

The Silent Era

The silent film era extends from the late nineteenth century, with the earliest work by the Lumière Brothers in France and Edison in America, into the early 1930s, when silent film gave way to “talkies.” However, most scholars situate the silent era in America during the 1910s and 1920s, when it matured as a tightly organized industry privileging the multi-reel feature film after the waning of the nickelodeon, the move to Hollywood from earlier production headquarters in New York and New Jersey, and the decline in competition from European filmmakers caused by World War I. D. W. Griffith's twelve-reel feature *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) was a major commercial and cinematic success showcasing many of the directions the industry was to take into the 1920s.

While the term “silent” in silent cinema refers to the lack of synchronized sound, early cinema was far from silent in other respects. From the nickelodeon era into the 1920s, films were accompanied with live music, ranging from single pianos or reed organs to large orchestras, depending on the nature and location of the venue—which also ranged from small store-front theaters to thousand-seat picture palaces. Some studio releases came with specifically-composed musical scores, and almost all with cue sheets that suggested musical themes for specific scenes. Often, solo musicians more or less expert at reading the visual cues of the film improvised a score on the spot, and exhibitors also drew on large published collections of sheet music appropriate for stock scene types. Outside of musical accompaniment, theaters in the silent period could employ “descriptive talkers” or “lecturers” who narrated the film, sometimes from printed matter of varying degrees of specificity. Other lecturers improvised dialogue not included, for instance, on intertitles. In urban immigrant communities, this feature was represented as a means of self-improvement, and it continued to be employed whenever visual narrative clarity was compromised. As the feature film became the central industry product, the use of lecturers declined and the use of title cards for dialog became more realistic, gradually supplanting exposition cards. In 1925, Warner Brothers created the Vitaphone process, a sound-on-disc system that began the end of silent film, releasing *The Jazz Singer* in 1927; however, silent films would continue to be made into the 1930s, and Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936) is sometimes described as the last silent film. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine the cinematic experience during the silent period because of individualism in respect to the varieties both of aural accompaniment and projection speeds. Though the standard projection speed was 16fps, exhibitors would often project films faster or slower than taking speed to ensure the program began and ended on time.

As a medium derived from still photography, vaudeville, and theater, silent film adapted many of their presentational methods; as the period progressed, however, the industry worked diligently to become more respectable, seeking to dissociate its product from that peddled by vaudeville houses and nickelodeons. While older venues and distribution methods persisted, grand picture palaces of the silent era dramatized the goals of the uplift movement—to create a safe, clean, family-friendly environment for an orderly, middle-class audience in an economical fashion with vast seating capacities, elegant lobbies, and impressive orchestras. Despite the rise of the picture palace, however, smaller theaters were more prevalent, with most having a seating capacity of under 500—

the Roxy theater in New York, which boasted 6,214 seats, was opulent indeed, but it represented an extreme case. At the dawn of the 1920s, there were approximately 15,000 theaters in the United States, charging between 10 and 25 cents admission; of that number, more were in rural settings than in urban. Theaters exhibited varied entertainments in a balanced program, which grew in length over the period. A typical mid-1920s bill might include combinations of a musical overture, a news weekly, a lantern slide show, a live revue, a brief comedy or novelty film, and a feature film. Exhibitors sought to begin and end the programs at specified times, which sometimes meant, in addition to speeding up projection, dropping items from the bill or even cutting reels from the feature, to accommodate continual groups of audiences. As the number of larger theaters increased, there was less need for rapid audience turnover and the multi-reel feature film grew into the central attraction.

The evolution of the film industry's structure during the silent era was complex, and it is marked by new refinements in cinematic production, distribution, and exhibition that brought about the feature film. The tenor of the film industry in the silent era is presaged by development of The Motion Picture Patents Company (1908-1918), a licensing and trade association set up among established production companies to discourage competition, chiefly by controlling the availability of raw film stock—though it also consolidated resistance among the independents. Throughout the period, the industry worked toward standardization; contracts, patents, and licenses bound the industry into a tight network. Studios affiliated with the MPPC controlled the distribution of their films—generally short one- to three-reel pictures—through The General Film Company. Controlling distribution enabled established east-coast companies to achieve a monopoly. These early efforts to control the film industry also included the development of the film exchange, a commercial arrangement between patent companies and exhibitors in which exhibitors rented their films—which changed almost daily—at set prices. In the early silent period, this established exchange system was not calibrated for multi-reel features; exhibitors, exchanges, and production houses themselves were reluctant to push multi-reel films both because of audience expectations and the costs associated with them. Within the existing system, multi-reel films were released one reel at a time, ensuring quick audience turnover but retarding the development of complex narratives. Multi-reel features would typically be shown as special attractions or outside of the established distribution and exhibition system, and states rights distribution practices evolved to allow local exchanges to contract with major distributors for territorial exhibition rights. Longer films were exhibited in this fashion, because they could travel throughout a territory as a special attraction until the audience pool was exhausted. Thus, early multi-reel films tended to emerge from independent production houses or European film studios, which didn't experience the same limitations as mainstream American outfits. While distributors had separate arms specializing in features, as more large first-run theaters were constructed and demand increased, longer films became the order of the day. The devastation caused by the First World War had all but decimated the mainstream European industry, and American companies, often building on already existing import agreements, began to compete vigorously for prestige pictures.

Independent American houses and European companies realized that to compete they

must be able to distribute their products as well, and they set up their own corporations; ultimately, a small number of these corporations would gain tight control over the industry. Carl Laemmle's move from the east coast to the west in 1915, where he set up Universal City, allowed his company to escape the patent and licensing wars in some measure, and production houses began cropping up in what was to become Hollywood. Laemmle launched several important silent stars, though he for some time resisted the feature film movement. Despite the success of some early Universal features, like *Traffic in Souls* (1913), it was only in the 1920s that Laemmle sought to elevate the company's profile. The assembly-line methods of Universal City meant harsh working conditions, and many talented actors were easily lured away. Nonetheless, the star system was emerging and the prestige film, the star's vehicle, was on the rise. In 1914, Adolph Zukor released the New York-based Famous Players films through a newly-created corporation, Paramount, which soon merged with the Lasky Company to become Famous Players-Lasky; Paramount Pictures quickly dominated the industry as the MPPC weakened, benefiting from Zukor's cunning business practices, the collapse of Triangle Film, a high concentration of star power, and the institution of block booking practices. Exhibitors threatened by Paramount banded together to form the powerful First National, which used states rights practices to distribute exclusively to the near 6,000 theaters they owned, and soon moved into production as well, acquiring a significant amount of talent. The battle between Paramount and First National for industry control and the distribution of prestige feature films had far-reaching effects. Amidst these power plays, and concerned with salary caps, the restriction of creative freedom, and a rumored merger between Paramount and First National, actors and directors entered the fray to form United Artists in 1919; however, without access to theaters, and burdened by hefty actors' contracts, it foundered—despite Joseph Schenck's inspired reorganization of the company in 1924. Zukor's vast acquisitions spurred Marcus Loew's expansion into feature films and the creation of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, and even Fox Film Corporation, which like Universal had been profitable with shorter and less prestigious films, moved after 1925 to strengthen their American real estate holdings, acquire new technological patents, and elevate the level of their productions, most notably in their expressionistic experiments inspired by F. W. Murnau. One important cause of the dramatic changes to the industry during the silent era was the method by which filmmaking was financed; by selling their stock on the public market, production and distribution companies not only acquired the influx of capital needed to compete but also made the industry more business-like. In conjunction with factory production methods, which ensured consistent quality and regular release schedules, these methods of financing transformed cinema into one of the nation's leading industries. Cinema, trending towards the feature film, was becoming both art and product.

With standardization in production came a decrease in radical technological and artistic innovation, but an elevation in production values, set quality, costumes, acting, and lighting. Very early silent film tended to minimize the camera's presence, composing short films of single, static shots or simple linear cuts, typically showing actors full-frame as on a stage. With the multi-reel feature, scene dissection became much more common, and a grammar of film emerged. D. W. Griffith pioneered cross-cutting and editorial techniques designed to control pacing, and Mack Sennet used quick cuts to develop a

distinguishing comedic style. As the variety show waned, spectacle was incorporated into the feature film, in part under the pressure of foreign imports like *Queen Elizabeth* (French, 1912) and *Cabiria* (Italian, 1914). The extreme long shot and the wide pan could capture the spectacular expanses of the American landscape, and vast, detailed indoor sets could recreate images of elsewhere. With the rise of multi-reel feature films came a corresponding need for continuity, clarity, and character development; filmmakers introduced a more restrained acting style that emphasized facial expression over broad pantomime. The close-up became an important—though sometimes derided—stylistic device in the silent era, creating a new intimacy between audience and actor that opened the way for the star system. With the emergence of the star system, fan magazines like *Motion Picture Story Magazine* (1911) and *Photoplay* (1911) galvanized a mass audience of consumers, and some of the most enduring actors captured the public imagination—Lillian Gish, Norma Talmadge, Harold Lloyd, Charlie Chaplin, Rudolph Valentino, Mary Pickford, Theda Bara, Douglas Fairbanks. In the 1920s, few dramatic American innovations in cinematography occurred, but abroad, flourishing avant-garde movements produced a variety of experimental cinema in the wake of war; surrealism, expressionism, and impressionism offered alternatives to mainstream narrative film, and Soviet filmmakers like Sergei Eisenstein developed rich montage techniques.

The significance of the silent era in film history cannot be overstated. During the first decades of the twentieth century, a truly commercial popular art emerged bound closely to the image of a modern America. With the development of synchronized sound, the era drew to a close, but the modes of production, distribution, exhibition, and consumption inaugurated during the silent film era persisted, creating the film industry as we know it today.

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