The Golden Age of Hollywood: Crash Course Film History #11

Crash Course: Film History
https://youtube.com/watch?v=6KfBNrHU_SY
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/6KfBNrHU_SY

When I say Hollywood, you probably think of big-budget movies, star-studded premieres, and studios with giant backlots pumping out film after film.

Most of those associations really began sometime between the 1920s and the 1950s. Once audiences could hear actors speak, listen to pre-recorded musical scores, and enjoy sound effects, film cemented its place as the main medium for mass communication, art, and commerce.

And as important as Hollywood was during the Silent Era, nobody could compete after the arrival of sound. New major film studios emerged, each with their own style and favorite celebrities: before George Clooney and Jennifer Lawrence, there was Clark Gable and Janet Leigh. This cascade of films led to more technological innovations, too, like color film and the widescreen formats we still use today.

This was the Golden Age of Hollywood. [singing] Hollywooood ba-ba-da-ba-d– OK, I'll stop.

[Opening Music Plays]

After the Stock Market Crash in October of 1929, most parts of the American economy took a real hit. But not Hollywood. And at the height of the Great Depression in 1933, roughly a quarter of the American workforce couldn't find a job, and millions of others were barely making ends meet.

So you'd think that the last thing people would do with their hard-earned money was go to the movies. And yet, the Depression was one of the best things to happen to the American film business. That's depressing...

In fact, more films were released by the major studios during the 1920s and '30s than any other decade – averaging about 800 a year, compared to less than 500 per year today. It was cheaper to go to the movies than a play or a concert, and cinema became a means of escape. As we've talked about, films are an illusion of reality.

And that illusion was super attractive to people whose day-to-day reality was often pretty bleak. Genre films became more popular – things like gangster films, musicals, Westerns, and screwball comedies. Anything to take people's mind off their own struggles and celebrate good old American values of optimism, resilience, ambition, and courage.

At the height of Hollywood's Golden Age, five film studios ruled the town. All five were vertically-integrated, just like the major studios of the Silent Era. They each had their own distinct reputations and focused on different kinds of films.

First up, we have Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer – or MGM – which was the biggest studio in the 1930s. Louis B. Mayer ran MGM with his business partner, Irving Thalberg.

Mayer was the savvy businessman of the two; he approved the budgets and oversaw the distribution and marketing. Thalberg, on the other hand, was a former producer, and the mind behind the stories and actual production. Together, they made slick, big-budget musicals, comedies, melodramas, and literary adaptations – sparing no expense on sets, costumes, extras, and the biggest movie stars. Think of *The Wizard of Oz*, *Gone with the Wind*, and *Mutiny on the Bounty*. I'm talking opulence, people!

Next is Paramount Pictures, which was known as the most "European" studio, because they lured a lot of filmmakers away from Germany and the UK. They also gave these filmmakers more leeway to put their own stamp on movies – hits like *Shanghai Express*, *The Sign of the Cross*, and *Morocco*.

Our third player, Warner Brothers, branded itself as the studio of the working class. They churned out low-budget melodramas, gritty gangster movies like *The Public Enemy* with James Cagney, and musicals set in the Depression like *Footlight Parade*, with James Cagney.

The fourth major studio was 20th Century-Fox, which made its reputation thanks to its chief director and its most profitable star, not James Cagney. That director was John Ford, who won back-to-back best director Oscars for *The Grapes of Wrath* and *How Green Was My Valley*, while Shirley Temple sang and danced her way through a string of wholesome hits.

And lastly, RKO was the home of the extremely popular Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers musicals. Can I do a dance number Nick?

Nick: Nope.

RKO also took a lot of chances, producing everything from Howard Hawks' screwball comedy *Bringing Up Baby*, to the 1933 version of *King Kong*, and one of the most influential films of all time, *Citizen Kane*. Never heard of it.

Now, all five of these studios dominated the production, distribution, and exhibition of films – for a while. But a US Supreme Court Case in 1948, along with the coming of television, signaled a major turning point. In the case, known as United States versus Paramount Pictures, the government argued that the major studios were in violation of antitrust laws. In other words, by owning both the production studios and the movie theaters, they were exercising an unfair monopoly and stifling competition. The Supreme Court agreed, and forced the studios to break up their businesses, sell their theaters, and focus on just production and distribution. Hollywood continued to lead the global film market for another 10 or 15 years, but that near-complete control over the industry was ending. We'll talk a lot more about this next time.

Now, the Golden Age of Hollywood saw some major technical leaps in the film business, too, including color. Filmmakers had been experimenting with color since the dawn of cinema. The earliest techniques involved hand-tinting individual frames, a painstaking process that had to be repeated for each print of each film. Not great. Over the next few decades, engineers found ways to use stencils to tint films much faster. They also developed other means of adding color, like bathing the film stock in dyes that fit the mood of the scene, called toning – red for violence, blue for sorrow, green for... grassy. By the mid-1920s, nearly 90 percent of Hollywood films were either tinted, toned, or some combination of the two.

Which was great, except the color itself looked wildly artificial. And once Hollywood converted to sound-on-film technology, the tinting interfered with the film stock's ability to record proper sound. Crash Course Film History, tl;dr: it's hard. So filmmakers needed to figure out color cinematography – capturing color with the image. As early as 1861, a Scottish physicist named James Clerk Maxwell – who we talked about in Crash Course Physics (well, I didn't, Shini did) – built the foundations of color photography. The light all around us is made up of a spectrum of different wavelengths, some of which we see as visible colors. Knowing this, Maxwell figured out that all those colors can be derived from some combination of red, yellow, and blue. Beginning in 1906, artists and engineers tried for 15 years to use this technology to achieve color cinematography. But, much like me in high school, they kept failing. Their experiments were unreliable or too expensive.

Then along came Technicolor. In 1922, the Technicolor Corporation saw its first success with a special beam-splitting camera that could make two separate negatives. The light entered the camera and was split into different wavelengths, just like how sunlight hits a prism and splits into a rainbow. Half continued straight ahead, while the other half was diverted 90 degrees, to produce two film negatives. These negatives were chemically treated, dyed either blue or red, and cemented together. Then you could run that final film strip through a regular projector, and voilà! Even though they weren't spot-on, the colors in these films were more reliable and accurate than any of the earlier attempts. And while that beam-splitting camera was expensive, at least theaters didn't have to buy new projectors to show color films.

Over the next decade, Technicolor expanded its system into a three-color process, with a camera that recorded the original image onto three separate negatives – red, blue, and green. And by 1932, this process created such high-quality, vibrant results, that Technicolor ended up with a virtual monopoly on color film for the next 20 years. Throughout the 1930s, filmmakers and studios gradually began playing around with Technicolor. By the middle of the decade, producer David O. Selznick turned a corner by casting big stars in color films for the first time. And as the 1930s came to a close, Hollywood released a series of high-profile hits that proved color was here to stay.

These films that used Technicolor ranged from the Errol Flynn swashbuckler *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, to classics like *The Wizard of Oz* and *Gone with the Wind*, and even animated features like Disney's *Snow White* and *Pinocchio*. Advances in color cinematography would continue to develop over the years, but the basics stayed the same until film stock gave way to digital video in the 21st century.

Now, a third technical element of cinema was standardized during the Golden Age of Hollywood. It's something called aspect ratio – that's the ratio of the movie screen's width to its height. Back in 1932, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences – the folks who give out the Oscars – established a standard aspect ratio of 4:3, which looks like this. Also known as the Academy aperture, this ratio isn't a square, but it's closer to a square than we're used to these days. That's because most movies we see today are shot in an aspect ratio of 16:9, which looks like this. That's more like it! We often call this widescreen. And so much film and TV is shot at this ratio that most new screens are built to fit it. But those are just two possible aspect ratios.

Back in the 1950s, some filmmakers experimented with an extreme widescreen ratio called Cinerama. This process involved shooting a film with three separate synchronized cameras hooked together in an arc, and projecting it from three synchronized projectors. It's weird. The screen was shaped in a similar arc, kind of wrapping itself around the audience. Y'know, for a real immersive experience. And the final aspect ratio of Cinerama was about 8:3, which looks like this. The most famous film shot in Cinerama was the western epic *How the West Was Won*. But, as you can probably guess, this process was too expensive and complicated to achieve widespread use. And it was bad for performer's necks.

On the heels of Cinerama came CinemaScope. Rather than shooting with multiple cameras, CinemaScope utilized something called an anamorphic lens. This was a special lens for cameras that recorded a wider image, but squeezed it laterally so that everything would fit onto standard 35mm film stock. When the film was projected, a similar lens attached to the projector would "unsqueeze" the image, expanding it back out, and projecting it up onto the screen. The result was an impressive 2.55:1 aspect ratio. Audiences got their first taste of it in the 1953 biblical epic *The Robe*. And by the end of that year, every major Hollywood studio except Paramount was licensed to make CinemaScope films. Over time, the ratio was reduced to 2.35:1, and in the mid-1950s, the American film industry had almost entirely converted to shooting anamorphic widescreen films.

It took some time for filmmakers to adjust to widescreen shooting. When you move from an aspect ratio of 4:3 to 16:9, that's a whole lotta extra room to fill. So what do you do with it? Well, we fill it with, like, knickknacks and stuff. Close-ups, especially of faces, became difficult to frame, while landscapes got easier. At first, widescreen films rewarded composition and long takes over editing. Filmmakers built their stories by filling the frame, rather than cutting to new images. Genres like the Western, the musical, and large-scale epics all lent themselves to these kinds of world-building possibilities. In the end, the technical advancements of sound, color, and an aspect ratio that could surround the audience made the powerful Hollywood studios the center of the cinematic universe from the late 1920s to the late 1950s. It was a Golden Age whose echoes are felt in our films today.

Today we learned about how the the American studio system took advantage of sound film and the Great Depression to achieve global dominance. We discussed the development of color cinematography and what it meant for filmmakers and film audiences. And we examined aspect ratio, and how the move to widescreen cinema affected films being made. Next time, we'll learn about how filmmakers in Europe and the United States reacted against the formulaic movies coming out of Hollywood and created a new wave of gritty, irreverent, and innovative cinema.

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