# The Silent Era: Crash Course Film History #9

Crash Course: Film History
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Hollywood, here we come! The glamour! The celebrities! The scandals! I'm not talking about "Bennifer" or "Brangelina." Are they still things?

*Off-camera voice*: "No."

Ah. I'm kind of out of touch. But I'm not out of touch with the Golden Age of Silent Cinema when stars rose and fell. Studios perfected the mass production of films, and American movies dominated the global film market.

In some ways, it was very different from the Hollywood we know today. Movie studios wielded enormous power. They kept stars and directors under tight control. The movies they made were silent. And a ticket would set you back a whopping 10 or 25 cents.

On the other hand, a lot of the patterns set during this time still seem awfully familiar today. Studios marketed films on the power of their stars. Genres like gangster movies and romantic comedies took hold and flourished, and audiences craved gossip about the private lives of celebrities.

To understand the world as it is, sometimes you have to go back to where it all began. And for Hollywood, that's the silent era.

Film was going in a lot of different directions after the first World War. In Germany, filmmakers drew on the expressionist movement to manipulate their films' mise en scene, creating ground-breaking horror films. In Russia, Soviet filmmakers were using cinema to perfect the art of propaganda through revolutionary editing techniques. And in the US, the Hollywood Studio System was positioning itself to dominate the rest of the world.

Within film studios, the entire filmmaking process took place, from conceiving, writing, and shooting the films, to marketing and distribution. The studios had chosen California for its film-friendly sunny weather, its proximity to all kinds of terrain, and its distance from Thomas Edison, who spent much of the 1910's fighting for control of the American film industry from his base in New Jersey.

In the early days of the Silent Era, three film studios ruled them all: the Famous Players Lasky Corporation, which would eventually become Paramount Pictures, Loew's Inc., which began as a theater chain, and First National Pictures. Not only did these three dominate the marketplace, they exercised near complete control over the creative and personal lives of their stars, writers, and directors. Filmmakers often had to choose between following the studio's orders, or abandoning their careers.

Then, four of the most powerful figures in early silent cinema came together to create their own film studio. In 1919, two directors, Charlie Chaplin and D.W. Griffith, and two stars, Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford, founded United Artists. Their goal was to give filmmakers more control over their films, and a greater percentage of the profits. Cha ching!...is what I assume they would say. Of course, not many filmmakers could afford to go out on their own like that, so the contract system would continue for several more decades.

In 1924, the most powerful studio emerged when Loew's purchased Goldwyn Pictures and Louis B. Mayer Productions to create Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, better known as MGM, which lead to MGM Studios, which lead to Tower of Terror, and if you've been on Tower of Terror, that's a pretty fun time.

This is a process that would get repeated throughout the 1920's and 1930's as studios merged, or sold, or split apart, probably because it was the prohibition and they didn't have anything else to do. By the end of the era, most American films were being made at studios whose names you might recognize from the multiplex today. Not only United Artists and MGM, but also Warner Brothers, Fox, Universal, and Columbia Pictures.

Now, while the corporate structure of these companies kept changing, the process by which they were making films was becoming remarkably stable and efficient. Unlike me. The major studios became very good at churning out large-scale commercial movies with mass-appeal.

One of the leading innovators in setting up the way studios worked was a man named Thomas H. Ince. Like D.W. Griffith, Ince came to film as a failed actor. He directed his first film in 1910, and by 1913 he was making as many as 150 two reelers a year.

His biggest impact on film came by applying the lessons of mass-production to the actual making of movies. Prior to Ince, most films were overseen by a director-cameraman, a single person who conceived the story, worked with the actors, and operated the camera.

Ince broke those roles into separate jobs: a screenwriter to conceive the story and write the script, a director to make creative decisions on set and work with the actors, an editor to assemble the footage, a producer to supervise the project from inception to final cut, and a studio head to oversee the entire studio. While other filmmakers had played around with these roles, it was Ince who standardized them into a system, a system still used today.

By 1912, he earned enough money to buy a ranch west of Hollywood, where he built his own studio, a place he called Inceville. Yep. It was here where the first permanent exterior sets were built, made to resemble far flung locations like a cowboy saloon, a little Swiss street, or a Japanese village. And as Ince worked to define the roles and streamline the means of production, he was able to triple the output of his studio. Though he died quite young in 1924, Ince's impact on film production was thorough, wide-spread, and lasting.

Now, Mack Sennett, another early film mogul and one-time partner of Ince, was responsible for discovering a whole slew of film legends whose names you might recognize. People like the Keystone Cops, "Fatty" Arbuckle, Gloria Swanson, Carole Lombard, W.C. Fields, and the great Charlie Chaplin.

Let's talk a little bit about Charlie Chaplin. He was born into poverty in England in 1889. He went into acting, signed with a prestigious Vaudville touring company, and set off to America at age 19. A film talent scout spotted him there, got him a hired by Sennett, and the rest is history...that we're going to talk about, because we're talking about film history.

Smart, curious, and driven, it didn't take long for Chaplin to develop his iconic tramp persona and begin directing his own films. After finishing his first film contract, Chaplin struck an extremely lucrative deal with Chicago based Essanay Studios to make 14 short films. While at Essanay, he found ways to combine his finely-tuned sense of empathy and his recognizable tramp character with a growing ability to make audiences laugh through both physical comedy and increasingly clever story lines.

In fact, he was so popular that by the time his Essanay contract was up in 1915, he negotiated an almost unprecedented salary of $10,000 per week with another studio, the Mutual Film Corporation. They also paid him a signing bonus of $150,000, the equivalent of about $3.5 million today. Cha ching!...is what they would have said at the time.

The movies Chaplin made with Mutual brought him international

stardom. They marked the first time his focus on the poor verged into social criticism, a place silent comedies rarely if ever went. True to his roots - and despite being one of the highest paid people in the world - Chaplin's films often focused on the gentle, accidental heroism of the downtrodden.

Time and again, he made the powerful the butt of his jokes, and displayed tremendous empathy for the poor and the humble. Then, in 1919 at age 30 he co-founded United Artists in an effort to exercise greater control over his films. I'm 36. I better get moving.

What followed was a string of classic movies that rank not only among Chaplin's best, but among the best film comedies of all time. The Kid, his first feature film and smash hit, The Gold Rush, City Lights, Modern Times, and his controversial take-down of Adolph Hitler, The Great Dictator. His later career would be hampered by legal problems and socialists' sympathies, which would land him on the infamous post-war blacklist and keep him from making films.

But at his height, no one benefited more from the silent era studio system than Charlie Chaplin, as a director, making a lot of films quickly and efficiently, and as an actor, commanding enormous salaries and unheard of creative control.

And he wasn't the only one to turn the system to his advantage. Actor/Directors like Buster Keaton, "Fatty" Arbuckle, and Harold Lloyd achieved great success making their own short and feature-length comedies. Stars like Mary Pickford and Gloria Swanson parlayed their celebrity into tangible behind-the-scenes power.

Now as film became more and more central to popular culture, some people started to get nervous. They worried that movies posed a real threat to public morality. They saw films promoting materialism, cynicism, and sexual license. This would be a debate that would come up again and again in American culture about movies or music or video games, until now when we've solved all those problems. Is the medium causing society's problems, or just reflecting them?

A few real-life Hollywood scandals at the time tipped the scales, bringing on the first real self-censorship of American cinema. The gossip press fed readers stories about stars dealing with addictions, affairs, and worse. The most famous of these centered around "Fatty" Arbuckle, who was accused of the rape and accidental death of an actress named Virginia Rappe. Although he was ultimately acquitted after three highly-publicized trials, the scandal itself all but ended Arbuckle's career, and left an opening for a government crackdown on immorality in films and the film business.

Rather than wait for Congress to get involved, the major players in the film industry banded together to form the MPPDA: the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America. They hired a retired Postmaster General named Will Hays, a conservative evangelical, to prove they were serious about cleaning up their act.

And that's exactly what Hays did in 1930, putting together the Motion Picture Production Code, also known as the Hays Code, a catalogue of things filmmakers could and couldn't show on screen. Fun. The code also suggested a strategy called Compensating Values. The idea was that films could show characters engaging in vice for most of the film, as long as virtue triumphed in the end.

No one employed this technique better than director Cecile B. Demille. He was a master at giving the audience all the vice in excess they could handle for the first three-quarters of the movie before virtue came out on top.

Other filmmakers found their own ways around the Hays Code. German director Ernst Lubitsch came to Hollywood in 1922, and made a successful series of witty sex comedies that relied on suggestion and innuendo rather than skin. For many of these filmmakers, however, the Hays Code was about to become the least of their worries.

A seismic event was poised to shake up Hollywood, and not every filmmaker of the silent era was going to come out the other side with their career intact. The world was about to get its first taste of synchronous sound, and it tasted good...uh maybe. I don't know.

Today, we explored the Silent Era, the first golden age of Hollywood filmmaking. We learned about the innovations of Thomas Ince, and the rise of the American film studio. And, we discussed some of the most important Silent Era filmmakers and how their scandals both real and imagined lead Hollywood to institute industry standards governing the content of their films.

Next, we'll tackle the biggest shift in the history of film yet, as movies find their voice(s).

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