

# Hollywood's Fall Into Virtue

ROBERT ARDREY

SOMEbody once said that Hollywood is the most famous community in the world existing only in the imagination. After ten years of living in the imaginary community, and almost twenty years of occasional screen writing, I entirely agree. If Hollywood were to lose its grip on the world's imagination (as it has today on the imaginations of a majority of adult Americans), it would literally cease to exist. A few deserted sheds would mark the spot; that would be all.

It isn't easy for Americans "who never go to the movies any more" to understand that beyond our borders the Hollywood legend persists. Lines still mass in Leicester Square. When Gregory Peck opens in Capetown or Geneva or on the Kurfürstendamm, spacious sidewalks are jammed. Better than half of an American film's total return comes today from abroad. What Hollywood has lost so far is solely (and disastrously) the Battle of America.

Last spring, in Buenos Aires, I felt the full force of the paradox. At the home of Señora Gainza Paz y Sánchez Elia, the brilliant, charming sister of *La Prensa's* publisher, the talk came around to movies. I outlined as best I could the catastrophe facing the major studios: their economic dependence on the American audience, the gradual shrinkage of that audience over the last twenty years, the reduction nowadays to an audience made up largely of juveniles, and the final impact of television.

Señora Sánchez Elia was utterly upset. Did that mean there would be no more American films? I pointed out that there would be films, and that there might even be better films without the control of the major studios, but that the old notion of Hollywood would definitely be lost, and perhaps it was a good thing.

"How can you say that?" she demanded.

"Do you mean you care about Hollywood?" I said.

"Of course I care!" she said. "I love Hollywood. Who doesn't love Hollywood? Do you mean that you *don't* care?"

I SAT in the Plaza San Martín that night, reflecting on what had been said in this most sophisticated of households. An Argentine workman passed along a path, whistling cheerfully to himself. I reflected on him.

In the days before Perón came to power it was probably only in Hollywood films that he had seen workers recognized as human beings. Then there had come *Evita*, in a half million dollars' worth of diamonds, cheating him but addressing him as a fellow human. He would still be for Perón until something better came along. In the meantime, he would whistle "Mr. Sandman," and listen, troubled, to Communist leaders trying to take over the remnants

of Peronismo, and he would see *Oklahoma!* if he could find the inflated pesos.

When had any nation ever possessed an ambassador so extraordinary as Hollywood—at no cost to the taxpayer? Here was an American institution rating somewhat higher than the Presidency in the world's affections. How direct had been our vulgar gift for going straight to the pie-throwing hearts of men! How much, I wondered, had Hollywood contributed to the restlessness of the century? African gangs in Johannesburg and Capetown bear names like the Sonny Boys and the Dead End Kids.

Whatever its social consequences, there could be no doubt that it was Hollywood that had introduced to the minds of multitudes their first concepts of the free life—sentimental, vulgar, happy, carefree, touching, mad—populated exclusively by uninhibited heroes each at least ten feet tall. Here was the essence of the Hollywood legend so dear to the human race.

AND it occurred to me that night, in the Plaza San Martín, that of all the symbolic names one hears mentioned in conversations abroad—Gable, Chaplin, Jean Harlow, Jolson, Garbo, Tom Mix, Valentino, Fairbanks, Cooper, Crawford—only two remain vital ingredients of Hollywood today: Donald Duck and Marilyn Monroe.

That these two free and uninhibited spirits belong legitimately to the great tradition is beyond question. But what else has happened to fortify the legend since Clark Gable, a generation ago, made his shattering entrance to the world's subconscious in a film aptly titled "A Free Soul"? Grace Kelly, shackling herself to a hereditary amusement park, has certainly filled headlines but scarcely the bill.

Good, old-fashioned freewheeling wickedness has fallen indeed to a sorry state. What has happened to it bears a little looking into. For to my mind, it is the withering away of the Hollywood legend that has destroyed in adults (and most particularly in good, sound, right-thinking American adults) the compulsion to go to the movies. And so, in the rich profusion of dull alternatives

which our society provides, we have found other amusements. Audiences overseas, with fewer alternatives, cling for the time being to the Hollywood legend.

### Making 'Madame Bovary'

Some years ago Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer made a film of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. If we are to investigate current standards of Hollywood wickedness, then what happened to that wicked classic may present us in a sense with a built-in yardstick. How did Hollywood measure up? Certainly an honest effort was made. Vincent Minelli, the studio's most sensitive director, had been yearning to make *Madame Bovary* since approximately three days after he was born. Pandro S. Berman, Metro's ablest producer, had been standing in line for ten years and had at last obtained the registration.

It should be explained that when a producer wants to film a work in the public domain, he registers his intent with the Motion Picture Producers Association, the same organization that operates the Code. He then has a two-year period of exclusive privilege to work on the project. If at the end of two years he has no film in production, the registration goes to the next man in line. In the case of *Bovary*, someone or other had probably been trying to make a film out of it since the days of D. W. Griffith. Now it became Berman's turn.

FLAUBERT'S classic was a project to fascinate any author. Once, in Germany, it had been filmed, both badly and unsuccessfully. Before that, I believe, Bernhardt had played the role, but otherwise the stage had done as poorly as films. Flaubert's iron prose and flawless novel form simply defied adaptation to a dra-

matic medium. But I thought I understood the problem.

Like Berman and Minelli, I too had had *Madame Bovary* on my waiting list for years. I thought I had some understanding of the difficulties of Flaubert's work for I had tried my hand at both novels and plays. I was aware of a subtle and little-understood difference between the two forms. While in a novel a character may act for any number of reasons, in a play he must act for one.

This may seem the most simple-minded of formulas. It is not. The difference stems from the broad gulf between the primitive, emotional, highly conventionalized play form, rooted in Aeschylus, and the modern, sophisticated, analytical novel, rooted in the rationalism of the late eighteenth century. One of the best of my earlier plays foundered because the hero, with two good solid reasons for acting as he did, seemed therefore a weak man.

Double motivation, as it had sunk my early play, had thwarted every effort to bring *Madame Bovary* to life on stage or screen. In the novel it was entirely acceptable that Emma Bovary should be driven to ruin both by the romantic fallacy—Flaubert's thesis—and by a lout of a husband who would have driven any sensible woman to the bushes. In a dramatic form, acting for two reasons, Emma would seem merely a fool. If the essence of Flaubert were to remain, whether or not Flaubert fans tore their hair, the husband had to become a nonentity. (As it happened, Van Heflin's performance of the non-Flaubert Charles Bovary was such a miracle of tender inoffensiveness that I heard never a wail.)

### Clean as a Hound's Tooth

There were other problems, of course. It was obvious that only a fraction of Flaubert's flashing ironies and savage incongruities could survive transportation. But any innocent bystander would suggest that the next real Hollywood hurdle to surmount, in a work of artistic depravity, would be the Code. I refused to sign a contract to write the film until I had received some kind of assurance from the Code office. A meeting was arranged.

If I have few good words to say about the Code, I have nothing but



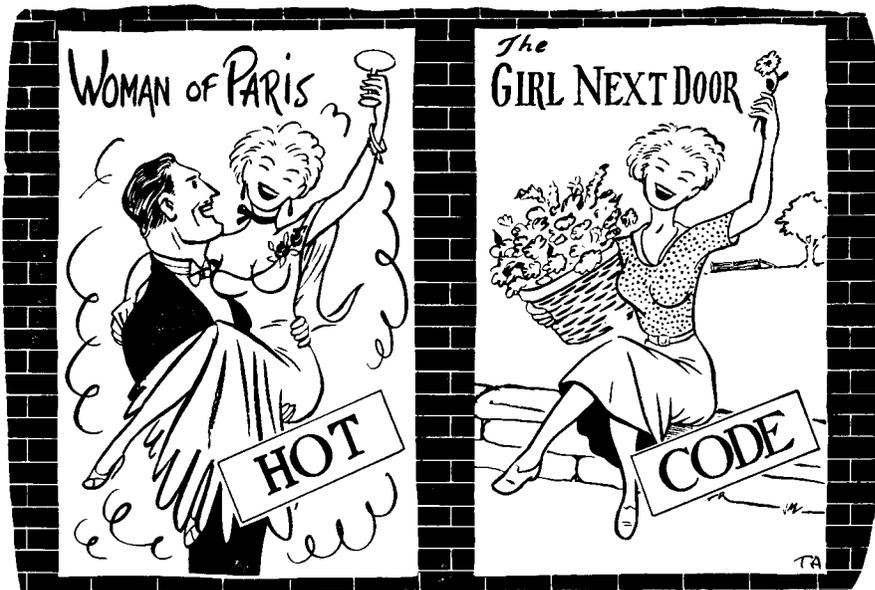
good to say about Code officials. My introduction to Joe Breen, back before the war, was a matter of love at first sight. His successor, Geoffrey Shurlock, whom I was to meet in connection with *Bovary*, I have fought with—enjoyably—on innumerable occasions. I have known few Code officials who were not literate, who did not sense integrity when they met it, and who did not feel a profound distaste for tampering with the good writing which they so seldom encountered. I used to look forward to most Code meetings—frequently hilarious, invariably unprintable. Not to this one.

**A**PPREHENSIVELY, I put my problem before Shurlock. The Code says a sinner must be punished. If I had to disembowel every adulterer who appeared in “*Madame Bovary*,” then the final reels would have to be shot on the field of Waterloo, and I wanted no part of the project. To my astonishment, Shurlock dismissed my worries. There would be no Code problems.

To this day I don’t know whether Shurlock waived the Code because his office wanted no arguments with Flaubert, or whether, more likely, it was his reasoning that if Emma Bovary ate as much arsenic at the end of the film as she did at the end of the book, she would give adultery a bad name for a generation to come. In any case I was free. I accepted the Metro contract and went to work. When the screen play was finished it went to the Code office, and was returned with almost as little objection as a typical “*Lassie*” screen play.

That script, written many years ago, had been the work of a gentle English lady brought to Hollywood for the specific project. Which one of the “*Lassie*” stories it was, I cannot remember. But in the course of the delicate tale the young hero and heroine exchanged a single kiss. And when the script came back from the Hays Office, it bore, to the author’s stupefaction, a single comment: “We remind you that there will be no prolonged, open-mouthed, or lascivious kisses.”

That “*Madame Bovary*” should have done as well as “*Lassie*” seemed to me the one miracle we needed. In my parochial author’s-eye view, I



learned only the damage that the Code might do to the screen play. I neglected to consider, in any part, what the Code had already done to Hollywood itself. That damage was soon apparent.

#### A Twice-Blessed Event

Within the studio, pressure developed for Lana Turner to play the part of Emma Bovary.

Just where such pressures come from in a great studio is always hard to say. It’s like a lynching party. Ask this man or that, “Are you for stringing this fellow up?” and each will say “No.” But enthusiasm keeps mounting. I could find few at Metro who would not agree that Miss Turner’s performance, while unquestionably of the highest merit, might just possibly bring to the Flaubert classic a touch of juvenile delinquency.

Even to say where power rests in such a situation is baffling. To say that so-and-so is head of the studio and that so-and-so is producing a particular film scarcely covers the ground. At this period, for example, Lillian Burns, Miss Turner’s dramatic coach, was a power to be reckoned in the highest bracket. Miss Burns had taught Margaret O’Brien to act. She had capped this achievement, many believed, by teaching the other Metro stars to act like Margaret O’Brien.

The depression in the “*Bovary*” forces was considerable. We had a screen play, which was more than

anyone else had achieved. We had the Code office approval, which was a miracle. We had a part which not an actress alive would reject. And we faced colleagues whose notions of female wickedness turned naturally to the affable Miss Turner.

Minelli, who had been waiting to direct this performance for so many years, began to take on a permanently bad beige color. Berman, who had stood in line for ten years, settled down to a silent delaying action. I was in a better position, however, since they worked for Metro and I did not. Each faced the possibility of working with Miss Turner on some future film, or even of having to work with her on this. Delicate intrastudio relations hemmed each to a narrow tactical position. Mine was free. As an independent contractor I was not an employee, not a member of the club, and I was not expected to abide by club rules.

An author has little to say in the casting of the films he writes. I, at least, could say it. And so through the following weeks I conducted a harrying action. I made an elaborate nuisance of myself. I became a kind of studio joke. Time passed. I turned to other chores. But every so often I visited Metro to play again the anti-Turner role that by now was expected of me. Until, one morning, I received a call from Berman at my home.

“Well, you’ve won,” said Berman. I was staggered. “How?”

"Lana's pregnant."

Thirty minutes later I was at the studio. In a corridor an executive congratulated me solemnly. I assured him I couldn't take credit for this. "Oh, I wouldn't put it past you," he said. I found the remark vastly flattering.

In Berman's office we all congratulated each other. Again, there had been a miracle. We were free. The world was our oyster bed, and in full freedom we could take our choice.

### Lots of Girls, No Women

It's curious how until that moment we had never truly faced the question of who *was* to play the part. We had been blocked at one time by our preoccupation with the Code; and then, through the second period, by our other troubles. Perhaps through our minds had always floated that image which comes so easily in early casting thoughts—"Like Garbo."

Now we had to face it—who was like Garbo? Well, obviously no one. But there should be a fair choice of women who could fill the dimensions of our role. Names began rolling past, and sometimes we laughed and sometimes we just shook our heads—Hayworth, Liz Taylor, De Havilland, Bergman, Davis, Garson, Leigh, Gardner, Allyson, Hepburn . . .

Days passed, and weeks. Admittedly, there were limits to the system. We were dealing with a studio that didn't know how to sell a picture without a star. And it wasn't a story, like *Gone With the Wind*, with a great male part to balance off against a fairly unknown woman. But granting the limits, the facts were crushing enough: that the generation since Garbo had produced not a single star (this was before Magnani) capable of making believable the tragic life of Emma Bovary. Garbo's generation had produced a dozen. But ours? Who could deal with the obsession, with the abandonment to sensuality, with the foreknowledge of doom and the inexorable pressing on into joyless wickedness? I thought of Flaubert's haunting reference to the time when for Emma the platitudes of adultery came to equal the platitudes of marriage. What woman, in con-

temporary acting terms, could explore to such levels?

No such woman existed. The screen, in the past quarter century, has produced no women among its outstanding actresses. It has produced only girls.

We settled for Jennifer Jones.

FOR A significant period, and with the rarest of exceptions, Hollywood's self-censorship has prevented the production of mature stories. Without mature roles to play, a generation of immature actors and actresses has necessarily been bred. In consequence the adult audience, lacking both mature stars and mature situations to enjoy, has come to look upon motion pictures as a replaceable form of entertainment. When the ADULTS ONLY sign was taken down from the theaters many years ago, an unseen and unprofitable JUVENILES ONLY sign took its place.

### A Margin for Morons

My first encounter with the Code was before the war at RKO, in the production of "They Knew What They Wanted." Here again was a dedicated group: Charles Laughton; the unforgettable Carole Lombard; Garson Kanin, then the boy wonder of films; the beloved old actor from silent days, Harry Carey; the producer, Erich Pommer, who had headed the famous German U.F.A. studios in the days of "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari"; and, as

dedicated as any, Code administrator Joe Breen.

Breen admired Sidney Howard's play and the screen play I had written from it. He became a virtual collaborator, and it may be added that his collaboration was in high demand, for the story of "They Knew What They Wanted" violated the Code up, down, and across the middle. A story of adultery, it ends with forgiveness. According to the Code, there is no such thing as forgiveness in this context.

Breen was no hypocrite. He believed in the Code, and would explain it this way: "Here we have twenty-five cents that comes in at the box office. A third goes to the theater. Another third goes to distribution, whatever that is. Another nickel goes to New York; I never figured out what New York is, either. Two cents winds up coming back to the picture. Two cents! If you've spent a million dollars, fifty million people have to see that picture before you break even. Now will you grant that one man in a hundred is a moron? All right, then to break even you've got to play to no less than *five hundred thousand morons*. And every one of them has got to come out of the theater convinced that crime doesn't pay and that sin gets punished. Or you're socially irresponsible."

Joe Breen was the best advocate the Code ever had, but he loved art too. And so at conference after conference he sweated out with the rest of us means of breaking his own Code without avoiding its responsibility. In the end we succeeded. But there was a bad day when it looked as if all were lost.

Charles Laughton joined us that day. Heavy-faced and heavy-spirited, he sat at one side listening to the endless, fruitless discussion. Forgiveness, forgiveness. How could one achieve forgiveness and stay within the Code? It seemed that day the picture would never be made. We had forgotten Laughton when suddenly he stirred his bulk.

"Do I understand, Mr. Breen," he said, "that the Code does not recognize the New Testament?"

It was as if someone had decreed one minute of silence. A clock ticked. Laughton sat with his fat hands on his knees, his heavy mouth



drooping, his eyes brooding on Breen's blue shirt front. A secretary's pencil idled over her pad.

Breen, the good Catholic, looked out the window. There was a curious sadness: a sense of Christmas trees lying in the snow in January, of a deserted churchyard when the mourners have left, or of an empty street when the parade has passed, of the place where children once sang before they went away.

At last Breen turned: "That would be a rough way of saying it, Mr. Laughton."

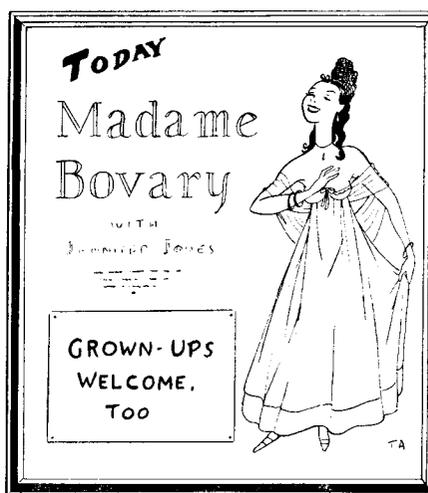
### The Last Palm

It is conformity that has killed the Hollywood legend.

Out of the Roaring Twenties in Hollywood came rape, manslaughter, white Rolls-Royces, and an equal host of masterpieces and paternity suits. Out of the wildness and the wickedness of man at his most free came Barrymore at the height of his drinking, Garbo at the height of her acting, Harold Lloyd at the height of his hilarity, Chaplin, Jolson, Valentino, all reaching a variety of heights never before attained by man, certainly not in the presence of the multitude. What precise straw was it that snapped the back of the delirious camel? I am not quite sure. Perhaps it was Jean Harlow, suggesting to the multitude that sex was fun.

Faced by puritan uproar and pickets, the institution known as Hollywood caved in, conformed, turned on its members instead of the opposition, and created the Code and the morals clause. It was a mistake that the theater has never made. Down the drain went the best and the worst, the fine and the wicked, the baby with the bath water. Public relations replaced private instinct; brains replaced glands; the cautious the courageous; the package the substance.

A new type of genius took over to replace the Chaplins. His character is best illustrated by a vintage story from the time when the sound track was new. Music was now available, but it was assumed that the audience must see the orchestra on the screen. Experiment determined that the orchestra could be moved to the background, the scene played before it, and the audience would



not object. Further experiment demonstrated that the audience would still not question the source of the music if a row of potted palms was placed before the orchestra, so that only occasionally did one see a lifted violin. Then, to the amazement of all, it was found that the camera, on a music cue, had only to go to a row of potted palms. Remorselessly the creative spirit moved on, using fewer and fewer palms. Irving Thalberg, so the story goes, was the genius who removed the last palm.

Artistic daring, it may be seen, had not at this early date been yet eliminated from the movies. But the spirit of conformity, once invoked, is hard to put back in the bottle. Hollywood marched drearily on, giving the public what its best brains determined that the public wanted.

### The Risk in Playing Safe

With conformity came guilt. Now everybody began to feel guilty because he made so much money. Great stars moved from the display of Beverly Hills to more secluded areas where they might hide their unseemly comforts behind rows of eucalyptus trees. Few got drunk in public any more. The outrageous Hollywood party vanished. Under the vigilant eye of the gossip columnist, the erring star married the girl and later contributed to the rising divorce rate. Actresses were photographed washing their own dishes, actors mowing their own lawns. Great stars, under the direction of wise press agents, were portrayed as being in private life "just like the fellow next door." (Whom

in depressing truth they did come more and more to resemble.) The cult of children became highly publicized. What the great star of the 1920's did with his children I never heard—gave them away, I presume.

The thing that has always frightened me about playing things safe is the risk involved. I do not have the courage to live so dangerously. I listen to men tell me with total confidence what they think the public thinks it wants. I watch one cheerfully walking the plank, another running full tilt into the darkened room. I wait in horror for the splash and the crash. Playing things safe is for braver men than me.

The great public, it goes without saying, began slowly, perhaps regretfully, to turn its back on Hollywood the day Hollywood started behaving the way the great public wanted. Whether or not what the public wanted, in its heart of hearts, was more rape, more manslaughter, and more paternity suits, I cannot pretend to know. But there is little doubt in my mind that Hollywood's evil days have had more than a coincidental relationship with its flight into virtue.

Legends of such magnitude die hard. There were other flare-ups between the public and the West Coast Plaster Pleasure Dome. In 1947 the Case of the \$3,000-a-Week Communists staggered the public imagination, and for a time life again became interesting in Xanadu. But once more the motion-picture industry—for the purest of box-office reasons—sided with the public against its own members, and once more saw its good behavior rewarded by the most irascible box-office indifference. From that time on, both Hollywood and its public sank deeper and deeper into boredom.

WHEN WE MOVED to Geneva last year, London friends asked how we could live in such a dull city. We could only reply that it didn't seem dull to us, perhaps because we had lived in Hollywood so long and had grown so dull ourselves.





## *Cars, Cars, Cars, Roads, Roads, Roads*

### **A South African Looks at California**

**DAN JACOBSON**

**A**T NIGHTFALL, after thirty hours in the plane, we found ourselves level with the country we had been flying over during the day. We came out of the terminal building, and before us more parked motor cars than I had ever seen in a single place stretched in an expanse toward some kind of bridge in the distance. Cars were passing over the bridge and to the right and the left of the terrain of parked cars, and from the night sky broken by the chasing headlights there came a continuous rustle, a fall of sound—a whisper out of the throat of the night. The cars moved all about us; they moved above us, until where we stood seemed to be the center of a circle of country that gleamed and whirred, and wheeled entirely around us.

Then we were taken to a car, and we too were moving around the plain of parked cars, and the road we were on suddenly fell away in an arc and then went up again, and around us other roads were rising and falling in arcs. Which road we were on I no longer knew. A broad, black width of tar, tilted down and curving to the right, rushed toward our headlights, and by their light we saw that none of the other roads

were lying on the earth, but all were moving up from it or stepping down to it on great concrete stilts. And they were all wide, wide, and ran as fast as the headlights of our car, which rushed down to another road, wider than any we had yet seen, and flat before us, at an angle to our arc.

Suddenly we were no longer tilted, but on a level with the big road. Then, though neither we nor any other cars slowed down to let us onto it, we were moving on this new road, and cars came past with a curiously close and confidential rustle at their rear wheels, for in comparison with them, it seemed, we weren't traveling so very fast after all.

**T**HE CARS were swollen and shining; their colors were different above and below: they bulged in front and they bulged at the back. Never had I seen, never could I have imagined so many of them moving so fast all at one time. It is the movement, I suppose, that paralyzes the mind: One could imagine cars, just cars, stretched out indefinitely, but set them moving, set them moving at sixty or seventy miles an hour, set them moving three or four abreast, set them moving in two directions,

and the imagination simply retreats and despairs; the mind is numbed.

In two directions, I have said, but there were more than two directions. As we had joined the road by hurling ourselves at an angle into it, so other cars were doing along other roads that came into ours from the right; and so too roads suddenly sheered off to the right, some running level but others climbing onto structures that swung each road around in mid-air so that it crossed overhead, though the cars on it had a moment before been racing pell-mell in front of our own. Now they passed across in mid-air, their headlights still flinging light on the tar and the concrete. On the other side of the road, as in a mirror where everything was reversed, cars that had been coming with their lights toward us now crossed from left to right above our heads. The sensation was that not the cars but the roads themselves were moving, like giant escalators, ferrying hundreds of cars at a time, fast, fast, fast.

We have been some two months in California now; but the biggest single impression is still of that road.

### **The Kindly Night**

I have been up and down it now a few times, and have seen the shabbiness that the thousand neon signs hid from us the first time we drove down it. Then it was as if every motel or drive-in we passed was a place of light, bloated and palatial under the signs that stared and glared and gave each one of them a different name in letters three feet high. By daylight some of these places were not much better than shabby wooden lean-tos, or shabby brick-fronted buildings, or else cheap, jerry-built places vaguely Spanish in intention, with their plaster and arches and red-tiled roofs. None looks like its neighbor; they share no style, no size, they have no relation to one another but that imposed on them by the single thing they do share: a frontage on the road, a view of the traffic, a gaze across to the other side of the road where there are other motels, drive-ins, used-car lots, gas stations, other giant billboards, and other names—The Crown, Crazy Jack's, Ole Olsen's, Top-T Service, and a supermarket spaciouly spell-