The Birth of the Feature Film: Crash Course Film History #6

Crash Course: Film History
https://youtube.com/watch?v=HaBmjhmKWTs
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/HaBmjhmKWTs

If you've been joining me from the beginning of our journey through the history of film, you might've noticed something.

None of the films that I've talked about so far look like the movies you see today. Yes, Ryan Gosling got very little play in the late 1800s.

But what I really mean is: We haven't talked much about story. Character. Narrative.

Like, you don't go the the megaplex today, buy a bunch of popcorn, and sit down to watch movies of trains entering stations, or horses running in slow motion. That's because, there was a period in the history of film – a really important and kind of problematic one – when film evolved, from a technical curiosity into a powerful visual storytelling machine. Artists, technicians, and engineers started devising ways of making films longer, more complex, and more narrative.

This is when it began to develop its own language, through the power of editing. And the way films were made, and watched, became more familiar, too. Film studios began to pop up.

Movie theaters proliferated. Systems were created to develop film, shuttle movies from theater to theater, and publicize them to hungry audiences. As film's physical and economic imprint became more stable, so too did its visual language, taking a shape that more closely resembles the movies you see today.

And this was due in large part to the exhaustive work of D. W. Griffith, a failed actor-turned-filmmaker whose own legacy was as complicated and sprawling as one of his films.

It's time to tackle D. W. Griffith and the arrival of the feature film.

[Opening Titles]

As the film industry took root, that whole system began to take a shape that's recognizable to us modern movie-goers.

First, there's the studio. When an entertainment company grows big enough to have its own production facilities – from offices and sound stages to props, costumes, and editing rooms, we call it a studio. The studio is where the films are made by the production company.

Second is the distributor. Its job is to market the movie to its audience, book the films onto screens, and then deliver them to the theaters. So the distributor actually gets the films out into the world.

Thank you, distributor. I like watching movies. Finally, we have the exhibitor.

This is the company that actually provides the film to the audience. Movie theaters and big theater chains are exhibitors, as are streaming services and DVD rental companies. In the first few decades of film production in the US, many of these companies were vertically integrated.

That means that the studio owned the production company. And the distribution company. And even the exhibition company.

While this made a lot of sense for the owners of the studios – to be able to control the process from production to exhibition – it would eventually be ruled a monopoly. At that point, the studios would be forced to break off their distribution and exhibition businesses and open the field to competition. But that came later.

In the early days – from about 1907 to 1913 – the major film studios had tremendous power... like me. Eager to please a growing and ravenous audience, these studios looked to the success that manufacturers like Henry Ford were having with mass production, and tried to make films in a kind of "assembly line" process. Write the film, shoot the film, edit the film, distribute the film, screen the film, and repeat.

As fast as possible, and as often as possible. That's how you make art! It was about quantity, not quality.

If the movies were good, that was cool; but it wasn't the goal. Experimentation of any kind was discouraged. Time was money.

The standard length of these films was about 10 to 16 minutes, or one reel of film. The creative name they came up for these films? "One reelers." But despite the flattening out of quality, this was a period of astronomical growth for the film industry, in the US and western Europe in particular. Demand was through the roof, and filmmakers were working overtime trying to meet it.

They were also stealing. Copyright law was still in its infancy, and – as with books prior to 1893 – most films were considered to be in the public domain. This meant that prints could be stolen and duplicated without legal consequences.

It was kind of the Wild West, and it can be as confusing to make sense of as it was to live through. YEE-HAW! So let's see if we can work our way through it.

The person in the best position to bring some order to the chaos of this burgeoning film industry is our old friend Thomas Edison. Edison claimed that he held the patents on several elements in almost all motion picture cameras and projectors. So he believed he was entitled to a cut of every camera and projector sold, as well as every movie that was made, sold, or screened.

And who was the competitor who most got under his skin? His former lab assistant – and the man who actually invented the first motion picture camera – William Dickson. After he left Edison, Dickson started his own production company called Biograph, which made films using a camera similar to Edison's kinetograph, but different enough to survive a lawsuit.

And sue Edison did. No fewer than 20 times in just a few years. I mean, Edison was suing everybody.

This era became known as the Patent Wars, as gangs of men connected to Edison were known to show up at independent film studios and threaten the filmmakers. Eventually Edison realized that he was wasting time and money in court. Independent producers and distributors were popping up all over the place, and he was left playing this big, high-stakes game of whack-a-mole.

Sounds like fun, but it's not... trust me. So he proposed a truce, and partnered with Dickson's Biograph and eight other major film studios, the country's leading film distributor, and George Eastman, the biggest supplier of film stock. Together, they created the Motion Picture Patents Company, also known as "the Trust," an effective monopoly on film production and distribution in the United States.

Instead of selling films to distributors and exhibitors, studios would rent them out, and retain all legal rights to them. This gave studios control over which films were screened, how often, and in which theaters. Sounds great! ... no it doesn't.

Plus, because Eastman was a member of the MPCC, independent film companies couldn't get their hands on film stock without permission. Which meant that Edison got to decide who could and couldn't make movies! In addition to the stranglehold that the Trust

put on the industry, it also promoted the assembly line process of film production.

As a result, the films themselves by and large became unimaginative, stale, and static. But, the independents refused to go quietly. They banded together to form groups aimed at resisting Edison and the MPPC.

The last and most successful of these was the Motion Picture Distributing and Sales Company. Many of them also decided to move their production facilities as far away from Edison's New Jersey headquarters as possible. Can you guess where they ended up?...

Not Synecdoche. That's right: Hollywood, California, which had the added benefits of year-round sunshine and a diverse and handy assortment of natural landscapes. And earthquakes.

That's not a benefit it's just something they had. Finally, in 1918, the United States Supreme Court broke up the MPPC and ordered film studios to sever their distribution and exhibition branches, ending Edison's run as American film's great gatekeeper. While all this was going on, films themselves were struggling to change, and though no one knew it yet, features were on the way.

A feature film is a movie with a running time long enough to be considered the principal film in a program. Usually, features clock in at between 70 and 130 minutes. When Edison's posse was in control, the MPPC strictly forbade films longer than one reel, or 10 to 16 minutes.

So filmmakers began looking for creative ways around the length restriction. Some would make two reelers and then show them in a serial format – the first reel this week, the second next week. Sort of like what they did with the last Harry Potter book.

I'm still not over that. Three films in particular paved the way for features by convincing studios that longer films could be commercially successful. The first was The Crusaders, an Italian film from 1911 that was four reels long.

The second was another 4-reeler, a French film called The Loves of Queen Elizabeth, that starred megastar Sarah Bernhardt and made a ton of money in 1912. And finally, Quo Vadis, a 1913 Italian spectacle that boasted huge crowd scenes and big special effects, and ran nine reels in length! And working steadily through all of this was a director named D.

W. Griffith. The son of a Confederate colonel, Griffith was a failed stage actor who happened to be on an Edwin S.

Porter set one day and fell in love with film. Within a few months, he was directing one reelers at an astonishing rate – he would go on to make more than 450 in less than a decade. What's even more impressive, he was able to integrate an actor's understanding of nuance and character with the film grammar laid down by pioneers like Porter.

He made incredible innovations in how a film could be shot and cut. And most importantly, he grounded all of his new techniques in the service of character and story. For example, Griffith is credited with innovating the close-up – cutting to a shot of a character's face at a moment of high drama.

This also required – and rewarded – a more subtle style of acting than film actors often delivered. Can we cut to a close up, Nick?

Nick: No. Drama, right? Are we in a close up?

Nick: No.

Why? He used insert shots – close-ups of objects or characters' hands – to draw attention to symbolic props or key narrative moments. He used increasingly extensive flashbacks to add depth to characters and their stories. And he found ingenious ways to use cross-cutting to engage the audience on a deep level, to make us empathize with his characters, to really care about what was happening to them. It's remarkable how modern his films feel today. So I'm gonna remark on it. Sure, they're in black and white, and they're short, and they don't star Captain America or Vin Diesel's car or an Oscar-worthy bucket of tears. But the way the shots are framed and arranged hasn't changed all that much since Griffith. And Griffith's biggest achievement was the film Birth of a Nation.

This is the film that paved the way for feature-length films to become the gold standard. It was successful enough – both financially and in terms of its massive scope mixed with its detailed attention to character, emotion, and story – that audiences demanded more like it, and would no longer be satisfied with a program of half a dozen one reelers. Birth of a Nation is also a deeply racist film. It offers an extremely sympathetic view of white southern former slaveholders under Reconstruction. The heroes at the end of the film are the reborn Ku Klux Klan, who ride across the countryside, racing to save poor white southerners besieged by mobs of murderous former slaves. It's stunningly effective in its use of cross-cutting and screen direction; it's also profoundly disturbing in its message and imagery. This is the double-edged sword of D. W. Griffith: a master of cinema on one hand, and an apologist for a legacy of hatred, violence, and persecution, whose work inspired actual hate groups to reconstitute in this country. The film faced protests at the time, particularly in places like Chicago, where people of all ethnic backgrounds objected to its twisted view of history and race relations. And there was a very small but vibrant underground African American film industry at the time that responded to the racism of Birth of a Nation with films of their own. Most famous was Oscar Micheaux's Within Our Gates, released in 1920, the story of a mixed-race school teacher who encounters violence and prejudice as she tries to make a better life for herself. The most successful African American filmmaker of the time, Micheaux examined the racial climate in the United States in a way that's as nuanced and searing as Griffith's is bigoted and inaccurate. Whatever else it is, Birth of a Nation marked the end of the Silent Shorts era, and challenged film studios to allow filmmakers to make longer, more complex films that told grand stories with unique characters and powerful emotions. The pictures may have moved before Griffith, but now the audience was moved too.

Today we talked about how the film industry is divided up into studios, distributors, and exhibitors – and how all those systems used to be controlled by the same people. Then, we discussed the independent filmmakers who resisted the monopolies, started up Hollywood, and began creating longer feature films instead of one reelers. We introduced D. W. Griffith who was an innovator and master of film language, but his biggest achievement was a film cloaked in hate and racism.

And next time, we'll talk about how the violence and politics of World War I influenced cinema, and how filmmakers began to experiment with horror, psychological twists, and the distortion of reality. Crash Course Film History is produced in association with PBS Digital Studios. You can head over to their channel to check out a playlist of their latest amazing shows, like Shank's FX, Indie Alaska, and Deep Look. This episode of Crash Course was filmed in the Doctor Cheryl C. Kinney Crash Course Studio with the help of these one reelers and our amazing graphics team, is Thought Cafe.