The rewards for filmmakers who produced the “hit” films were enormous, but this was also an extremely risky business, as it was not possible to predict with any degree of certainty which films were most likely to become “hits” (although the majority of hit films featured well-known stars

13. For example, Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment*; Gerben Bakker, “The Decline and Fall of the European Film Industry: Sunk Costs, Market Size, and Market Structure, 1890–1927,” *Economic History Review* 58 (May 2005): 310–51.

14. Bakker, “Decline and Fall.”

15. David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London, 1985). The degree to which the film industry has continued to be dominated by the same few firms up to the present day is a key theme in David Waterman, *Hollywood’s Road to Riches* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005).

16. Sedgwick and Pokorny, “The Film Business”; John Sedgwick and Michael Pokorny, “The Risk Environment of Film-Making: Warner Bros in the Inter-War Years,” *Explorations in Economic History* 35 (April 1998): 196–220.

and were made with high production values and big budgets).¹⁷ The major U.S. film producers, therefore, followed a strategy whereby they concentrated most of their resources on medium-budget pictures that, if widely distributed, could be relied on to make a moderate profit, while setting aside around 20 percent of their production budgets to make two or three high-profile films. The big-budget films ran a much greater risk of losing money than the smaller-scale productions, but if they were to succeed in becoming “hits,” then the rewards were very great. One of the crucial advantages that the major U.S. companies had over British firms was that because they produced upward of fifty films a year, the combined profits from their medium-budget films were able to cover the potential losses incurred by the failure of bigger, riskier pictures. By spreading this risk across a broad production portfolio, U.S. firms were able to consistently produce the type of big-budget films most likely to become each season’s hits.¹⁸ The success of a company’s high-profile films was clearly an important determinant of its financial performance in any given year, but as high risk ventures, these only constituted a small part of their overall production portfolios. Equally important for the major companies was the need to ensure that their lower-budget and lower-risk pictures also received as wide a distribution as possible. It was to guarantee this that major film studios deemed it necessary to integrate forward into areas of distribution and exhibition.

The economics of the industry, therefore, appeared to militate against independent film production. Firms seeking to produce low- or medium-budget pictures would have found it very difficult to guarantee a wide-enough distribution for their films to operate profitably, although the strategy of concentrating on the production of fewer high-budget films was an extremely risky one. However, there were a small number of actors and producers whose films seemed to be consistently popular with audiences. By the 1920s, an elite group of “stars” had emerged whose names, like brands, served as signifiers of quality—greatly increasing the likelihood that their films would become hits.¹⁹ These leading actors and producers were able to command munificent salaries under the studio system, but only by producing their pictures independently could they capture the full commercial value of their star status. Very few actors or producers had sufficient star appeal to offset the risks of

17. Arthur de Vany, *Hollywood Economics: How Extreme Uncertainty Shapes the Film Industry* (London and New York, 2004).

18. Sedgwick and Pokorny, “The Film Business.”

19. Bakker, “Stars and Stories.”

operating outside the studio system, but for this Hollywood elite, the lure of independent production was twofold. First, there was an economic incentive to fully benefit from the profitability of their most successful pictures (rather than simply receiving a salary). Second, there was an incentive of “artistic integrity” to retain full creative control over the film-making process. For filmmakers who thought of themselves as artists, freedom from studio control was an important consideration.

The incentive existed for leading film producers to operate outside the control of the major film companies, but to do so, they needed a distribution outlet for their pictures. There was no shortage of film exhibitors around the world willing to screen pictures made by famous producers and featuring leading stars, but independent production companies were in no position to negotiate exhibition contracts with hundreds of cinema circuits and thousands of more independent cinemas for each film they made. If independent film production was to exist and prosper outside the studio system, there also needed to be an alternative outlet for film distribution independent of the major vertically integrated companies through which filmmakers could release their pictures. Moreover, such a distribution company would need to allow film producers to retain commercial and creative control over their products. There would be little incentive for filmmakers to operate independently of the major production studios, only for their distributors to impose similar terms and conditions before agreeing to handle their films. For those film actors and producers whose status and reputation gave them the incentive to operate outside the studio system, finding a distributor who would allow them to retain their independence was a problem. Unable to find such a distributor, they instead created one.

UA: An Atypical Film Company

UA was formed in 1919 by four of the most well-known actors/producers in the film industry at that time—Charles Chaplin, Mary Pickford, Douglass Fairbanks, and D. W. Griffith. It was a film distribution company set up for the purpose of handling the distribution and sale of films made by the founding members and other creative artists able and willing to operate independently of the major studios. In its early years, the company did struggle to find a regular supply of product, partly because its founders (most notably Chaplin) had to fulfill contractual obligations to former employers and partly because of difficulties faced by independent producers in

self-financing their films.²⁰ As banks began to recognize that films by the likes of Chaplin, Pickford, and Fairbanks were actually very safe investments, these financing problems declined, not just for the founders but also for other high-profile producers thinking of “going it alone.” In the mid-1920s, in addition to the films of the four founding members, UA began distributing the pictures of Sam Goldwyn, Joseph Schenck, and Howard Hughes. During the 1930s, product was also provided by the likes of David O. Selznick, Twentieth Century (who, under Darryl Zanuck, distributed through UA until their merger with Fox in 1935), Edward Small, Walter Wanger, and, briefly, Walt Disney. By this time, UA was one of the leading international distributors of motion pictures and a profitable commercial enterprise. Unlike the largest U.S. film companies, UA did not produce its own films, did not finance the pictures of its independent producers, and did it own or control any chains of cinemas.

UA operated by signing up the services of independent producers who were contracted to supply a fixed number of pictures, with the most sought-after producers typically offered the longest contracts. The most important producers of all were also offered the opportunity to buy into the company as partners. The advantage for independent producers in releasing their pictures through UA was that they received 75 percent of net receipts—which meant that they, rather than the distributor, captured most of the profit from the highest grossing films. For exhibitors, the benefit of screening UA product was at least as compelling. These pictures, made by some of the leading figures in the industry, were top box-office attractions which not even cinema chains owned by UA’s vertically integrated competitors would turn away.²¹ For independent exhibitors, UA’s pictures had the added attraction that they were rented individually rather than being tied up as part of block-booking packages.

UA, far from being representative of the industry as a whole, is interesting precisely because it managed to operate successfully outside of the dominant industry structure. It distributed fewer films each year than the likes of MGM, Warner Brothers, or Paramount, but

20. The problem was not just raising cash but the speed with which investments could be recouped. Unlike their major competitors, UA could not sell their products to exhibitors in advance through block-booking arrangements. Thus, as Tino Balio explains, “a UA producer would be well into his third picture before he could hope to recoup his investment on the first.” Tino Balio, *United Artists: The Company Built by the Stars* (Madison, Wis., 1976), 35.

21. For the large integrated cinema companies, profits from exhibition were at least as important as those from production, and firms would willingly screen films made by rival studios in their cinema chains if there was sufficient demand for them. See Sedgwick and Pokorny, “The Film Business,” 91–3.

Table 1 U.S. Film Distribution Companies in Britain in 1936

Distributor	Feature Films ^a		Short Films ^a	Total Sales (£)	Sales Per Feature Film (£)
	U.S.	U.K.			
Columbia	37	11	52	716,974	14,937
MGM	43	16	66	1,899,765	32,199
Paramount	64	22	90	1,286,384	14,958
RKO	43	15	45	1,092,205	18,831
Fox	53	17	–	1,515,468	21,650
United Artists (UA)	13	8	17	1,541,176	73,389
Universal	38	16	89	Not available	Not available
Warner Brothers	57	23	103	1,357,014	16,963

Note: The figures in this table are given in nominal terms.

Sources: Inland Revenue Papers, IR 40/7292 “Tax and foreign exchange arrangements concerning the import of American films,” Public Record Office, Kew, U.K. (PRO); United Artists Collection of the Center for Film and Theater Research, State Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin (UAC), Series 1F, Black Books, box 7, file 2.

^a Figures given in these columns refer to the year ending March 31, 1937.

its pictures were mostly high-quality productions. By the 1930s, UA was successful enough to be counted among the top 8 international film distributors, but it was the only one of these companies not to resemble a vertically integrated “Chandlerian” enterprise.²²

As a distributor rather than a producer, UA did not face the same type of risks as the major Hollywood studios. It could concentrate on distributing a relatively small portfolio of high-quality films each year and did not need to offset the risk that these pictures failed to recoup their costs by also distributing a large number of lower-budget, lower-risk offerings. The risk of failure was borne by the film producers, not by the distributors. As we have seen, there were relatively few filmmakers in a position to take on this risk, but there were enough to provide UA with a steady stream of high-quality products throughout the period covered here. The portfolio of films handled by UA, and distributed around the world, was balanced very differently from those of other major U.S. producer–distributors. This could be illustrated by showing the number of films released by each of the leading U.S. film distributors and the amount of revenue they generated in any of their leading markets. Table 1 summarizes such data for the U.K. market in 1936.

As the figures in table 1 suggest, in the 1930s, UA could best be described as a specialist distributor of prestige pictures, quite unlike its vertically integrated rivals who pursued a strategy of mass production

22. Balio, *United Artists*.

Table 2 Rentals Received and Paid by U.K. Subsidiaries of U.S. Film Distributors, 1941

British Distribution Subsidiary	Rentals Received (£)	% Paid to U.S. Parent	% Retained by U.K. Firm	Producer's Share
Warner Brothers	1,527,064	75	25	–
United Artists (UA)	1,224,386	12.5	12.5	75
Twentieth Century Fox	2,212,020	83	17	–
Paramount	2,056,820	71	29	–
M-G-M ^a	3,008,339	70	30	–
Radio Pictures	1,136,915	76	24	–
Columbia Pictures	865,724	74.5	25.5	–

Source: PRO, Inland Revenue Papers, IR 40/7292 "Tax and foreign exchange arrangements concerning the import of American films."

^a Excludes *Gone With the Wind*, which was supplied by a third party on special terms.

and exhibition. The sales per feature film of the major producer–distributors are, admittedly, somewhat distorted in this table by the inclusion of their “quota quickies” (low-budget films that did not play to large audiences). Yet even if we assume that the British-made films of the major studios recouped no money at all, the average revenues achieved by their American pictures were still significantly lower than those of UA’s products. In keeping with the company’s founding principles, the lion’s share of this revenue was returned directly to the film producers. As table 2 summarizes, the share of revenue UA passed directly to its producers was equivalent to (and in several cases higher than) that which other U.K. distribution subsidiaries remitted to their U.S. parents.

Not only was UA different from other firms, it was also remarkably successful in the United Kingdom in the mid-1930s, as table 1 summarizes, generating more revenue than all but one of its competitors while handling far fewer films. The literature on the economic history of the U.S. film industry emphasizes that the shift from mass production (organized by vertically integrated firms) to flexible specialization (in which leading distributors were supplied product by a range of independent producers) took place in the 1950s, prompted in large part by the Paramount antitrust legislation.²³ The case of UA reminds us that independent production and distribution flourished on an international level even at the high point of the studio system.

23. See Michael Storper, “The Transit to Flexible Specialization in the US Film Industry: External Economies, the Division of Labour and the Crossing of Industrial Divides,” *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 13 (June 1989): 273–305; John Sedgwick, “Product Differentiation at the Movies: Hollywood, 1946–1965,” *Journal of Economic History* 62 (Sept. 2002): 676–705.

American Films and the British Market: A Mutual Reliance

In the mid-1920s, 95 percent of films shown in Britain were of American origin. By any standards, it was clear that American pictures dominated the British market. Yet although Britain was one of many countries where American films were dominant, the British market was actually far more important to U.S. film companies than any other. As table 3 summarizes, Britain accounted for more than one-third of foreign revenues generated by American films.

Legislation introduced by the British Government in 1927 (and updated in 1938 and 1948) meant that, in the 1930s and 1940s, the proportion of American films shown in British cinemas fell from 95 percent to somewhere between 70 and 75 percent. British exhibitors continued to rely on American companies to supply the majority of their product, but the extent of American dominance had been somewhat reduced. Over the same period, however, the relative importance of the British market to U.S. companies increased significantly. There were four main reasons for this.

First, the introduction of talking pictures in the late 1920s meant that the demand for American films began to fall away in non-English-speaking countries. American firms did subtitle or dub (or occasionally entirely remake) pictures for foreign markets, but subtitled or dubbed films were usually less popular with audiences than those made in their own language.²⁴ Second, at about the same time as sound films were becoming widespread, legislation designed to protect national film industries was beginning to take effect. In large

Table 3 Selected Markets for American Films, 1925

	Percentage of America's Foreign Revenue	Percentage of American Films in Total Films
United Kingdom	35	95
Germany	10	16
Australia and New Zealand	8	95
Scandinavia	6	85
Argentina	5	90
Canada	5	95
France	3	70
Japan	3	30
Brazil	3	75

Source: Howard Lewis, *The Motion Picture Industry* (New York, 1933), 397.

24. Vasey, *World According to Hollywood*.

European markets such as Germany and France, imports of American films were restricted, and domestically produced films took up an increased market share.²⁵ Third, as the 1930s progressed, many European markets were effectively closed off to American firms as nationalist governments assumed power. By 1940, with most of Europe under either fascist or communist control, there were few outlets for U.S. films in large industrialized economies.²⁶ Finally, at the same time as other foreign markets were being lost, the size of the British market was rapidly expanding. Film audiences grew slowly in Britain during the 1930s, but they increased dramatically in the 1940s, from around 19 million per week in 1939 to over 31 million per week in 1946.²⁷

The increasing importance of the British market in the 1930s and 1940s meant that American film companies came to rely on Britain as much as British cinema exhibitors relied on American films. The relationship was less one of American dominance than of mutual dependence. For an illustration of the relative importance of the British market for American companies, one need look no further than the output of Hollywood studios. As Mark Glancy has shown, the period from the mid-1930s to the mid-1940s was one “when Hollywood loved Britain.” Far from imposing their products indiscriminately on the British market, U.S. film studios made a series of films in this period that portrayed Britain and the British in an extremely positive light. They also avoided making pictures that presented a negative image of the British, which explains the virtually complete absence of films during Hollywood’s “golden age” that celebrate the “birth of a nation” in the War of Independence. In “selling America to the world,” U.S. filmmakers in this period were as conscious of the views of British film censors as they were of the Production Code Administration. Indeed, the Hays Office was almost as rigorous in forcing firms to comply with British censorship guidelines as it was in enforcing its own Production Code.²⁸

UA may have been an atypical company in terms of its size and organizational structure, but in the degree to which it relied on the U.K. market, it was no exception.

25. Lewis, *Motion Picture Industry*; Guback, “Hollywood’s International Market”; Andrew Higson and Richard Maltby, ed., “*Film Europe*” and “*Film America*”: *Cinema, Commerce and Cultural Exchange, 1920–1939* (Exeter, U.K., 1999).

26. Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment*; Glancy, *When Hollywood Loved Britain*.

27. H. E. Browning and A. A. Sorrell, “Cinemas and Cinema-Going in Great Britain,” *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* 117, no. 2 (1954): 133–65.

28. Glancy, *When Hollywood Loved Britain*; Trumbour, *Selling Hollywood to the World*.

As figure 1 shows, between the early 1930s and the early 1940s approximately two-thirds of UA's foreign revenues came from Britain, and the British market constituted around one-third of the company's overall sales. The reasons behind UA's declining sales in Britain from the early 1940s will be explored in later sections of this article.

The Challenges Facing U.S. Film Companies in Britain in the 1930s and 1940s

The British market may have become increasingly important for U.S. film companies in the 1930s and 1940s, but how easy was it for these companies to do business there?

Like other European governments concerned about the threat to national culture posed by "Americanization" in general, and by Hollywood films in particular, Britain introduced measures in the late 1920s to protect and promote its own national film industry. It chose to do this by requiring that a minimum quota of screen time in British cinemas be reserved for films made in Britain or the Empire.²⁹ The introduction of quota legislation by the British Government in 1927 did not cut off the British market, but it served to increase the level of competition between U.S. firms for access to British screens. As exhibitors were obliged to fill 25 percent of screen time with British films, the market share available to U.S. films was significantly reduced between the mid-1920s and the mid-1930s. In addition to the exhibition quota, there was also a distributors' quota which, by the mid-1930s, meant that 25 percent of all films offered to the market by film distributors needed to be British.³⁰ Because most U.S. film companies had their own distribution subsidiaries in Britain, this meant that U.S. firms themselves

29. The 1927 Cinematograph Films Act and its consequences have been extensively examined by film historians. See, for example, Rachael Low, *Film Making in 1930s Britain* (London, 1985); Margaret Dickinson and Sarah Street, *Cinema and State: The Film Industry and the British Government, 1927-1984* (London, 1985); Sarah Street, *British National Cinema* (London, 1997); Sedgwick, *Popular Filmgoing in 1930s Britain*; Jeffrey Richards, ed., *The Unknown 1930s: An Alternative History of the British Cinema, 1929-1939* (London, 1998); Jarvie, *Hollywood's Overseas Campaign*.

30. The quota was set according to film footage, rather than actual numbers of films. Because many of the "British" films produced or distributed by U.S. companies were shorter in length than their American pictures, the actual number of British films released by U.S. firms was usually more than the minimum percentage requirement. No U.S. film company, apart from UA, released significantly more British film footage than it was legally required to. Simon Rowson, "A Statistical Survey of the Cinema Industry in Great Britain in 1934," *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* 99, no. 1 (1936): 67-119.

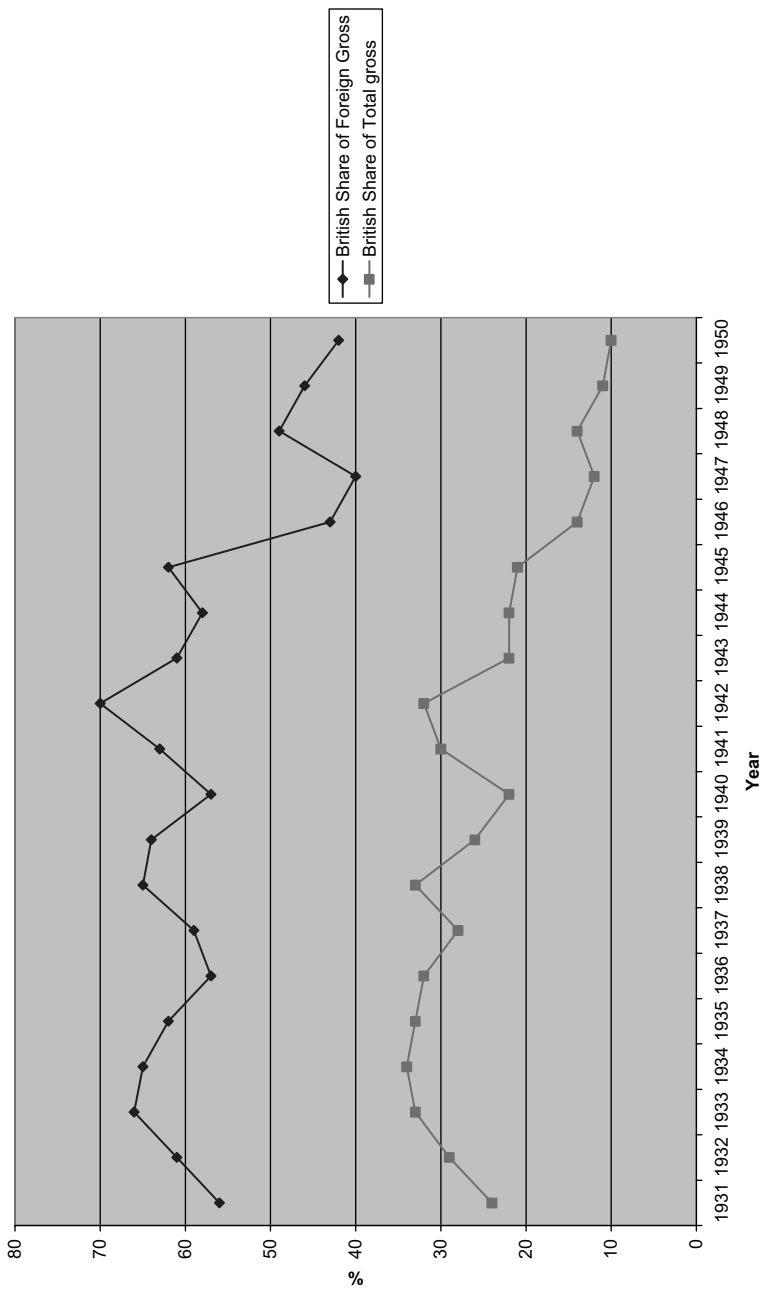


Figure 1 Proportion of United Artist's (UA) Gross Box-Office Revenues coming from Britain, 1931–1950. Source: UAC, Series 4C: Balance Sheets and Associated Papers.

needed to offer British pictures for distribution. The quota legislation was certainly an inconvenience for most U.S. companies, but it did not prevent any of them from operating profitably in the British market.

There were two ways in which U.S. firms chose to meet their quota requirements in Britain. One was by producing their own “British” films. The 1927 Act defined films as British if filming took place within the British Empire and if the majority of labor costs were paid to British subjects. MGM, Warner Brothers, Twentieth Century Fox, and Columbia all operated production facilities in Britain by the middle of the 1930s. This constituted a form of defensive foreign direct investment, and there was little attempt by these companies to tailor the output of their British studios to the specific tastes of British audiences. The films produced by these U.S. companies in Britain were much derided at the time (and since) as “quota quickies,” which according to some sources were screened reluctantly by exhibitors and often in the mornings when only cleaners were to be found in the auditoria.³¹ The other way in which American firms could meet their quota requirements was by distributing films made by British producers. As UA was a film distribution company, not a producer, this was the course of action it took. UA distributed a small number of Herbert Wilcox films in the early 1930s, before striking a much more important deal with Alexander Korda in 1933. Paramount and RKO also sought distribution deals with British producers in the 1930s. Wilcox and Korda, as two of the most prominent film producers in Britain at this time, found that their talents were much in demand by U.S. companies.³²

As well as forcing U.S. firms to offer a minimum number of British films for distribution in the United Kingdom, the quota legislation also increased the level of competition among these firms for the remaining portion of screen time available for their American films. A booking with one of the three main cinema chains (Gaumont, ABC, or Odeon) was essential for a film to be successful in Britain, and as such, U.S. distributors attempted to exert some control over the booking policy of these chains by investing in them. Fox bought what it (mistakenly) believed to be a controlling interest in Gaumont-British in the early 1930s—an investment that provided the British circuit with enough capital to install sound equipment.³³ Warner

31. Evidence of the Board of Trade to the Committee on Cinematograph Films (Lord Moyné's Committee) 1936, Public Record Office, Kew, U.K., BT 55/3, No. 44, p. 9.

32. Karol Kulik, *Alexander Korda: The Man Who Could Work Miracles* (London, 1975); Herbert Wilcox, *Twenty-Five Thousand Sunsets* (London, 1967).

33. Robert Murphy, “Under the Shadow of Hollywood,” in *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema*, ed. Charles Barr (London, 1986), 47–71.

Brothers invested in the ABC circuit, and for most of the 1930s and 1940s, the non-British content offered by ABC cinemas was provided almost exclusively by either Warner Brothers or MGM. In 1935, UA acquired a stake in the Odeon chain, owned at that time by Oscar Deutsch.³⁴ UA had hoped that its part ownership of Odeon (approximately 25 percent holding) would give it some influence over the circuit booking policy, though this was not the case.³⁵

Most U.S. distributors were in no position to force the major British circuits to book their films, and so, more indirect methods of persuasion were also employed. The principal such marketing device was the acquisition or lease of a showcase cinema in London's West End. Such cinemas gave U.S. firms control over the way their main feature films were initially released and marketed in Britain. These cinemas at least guaranteed that a company's most important pictures would receive a British premiere and that they would also attract publicity, press comment, and reviews. By generating public interest in their films in this way, U.S. firms were then in a stronger position to rent their pictures to the main circuits. UA took out a lease on London's Pavilion Theatre for this purpose in 1934. The way in which the Pavilion could be used to negotiate a circuit release was explained by UA's British manager to his superior in New York in 1948:

In ordinary circumstances we would put this picture into the Pavilion with a big campaign and for a long run. During the run we would negotiate a deal. When the picture is in its sixth week or so, despite ABC's position, they are equipped to say to both Warners and Metro that they cannot disregard an attraction of this strength. That is the way we will wind up with *Red River* . . .³⁶

In pursuing such a marketing strategy, film companies such as UA were following a well-established pattern. One recent study of multinational retailing in Britain identified thirty-three "showcase retailers," mostly manufacturers of branded products that had integrated forward into retailing by setting up showcase outlets in London's West End for their products.³⁷

34. Robert Murphy, "Deutsch, Oscar," in *Dictionary of Business Biography*, ed. David Jeremy (London, 1984), 89–92; Rosemary Clegg, ed., *Odeon* (Birmingham, U.K., 1985).

35. Balio, *United Artists*, 129.

36. David Coplan to Arthur Kelly, 19 Aug. 1948, United Artists Collection of the Center for Film and Theater Research, State Historical Society, Madison, Wis. [hereinafter, UAC], Series 6B: Arthur Kelly Papers, box 7, file 5.

37. Andrew Godley, "Foreign Multinationals and Innovation in British Retailing, 1850–1962," *Business History* 45 (Jan. 2003): 89–90.

Table 4 Billings on American Pictures as Reported to the Motion Picture Association of America

Year Ending	United Artists (UA) (£)	All Companies (£)	UA Share (%)
July 1939	1,042,660	9,914,900	10.5
October 1940	991,082	10,349,645	9.6
October 1941	1,455,165	13,634,077	10.7
October 1942	1,140,117	17,775,444	6.4
October 1943	988,145	20,116,958	4.9
October 1944	1,248,739	21,061,545	5.9
October 1945	1,581,739	21,581,921	7.3
October 1946	1,307,358	21,538,023	6.1
October 1947	1,001,068	17,933,572	5.6

Note: Relative Performance of UA Against Other U.S. Distributors in Britain.

Source: UAC, Series 6B: Arthur Kelly Papers, box 4, file 24.

In many ways, the onset of the Second World War made things easier for American film companies operating in the United Kingdom. As the British economy geared itself up for wartime production, many film studios were requisitioned, and the number of films produced in Britain fell sharply. With fewer British films available, quota regulations were relaxed.³⁸ Furthermore, increasing cinema attendances meant that the size of the market was expanding rapidly. U.S. companies, then, found themselves operating in a quickly growing market, facing less competition from domestic competitors and also facing fewer restrictions in the form of government legislation. Most U.S. film companies saw their sales figures increase significantly in Britain in the 1940s (table 4).

The operating environment facing U.S. film companies in Britain did become decidedly more difficult from 1947 when the British Government, in the midst of a dollar crisis, imposed a 75 percent import duty on foreign films. After an eight-month boycott of the British market by U.S. distributors, the duty was eventually lifted in March 1948, only to be replaced by a new form of quota legislation reserving 45 percent of screen time in British cinemas for British films.³⁹ The changing regulatory environment facing U.S. film companies in Britain at the end of the 1940s did cause them real problems, but this is not the focus of this article. The remainder of the

38. Dickinson and Street, *Cinema and State*; Glancy, *When Hollywood Loved Britain*.

39. The implementation of the import duty, and the response it generated from both American firms and J. Arthur Rank, is discussed in Jarvie, *Hollywood's Overseas Campaign*; Robert Murphy, *Realism and Tinsel: Cinema and Society in Britain, 1939–1949* (London, 1989); Geoffrey Macnab, *J. Arthur Rank and the British Film Industry* (London, 1993).

article will focus on the performance of UA in the United Kingdom in the 1930s and 1940s up to the point when the regulatory environment shifted so significantly in 1947.

UA's operations in Britain in the 1930s and 1940s

The quota legislation introduced by the 1927 Films Act, potentially at least, posed a very real problem for UA. As we have seen, the only way in which the company could meet its quota requirements was by agreeing to distribute films for British producers. However, the company had also established a position for itself as a specialist distributor of high-quality films. If it was to continue operating in the important British market, and in doing so maintain its reputation, it needed not just to distribute British films but good-quality ones that would prove popular with British audiences. Could such producers of high-quality British films be found? Perhaps surprisingly, given the poor reputation British films of the 1930s have acquired in some quarters, the answer to this question was an unambiguous yes.⁴⁰ Indeed, UA was the only American film distributor in Britain in the 1930s and early 1940s that routinely handled significantly more British films than it was legally required to.⁴¹ This would suggest that far from acting as a limitation or a constraint on the firm's performance, the distribution of British films was actually a successful and important part of its business. How did UA manage to turn this potentially serious problem to its advantage?

After the quota legislation was introduced, UA started to sign up independent British producers, typically offering short contracts for two or three films. The company continued to do this throughout the 1930s, releasing small numbers of films by a range of minor British production companies, such as Criterion Films, Trafalgar, Reliance, and British and Dominion. One such contract however, a two-picture deal with Alexander Korda's production company London Films, turned out to be far more valuable than UA could have predicted. The first of the pictures Korda made for UA was *The Private Life of Henry VIII*. This proved to be an unusually popular attraction and was the first British film to achieve a notable box-office success in

40. Recent scholarship has begun to redeem the reputation of British filmmakers of the 1930s. See Richards, ed., *The Unknown 1930s*; Sedgwick, *Popular Filmgoing in 1930s Britain*.

41. Rowson, "Statistical Survey of the Cinema Industry," 110; UAC, Series 1F: Black Books, box 7, file 2.

the U.S. market in the interwar period.⁴² Korda immediately became a highly sought-after producer, and UA's chairman, Joseph Schenk, quickly signed him up to a sixteen-picture deal on improved terms. A clear illustration of the importance UA attached to Korda was that in addition to a long-term contract, he was also offered part ownership of the company "practically [as] a goodwill gift." In September 1935, he became a 25 percent shareholder in United Artists Corporation, without actually investing any of his own money in the first instance.⁴³

Between 1933 and 1940, Korda supplied UA with thirty-two feature films for distribution in the United Kingdom. This output, in addition to many films from smaller producers, meant that UA distributed as much as double their legal requirement of British pictures in some years. Few of these films proved anywhere near as successful as *Henry VIII* in overseas markets, but pictures such as *Catherine the Great*, *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, and *The Ghost Goes West* were very popular indeed with British audiences.⁴⁴ Whether these films actually made a profit for their producer is far from certain. Korda was the most ambitious producer of British films in the 1930s, and his pictures were typically made with big budgets (comparable with those of the major Hollywood studios) and international audiences in mind.⁴⁵ Even Korda's most successful films, however, were unable to recoup their production costs in the British market alone.⁴⁶ To make a profit, these pictures needed to penetrate international markets, the most important of which was the United States. Korda's films seldom aroused much interest in the United States, however, and UA, without owning a cinema chain of its own in the United States, was in no position to guarantee a wide distribution for these pictures in the world's largest market.⁴⁷ For UA, the benefits of distributing Korda's films in the United Kingdom were clear enough; for Korda, the advantages of independent film production were much less apparent.

42. Sarah Street, "Stepping Westward: The Distribution of British Feature Films in America, and the Case of *The Private Life of Henry VIII*," in *British Cinema, Past and Present*, ed. Justine Ashby and Andrew Higson (London, 2000), 51–62; Sue Harper, *Picturing the Past: The Rise and Fall of the British Costume Film* (London, 1994).

43. The stock Korda acquired was valued at \$650,000, but payment of this was extended over a long period. Balio, *United Artists*, 132–35.

44. Sedgwick, *Popular Filmgoing in 1930s Britain*.

45. Kulik, *Alexander Korda*, 96–115.

46. Sedgwick, *Popular Filmgoing in 1930s Britain*, 232–35.

47. Sedgwick and Pokorny, "The Film Business," 98; Kulik, *Alexander Korda*, 99–100.

By the late 1930s, Korda was, in fact, facing serious financial difficulties and was forced to relinquish control of Denham Studios. To help assuage his financial problems, in June 1938, Korda proposed to the UA board that the distribution fee (that portion of net receipts retained by UA) be reduced to 17.5 percent for British quota films. Goldwyn, and other stockholders, opposed the idea on the grounds that “if Korda received the lower rate, he could afford to sign up the best stars and directors in England and make it impossible for UA to negotiate with other successful British producers.” Korda’s proposal was never accepted, but the dispute triggered a falling out between Goldwyn and his co-owners (most notably Mary Pickford) that ultimately led to Goldwyn’s acrimonious departure from the company.⁴⁸

The chief benefit Korda derived from his association with UA was his 25 percent stockholding in the company. The only way to “cash in” such an asset, of course, was to sell it, which, after completing his contractual obligations for the company, is precisely what he did. Korda had made his last film for UA by 1941 and, after a protracted struggle, eventually sold his stock in 1944. This presented a major problem: without Korda, UA’s ability to offer for distribution in the United Kingdom a regular supply of high-quality British films was severely restricted. An alternative source of British pictures was required, and UA managed to strike a deal with Michael Balcon’s Ealing Studios. Ealing was one of the most successful producers of distinctively British pictures throughout the 1940s. Their films (ranging from George Formby vehicles in the early 1940s to the more famous cycle of comedies including *Kind Hearts and Coronets* and *Passport to Pimlico* later in the decade) were typically much lower-budget productions than those of Alexander Korda, although they proved consistently popular with British audiences and achieved a measure of success overseas.⁴⁹ Under the agreement, UA also agreed to distribute three Ealing films per year in the United States. The first film the studio delivered to its American distributor was a Formby picture: *It Turned Out Nice Again*. The importance of the deal with Ealing was outlined in a memo from UA’s foreign manager to the vice president responsible for domestic sales:

Our English company made a contract for Ealing Studios to produce pictures for United Artists to be distributed throughout the world . . . This is a very valuable contract for our English organisation and it was made primarily to accomplish three things:

48. Balio, *United Artists*, 154–9.

49. See Charles Barr, *Ealing Studios* (London, 1977); George Perry, *Forever Ealing* (London, 1981).

- (a) to bolster up our business in Great Britain in sterling;
- (b) to take care of our Quota requirements;
- (c) to work out compensation agreements to exchange pounds for dollars.⁵⁰

Quota legislation was clearly a concern for UA, but not the only one. The company (or at least its foreign manager) realized that distributing British films was more than just a legal requirement; it was good business practice. After the deal with Ealing had been reached, UA continued to comfortably exceed its minimum quota of British-made pictures (it was alone among U.S. distributors in doing so).⁵¹ In August 1943, however, Ealing broke off its agreement with UA and after a brief alliance with Associated British Film Distributors began in 1944 to release films through the Rank organization. Rank provided up to 50 percent, and later 75 percent, of the production budgets for Ealing films.⁵² When the arrangement with Ealing came to an end, UA's supply of British pictures dried up.

If UA was to maintain a regular supply of quality British films, it was becoming increasingly apparent that they would need to come to some arrangement with J. Arthur Rank. By the early 1940s, Rank had achieved a position of dominance within the British film industry. Between 1936 and 1942, he had acquired control of two of the three major British cinema circuits (Gaumont-British and Odeon), the most important British distribution company (General Film Distributors), two film studios (Pinewood and Denham), and the Gainsborough production company. During the war years, Rank helped finance the films of independent British producers such as Powell and Pressburger, and Launder and Gilliat, and also came to control the production units of Two Cities and Ealing.⁵³ Rank allowed his producers to retain a high degree of creative freedom but, crucially, unlike UA, also provided them with financing for their projects. Unable to match the terms Rank was offering to independent producers, UA's management could do little more than express their dismay at his methods. In a report to the company's owners on their return from a visit to London, the president and the head of foreign distribution complained: "[u]nder Rank's method of financing the producer puts

50. Arthur Kelly to Gradwell Sears, 19 Nov. 1941, UAC, Series 8B, Gradwell Sears Papers, Box 5, File 7.

51. In January 1942, UA was the only U.S. film distributor continuing to meet its quota requirements on the basis of the 1938 legislation, despite the fact that these requirements had subsequently been relaxed. Carr to Schroeder, 14 Jan. 1942, UAC, Series 1F: Black Books, box 7, file 2.

52. Macnab, *J. Arthur Rank*, 110–15.

53. Macnab, *J. Arthur Rank*; Murphy, *Realism and Tinsel*, 61–75.

up nothing. George Archibald, head of Rank's independent setups, described the Rank method of financing as complete financing plus a bonus for any producer who will produce under the Rank banner. It violates every principle under which United Artists does business in America."⁵⁴

By the end of 1943, UA was looking for a new supplier of British films, whereas Rank was anxious to find a distributor for his pictures in the United States. A deal between UA and Rank could certainly have been mutually beneficial, and with Korda looking to relinquish his 25 percent holding in the company, there appeared to be an opening for Rank to become a partner in the business. Rank, for his part, wanted to secure worldwide distribution for his films and saw UA as an appropriate outlet for doing so. To achieve this, he expressed an interest in purchasing up to 50 percent of UA stock and becoming president of the company. Rank's proposal, which he outlined in a discussion with UA's general manager in Britain, was a tentative one, and he was only prepared to enter serious negotiations if other stockholders consented. Had it gone through, however, the plan would have made UA a much more "Anglicized" company:

Rank's basic idea is that he wants an American British company to market American produced and British produced films and he is very keen that United should have this as their basic policy stop if this cannot be agreed he prefers to start new organisation with an American producer who shares his views of marketing together American and British films.⁵⁵

The proposal was rejected on the grounds that at least two of the existing stockholders (Pickford and Selznick) were opposed to having Rank as a partner, although the precise reasons for their opposition are not entirely clear.⁵⁶ On hearing that he would not be welcomed in by the other stockholders, Rank swiftly dropped his interest in UA and moved instead to build up his own Anglo-American distribution

54. Sears and Raftery to the Board of Directors and owners of United Artists, 18 Dec. 1945, UAC, Series 6B: Arthur W. Kelly Papers, Box 2, File 11 "Rank, J. Arthur."

55. Carr to Kelly, 2 Dec. 1943, UAC, Series 8B: Gradwell Sears Papers, box 5, file 7.

56. One explanation, provided at the time, was that "we would not buy out one stockholder who is 6000 miles away only to turn around and acquire another stockholder who has exactly the same drawback." Perhaps more important was the fact that relations between the other stockholders were uneasy to say the least. As the company president explained to Korda: "As you know one stockholder is suing another in the New York courts. Another one of the owners has retained counsel to test its rights in the Delaware courts. With this situation how could anyone in conscience invite a man of Mister Rank's integrity and business ability to join as a partner." See Balio, *United Artists*, 198, 200.

company: Eagle-Lion.⁵⁷ UA's failure to reach agreement with Rank was a serious setback, which caused great consternation and bitterness among the company's management. The following extract, which comes from a cable from UA's head of foreign distribution (Arthur Kelly) to the company president (and copied to the owners), captures the mood:

You personally have lacked enthusiasm for Rank as a partner and now it appears that as Rank is through with United that you are panicking realising what it can cost the company and our owners who have been so foolish that you want to protect your hide from criticism. If your foresight had been as good as your hindsight you would have supported me who has fought for an expansion policy with Rank and right up to the eleventh hour ...I cannot and will not permit you or anyone else to make me the scapegoat for your and two other owners lack of foresight as it applies to Rank.⁵⁸

The breakdown of negotiations with Rank meant that UA would find it almost impossible to handle the distribution of leading British films in the U.K. market for the remainder of the 1940s. By 1946–1947, UA was actually in “technical” default of British quota legislation and was allowed to continue operating only because of its distribution of British pictures in the U.S. market.⁵⁹ This setback made little difference to UA's sales in its home market, but it undoubtedly had a detrimental impact on the company's performance in Britain. Shortly after sending the above cable, Kelly resigned to take up a post with Rank's new Eagle-Lion organization.⁶⁰

Explaining UA's Performance in Britain in the 1930s and 1940s

This article has argued that the introduction of quota legislation in Britain at the end of the 1920s presented some problems for U.S. film companies but that the relaxation of these quotas during the war

57. Macnab, *J. Arthur Rank*, 77–81.

58. A. Kelly to E. Raftery, 10 Jan. 1944, UAC, Series 8B: Gradwell Sears Papers, box 5, file 7.

59. Letter from W. J. Smith, 25 March 1948, UAC, Series 1F: Black Books, box 7, file 2.

60. The manager in question, Arthur Kelly, did later return to UA, where he continued to strive to reach a deal with Rank. In 1947, he (unsuccessfully) proposed offering Rank 25 percent ownership of UA's British subsidiary to secure more play dates for UA pictures in Rank's cinemas. A. Kelly to G. Sears, 5 Sept. 1947, UAC, Series 8B: Gradwell Sears Papers, box 5, file 8.

years, along with rapidly rising audiences, meant that trading conditions improved for American firms in the 1940s. Yet although most U.S. firms saw their sales rise significantly in the United Kingdom in the first half of the 1940s, this was not the case for UA. Figure 1 shows that the relative importance of the British market for UA actually declined quite significantly in the 1940s. Figures 2 and 3 provide more specific information on the actual level of sales generated by UA (in real terms) in the British and American markets, whereas table 4 summarizes the performance of UA's American films in the British market relative to those of other U.S. firms.

Figure 2 shows UA's real terms income from sales of films in the British market in pounds sterling (at 1930 prices). Sales were clearly at their peak in the mid-1930s and steadily declined thereafter, with a good year in 1945 offering only a temporary revival in fortunes. Even in 1945, however, when cinema attendance in Britain was approximately 75 percent higher than it had been a decade earlier, UA's sales remained much lower in real terms than they had been in the 1930s.

One obvious explanation for UA's declining fortunes could be that the quality of its (American) product had diminished. There is certainly some evidence for this. Tino Balio, in his history of the company, describes a product shortage crisis in 1942–1943 which led UA to purchase a package of inferior films from Paramount. For a short period in the early 1940s, UA found itself “supplying second features for double bills almost exclusively.”⁶¹ Table 4 summarizes that the market share held by UA of American films distributed in Britain did indeed fall from around 10 percent in the late 1930s to little more than 5 percent in the mid-to-late 1940s. Although UA's sales figures remained relatively constant (before adjustment for inflation) for most of the 1940s, those of its major U.S. competitors had virtually doubled. UA continued to release very popular films in Britain in the 1940s, but not with the same consistency as they had managed in the 1930s. Although the likes of Goldwyn, Selznick, and Wanger had regularly released pictures through UA in the 1930s, they did not continue to do so in the 1940s. Goldwyn, as we have seen, fell out with his partners in the late 1930s. Selznick, who had released ten films through UA between 1936 and 1940, became a partner in the company in October 1941. He also became embroiled in disputes with Chaplin and Pickford, however, and made only three more pictures for UA before being ejected from the company in 1947.⁶²

61. Balio, *United Artists*, 187–89.

62. *Ibid.*, 202–29.

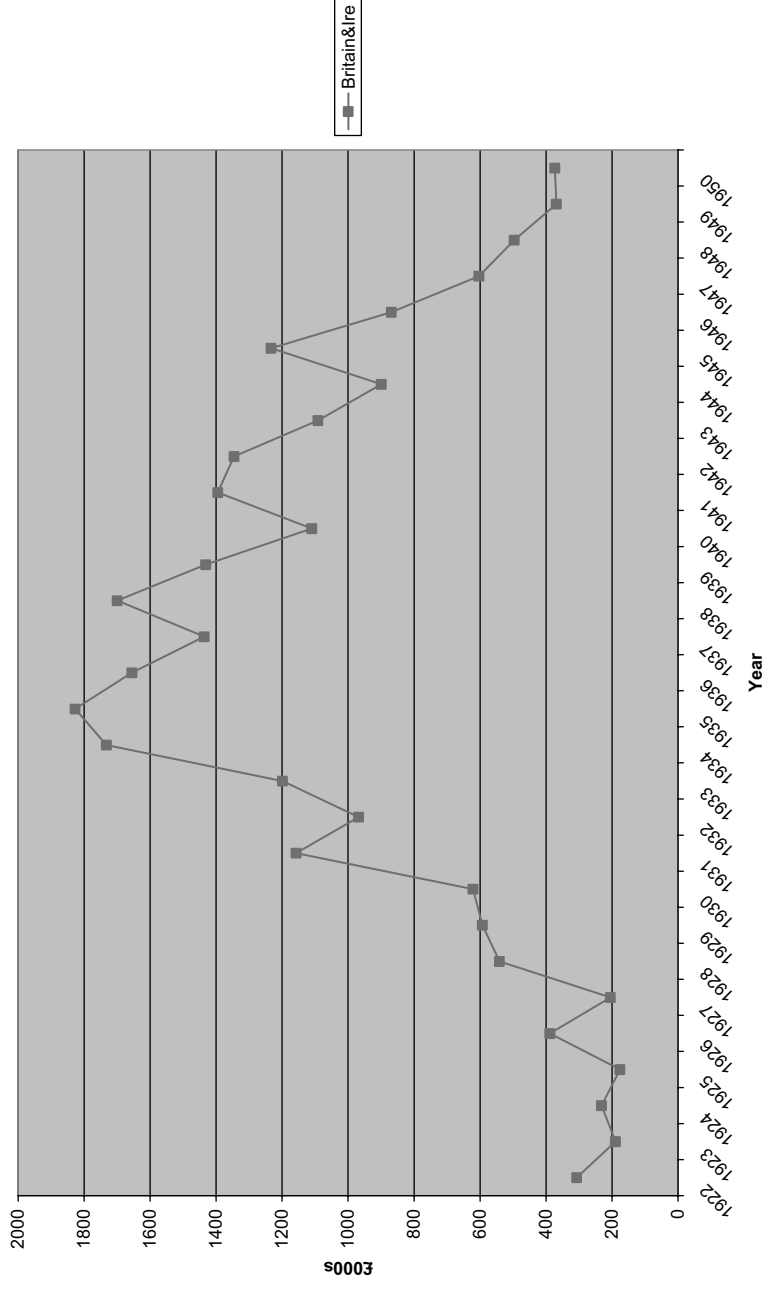


Figure 2 United Artist's (UA) Revenues in Britain, 1922–1950 (at 1930 prices). Note: The figures here do not correspond exactly with those given for UA's sales in tables 1 and 2 because they are presented in real, not nominal, terms. Source: UAC, Series 4C: Balance Sheets and Associated Papers.

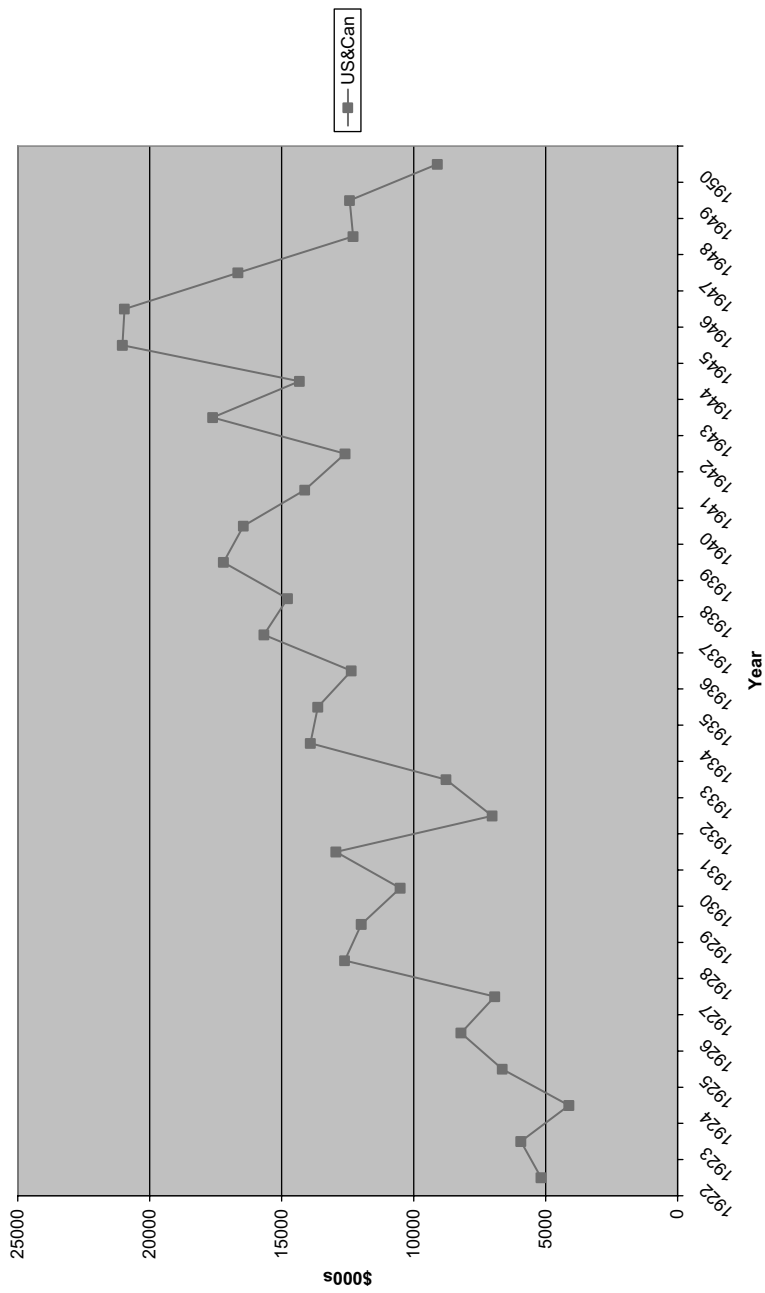


Figure 3 United Artists' (UA) Revenues in the United States and Canada, 1922-1950 (at 1930 prices). Source: UAC, Series 4C: Balance Sheets and Associated Papers.

But is it enough simply to attribute UA's decline in the U.K. market to the diminishing quality of its films? If this were the case, we would expect to see the company's performance weaken not just in Britain but also in its home market. Yet the evidence from figure 3 shows that after the product crisis of 1942–1943, UA's sales continued to rise in the United States until the late 1940s. The war years, in fact, witnessed a burgeoning of independent film production (as salaried film producers were subject to much higher rates of tax than independent ones). UA was able to reach distribution agreements with many of the new independents, most notably Hunt Stromberg (producer of over 100 features for MGM). If UA's films really were weaker in the 1940s than they had been in the 1930s, American audiences appear not to have noticed. The explanation for UA's relative underperformance in Britain in the 1940s cannot simply be attributed to a lack of good films; the problem appears to have been more specific than that: a lack of films that appealed particularly to British audiences.

If we are to understand why UA saw their sales steadily eroded in Britain throughout the 1940s, we must first identify what underpinned their success in the 1930s. The opening section of this article explained that because the distribution of film popularity was so uneven, with the most successful pictures taking up to ten times as much money at the box office as the average film, the performance of film companies in any given year was determined to a large extent by the "hit" films they were able to produce/distribute. How many "hit" films were UA responsible for distributing in Britain in the 1930s and 1940s, and where did these films come from?

Precisely how much money was taken at the box office by individual films released in the U.K. market in the 1930s and 1940s has traditionally been difficult to determine. The British trade press did publish a list of the top box-office attractions each year from the late 1930s, but before this information is limited. The best indication we have of how popular individual films were in Britain in the 1930s has been provided by John Sedgwick.⁶³ His POPSTAT index ranks each film released in the United Kingdom between 1932 and 1937 according to its potential earning power, based on the amount of screen time it was allocated and the types of cinemas at which it was shown. Each film is given ranking such that a score of 50 indicates a film which is ten times more popular than one scoring 5. The POP-STAT score of the average film was just over 6, and only a tiny proportion (<1 percent) scored over 50. Assuming that the films with

63. Sedgwick, *Popular Filmgoing in 1930s Britain*.

Table 5 Number and Nationality of Top-Ranking Films Released by United Artists (UA) in Britain, 1932–1937

POPSTAT	1932		1933		1934		1935		1936		1937	
	U.K.	U.S.	U.K.	U.S.	U.K.	U.S.	U.K.	U.S.	U.K.	U.S.	U.K.	U.S.
>20	–	1	3	4	2	5	4	7	3	6	5	4
>40	–	–	1	–	1	2	2	1	2	1	0	1

Source: John Sedgwick, *Popular Filmgoing in 1930s Britain: A Choice of Pleasures* (Exeter, U.K., 2000), appendix 3.

the top POPSTAT scores were actually the films that took the most money at the box office, we can identify which of the films released by UA in the 1930s accounted most for their strong overall sales. According to Sedgwick's classifications, films with a POPSTAT of 20 or more would have been among the top 5 percent of releases in any given year, whereas a POPSTAT of 40 or above was achieved by only the top 1 or 2 percent. Table 5 summarizes the number of such films released by UA.

The evidence from figure 2 and table 5 appears to be very closely correlated. UA's British sales rise rapidly between 1932 and 1934, in line with the growing number of very popular films the company released. Sales were at their peak between 1934 and 1936 when UA released three films a year with a POPSTAT ranking of over 40 but dropped somewhat in 1937 when only one of the company's films came into this category. For UA, the difference between a very good year and an average or moderately successful year was determined largely by the number of hit films it was able to offer. But what were these "hit" films? Interestingly enough, a significant proportion of them were British. Of the forty-four films released by UA with a POPSTAT of over 20, seventeen were British and twenty-seven American. But of the ten UA films that scored above 40 on the POP-STAT index, the majority (six) were British, all of which were made by Alexander Korda's production company London Films.⁶⁴

Another method of expressing the relative popularity of UA's films in this period, again using the POPSTAT rankings, is to show how many of them made it into the top 10, top 50, or top 100 releases of the year (table 6).

Again, we see that the best years for UA were 1934–1936, and again, we see that UA's British films were just as likely to make it into the top 10 as their American ones. UA did release more American

64. The six top-ranking British films were all Korda productions: *Private Life of Henry VIII*, *Catherine the Great*, *Scarlet Pimpernel*, *Sanders of the River*, *The Ghost Goes West*, and *Things to Come*.

Table 6 Number and Nationality of Top-Ranking Films Released by United Artists (UA) in Britain, 1932–1937

	1932		1933		1934		1935		1936		1937	
	U.K.	U.S.	U.K.	U.S.	U.K.	U.S.	U.K.	U.S.	U.K.	U.S.	U.K.	U.S.
Top 10	–	1	1	1	2	2	3	2	2	1	–	1
Top 50	–	4	3	4	2	7	5	9	5	7	8	5
Top 100	–	11	4	5	4	13	6	13	8	10	12	8

Source: Sedgwick, *Popular Filmgoing in 1930s Britain*, appendix 3.

Table 7 Performance of United Artists (UA) films in the British Market, 1938–1943

	1938		1939		1940		1941		1942		1943	
	U.K.	U.S.	U.K.	U.S.	U.K.	U.S.	U.K.	U.S.	U.K.	U.S.	U.K.	U.S.
Top films of the year	–	–	1	–	–	2	1	1	–	–	–	–
Top films of the month	1	2	2	2	–	2	1	1	–	–	–	–
Notable attractions	5	7	2	8	–	11	3	2	3	2	1	4

Source: *Kinematograph Weekly* January 12, 1939; January 11, 1940; January 9, 1941; January 8, 1942; January 14, 1943; January 13, 1944.

films than British ones, and the majority of their top 100 and top 50 films were from their U.S. producers. However, given the disproportionate importance attached to the very top end of the market, it seems reasonable to conclude that UA's British films were crucial to the level of success it achieved in Britain in the 1930s.

Between 1938 and 1943, UA continued to release both British and American films in the U.K. market. The best available evidence for the relative popularity of these pictures comes from the British trade paper *Kinematograph Weekly*, which published an annual roundup of the year's most successful films. These reports do not provide data on the actual box-office revenues generated by each film, although they were based on information provided by the leading cinema chains. Each year, the most successful box-office attraction was identified, along with many "runners-up" (only two runners-up were listed between 1938 and 1940, but this rose to four in 1941 and six in 1942–1943). In addition, for each month of the year, the most popular film was identified and a list of other notable attractions listed. Table 7 breaks down the films listed in *Kinematograph Weekly* into three categories: the top films of the year (i.e., the top grossing film and the annual runners-up); the top box-office film of each month; and films noted as doing good business in each month. It shows the

number of UA films falling into each category, although the data are presented in such a way that a single film could fall into all three categories.

As we can see, up to 1941, UA's best-performing films in the British market were almost as likely to be British as American. The top British films in this period were both Alexander Korda productions (*The Lion Has Wings* and *Lady Hamilton*).⁶⁵ In 1942 and 1943, as UA experienced a shortage of top-quality American product and relied on Ealing to supply its British films, its pictures did not make it into the very top rank. The Ealing films, however, were almost as frequently listed among the year's notable attractions in this period as its U.S. pictures.

From 1943, as we have seen, UA found it increasingly difficult to distribute any British films in the U.K. market at all. We know from the annual *Kinematograph Weekly* reports that although fewer British films were made each year during the war than had been the case in the 1930s, the best of these British films were just as popular with U.K. audiences as the leading American pictures.⁶⁶ Without access to the films of the leading British producers, UA found that the share of "hit" films it distributed in the United Kingdom was much reduced. Only one notable British film was released by UA between 1944 and 1947 (*The Way to the Stars*, 1945), but even this was not listed among the top films of its year (although it was among the top British films of 1945).⁶⁷

Precise information on the box-office returns of the films released by UA in the British market became available from March 1943.⁶⁸ These data show that *The Way to the Stars* was actually one of only four UA films to take over £200,000 at the box office between 1943 and 1950. The other three were *Stage Door Canteen* (Lesser, 1943), *Since You Went Away* (Selznick, 1945), and *Spellbound* (Selznick, 1946). *Stage Door Canteen* was not among the top 7 films listed by *Kinematograph Weekly* in 1943; *Since You Went Away* was named among the 21 "runners-up" in 1945; in 1946, *Spellbound* was not one of *Kinematograph Weekly's* top 3 films but was listed as 1 of 26 other notable attractions.⁶⁹ Table 8 summarizes the number of films

65. UA's most successful U.S. pictures in these years were *Rebecca* (Selznick, 1940), *Foreign Correspondent* (Wanger, 1940), and *The Great Dictator* (Chaplin, 1941).

66. According to *Kinematograph Weekly*, between 1939 and 1949 (inclusive), there were only three years (1942, 1943, and 1948) when the most successful film released in the British market was not British.

67. *Kinematograph Weekly*, 20 Dec. 1945.

68. UAC, Series 8B, Gradwell Sears Papers, box 3, file 5.

69. *Kinematograph Weekly*, 13 Jan. 1944, 20 Dec. 1945, 19 Dec. 1946.

Table 8 Films Released by United Artists (UA) in Britain, 1943–1947

	1943 ^a		1944		1945		1946		1947	
	U.K.	U.S.	U.K.	U.S.	U.K.	U.S.	U.K.	U.S.	U.K.	U.S.
Total films released	1	17	0	17	1	18	0	16	1	15
Number taking >100,000	0	4	0	1	1	5	0	3	0	3
Number taking >200,000	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	0
Average takings per film (£000's)	85.9	72.2	–	58.8	235.9	79.0	–	68.1	17.8	58.6

Source: UAC, Series 8B: Gradwell Sears Papers, box 3, file 5.

^a Data in this column refer to films released in the period March–December 1943.

released by UA in Britain between 1943 and 1947 and how they performed at the box office.

Once again, we see that the figures in this table correspond closely with the sales data given in figure 2.⁷⁰ The best year for UA was 1945, when the company released a handful of popular American pictures (the most successful of which was Selznick's *Since You Went Away*) as well as the British film *The Way to the Stars*—which the readers of one national newspaper in Britain voted their favorite film of the war years.⁷¹ (UA's British manager felt that *The Way to the Stars* would actually have made more money at the box office had it, like other popular British films, been given a two-week run at Rank's main Odeon cinemas.⁷²) In real terms, however, sales in 1945 were well down on the levels achieved a decade earlier when the company released a similar (although slightly higher) number of successful American films but supplemented these with several more very popular British ones. For the years, either side of 1945 UA's performance in Britain suffered in part because its American films were not quite as popular as they had previously been but, more importantly, because they had no British "hit" films to distribute at all.

70. The figures in this table refer to the sales achieved by individual films that were released in each year, although a significant amount of the revenue generated by a film may have been earned in the year after its release. Thus, even though the years 1944 and 1946 appear to have been ones in which very few successful films were released by UA, the total sales figures for these years (as given in figure 2) are still relatively healthy because they include some of the revenue generated by the previous year's releases.

71. The poll was conducted by the *Daily Mail* in April 1946. See Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards, *Britain Can Take It: The British Cinema in the Second World War* (Oxford, U.K., 1994), 277–98.

72. D. Coplan to A. Kelly, 7 Feb. 1949, UAC, Series 6B: Arthur W. Kelly Papers, box 2, file 7.

Conclusions

This article has examined the operations and performance of one of the leading U.S. film distributors in its most important foreign market in the 1930s and 1940s. In doing so, it has shown that UA, as a specialist distributor of high-quality films, pursued a very different business strategy to the major vertically integrated film companies. More importantly, it has argued that the company's performance in the British market was determined by more than just the popularity of its American films. For UA, success in its largest foreign market was achieved by distributing the films of British producers, which had a particularly strong national appeal, alongside those of independent U.S. filmmakers. This film company did not win over consumers in its main foreign market simply by "selling America to the world." It was at its most successful when it had something distinctively British to sell to British audiences.⁷³

UA did not originally set out to develop a strategy of international product differentiation to allow for greater responsiveness to national markets. Had it not been for British quota legislation, the firm would have had no cause to seek out films from British producers. Once it had begun to distribute British films, and in particular those of Alexander Korda, it quickly became apparent that these were actually highly popular with British audiences. Perhaps more by accident than design, UA managed to develop portfolios of films for the British market in the 1930s that combined some of the leading pictures from both British and American producers. Although the likes of MGM and Paramount impressed British audiences with films such as *Mutiny on the Bounty* and *Lives of a Bengal Lancer*, UA had found in Korda a British producer whose films were as popular in Britain as those of any Hollywood studio. The irony here is that Korda, more than most other British producers, always aimed to make films that appealed to international audiences, not just British ones. His films, however, based as they usually were on British characters and themes, were almost invariably far more successful in Britain than anywhere else. Korda, in fact, always held that, as a foreigner, he was better placed to identify and distil the British character on screen than the British themselves.⁷⁴ Although there were many critics at the time who disagreed, the success of his films with

73. The phrase comes from Will Hays, head of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), who announced in October 1923: "We are going to sell America to the world with American motion pictures." See Trumbour, *Selling Hollywood to the World*, 17.

74. See, for example, Kulik, *Alexander Korda*, 97–8.

U.K. audiences (along with appeal of the Hollywood “British” films that Glancy has identified) suggests that he may, after all, have had a point. Korda’s films, as much as those of David Selznick or Darryl Zanuck, enabled UA to achieve the success it did in Britain in the 1930s. The loss of its British product was the single biggest factor behind the decline of UA in the British market in the 1940s. For this independent film producer, success in its largest foreign market depended as much on the quality of its British as its American films.

In the 1930s, UA had discovered, by serendipity, that by offering audiences films with a particular national appeal, alongside its American product, it was able to outperform other American film distributors in Britain. According to Sedgwick’s POPSTAT rankings, no less than 30 percent of the top 10 films released in Britain between 1933 and 1937 came from UA. This is a remarkable figure, given how few pictures the company actually released compared with its much larger rivals. Moreover, the majority of the top 10 films released by UA in these years were British.

Given the spectacular success UA had been able to achieve in Britain in the 1930s, it is surprising that the firm did not make more effort to maintain regular supply of British films in the 1940s by striking a deal with J. Arthur Rank. UA’s managers, both in the United States and in the United Kingdom, were well aware of the importance of reaching an agreement with Rank, but their views seemed to make little impression on the all-important stockholders. In his history of UA, Tino Balio describes a firm heading deeper into crisis as the 1940s progressed. Personality clashes and management failures were much in evidence. Perhaps none was more costly than the failure to reach an agreement with Rank and continue the strategy that had served the company so well in the 1930s.

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