

# DeMille and Danger: Seven Heuristic Taxonomic Categories of His Hollywood (Mis) Adventures.

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# DeMille and Danger: Seven Heuristic Taxonomic Categories of His Hollywood (Mis)Adventures

Anton Karl Kozlovic

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## Abstract

The legendary producer-director Cecil B. DeMille<sup>1</sup> was an unsung auteur, a master of the American cinema, and a seminal cofounder of both Hollywood and Paramount Pictures who was professionally enamoured with the pursuit of sensationalism, authenticity and realism for his crowd-pleasing productions. Whilst pursuing this filmic quest, many of his crew were subjected to real danger, distress and injury, sometimes mortally. Utilising humanist film criticism as the guiding analytical lens, the critical DeMille, autobiographical and related

anecdotal literature was selectively reviewed for illustrative instances of this infamous production penchant. Seven heuristic taxonomic categories were identified and explicated herein, namely: (1) Unexpected Working Accidents: From Annoying to Dangerous to Deadly, (2) Pain as a By-Product of Production: Expected and Unexpected, (3) Personal Discomfort as a Professional Norm: More Real Than Real?, (4) Professionalism as Expected Risk-Taking: Normalising Danger, (5) Miserliness and Rebellion: Managerial Risk-Taking, (6) The Engineering of “Accidents”: Applied Miserliness?, and (7) Bravely Leading from the Front: DeMille as Macho-Man. It was concluded from this montage of reported incidents that DeMille played a very colourful part in creating the factually-based legends of this never-to-be-repeated Golden Age of Hollywood. Further research into DeMille studies, the expansion of the above-constructed categories, and other autobiographical reminiscences about Tinsel Town is warmly recommended; whether as history, art or entertainment.

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## Index terms

### Keywords :

[danger](#), [accidents](#), [Hollywood](#), [Golden Age](#), [humanist film criticism](#), [silent films](#), [cinema history](#), [stunt persons.](#), [Jean Arthur](#), [Lucille Ball](#), [James M. Barrie](#), [Lina Basquette](#), [Eleanor Boardman](#), [Joe Bonomo](#), [Polly Burson](#), [Diana Serra Cary](#), [Iron Eyes Cody](#), [Claudette Colbert](#), [Antoinette Consello](#), [Gary Cooper](#), [John Davidson](#), [Agnes de Mille](#), [Cecil B. DeMille](#), [Cecilia “Ciddy” DeMille](#), [George Duryea](#), [Kurt Frings](#), [John “Jack” Gilbert](#), [Gloria Grahame](#), [Charlton and Lydia Heston](#), [Alfred Hitchcock](#), [Leatrice Joy](#), [Dorothy “Dottie” Lamour](#), [Jesse Lasky Jr.](#), [Charles Laughton](#), [Jeanie Macpherson](#), [John Lee Mahin](#), [Pev Marley](#), [Victor Mature](#), [Thomas Meighan](#), [Bob Miles](#), [Ray Milland](#), [Conrad Nagel](#), [Leo Noomis](#), [House Peters](#), [Arthur Rosson](#), [Joseph “Pepi” Schildkraut](#), [Audrey Scott](#), [George Sowards](#), [Gloria Swanson](#), [Victor Varconi](#), [Frank Westmore](#), [Joseph C. Youngerman](#)

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### [1.0 Introduction](#)

1Cecil B. DeMille<sup>1</sup> (1881-1959), affectionately known as CB, was a seminal cofounder of Hollywood and a progenitor of Paramount Pictures (Birchard; Cherchi Usai and Codelli; DeMille and Hayne; Edwards; Essoe and Lee; Eyman; Higashi *Guide, Culture*; Higham; Koury; Louvish; Noerdlinger; Orrison; Ringgold and Bodeen). In 1913, he changed careers from the theatre to the cinema and moved from New York to California to help make a world-class movie centre out of a Californian orange grove that eventually became a worldwide synonym for cinematic success—Hollywood. This unsung “*auteur* of *auteurs*” (Vidal 303) was not only a seminal film pioneer who helped institute “the Age of Hollywood” (Paglia 12). DeMille became internationally famous as the American father of the biblical epic with his indelible classics: *The Ten Commandments* (1923), *The King of Kings* (1927), *Samson and Delilah* (1949), and *The Ten Commandments* (1956). These religious epics sat alongside many of his other notable landmark productions ranging from his silent crime drama *The Cheat* (1915) to his Oscar-winning circus story *The Greatest Show on Earth* (1952).

2During his prodigious filmmaking career that spanned almost five decades (1913-1959) and seventy feature films, the iconic DeMille became the archetypal image of a movie director; especially when wearing puttees, barking orders through a megaphone, and having a chair boy follow him two lock-steps behind his every move. He quickly became an enduring screen legend full of glamour, thrills, and spills, and wherein DeMille himself became the “Golden Age of Hollywood summed up in a single man” (Mitchell 17). His filmmaking passions included the pursuit of sensationalism, authenticity, and realism, which frequently meant that his crew were subjected to real danger, distress and injury, sometimes mortally, due to a lack of special effects and the need for spectacular stunts. This practical eventuality was confessed to by DeMille himself (DeMille and Hayne 93) and attested to within numerous critical reviews, autobiographical tomes, and nostalgic crew reminiscences. An introductory survey and taxonomic categorisation of some of these reported DeMilleian dangers is thus intrinsically interesting, historically revealing, and a necessary nascent foundation for further investigations into the man, field, and theme, especially one that is frequently under-investigated and not collated in one convenient spot before.

3Consequently, DeMille's cinematic *oeuvre*, critical literature, and associated autobiographical reminiscences from his cast, crew, and commentators were selectively reviewed, categorised, and integrated into the text to enhance narrative coherence (albeit, with a strong reportage flavour), utilising textually-based humanist film criticism as the guiding analytical lens (Bywater and Sobchack 24-47). This grossly under-utilised methodology is applicable to all genres ranging from science fiction (Telotte 35-38) to literary autobiography (Johnson). It assumes that audiences are cultured, accept the cinema as fine art, and have seen the movies under discussion. Its main pedagogic function is to identify noteworthy incidents and foster critical commentary rooted in primary and secondary sources (e.g., memoirs, autobiographies, film journals); and especially the tracking and interpretation of motifs, symbols, themes and other behind-the-scenes construction secrets, tropes and topoi.

4Although autobiographical reminiscences and related anecdotal literature are intrinsically subjective and can suffer seriously from errors and distortions by not doubting its witnesses, this bias is ameliorated by reliance on a diverse range of evidential sources, interlocking continuances, and cross-referencing. Nevertheless, autobiographical accounts in particular are intrinsically valuable because they are good sources of direct and intimate information focused on the events of interest, and usually done in more depth, detail, and emotional impact than generalised accounts. But even when the sources are not totally objective, they still add significantly to our bank of knowledge of the kinds of stories that DeMille's cast, crew, and commentators wanted to tell about him, which itself is invaluable for folkloric studies of this fascinating person, process, and period of Hollywood history.

## [2. Seven Heuristic Taxonomic Categories of DeMille's Hollywood \(Mis\)Adventures](#)

5The introductory literature review revealed many illustrative exemplars of the DeMilleian filmmaking practice-cum-(mis)adventure thematic, which were subsequently sorted into the following seven heuristic taxonomic categories (with some minor degrees of overlap): (1) Unexpected Working Accidents: From Annoying to Dangerous to Deadly; (2) Pain as a By-Product of Production: Expected and Unexpected; (3) Personal Discomfort as a Professional Norm: More Real Than Real?; (4) Professionalism as Expected Risk-Taking: Normalising Danger; (5) Miserliness and Rebellion: Managerial Risk-Taking; (6) The Engineering of "Accidents": Applied Miserliness?; and (7) Bravely Leading from the Front: DeMille as Macho-Man. The following is a brief explication of each of these categories utilising a copious montage of narrative excerpts and mini stories to illustrate the phenomena.

### [2.1 Unexpected Working Accidents: From Annoying to Dangerous to](#)

## Deadly

6Accidents occur on film sets for a variety of reasons ranging from the annoying to the dangerous to the deadly. For example, House Peters was playing the role of Ramerrez in *The Girl of the Golden West* when a “pistol exploded, and he was badly burned on the face and hands” (Katchmer 785). Whilst filming the bullfight scene in *Carmen*, DeMille explained how the bull

caught my matador with his feet badly placed, and the next thing we knew the bullfighter was spinning through the air and landing hard squarely in front of the bull. The bull lowered his head to gore the man to death. We were helpless. But nature, which is benign at times, had helped by giving the bull, out of all the thousands of bulls born in his generation, a pair of horns set unusually wide apart, [sic] Instead of cruelly piercing the prone body of the matador, the horns gently cradled him and lifted him into the air in their embrace; and when the bull recovered from his surprise, the bullfighter had time to land again, far enough away for safety. The camera caught it all. (DeMille and Hayne 132)

7During filming of *The Sign of the Cross*, DeMille was screen testing a pack of elephants when they were suddenly alarmed:

One of our players, Bob Miles, was caught in the very middle of the stampede. But the female elephant carrying him in her trunk put Bob on the ground and stood over his body and stayed there immovable, shielding Bob with her sturdy bulk and her great legs like trees, until the other crazed pachyderms were corralled and quieted. If that one elephant had not had presence of mind or protective instinct or whatever it was that made her a nonconformist among the herd, nothing could have saved Bob Miles from being trampled to death. (DeMille and Hayne 295)

8This benign result is especially miraculous considering that the animal trainer from TV's *Tarzan* (1966-1969) “was killed when an elephant, startled by a pack of stray dogs, hoisted him in his trunk and flung the man against a building, killing him” (Rovin 162).

9Whilst filming the Indian uprising story, *Unconquered*, stunt woman Polly Burson was subjected to other unforeseen dangers. As she explained:

There's a scene where we go over a waterfall in a canoe and grab onto a tree limb. It was one of the most unrealistic stunts I've ever done. They sent the canoe over a waterfall near McCall, Idaho, on the Snake River, with dummies in it. Then they came back to the studio in California and they put another dummy in the canoe—me. We had to grab a

branch and swing under this artificial waterfall onto a ridge. There was a fellow that manually swung the limb out. But nobody thought about how strong or swift the water was, and it just flung him away. They couldn't stop the rushing water until the dump tank ran dry. When we hit the waterfall, it just caught us. They had a net underneath, and we landed in that. It was a struggle for me to roll off my back and onto my face before I drowned. (Weiner 29)

10Furthermore, "DeMille used dozens of real fireballs and flaming arrows in the battle scene; eight persons suffered burns and one extra's hair was burned" (Hanson and Dunkleberger 2648).

11The spectacular train wreck scene with dangerous animals on the loose within DeMille's circus epic *The Greatest Show on Earth* worried the pinned down Charlton Heston. As he recalled:

The plan was to have a black panther leap out of the cage and escape through the bent bars. Of course, I was in no position to argue about this because there I was, pinned down to the hilt. So they got the panther, but the animal stayed in the back of the cage, and was disinclined to go anywhere else. "Don't worry, I'll just goose him in the ass with an air hose," said the trainer. "Don't goose him in the ass with an air hose," I hissed between my teeth. So they did. The panther, seething with rage, jumped right on top of my chest, adding to my already considerable discomfort. I decided it was best to play dead, but let me tell you, panthers have horribly bad breath. Lydia [Heston] was on the scene throughout the filming, gripping a still camera that DeMille's stillsman had taught her how to use. "I was watching all of this," Lydia says, "and I was quite terrified." "*You were terrified?*" Chuck laughs. "*I was terrified!*" "Well," Lydia says, "finally they brought the elephant who was supposed to lift the cage that was pinning him down." "Ninya was her name. A very good elephant." "But there was a nail on the ground and it went right through the elephant's foot. She trumpeted and pounded her feet and—" "There I was...dead again!" he laughs. (Heston and Isbouts 44-45)

12Heston survived the terrifying ordeal to forge a glorious career for himself and so he could well afford to laugh graciously in retrospect.

13Other worrying accidents occurred during the filming of *The Ten Commandments* (1956). Frank Westmore, DeMille's makeup artist, had prevented a near fatal accident involving ten aging, wingless aeroplanes that were used to generate a hellish desert sandstorm for the film. As he explained:

One of the extras, who was carrying a burning torch, tripped in his haste to escape the blast of sand and fell into a little girl marching in

front of him. The flaming fuel sloshed out and set her clothing on fire. Luckily I was standing just a few feet from the child. I reached out, jammed my arm inside her costume, and literally tore it off her body. Some of our Egyptian extras were bitten by scorpions blown out of their burrows in the sand, and one man was bitten by an Egyptian cobra. (Westmore and Davidson 159, 162)

14 During the making of the war film, *The Captive*, death stalked the set and claimed an innocent victim. A detachment of soldiers were supposed to storm a heavily locked door, which had to be splintered with live bullets before being broken down with rifle butts. The door was dutifully shot and splintered and then DeMille ordered that blanks be substituted for the remainder of the scene. Consequently,

[t]he soldiers charged the door, battered it with the butts of their guns. Several of the guns discharged their blanks as planned—and then I saw an expression of surprise come over the face of one of the soldiers. He faltered, and then I saw the neat bullet hole in his forehead, and he fell dead at my feet. One of the players had neglected to make the change I had ordered from live ammunition to blank. The muzzle of his gun happened to be pointed squarely at the head of another man. And now that man was dead. It was pure accident of course. No examination of the guns could show which one had killed him, since several of them had discharged their blanks at the same time. No one ever knew, *officially*, who had carelessly omitted to unload one of the rifles.... (DeMille and Hayne 116-17) [my emphasis]

15 In effect, it was accidental death by *de facto* firing squad.

## **2.2 Pain as a By-Product of Production: Expected and Unexpected**

16 Occasionally, crew pain was either an expected or unexpected by-product of DeMille's production desires. For example, whilst filming the ancient Aztec adventure, *The Woman God Forgot* (1917), John "Jack" Gilbert took screenwriter John Lee Mahin to Inceville (the old Ince studio) and pointed out its Aztec pyramid prop and fully expected pain by-product: "It had been made of wood and covered with paper, upon which sand had been glued for a rocklike appearance. The result was stone-colored sandpaper. Jack said the extras were thrown down the sides of the pyramid and a man stood at the bottom with a bucket of iodine and patched them up" (Fountain and Maxim 198). However, serious pain was an unexpected by-product of filming his legal drama, *Manslaughter* (1922). DeMille's desire for realism required stuntman Leo Noomis to crash his police motorcycle into the side of a car at about forty-five miles an hour. Unfortunately, in the attempt Noomis "broke six ribs and his pelvis" (Wise and Ware 43).

17At other times, crew pain was covertly engineered with a tinge of cruelty for additional dramatic effect. For example, whilst filming his Mexican melodrama, *Fool's Paradise* (1921), Conrad Nagel nearly lost his life. This DeMille thriller

involved a scene where one of the heroines, Mildred Harris, tests the love of her two suitors, a prince (John Davidson) and Arthur Phelps (Conrad Nagel), by throwing her glove into a crocodile pit with four of the hungry-looking reptiles slithering about. The one who retrieved the glove would win her love. Of course, Nagel, as the leading man, was the one to descend and battle the beasts. DeMille had obtained the crocodiles from the Los Angeles zoo. They ranged from seven to ten feet in size. Crocodiles away from their native waters are not particularly savage, but these four had not been fed for several days while at the studio.

At rehearsal Nagel lowered himself into the pit and after a brief pause, the crocodiles started toward Nagel. He retreated slowly, brandishing a short spear, but they kept slithering towards him. With his back to the wall, he lunged his wooden spear at the nearest reptile, who snapped it into two pieces. With a shriek he grabbed one of the property vines lining the wall and tried to pull himself out of the pit. His weight was too much for the fragile vine, and he fell flush on his shoulders several feet towards the center of the pit. He jumped to his feet and ran to the opposite side where a rope had been lowered. No sailor ever scaled the side of a ship with more agility as Nagel scaled that wall of stone and concrete.

When he reached the top, he sprawled on the floor without speaking or moving for ten minutes. When he did raise himself on an elbow there was deMille grinning at him. He told deMille to get a substitute for the shooting as he wouldn't go down again for all the picture's receipts. "Fine," replied deMille. "You see, I had the cameraman shooting all the time. You acted exactly as a man would naturally under such circumstances. It's going to be a whale of a scene. I'm sorry you had to do it, but it's good stuff. (Katchmer 717)

18Either DeMille was a cunning filmmaker who had tried to get around potentially vigorous actor protestations, or he actively saved face (and his valuable ogre reputation) by his snappy retort when Nagel refused to repeat the scene.

19Occasionally, crew pain was a by-product of DeMille's over-zealousness desire for realism that stopped a smidge short of fatal seriousness, as happened to Lina Basquette during the filming of his atheism and reform school drama, *The Godless Girl* (1929). Basquette and George Duryea were trapped in the corner of a building by fierce flames.

The fire was chemically treated and controlled by a special, experienced crew. Our hair, clothes, and exposed flesh were smeared with an asbestos coating that fireproofed against actual burning, if not against the unbearable heat. The scene was photographed through a telephoto lens, with De Mille, the cameras, and crew well out of range of the intensity of the heat. Bellowing through his bull horn, C.B. ordered more flames. "My God!" George Duryea gasped, "What's he trying to do? Roast us alive?"...Duryea was justifiably frightened. His terror seemed to calm me and I was able to quip, "Well, Georgie, they say De Mille eats roasted actors for midnight supper." I giggled, "Hope he gets indigestion!" "How can you joke at a time like this?" "More flames!" De Mille roared. "Get them brighter!" "The man's CRAZY!" sobbed Duryea. "Say your prayers, Georgie. Now you know how the hinges of hell feel" "I'm getting out of here, Lina!" "No! George! Stay! You'll spoil the scene!" "To hell with the scene! Are you coming?" "NO!" (Basquette 132)

20Basquette stoically stayed behind because she was trying to curry favour with DeMille. She and Pev Marley, DeMille's chief cameraman, were secretly engaged and they had kept this secret from DeMille, who supposedly would have been furious if he had found out. She explained:

Here was my big chance! De Mille loved gutsiness! The bald-headed-son-of-a-sea-cow would forgive me anything if I pulled off this scene. I heard De Mille shout, "Stay where you are, Lina!" I kept cowering in the corner, improvising action now that my leading man had left me to a fate worse than De Mille's wrath. The cameras rolled on and on. "Fine! Fine! Keep it up, girl!" The Chief sounded like a cheer leader rooting the home-town's quarterback to a touchdown. "Marley! Get another camera on *this!* Get a close-up lens!" A leaping flame struck out at my face. DAMN! This was getting too close! I screamed! But I stayed glued to my corner. "GOOD GIRL! GREAT! Shoot another gust of fire at her! "YELL, GIRL! Throw you [sic] arms up over your head! TERRIFIC! This is SENSATIONAL, eh, Marley? "Yes, Chief, but--" "MORE FLAMES! That's what I call a TROUPER! WHAT A GIRL! She has GUTS! "Cooked guts," I thought, but gave the scene all I could. I was scorched as I'd have been from staying too long under a sunlamp. "Okay! That's it! Take away the fire. CUT! CUT!!"

I could barely stagger to my feet. After one step I collapsed against a prop man as he threw a wet blanket over my steaming body. Pev rushed to me. "Sweetheart! Are you all right?" My burns hurt like hell...On close examination, it was found that my eyebrows and lashes had been singed, and blisters had popped up on my forearms. Otherwise I was not permanently damaged. De Mille came up and slapped me on the back. He was actually grinning. "I'm proud of you,

Girl!” “Thank you, Mr. De Mille,” I said, with all the modesty I could muster through gritted teeth. De Mille then turned to Pev. “She’s much too good for you, Marley. But you both have my blessing.” (Basquette 132-33)

21Interestingly, the DeMillean demand for professional poise that was to be obeyed (almost) automatically nearly caused the serious injury of Dorothy “Dottie” Lamour (playing Phyllis the “iron jaw” circus girl), who hangs from her teeth in *The Greatest Show on Earth*. Over her natural teeth she wore fake teeth which were attached to a wide leather strip. At the end of the strip was a swivel device that hooked onto the rope and she was hauled into the air to perform her twirling stunts without a net. She was coached by circus professional Antoinette Consello, but one day a publicity photographer nearly caused her grief: “That particular photographer had worked with me many times before, and before tripping the shutter, he always reminded me to smile. Now, from force of habit, he called down, “Dottie, smile!” “No!” screamed Antoinette, in a near faint. Had I smiled, every tooth in my head would have come out with the pressure. Slowly, they pulled me up as I froze in a ballet pose” (Lamour and McInnes 184).

22Sometimes life-long suffering occurred because of unexpected production outcomes, as happened to Ray Milland starring in *Reap the Wild Wind* (1942). As he revealed: “I had black, wiry hair and always worried every morning before going on location how to damp it down. The role . . . demanded curly hair. They gave me women’s permanents with the electric curlers and all that. After seven weeks of shooting, I found my hair coming out by the handfuls. Ever since . . . I used a hairpiece” (Parish and Stanke 255), whilst Milland’s co-star John Wayne suffered a chronic inner-ear problem for years after as a result of working underwater in the film (Davis 101).

### **2.3 Personal Discomfort as a Professional Norm: More Real than Real?**

23Given DeMille’s penchant for authenticity, realism, drama, his crews’ discomfort became a professional norm with little room for the weak or the cowardly. For example, Victor Varconi and Leatrice Joy starred in the factory drama, *Triumph* (1924), and were subjected to a number of dangers that Varconi eagerly recounted in his autobiography.

In a climactic scene Victor was to save Miss Joy from a burning building. It wouldn’t have been too bad if it was your average, run-of-the-mill hotel. Say the Ritz in Paris or the Savoy in London. However, this was a “DeMille” hotel. That meant instead of carrying a girl down thirty steps through light smoke, you had to stumble down at least one hundred through a blazing hell. And DeMille was probably somewhere building more steps while you rehearsed. It was also a “DeMille” fire. No wisps of smoke but enough pollution to blanket Pittsburgh. He

made the first three steps before slipping. By the sheerest good fortune he managed to grasp the staircase railing with one hand and hang onto Leatrice Joy with the other. If some people on the set didn't notice the slip, the yelp from the actress indicated she had. *Triumph* had very nearly turned into "*Disaster*." Varconi continued down from the heights and eventually deposited Miss Joy in the arms of a wardrobe woman, his heart pounding mightily. DeMille called him aside, totally unruffled. "That wasn't bad, Vic. But you almost lost control there at the top of the stairs," DeMille said. "When we shoot that scene again, you must be careful. You see, Leatrice is expecting."

The Hungarian had heard too much of DeMille's tricks to fall for this obvious ploy for concerned emoting. He returned to the smouldering staircase, hefted Leatrice onto a healthy Hussar shoulder and once more threaded down the burning pathway. There he was, juggling Leatrice Joy, cursing the boat that brought him to this smoke-filled insane asylum and praying for a breath of fresh air. If only he could live through the first few scenes things might be all right. DeMille loved the scene and never mentioned Leatrice's condition again. Of course, what Victor had suspected was that DeMille was making up the pregnancy to inject more realism in the scene. But twenty years after *Triumph*, he went to a party in New York and Leatrice Joy introduced him to a lovely young woman. "I want you to meet the other woman you saved in your dash down the staircase," she said, "This is my daughter." (Varconi and Honeck 25-26)

24 Similar actor discomfort occurred during the making of the reincarnation tale, *The Road to Yesterday* (1925), starring Joseph "Pepi" Schildkraut, who was the human centrepiece of a dramatic train crash scene. It was so dramatic and potentially dangerous that it scared Joseph's mother into planning premeditated violence against DeMille. Schildkraut reported in his autobiography:

It was a night sequence and the accident was staged in the yards of the Southern Pacific Railway. I sat in a compartment of a car looking out the window at the supposedly passing landscape, while in back of me a steam locomotive was to crash through my car, stopping just one foot behind me. It was not a pleasant feeling to sit there and wait for that crash, hoping the engineer would stop in time. He did stop at the prearranged spot, but we had not thought of the hot steam escaping from the engine. It scorched my face and hands. In spite of my pain I did not move, according to the script presumably dead, until de Mille whistled the all-clear signal and I could climb out of the car. A physician and nurses rushed to my aid. Fortunately, I had not been hurt badly. My parents were among the guests who had been invited to watch this spectacular scene. But not until days later was I told about Mother's reaction. When the locomotive started to move,

Mother suddenly picked up a heavy stick of wood and hid it behind her back. Father looked at her stupefied. "What are you doing?" he asked her. "If something happens to Pepi in this scene," she said quietly, without raising her voice, "I'll kill that guy." And she pointed to de Mille. No, she was never impressed by his domineering pose. (Schildkraut and Lania 184-85)

25Another palpable incident of actor discomfort due to DeMille's need for realism occurred during the making of the castaway tale, *Male and Female* (1919). In this cinematic version of James M. Barrie's famous play *The Admirable Crichton*, Crichton the butler (played by Thomas Meighan) "kills a leopard with a bow and arrow and brings it back to camp for food. De Mille did not like the look of a stuffed leopard so he used a real one which had been chloroformed. During the scene, there were numerous delays and finally a nervous, cursing Meighan pleaded with De Mille to complete the scene as the leopard was coming back to life" (Bowers 691). Meighan's discomfort was very understandable because that leopard had been saved from the Selig Zoo and was going to be destroyed "because it had killed a man" (DeMille and Hayne 205). According to DeMille, the limp, drugged body of the leopard that was languidly draped around Meighan's shoulders "began to talk in his sleep. First cosy sighs and purrings, then low, contented growls, then, as the drama of his dream progressed, more ominous snarls and snorts issued from the head that was muzzling close to Tommy Meighan's ear. If *Male and Female* had not been a silent picture, the microphone would have picked up lines that Jeanie Macpherson never wrote" (DeMille and Hayne 206).

26However, Meighan's discomfort paled in comparison to Gloria Swanson's dilemma within the same film. During the Babylonian flashback scene entitled "The Lion's Bride," DeMille decided to use a real, non-drugged lion positioned on top of prostrate Swanson wearing only a backless pearl dress with peacock headdress. Swanson was "terrified" (Swanson 506). To achieve this dramatic pose: "Canvas was laid on her bare back and the front paws of the lion placed on top. The canvas was gradually eased out from under the animal's paws until they were directly in contact with her flesh. Finally the lion was induced to roar by having whips cracked in its presence" (Wise and Ware 75). As Agnes de Mille reported: "The cameras ground safely from above, and Cecil's heart swelled with pride as the brave and beautiful young girl, his "Little Fella," dared expose her flesh to laceration at his bidding" (*Martha* 57). This was a particularly brave act considering that the same "lion clawed a man to death two weeks after the scene was shot" (Charyn 99). Eventually, the scene became one "of the most famous in the De Mille filmography" (Bowers 691) and ensured Swanson's screen immortality in both the public and DeMille's eyes for he had found another gutsy girl that he could honestly admire.

27His Christian-Roman tale *The Sign of the Cross* (1932) provided another DeMilleian example of animal-related discomfort. As Charles Laughton reported,

Miss [Claudette] Colbert was plainly scared during the climactic scenes of the picture. The entire cast had been terrified. After controlling her nervousness as long as possible, she had given up and burst out with: “Gosh, here’s the corner where we turn to face the cameras. I hope my nose doesn’t itch—or the mascara doesn’t melt into my eye—or that darned leopard behind me doesn’t make a move. Why in heaven’s name does Mr. De Mille have to bring in the zoo on scenes like this? If the leopard moves even a little, I know I’m going to scream.” (Singer 138)

## 2.4 Professionalism as Expected Risk-Taking: Normalising Danger

28 DeMille’s demands for dramatic realism soon evolved into the regular professional need to take extra-ordinary risks on his pictures designed for the paying public’s amusement. For example, in his third version of his western drama, *The Squaw Man* (1918), the stunt woman Audrey Scott substituted Eleanor Boardman in a dangerous horse scene. She worked with fellow stunt man George Sowards who

was lying in a big mud hole. I was told to jump my horse as close to him as I safely could, then to go on past. As there is little that can be done to change a horse’s course once he leaves the ground, this was a dangerous thing to do. Few horses will jump on a person on the ground, but who knows whether this horse was one of those? I rode the horse up the muddy bog a few times, hoping he would see George lying there. As I started the run I planned to control him by holding to a slow gallop. In the instant before I thought he was ready to jump, I pointed his head away from George, lying there in the mud supposedly unconscious. The horse took off under my guidance and landed about two feet from George’s head. George didn’t flinch—he had tremendous control of his emotions—it must have looked to him lying there, in those eternity-like seconds, as if the horse were coming right on top of him. (Scott 47)

29 Sometimes DeMille’s realism was so realistic that it was horrifying. For example, he decided to use crocodiles in a gruesome scene within *The Sign of the Cross* (1932) just as he had done earlier in *Fool’s Paradise* and so he called upon Joe Bonomo, a giant of a stunt man. As Bonomo recounted in his autobiography,

[w]hile this picture was shooting he [DeMille] sent for me one day. “Joe, I’ve got to do something my regular stuntmen are backing away from. They just say, ‘Get Bonomo. He’ll try anything.’” Flattered, I assured him I would, but I almost weakened when he told me what “anything” was. I was to play a Christian martyr, be thrown into a pit of hungry crocodiles and be devoured before the eyes of the Roman spectators. Now I ask you! Before I could answer yes or no, he said,

“Figure it out, Joe, and make it look good.”...gave me a pat on the back and was gone, leaving me standing there, wishing I was back in Coney Island... [Alligators were eventually chosen] ...Alligators were bigger and looked more ferocious, whether they were or not. “But just remember this was your decision Joe, and if an alligator gets you, the studio won’t be responsible.” And with those comforting words he [DeMille] gave me another pat on the back and was gone again.

[T]he cameras were set—we waited until my particular alligator was a little apart from the rest—then two husky Roman soldiers threw me in beside him. As I hit the mud I grabbed him by a front leg—the one away from the side where the cameras were going to shoot the death scene. We wrestled for a moment, and he opened his big lower jaw. I grabbed it with my left hand, held it open and half put my head in his mouth, but from the side away from the cameras. From the camera side it looked as though my head was IN his mouth, then I slammed it shut and held it shut. Had my head actually been in that mouth, I would have been decapitated.

I quickly pulled him down on top of me, kicking my legs in the air so it looked as though the ’gator had me down. I kicked my legs violently just once, then stiffened them out suddenly as though he had gobbled off my head—then I slowly relaxed and fell “lifeless.” As the cameras stopped shooting I slowly got up and walked away. I did WHAT?? I lit out of there as though the Devil himself was on my coat-tail! Actually, the death scene was so realistic that for a moment De Mille, the cameramen, and everyone else thought the world had seen the last of Joe Bonomo. De Mille was torn between delight over having captured a sensational scene—what he should wire my family—and what he would tell the newspapers. What publicity it would make! Then, when I came up alive and smiling, I’m sure he was pleased—that is—I’m reasonably sure. (295, 298)

30Ironically, this alligator scene was so realistic and so frightening that it was cut from the final release version of the film. As Bonomo lamented, “Everyone said it was great footage. As a matter of fact, it was too great. At the preview women fainted at the horrible sight. It was too macabre for public viewing. So one of the greatest alligator-gobbles-man scenes in the history of motion pictures, wound up on the cutting room floor” (300). The world of 1930s America could not handle DeMille’s concentrated realist aesthetics.

31As times changed, moral standards altered and the power of craft unions increased, DeMille had to compromise, especially during the 1950s. However, he did not compromise on dramatic effects, but rather, upon the more ruthlessly enforced safer means of generating his screen tensions. Given his incredible box-office power and personal charisma, many actors were very willing to put

themselves in danger for him. For example, Lucille Ball's agent, Kurt Frings was negotiating for her to play in *The Greatest Show on Earth* because: "DeMille wanted Lucy for the role of a circus performer whose speciality is sticking her head face-up under the raised hoof of a trained elephant! "I thought she was nuts to even consider the offer. DeMille wouldn't permit doubles to be used, and she could be killed or seriously injured if anything went wrong," Kurt Frings said. But Lucy couldn't be talked out of it" (Harris 154).

32However, Lucille became pregnant and missed out on the film role (which went to Gloria Grahame) and she went on to find TV fame as the screwball star of *I Love Lucy*. Her replacement Grahame was just as eager to please DeMille and recalled regarding the elephant scene: "I was petrified. You know there was one retake on the scene. The elephant came so close he left a smudge on my nose" (Hannsberry 182). However, according to John Culhane, "[t]he script called for the trainer to threaten to command the elephant to crush her skull. These are the kinds of risks movie companies are not supposed to take with their actors. De Mille had special effects build a mechanical replica of an elephant's foot, which could be lowered almost to Miss Grahame's nose with no danger of mashing it" (261). Whether it was a prop decoy or not, or whether it was used or not, or which screen take was put in the release film, is problematic.

## **2.5 Miserliness and Rebellion: Managerial Risk-Taking**

33Not only was professional risk-taking expected, but DeMille sometimes demanded too much from his actors when wiser heads should have prevailed. For example, Claudette Colbert starred in the jungle adventure, *Four Frightened People* (1934), which was shot in Hawaii (supposedly a steamy Malaysian jungle) near shark-infested beaches and a nearby jungle full of bugs and spiders, which alone was hell on the cast and crew. As she recalled: "'I had just had an emergency appendectomy before starting that picture, and on the first day I arrived on location—with the nurse from the Good Samaritan Hospital—(DeMille) put me in a swamp up to my shoulders. A real swamp. The nurse yelled, and he said, 'I've waited for her 10 days already,' so in I went. "Two days later I was bedridden with a 104-degree temperature, and I really thought I was going to die" (Quirk 62).

34Even DeMille physically suffered on occasion because of his own production demands. During the making of his ancient world epic, *Cleopatra* (1934), he was arguing with his niece, Agnes de Mille, who reported that he "suddenly yelped, "Ouch!" The leopard which lay beside Cleopatra's bed, drugged on perfume, came to and playfully closed his jaws on Cecil's calf. The beast was kept so doped we all grew careless. Only the thick leather puttee saved Ce's leg. Even so, the teeth grazed the skin. Cecil was amused, but the keeper sternly rebuked his charge and hastened to administer another large dose of Arpege" (*Speak* 265). It was also another good reason for DeMille to keep on wearing leather puttee's even though the fashion faded and there was little practical need to be bothered about bushes, snakes and the long grass of his "primitive" Hollywood days.

35 Potential problems also arose due to DeMille's thrifty-cum-miserly management practices on location shoots. For example, during the filming of his western tale, *The Plainsman* (1936), Iron Eyes Cody reported that it was very boring, tedious work which was not made any better by the obligatory wait between snow storms, the rapidly developing food shortage which could not be alleviated due to closed roads, and the subsequent need for rationing. To make matters worse, the favoured French bread was not rationed equitably, which caused anger and resentment amongst the embittered crew. In the meantime, bored actors and crew enjoyed "rock 'n rye whiskey" and "tepee creeping" whilst grumbling about the shortages, holding powwows, and talking about forming war parties. Cody reported:

I got wind of some trouble brewing over the bread issue and, as the more cantankerous of the Indians were making alcohol a permanent high percentage of their bloodstream, thought it wise to lift the rationing. I told [Arthur] Rossen [sic] how I felt over dinner one night. "I know they don't like it," he snapped. "DeMille likes the fact that were sitting on our asses even less. You don't know the hell I'm getting from him." "We should be filming in a day or two, and the roads will be clear to get more food through. What the hell differences does it make to start giving out more bread now?" "No difference at all. You tell that to DeMille." (Cody and Perry 203)

36 The rationing stayed and the discontent rose to the point where a food raid was being planned by some disgruntled Indians. Even Gary Cooper, the film's star playing Wild Bill Hickok, colluded with Iron Eyes Cody to go on the food raid, suitably disguised as an Indian. With about twenty accomplices, a tree log was used as a battering ram on the food warehouse and armfuls of culinary delights were quickly snatched away to be greedily consumed in an orgiastic feast at a nearby stream. Fortunately, this event was kept from DeMille's knowledge (Cody and Perry 203-9).

37 After the raid, things were momentarily better: "But tension among the Indians and cowboy extras persisted, together with a continued flow of rock 'n rye. The Indians, a little high from downing a few good slugs before mounting their ponies for shooting the wagon train siege, might have actually bopped a few settlers' heads with war clubs instead of pretending" (Cody and Perry 209). DeMille would not have necessarily minded this because it added gritty realism to his film, for which he did not have to officially pay extra danger money. Perhaps, even, this was the *real* reason behind DeMille restricting the rations. In fact, many people suspected that DeMille engineered "accidents" as a deliberate policy for financial reasons on top of his usual authenticity and realism desires.

## **2.6 The Engineering of "Accidents": Applied Miserliness?**

38 Peter Guttmacher reported that former cowboys turned film actors and

stuntmen “passed the word that Cecil B. DeMille deliberately staged unexpected accidents to make his movies more racy” (24). A classic case in point was the clashing horse scene in his medieval Christian tale, *The Crusades* (1935). Although Alfred Hitchcock comfortingly assured that “I have it on very good authority that not a horse was hurt during production of that sequence. The effects were secured by the use of a few horses trained to fall, and skillful editing” (Gottlieb 111), the truth apparently was very different.

39According to Diana Serra Cary (223-24), four stuntmen suffered serious injuries, exacerbated by thrashing horses in the moat, which required X-rays and hospitalisation at Cedars of Lebanon, while all the horses were so badly smashed they had to be destroyed on the spot. To add insult to their injury, extra pay for the stuntmen was requested but denied by DeMille, who thought they had bungled a simple scene which he should not have to pay for. Cary also suspected that DeMille deliberately engineered “accidents” by pushing his stunt people so hard it caused exciting spills. Since they were officially unplanned, DeMille did not have to officially pay for them. As she explained, “[b]ut the worst offender, according to the cowboys, and the man for whom there was no budgetary excuse, was Cecil B. De Mille. The cowboys not only disliked him . . . but they distrusted him as well, for sooner or later on every job where the Gower Gulch men worked with De Mille, he seemed to find a subtle way of squeezing free falls out of them” (Cary 218). This miserly image of DeMille contradicted the stunt woman Polly Burson’s claim regarding *Unconquered* (1947), namely that “DeMille was awful good with his stunt people” (Wiener 29). But given the decade difference between the two films, DeMille may have moderated his excessive adventurism due to potential guilt, union power or financial liability claims.

40Conversely, there is also a strong suggestion that Hollywood horsemen tried to scam DeMille, or did not always earn DeMille’s respect, or satisfactorily meet his high standards of bravery for as DeMille recalled regarding a chariot scene from *The Ten Commandments*:

a delegation of the Hollywood cowboys came to me to protest that it was too dangerous for them to drive down a fairly steep hill where I wanted to get a shot of them descending into the Red Sea. While they were protesting, my teen-age daughter Cecilia happened to ride over the brow of the hill in question. I called out to her, “Ciddy!” Come here,” and without a second’s hesitation she galloped down the hill in full sight of the fearful cow-punchers. That shamed them into making the scene I wanted. (DeMille and Hayne 234)

## **2.7 Bravely Leading from the Front: DeMille as Macho-Man**

41DeMille was certainly *not* above putting himself in dangerous situations to illustrate his point, or demonstrate his leadership, or prove his considerable macho-man bravado (Kozlovic). He was certainly no backseat leader who

demanding of his staff more than he was prepared to do himself. Joseph C. Youngerman amusingly reported: “I guess I was the only prop man De Mille ever had who had as much guts as he did. He was about 15 years older than I was, and one time he walked with a gun and a chair into a cage containing 30 lions. I did the same thing, but I didn’t sleep for two nights” (36). During the filming of *The Plainsman*, DeMille “allowed [Jean] Arthur to practice flicking a pistol from his hand with her twelve-foot (3.6 m) bullwhip. (The actor De Mille was standing in for was a little nervous about it.) Eventually, she got it right . . . and the welts on DeMille’s arm went down” (Guttmacher 58). In fact, his “wrist bore lash marks for days”, but he offered it “as a convenient target” because “I insist upon authenticity” (DeMille and Hayne 320), and so he practised what he preached in his usual macho-man style. Nor did old age weary him in his macho desires. Whilst filming the 1956 version of *The Ten Commandments*, the mid-seventy-year-old DeMille had to literally lead from the front when he “noticed that Yul Brynner was nervous about driving his chariot in front of the army. “Don’t worry—it’s safe, Yul,’ he said. ‘Here, I’ll show you.’ And with that, DeMille got into the chariot, raced the horses in a circle, and parked the chariot right on the spot where it was supposed to be” (Thomas 197).

42DeMille’s personal courage ethic also applied to, and was demonstrated by, his non-acting staff on occasion. For example, in *Samson and Delilah*, Victor Mature had to wrestle a (stunt) lion in accordance with Judges 14:5-6 KJV, but he balked at the prospect so DeMille procured an old Hollywood lion called Jackie, a “reputedly harmless toothless, film veteran himself” (Lasky Jr. 231). But Mature still complained to DeMille saying: “Look, you bald-headed sonofabitch, I don’t want to be gummed to death either!” (Broccoli and Zec 120-21). So, DeMille ordered his scriptwriter Jesse Lasky, Jr., to tackle the lion for Mature’s benefit, which he dutifully did. When it proved safe: “Vic threw off his robe, flexing his famous muscles, and stepped ahead of me towards Jackie and the cameras. What actor could let a writer steal the scene?” (Lasky Jr. 231).

### [3. Conclusion](#)

43It can be concluded from this montage of reported incidents that there will never ever be another Cecil B. DeMille, Steven Spielberg and George Lucas notwithstanding. It is amazing that DeMille managed to survive all the dangers surrounding him, or that he was not sued into oblivion by disgruntled employees, or in some other way come to a sticky end; especially considering Diana S. Cary’s “Kill De Mille!” chapter within *The Hollywood Posse* concerning aggrieved horsemen who plotted DeMille’s “accidental” demise. The director certainly played a significant and colourful role in creating his own indelible PR image, historical legacy, and other factually-based legends of the never-to-be-repeated Golden Age of Hollywood. No doubt, many more examples of his Hollywood (mis)adventures await to be found and retold to new audiences in this post-Millennial age, including the hopeful resurrection of his “accident film” library

that was never to be released (DeMille and Hayne 93). Further research into DeMille studies, the expansion of the above-identified taxonomic categories, behavioural comparisons with other filmmakers (e.g., Otto Preminger, Alfred Hitchcock, Howard Hawks), and further reminiscences about DeMille is warranted, warmly recommended, and already long overdue, as history, art, or entertainment.

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*Unconquered* (1947, dir. Cecil B. DeMille)

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## Notes

**1** Many scholars have spelled Cecil's surname as "De Mille" or "de Mille" or "deMille" (which he employed for personal private use); however, for professional public use, he spelt his surname as "DeMille" (DeMille and Hayne 6). This format will be employed throughout herein unless quoting others, along with "Cecil" and "CB" as appropriate.

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# About the author

## [Anton Karl Kozlovic](#)

Screen and Media, School of Humanities, Flinders University (Adelaide, South Australia)

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