

The Hollywood Studio System



The Hollywood Studio System

- Some have compared the Hollywood studio system to a factory, and it is useful to remember that studios were out to make money first and art second.
- Their product output in 1937 surged to over 500 feature films.
- By the 1980s, this figure dropped to an average of 100 films per year.
- During the Golden Age, the studios were remarkably consistent and stable enterprises, due in large part to long-term management heads--the infamous "movie moguls" who ruled their kingdoms with iron fists.
- At MGM, Warner Bros. and Columbia, the same fabled immigrant showmen ran their studios for decades.
- Power, then, was definitely situated with the studio heads.

Treatment of Stars

- The rise of the studio system also hinges on the treatment of stars, who were constructed and exploited to suit a studio's image and schedule.
- Actors and actresses were contract players bound up in seven-year contracts to a single studio, and the studio generally held all the options.
- Stars could be loaned out to other production companies at any time.
- Studios could also force bad roles on actors, and control the minutiae of stars' images with their mammoth in-house publicity departments.

Niche Studio Styles

- The biggest cache of stars (Greta Garbo, Joan Crawford and Spencer Tracey, among others) and tended to put out a lot of all-star productions, such as *Grand Hotel* (1932).
- Paramount excelled in comedy, having Mae West, W.C. Fields, the Marx Brothers, Bob Hope and Bing Crosby at their disposal.
- Warner Bros. developed a reputation for gritty social realism, ranging from gangster pictures, which were often based on newspaper headlines, to war pictures and Westerns.
- 20th Century Fox forged the musical and a great deal of prestige biographies, such as *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939).

Niche Studio Styles

- Universal thrilled and terrified audiences with the original *Frankenstein* (1931), *Dracula* (1931) and *The Wolf Man* (1941). United Artists, formed by silent greats Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, D.W. Griffith and Douglas Fairbanks, specialized in distributing productions.
- RKO provided a haven for Orson Welles (*Citizen Kane*, *The Magnificent Ambersons*, etc.) and dance supernovas, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. RKO also created *King Kong* (1933). Columbia's major claim was director Frank Capra, including his masterpieces *It Happened One Night* (1934) and *Mr. Deeds Goes To Town* (1936), among others

Censorship

- Despite the early proliferation of film production that occurred during the classical Hollywood period, studios were also challenged by growing governmental censorship efforts that aimed to limit audience-pleasing films filled with unnecessary sex and violence.
- The movies were born as a low form of entertainment, and early on certain groups decried the movies' capacity to lower morals.
- Stars' scandalous cavorting - most notably, Fatty Arbuckle's conviction for a kinky sex-related murder of a model in 1921 - increasingly threatened the public's good graces towards the motion-picture industry.
- By 1922, it looked as if the studios faced imminent government intervention.

Censorship

- Rather than risk government intervention, the studios put William Hays, former Postmaster General of the United States, at the helm of the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors of America organization (MPPDA), in the hopes of adequately self-censoring before the government intervened.
- The MPPDA also assembled a Production Code in 1930, a document that outlined, in excruciating detail, what could not be shown or said in movies.
- Though this system ultimately broke down (the current rating system was adopted in 1968), the mesmerizing power of movies to both exhilarate and corrupt audiences remains a central American preoccupation. For example, Hollywood films are still criticized for the way in which they seduce underage viewers.

The Three Elements

Vertical Integration:

Production – The Making of the Movies

Distribution – The network that brought the films to the public – promotion, run times

Exhibition – The “Big Five” owned their own theatres

Hollywood in the Twenties

- After the first world war and with the destruction of much structure of European cinema, Hollywood established itself as the world capital of the film industry.
- This was also the result of the founding of major studios and the practice of what came to be called **factory film making**.
- The way films were made quickly became standardize as the studios became organized and different people were assigned specific tasks.
- This cut cost drastically because, instead of each film having to have its own crew of various specialists, the different departments - props and scenery, costumes and make-up, advertisement and distribution, scripting and editing - worked on several films at the same time.

Hollywood in the Twenties

- One of the first architects of the American studio system, Mack Sennett, is also responsible for establishing **slapstick comedy** as one of the dominate forms of silent cinema. In 1912 Sennett founded Keystone Studios, where over the years he produced thousands of one and two-reel shorts and hundreds of features.
- A great number of Hollywood figures began their careers at Keystone, including Buster Keaton, Fatty Arbuckle, Gloria Swanson, Carole Lombard, W. C. Fields, and Frank Capra. Sennett's most famous protégé was Charlie Chaplin, who first developed his famous tramp character while working at Keystone.



Buster Keaton in
Steamboat Bill Jr. (1924)



W. C. Fields in *Pool Sharks* (1915)

Hollywood in the Twenties

- By 1917 Chaplin had gained such star-power that he was offered a one-million-dollar contract with First National to produce eight films. This deals enabled him to establish his own studio, where he made all of his films from 1918 until he left the U.S. in 1952.
- In 1919, along with D. W. Griffith, Mary Pickford, and Douglas Fairbanks, Chaplin formed United Artists which was at first solely a distribution company that allow them a way of competing with the bigger studios. With the combined financing of United Artists Chaplin was allowed total control to create a body of work that sophisticatedly deals with the human condition and modern life.



The Big Five



The Jazz Singer, 1927

- The Studio moguls
- The “Big Five” and “Little Three” (Universal, United Artists, Columbia) controlled 95% of the theatres in the US
- This system begins to take root in the 1920s and takes off in the 1930s

Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM)



- Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM)
- Established in 1924 from parent company Loew's Inc
- Leader in stars and glamour
- *Gone with the Wind* and *The Wizard of Oz* (both 1939)
- Judy Garland, Spencer Tracey

MGM's Mighty Roar



- **Metro Goldwyn Mayer** was the biggest and most prolific of the Hollywood studios in the 30s. At one point it was releasing an unbelievable average of 1 feature per week. Its parent company, Loew's, provided the largest exhibition and distribution network in the world. There was no film or star too big for MGM.
- In the Golden Age of Hollywood the studio was run by Louis B. Mayer, who was known to be a ruthless businessman with little concern for art. Despite this, MGM produced some of the most dazzling films of the era, including *Grand Hotel* (1932), *Gone With the Wind* (1939), and *The Wizard of Oz*.

MGM's Mighty Roar



- The force behind *Gone With the Wind* was the famous Hollywood producer, David O. Selznick, who built his own production company. Based on his past successes, including *A Tale of Two Cities* (1935) and *A Star Is Born* (1937), he was contracted by the major studios, who guaranteed the finances of his films.
- Selznick was determined to film the greatest epic ever seen and he started generating a sensation by paying Margaret Mitchell \$50,000 for the film rights for her first novel, *Gone With the Wind*. This was unheard of amount at this time, but it paid off as a good adverting investment, as the book had sold over 1.5 million copies at the time the film's release.
- Selznick also spent \$100,000 doing screen tests to find the perfect Scarlett O'Hara

Recipe For An Epic



The total budget for the film was over \$4 million, topping all previous records. But once again Selznick's gamble paid off. When *Gone With the Wind* was released in 1939 it broke all box-office records. The film continues to generate income for MGM and it is estimated to have grossed \$200 million.

- All-star cast
- Over 50 speaking roles and 2400 extras
- Film in three-strip Technicolor
- Shoot and edit a final cut that runs close to four hours in length. To do this half a million feet of film was actually shot (approximately 85 hours of raw footage).
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- Elaborate costumes: Over 5000 items designed for wardrobe
- Enormous sets: 90 sets built (the 'City of Atlanta' set alone having over 50 buildings).
- For the famous "Burning of Atlanta" scene, the crew actually burned down a bunch of old sets on the studio backlot. The fire was so intense that the local fire department got calls reporting that MGM was burning down. This single scene cost \$25,000 to film.

The Wizard of Oz: Trouble in Paradise



- There was a great deal of fighting between the studio heads and the people involved in the making of *The Wizard of Oz*.
- A total of four directors were involved. The first was Richard Thorpe (lasted two weeks) and then George Cukor (lasted two or three days). Victor Fleming (the credited director) was involved for four months, but was hired away by David O. Selznick to direct *Gone With the Wind*. King Vidor was brought in to finish the production, which took him ten days. This consisted mostly of completing the film's opening and closing sepia scenes that take place on the farm in Kansas.
- Even with the different directors, the film is a stunning piece of art, with wonderful scenes that include flying monkeys, hundreds of dancing munchkins, the Emerald City and the famous Yellow Brick Road.

Paramount

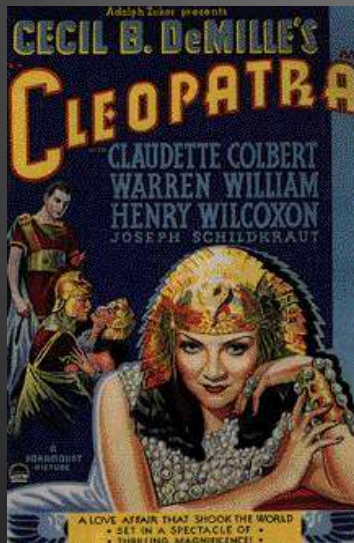


- Established as Distribution company in 1914; acquired by Zukor in 1917, who merges it with his production company
- First “vertically integrated” company
- Marlene Dietrich, Mary Pickford, Bing Crosby

Bible Epics and European Glamour



- Many of the directors and technicians in the early days of Paramount were Austrian and German exiles. Because of this the studio's films had a "European look," being full of dramatic lighting and elaborate set designs.



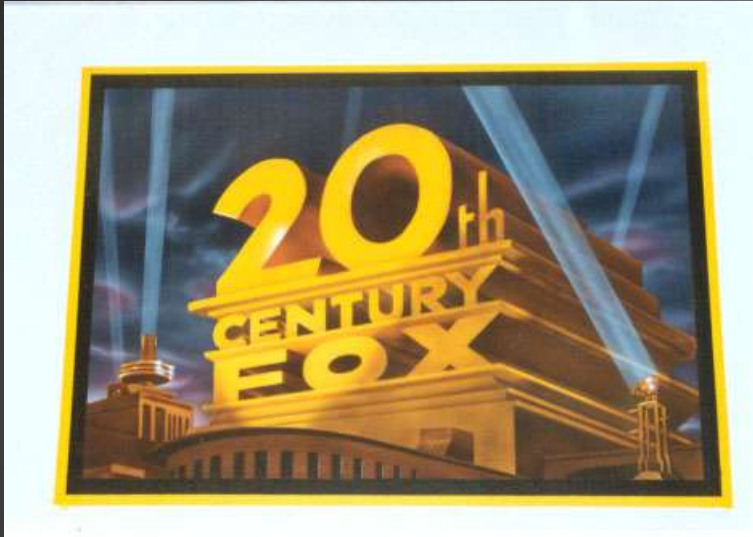
- One of Paramount's main directors was **Cecil B. DeMille**, who, along with D. W. Griffith, invented the Biblical Epic. If you close your eyes and try to imagine different stories from the Bible or from ancient mythology, you will probably picture the films of DeMille.

Ernst Lubitsch and the Comedy of Manners



- In contrast to the epics of DeMille, Paramount also had the German director Ernst Lubitsch under contract, who directed films that featured the glamorous lives of the “jet set.”
- A recurring theme in classical Hollywood film is the lifestyles of the idle rich. Endless films featured New York playboys and dancing girls sipping champagne and dancing the night away in elaborate nightclubs and dark speakeasies.
- The fact that these films continued to be successful at the box-office during prohibition and at the very height of the worst depression in the United States speaks volumes to idea that for most of its audience Hollywood functioned as a great fantasy factory.

Fox (later 20th Century Fox)



- Established in 1913 by William Fox
- Known for musicals and westerns
- John Ford, Shirley Temple, Marlon Brando, Marilyn Monroe

20th Century Fox and The Blockbuster



- William Fox founded Fox Studios in 1914 and began building his empire by buying up chains of movie theatres. This coincided with a production strategy that emphasized big spectacle.
- Fox had early success with this strategy with such films as *Seventh Heaven* (1926) and *What Price Glory* (1926). Both films were box-office hits, but Fox soon found himself locked into this format, as he needed to continue to gamble with big budgets films to offset production cost and the company's real estate holdings.

20th Century Fox and The Blockbuster



- It was under these conditions that F. W. Murnau made his 1927 film *Sunrise*.
- The film cost more than \$1.5 million to make and included one of the largest sets ever constructed in the history of film, consisting of a city boulevard with moving streetcars and village square.
- The sets took up a space a mile long and half a mile wide.

20th Century Fox... Continued



- William Fox continued in this manner until the stock market crash of 1929 brought about the Great Depression.
- In 1930 with a national decline in box-office revenue and the studio close to bankruptcy Fox was ousted from the board of directors.
- Five years later the studio merged with a small independent, 20th Century Pictures, to become 20th Century Fox.
- Darryl Zanuck, a former producer at Warner Bros, was put in charge of studio production.
- One of the first things Zanuck did was to secure the contract of one of the most popular stars in Hollywood, the seven-year-old Shirley Temple.

20th Century Fox... Continued



- It is not surprising that with the Chase National Bank as a major investor and with Shirley Temple being the studio's primary asset, Zanuck favored "safe" films that often carried strong pro-republican sentiment.
- A glaring exception to this policy is John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940).
- It is a stunning indictment of the of financial institutions that profited at the expense of poor farmers by foreclosing on mortgages and loans and forcing hundreds of dispossessed families off the their land.

Warner Brothers



- Established in 1924 by Harry, Jack and Albert Warner
- 1st Sound film – *The Jazz Singer* (1927)
- Assembly line production

Warner Brothers



- Established in 1924 by Harry, Jack and Albert Warner. **Warner Bros** is best known for its innovations in sound technology. In 1925 Warner partnered with Western Electric to develop a sound system. This involved a massive investment as the company had to reconvert all its theatres.
- Two years later, with much fanfare, the studio released *The Jazz Singer*. It was heralded as the first “talking picture” and was a huge international success, eventually grossing 3 million dollars.

Warner Brothers



- The sound was recorded on discs that each had a total playing time equal to one reel of film. Because this form of synchronized sound was rather unreliable, it was soon replaced by sound recorded directly onto film.
- 1st Sound film – *The Jazz Singer* (1927)
- Assembly line production

RKO (Radio-Keith-Orpheum)

- Born from merger in 1928
- Unit production – contracting to directors
- *Citizen Kane, King Kong, Bringing Up Baby*



RKO and the Film Factory

- RKO was formed at the beginning of the sound era. Its parent company was RCA (the Radio Corporation of America), which was headed by the tycoon John D. Rockefeller.
- RKO was partly responsible for streamlining Hollywood film, by instituting “unit production.” This involved RKO contracting independent producers who responsible for making a specific number of films that had a specific style or storyline (e.g. all of RKO’s musicals were made by a single crew on a single sound stage). In this way, different producers were put in charge of different genres.



By doing such things as recycling film footage and sets, and by writing screenplays geared for the different stars contracted to RKO, the studio was able to facilitate mass production.

Citizen Kong

- Even with this factory approach, RKO is not really associated with a particular genre.
- This is partly because the studio kept changing its production policies and did not commit to any one type of film (although it did make a number of Fred Astaire musicals).
- The studio is mostly remembered for producing two classic films: *King Kong* (1933) and *Citizen Kane* (1941).



Citizen Kong

- It was television that killed RKO. First RCA sold off its interests in the studio to concentrate on development of film's strongest rival, television (NBC would soon become the company's new flagship).
- And then in 1953, after another tycoon, Howard Hughes, took control of RKO, it could no longer compete and sold off all its assets. The studio facilities was brought by Desilu Television Productions.



Developments in the 1920s

- The Movie Companies move to Hollywood
- Vertical Integration
- Self-Regulation and Production Codes
- Introduction of Sound



Developments in the 1930s

- The Rise of the Movie Moguls
- Large monopoly on Production, Distribution and Exhibition
- Drop in sales because of Great Depression (25%)
- The introduction of the Double Feature, concession stands, longer hours for employees

Developments in the 1940s

- WWII
- 1946 record year (4 billion tickets)
- Move to suburbs
- Supreme Court Ruling in 1948 forces “Big Five” to sell their theatres
- 1950s introduce television to a mass audience



The Star System

- “The social history of a nation can be written in terms of its film stars”. (Raymond Durnat)
- What is meant by this observation? Who are some stars you could relate this comment to?
- Stars as the direct or indirect reflection of the needs, drives, and anxieties of American society
- From the beginning, the public often fused a star’s artistic persona with his or her private personality

The Star System

- “God makes the stars. It’s up to the producers to find them.” (Goldwyn)
- Golden age of star system coincided with the supremacy of the Hollywood Studio system
- What were some of the areas of control that the studios had over movie stars?
- Issue of types – what are some types of roles



The Star System

- “Whenever the hero isn’t portrayed by a star, the whole picture suffers.” (Hitchcock)
- What are the disadvantages of casting a star?
- Stars as signifying entities – celebrities show up in films already carrying bundles of associative meaning
- What are the distinctions between a personality star and an actor star?



Casting

- Sometimes directors will explicitly make use of public associations to a particular actor
- In *Pulp Fiction*, Tarrantino ressurected John Travolta's career and played on our awareness of Travolta's history in film



Casting



- In *Jackie Brown*, Tarrantino cast Pam Grier, star of many blaxploitation films as the heroine
- Actors can carry cultural baggage or significance that can add or detract from their meaning in a particular film
- What are some other examples of inspired casting?