

6.31 In *October*, a rapid burst of two-frame shots suggests the rat-tat of a machine gun.



6.32 Near the end of *Storm over Asia*, the Mongolian hero rebels against the British colonialists who have exploited him; single-frame shots alternate between him swinging his sword and the sword itself flashing against a dark background.

As these examples of temporal relationships among shots suggest, Montage editing can also create conflict

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through spatial relationships. Again, the filmmakers do not guide the spectator through a clear, straightforward locale, as in a Hollywood film. Rather, the viewer must actively piece together what is going on. In the plate-smashing scene from *Potemkin*, for example, Eisenstein creates a contradictory space by mismatching the sailor's position from shot to shot. The sailor swings the plate down from behind his left shoulder (see 6.23) and then is seen in the next shot with the plate already lifted above his right shoulder (see 6.24). In 6.17–6.19, the cuts violate the axis of action, with the officer facing left, then right, and then left again.

The Soviet filmmakers also used crosscutting to create unusual spatial relationships. As we have seen, crosscutting was common in the cinema from the early teens, and it most often presented simultaneous actions in different spaces (as in Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, p. 62). In the USSR, it also served more abstract purposes, linking two actions for the sake of a thematic point. Near the end of *Strike*, for example, Eisenstein cuts from a police officer bringing his fists down violently as he orders a massacre of the strikers (**6.33**) to a butcher's hands bringing a knife down to kill a bull (**6.34**). The scene continues to cut between the death of the animal and the attack on the workers—not to suggest that these two events are happening simultaneously, but to get us to see the massacre as being like a slaughter. In *Mother*, Pudovkin uses crosscutting more lyrically, moving between the hero in jail and the ice thawing on a river, suggesting the hero's hope as he learns of a plan to rescue him. There is no indication, as there might be in a French Impressionist film, that the hero is thinking of the ice; Pudovkin eventually gives the imagery a social meaning, as a political march is intercut with the surging river.



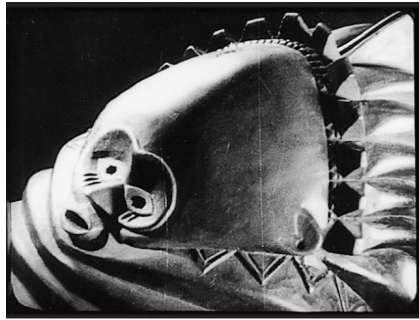
6.33 Intercutting in *Strike* compares a police officer ...



6.34 ... to a butcher.

The slaughter scene in *Strike* makes use of another common Montage device: the *nondiegetic insert*. The term *diegesis* refers to the space and time of the film's story: anything that is part of the story world is diegetic; a nondiegetic element exists outside the story world. In a sound film, for example, the voice of a narrator who is not a character in the film employs nondiegetic sound. A nondiegetic insert consists of one or more shots depicting space and time unrelated to those of the story events in the film. The bull being slaughtered in *Strike* has no causal, spatial, or temporal relation to the workers. Its nondiegetic image is inserted to make a metaphorical point: the workers are being slaughtered like animals. The use of such nondiegetic shots to make a conceptual point was central to Eisenstein's theory of "intellectual montage."

October makes extensive use of intellectual montage. Its most complex use comes when a leader calls upon soldiers to fight “For God and Country.” There follows a lengthy series of nondiegetic shots of statues of gods and churches from widely differing cultures (6.35) and then shots of military medals (6.36). Intellectual montage creates its effects through conflict; by juxtaposing shots that have no apparent causal connection, the filmmaker leads the audience to create a general concept that links them.



6.35, 6.36 In *October*, nondiegetic shots point up the contradictory religious beliefs and simplistic ideas of patriotism used to convince soldiers to risk their lives.

Montage directors carried conflictual editing further by creating striking *graphic contrasts* from shot to shot. A cut might bring a distinct directional change in the composition. The Odessa steps sequence in *Potemkin*, perhaps the single most famous scene in any Montage film, gains much of its effectiveness through graphic conflict (6.37, 6.38). The cumulative effect of such cuts in this scene is to help heighten the tension. In other films, graphic conflict contributes to comedy (6.39, 6.40).



6.37 In one shot from the Odessa steps sequence in *Potemkin*, the steps create a set of strong diagonal lines from lower left to upper right, while the running figures move quickly down and rightward.



6.38 In the next shot, the composition switches this orientation, with the row of unmoving rifles extending diagonally from upper left to lower right (*Potemkin*).

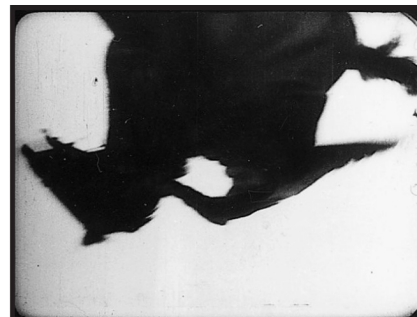


6.39, 6.40 *My Grandmother's* satirical treatment of bureaucracy uses a pair of shots in which canted framings juxtapose two typists.

One of the most striking graphic conflicts involves cutting from one image to the same image, but the latter is flipped right to left or even turned upside down (6.41, 6.42). Near the end of Pudovkin's *Mother*, mounted soldiers attack a workers' demonstration; the pace of the editing picks up, climaxing in a flurry of brief shots of soldiers riding past the camera, first to the right, then left (6.43), then upside down (6.44). Such cuts can be jarring, especially when they enhance the impression of violent action.



6.41, 6.42 In Ilya Trauberg's *China Express*, a medium close-up of a soldier aiming a rifle rightward is followed by the same image, but with the soldier now facing left.



6.43, 6.44 Two quick shots from the demonstration scene in *Mother*.

Camerawork Although the Soviet directors considered cinema's artistic qualities to depend primarily on editing, they realized that editing juxtapositions would be enhanced if the individual shots were as striking as possible. Thus they used camerawork in distinctive ways as well. Many shots in Montage films avoid conventional chest-height, straight-on framing and utilize more dynamic angles. Low-angle framings place buildings or people against a blank sky, making

characters look threatening (6.45) or heroic (6.46). Canted or decentered framings dynamize the image (6.47, 6.48). The Montage directors were also fond of placing the horizon line extremely low in the frame (6.49, 6.50).



6.45 A dynamic angle in *China Express*.



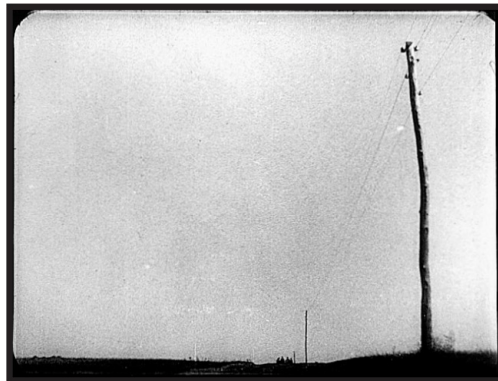
6.46 The heroine of *Mother* in the climactic demonstration scene.



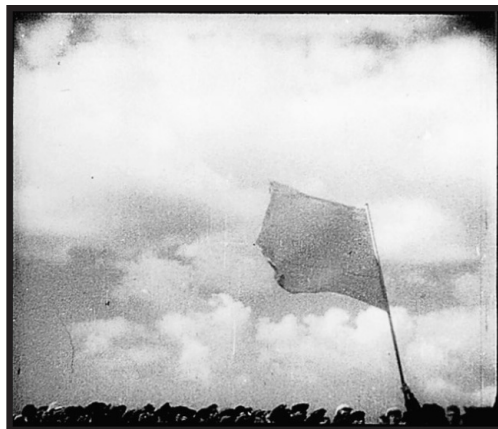
6.47 In *Arsenal*, a train carrying Ukrainian soldiers seems to rush upward at a steep angle, emphasizing its dynamic thrust.



6.48 In *The End of St. Petersburg*, Pudovkin satirized profiteers who wanted to carry on with Russia's participation in World War I by showing them only from the neck down.



6.49 In *Earth*, Dovzhenko repeatedly emphasized the vast farmlands of the Ukraine through framings that show almost nothing but sky.



6.50 Pudovkin used a similar device in *Deserter* to suggest the vulnerability of a workers' demonstration about to be attacked by police.

Special Effects Montage directors also exploited special-effects cinematography. Vertov's playful documentary *Man with a Movie Camera* shows off the power of the cinema through split-screen framing and superimpositions (6.51). Eisenstein's film about collective farming, *Old and New*, uses a superimposition of a bull towering above a field full of cows to suggest how important this one animal has been to the building of a successful farm (6.52). Although such camera tricks were likely used for subjective effects in French Impressionism, Soviet directors often employed them to make symbolic points. (The building that splits in *Man with a Movie Camera* is the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow, home of traditional prerevolutionary opera and ballet.)



6.51 In *Man with a Movie Camera*, Vertov makes a huge building split like a broken egg by exposing each side of the frame separately and rolling the camera in opposite directions for each.



6.52 A conceptual use of special effects in *Old and New*.

Mise-en-Scène Because many Soviet films dealt with historical and social situations, some elements of their mise-en-scène tended to be realistic. Scenes might be shot on location in a factory, as *Strike* and *Mother* were. Costumes often served primarily to indicate class position.

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Yet the Montage filmmakers also realized that dynamic tension between elements was not solely a matter of joining shots. Juxtapositions could be made within the shot as well, using mise-en-scène elements to heighten the impact on the viewer. Contrasting textures, shapes, volumes, colors, and the like could be placed within a single frame (6.53, 6.54).



6.53 In *Potemkin*, an officer glances suspiciously at some sailors. The composition splits into two distinct halves, dark and bright, with the lighting on the figures' faces matching the color of their costumes.



6.54 In *The New Babylon*, the heroine stands atop a barricade built by the Paris communards; her plain dress contrasts with the lacy frills on a department-store mannequin.

We have seen how shots containing opposed directions of movement might be edited together. A single shot can use this principle by setting up more than one direction of figure movement (6.55). Patterns might also create oppositions within the shot; in the plate-smashing scene from *Potemkin* (see 6.20–6.29), the horizontal stripes of the sailor's shirt clash with the vertical stripes of the wall behind him. Although the precise effect of the juxtaposition is difficult to define, we can imagine that our impression of the scene would be very different if the wall were simply blank. Also, mise-en-scène elements arranged in different planes in the depth of the shot could create juxtapositions of volume (6.56). When shots with visual juxtapositions are edited together with other shots, the multiple conflicting relationships can be complex indeed.



6.55 In *Potemkin*, a high-angle shot down the side of the battleship shows men on the upper level, moving left to right, while the group on the deck below move right to left.



6.56 A contrast in volumes in *Old and New*, as a bull looms hugely in the foreground while farmers and a cow appear as tiny figures below it.

Lighting also gives Montage films a distinctive look. Soviet films frequently used no fill light on the sets, so characters appeared against black backgrounds. Note in **6.57** how the front of the officer's face is relatively dark, while the sides are strongly lit; this approach to lighting actors is common in Montage films.



6.57 A typical use of an unlit background in *Mother*.

Montage films used a variety of types of acting, ranging from realistic to highly stylized—often within the same film. Because so many characters in Soviet films represented certain social classes or professions, directors used *typage*, casting nonactors whose physical appearances would instantly suggest what sort of people they were playing (**6.58**). There was no need for the nonactor to have

the same job in real life; for *Potemkin*, Eisenstein chose the small, fastidious man who plays the doctor because he “looked” like a doctor—though he actually made his living shoveling coal.



6.58 For the unglamorous role of the peasant heroine of *Old and New*, Eisenstein cast a real peasant.

Typage was a gesture toward realism, but many performers in Montage films borrowed stylized techniques from Constructivist theater and from the circus: *biomechanics* and *eccentricity*. As in the theater, biomechanical film acting stressed physical control rather than subtle emotion. The Montage filmmakers delighted in having their actors punch one another or scramble about over factory equipment. Eccentricity emphasized the grotesque; performers behaved almost like clowns or slapstick comics. Alexandra Khokhlova, Kuleshov’s wife and a member of his workshop, offered vivid instances of eccentric acting. Tall and gangly, she avoided the glamorous image of the female star; instead, she grimaced and used angular gestures (6.59). Eisenstein’s *Strike* and Kozintsev and Trauberg’s silent films all contain eccentric performances.



6.59 In *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks*, Khokhlova uses eccentric acting in playing a crook who vamps Mr. West.

Of the three avant-garde movements we have examined in Chapters 4 through 6, only the Soviet Montage style lasted into the sound era. In Chapter 9, we discuss how the Montage filmmakers applied their approach to sound.

OTHER SOVIET FILMS

During the Montage movement's existence, perhaps fewer than thirty films were made in the style. Nevertheless, as in France and Germany, these avant-garde films were prestigious and influential. Both at home and abroad, filmmakers picked up techniques of montage framing and editing.

Non-Montage films covered a wide range of genres. Although Soviet silent comedies are seldom seen today, there were plenty of them. Slapstick comedian Igor Ilinsky, a sort of Russian Adam Sandler, was the decade's most popular star. In *The Tailor from Torzhok* (made by Protazanov in 1925 to publicize the government lottery), Ilinsky plays a tailor frantically seeking a winning lottery ticket he has lost (**6.60**, **6.61**). A light tone also prevails in the crime serial *Miss Mend* (codirected by veteran filmmakers Fyodor Ozep and Barnet, a Kuleshov alumnus, in 1925). In this fantasy, three American workers from the "Rocfeller" company hear of a plot to poison the Soviet Union's water supply and, in a spirit of class solidarity, foil the villain.



6.60, 6.61 In *The Tailor from Torzhok*, the star mugs broadly, at one point glancing at the camera and crossing his eyes.

Despite the Montage directors' downplaying of major stars, other films exploited the fame of established stage actors by casting them in dramas. In a few cases, top stars

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of the famous Moscow Art Theater, established by Konstantin Stanislavsky in 1898 (and considered by many young filmmakers to be a bastion of conservative style), agreed to act in films (6.62). Other Moscow Art Theater actors such as Ivan Moskvina and Mikhail Chekhov starred in films, and the only surviving film performance by the great Constructivist stage director Meyerhold is in *The White Eagle* (1928).



6.62 In 1926, the acclaimed theater actor, Leonid Leonidov appeared as Ivan the Terrible in Yuri Tarich's *Wings of a Serf*; his performance aided the film's widespread success abroad.

A similar attempt at prestige came with historical epics and literary adaptations. Two popular films of this type were Viktor Gardin's *Poet and Tsar* (1927), a biography of the poet Aleksandr Pushkin, and *Decembrists* (1927, Alexander Ivanovsky). In a 1927 meeting to discuss the problems of Sovkino, Cubo-Futurist poet Vladimir Mayakovsky dismissed the former film contemptuously: "Take 'Poet and Tsar' for example. The picture is liked—but when you stop to think about it, what bosh, what a monstrosity."³ Similarly, *Decembrists*, with its large ballroom set (6.63), looked like a tired version of Russian historical dramas of the prerevolutionary era. The Montage directors found such films conservative and thus diametrically opposed to their own approaches to filmmaking.



6.63 Lavish production values in a conventional Soviet film, *Decembrists*.

THE FIRST FIVE-YEAR PLAN AND THE END OF THE MONTAGE MOVEMENT

As we have seen, several of the early Montage films were successfully exported and were praised at home for their political content. As a result, between 1927 and 1930, the movement's activities intensified. At the same time, however, criticisms were increasingly being leveled at the Montage filmmakers by government and film-industry officials. The main charge was *formalism*, a vague term implying that a film was too complex for mass audiences and that its makers were more interested in film style than in correct ideology.

Ironically, the very recovery of the film industry, which the export of Montage films helped create, led to the decline of the movement. In 1927, for the first time, the industry made more money from its own films than from imported ones. Official policy encouraged the industry to cut back its foreign trade. Sovkino and Lunacharsky came under attack for making films—including those of the Montage movement—that were more appropriate for sophisticated foreigners than for the uneducated peasant population at home.

Criticized by the press, the major filmmakers had difficulties getting scripts approved and projects funded. Kuleshov came under fire first. Then Vertov had to move from his base in Moscow to make *Man with a Movie Camera* for the Ukrainian national company Vufku. Critics charged that Kozintsev and Trauberg's eccentric stylization was frivolous and obscure. The prestige that Eisenstein gained through *Potemkin* protected him at first, but as he explored the

possibility of creating abstract ideas through intellectual montage in the late 1920s, he too faced growing oppositions. For a time, Pudovkin was spared such attacks, and he managed to keep making Montage-style films until 1933, when his *Deserter* brought the movement to a close.

A turning point for the Soviet film industry came in March 1928, when the First Communist Party Conference on Film Questions was held. Until then, the government had left film matters largely to the control of Narkompros and other, smaller organizations scattered through the republics. Now the USSR was instituting the First Five-Year Plan, a major push to expand industrial output. As part of the plan, the cinema was to be centralized. The goal was to increase the number of films and to build factories to supply all the industry's needs. Eventually, it was hoped, imports of raw film stock, cameras, lighting fixtures, and other equipment would be eliminated. Similarly, exportation would not be necessary, and all films could be tailored strictly to the needs of the workers and peasants.

The implementation of the First Five-Year Plan in the cinema came slowly. Over the next two years, the government still put little money into the industry. This delay probably helped prolong the Montage movement. Soon,

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however, circumstances changed. In 1929, Eisenstein left the country to study sound filmmaking abroad. Spending most of his time working on abortive projects, first in Hollywood and then in Mexico, he did not return until 1932. Also in 1929, control over the cinema was taken away from Narkompros and turned over to the Movie Committee of the Soviet Union. Now Lunacharsky had little input, being only one of many members of the new body. In 1930, the film industry was further centralized by the formation of Soyuzkino, a company that would handle all production, distribution, and exhibition throughout the republics of the Soviet Union. The head of Soyuzkino was Boris Shumyatsky, a Communist Party bureaucrat without film experience. Unlike Lunacharsky, Shumyatsky had no sympathy for the Montage filmmakers.

Soon the attacks on those filmmakers intensified. In 1931, for example, while Eisenstein was in North America, an article criticized his films for their supposed "petty bourgeois" tendencies. If Eisenstein could strengthen his ties to the

proletariat, the author concluded, he might “create real revolutionary cinema productions. But we must on no account minimize the difficulties confronting him. The way out of this crisis is possible only through a stubborn campaign for re-education, through merciless exposure and criticism of his first films.”⁴ All the major Montage filmmakers, and, indeed, modernist artists in every medium, eventually adopted more accessible styles.

The Soviet Montage movement’s influence lingered, however. Leftist filmmakers in other countries, especially documentarists like Scottish-born John Grierson and Dutch-born Joris Ivens, adopted heroic, low-angle framings and dynamic cutting for similar propaganda purposes. Kuleshov’s, Pudovkin’s, and Eisenstein’s theoretical writings have been read by critics and filmmakers ever since they were translated. Few filmmakers have used the full range of radical Montage devices, but in a modified fashion, the movement has had a broad influence.

During the early 1930s, the Soviet film industry moved toward an official policy that required all films to follow an approach called *Socialist Realism*. We examine that and other developments in Chapter 12.

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2. Sergei Eisenstein, “The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram,” in his *Film Form*, tr. and ed. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), p. 37.
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4. Ivan Anisimov, “The Films of Eisenstein,” *International Literature* 3 (1931): 114.

We discuss some topics in this chapter further on our blog, *Observations on Film Art*:

On some Soviet classics: “The ten best films of ... 1924” and “The ten best films of ... 1925” and “The ten best films of ... 1926”

On the influence of *The Battleship Potemkin* on Hitchcock: “Sir Alfred must have his set pieces: THE MAN WHO KNEW TOO MUCH (1934)

On the influence of *Potemkin* on Quentin Tarantino: (“50) days of summer (movies), Part 2”

CHAPTER 7

THE LATE SILENT ERA IN HOLLYWOOD, 1920–1928



Way Down East



The Clown's Little Brother

During World War I, the United States became the global economic leader. The center of finance shifted from London to New York, and American ships carried goods all over the world. Despite a brief, intense recession in 1921, resulting primarily from the shift back to a peacetime economy, the 1920s were a period of prosperity for many sectors of society. Republican administrations were in power, and a conservative, pro-business approach dominated the country. American consumer goods, including movies, continued to make inroads in many foreign countries.

In contrast to this fiscal conservatism, society seemed to lose much of its restraint during the Roaring Twenties. The passage of the Volstead Act (1919), outlawing alcoholic beverages, led to the excesses of the age of Prohibition. Bootleg liquor was readily available, and visiting speakeasies or attending wild drinking parties became common among all classes. Before the war, women had grown their hair long, worn floor-length dresses, and danced sedately. Now they created scandals by bobbing their hair, wearing short skirts, doing the Charleston, and smoking in public.

Many sectors of society, though, were shut off from the general prosperity and sophistication of the 1920s. Racism was rampant, with the Ku Klux Klan growing after its revival in 1915 and the stiffening of immigration quotas to keep certain groups out of the United States. Workers in agriculture and mining fared poorly. The film industry, however, benefited from the high level of capital available during this period, and its films bore traces of the fast pace of life in the Jazz Age.

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THEATER CHAINS AND THE EXPANSION OF THE INDUSTRY

The American film industry, expanding hugely during World War I, continued to grow in the postwar decade. Despite the recession of 1921, the era was one of prosperity and intensive business investment. For the first time, major Wall Street firms became interested in the young film industry. Between 1922 and 1930, total investment in the industry leaped from \$78 to \$850 million. The average weekly

attendance at American movie theaters doubled from 1922 (40 million) to 1928 (80 million). Hollywood's exports continued to grow nearly unchecked until the mid-1920s, leveling off only because virtually all foreign markets were sated.

Central to the industry's growth was a strategy of buying and building movie theaters. By owning theater chains, the big producers ensured an outlet for their films. Producers could then confidently raise budgets for individual films. Studios competed in offering eye-catching production values. A new generation of directors came to prominence, and Hollywood also attracted more foreign filmmakers, who brought stylistic innovations. If the 1910s had seen the formation of the film industry, the next decade witnessed its expansion into a sophisticated set of institutions.

Vertical Integration

The most obvious sign of the growth of the film industry was its increasing vertical integration. The biggest firms jockeyed for power by combining production and distribution with expanding chains of theaters.

At first, the main theater chains were regional. In 1917, seeking to challenge the power of the big Hollywood firms, a group of local theater chains formed its own production company, First National Exhibitors' Circuit. Its main member was the Stanley Company of America, a Philadelphia-based regional chain. Hollywood firms like Famous Players-Lasky, Universal, and Fox were suddenly faced with a competitor that combined production, distribution, and exhibition.

This three-tiered vertical integration guaranteed that a company's films would find distribution and exhibition. The bigger the theater chain owned by the firm, the wider its films' exposure would be.

Although First National's production wing never became really profitable, it goaded other firms to integrate vertically. Adolf Zukor, head of Famous Players-Lasky and its distribution wing, Paramount, began buying theaters in 1920. In 1925, during a second wave of theater-buying by the major firms, Famous Players-Lasky merged with Balaban & Katz, a Chicago-based theater chain controlling many of the biggest auditoriums in the Midwest. The result was the first production-distribution-exhibition firm with a truly national theater chain. Zukor marked the change by renaming the theater circuit Publix Theaters. The

firm as a whole became Paramount-Publix. By the early 1930s, it owned 1,210 North American theaters, as well as some theaters abroad. Paramount-Publix's extensive holdings made it the subject of repeated government antitrust investigation and litigation that would lead to major changes in the film industry after World War II.

Another important firm that achieved vertical integration during this era was Loew's, Inc. Marcus Loew had begun as a nickelodeon owner, expanded into vaudeville, and built up a large chain of movie theaters by the late 1910s. In 1919, he moved into production by acquiring a medium-size firm, Metro, run by Louis B. Mayer. With the purchase of Goldwyn Pictures in 1924, Loew combined his production wing into Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM). After Paramount, MGM became the second largest of the Hollywood companies.

The chains owned by the vertically integrated firms encompassed a small portion of the nation's 15,000 theaters. In the mid-1920s, the Publix chain had roughly 500 houses, while MGM had only 200. Yet the three main chains included many of the big first-run theaters, with thousands of seats and higher admission prices. By late in the decade, about three-quarters of box-office receipts came from these large theaters. Smaller urban and rural theaters had to wait to get a film on a subsequent run and often received worn prints.

As the big Hollywood companies expanded, they developed a system of distribution that would maximize their profits and keep other firms at the margins of the market. In dealing with the theaters they did not own, they employed *block booking*, meaning that any exhibitor who wanted films with high box-office potential had to rent other, less desirable films from the company. Exhibitors might be forced to book an entire year's program in advance. Since most theaters changed programs at least twice a week and each big firm usually made only around fifty films a year, a theater could deal with more than one firm. Similarly, the studios needed films from other firms to keep their own theater programs full. The biggest firms cooperated among themselves developing into a mature oligopoly during the 1920s.

Because the big theaters were so important, the major companies made them opulent to attract patrons, not simply through the films being shown but through the promise of an exciting moviegoing experience. The 1920s were the age of the *picture palace*, offering thousands of sets, fancy lobbies, uniformed ushers, and orchestral accompaniment to the films. Ordinarily attendance dropped during the summer, so in 1917 the Balaban & Katz chain pioneered the use of air-conditioning—a major draw in a period when home air-conditioning was unknown. Picture palaces gave working- and middle-class patrons an unaccustomed taste of luxury. Big theaters also offered a lengthy film program in addition to the feature, including newsreels and comic shorts. Silent films always had musical accompaniment. In the big palaces, this would usually entail a live orchestra; a smaller palace might have a chamber group or pipe organ; and small-town and second-run houses could offer only a piano player. Any of these might perform an overture and musical interludes. Some theaters even had live-action playlets and musical numbers interspersed with the film program.

There were two types of architecture: conventional and atmospheric. Conventional palaces were imitations of legitimate theaters, often incorporating elaborate ornamentation based on Italian baroque and rococo styles. Huge chandeliers, domes, and balconies were covered with stucco and gilt. The atmospheric palace gave the spectator the impression of sitting in an auditorium that opened onto a night sky. The dark-blue dome would have light-bulb stars, and projectors cast moving clouds onto the ceiling by projectors. The decor might imitate exotic places, such as a Spanish villa or an Egyptian temple. As the 1920s progressed, theaters got more flamboyant (7.1). The Depression would soon put an end to such extravagant theater building.



7.1 Part of the interior of the Brooklyn Paramount (built in 1928). This theater combined conventional and atmospheric approaches to picture-palace design, incorporating trees and false sky glimpsed through the alcoves, topping it all with an elaborately decorated ceiling. (*Source:* Brooklyn Paramount Theater)

The Big Three and the Little Five

The vertically integrated firms that owned big theater chains—Paramount-Publix, Loew's (MGM), and First National—constituted the Big Three at the top of the industry. Trailing behind, but still important, were the Little Five, firms that owned few or no theaters: Universal, Fox, the Producers Distributing Corporation, the Film Booking Office, and Warner Bros.

Under founder Carl Laemmle, Universal continued into the 1920s to concentrate on relatively low-budget films aimed at smaller theaters. Despite a strong distribution wing, the firm had few theaters. Several major directors (John Ford, Erich von Stroheim) and stars (Lon Chaney) worked there early in the decade, but they were soon drawn away by higher salaries. For a time Universal

employed the successful young producer Irving Thalberg, who helped the firm move into higher-quality, big-budget films; soon Thalberg also left, becoming a major force in shaping MGM's policies. Later in the decade, German-born Laemmle was in the forefront in hiring émigré directors, who brought a brooding, distinctive style to the studio's output.

Fox also continued to concentrate on lower-budget popular fare, including its Westerns with William Farnum and Tom Mix. Fox launched a modest theater chain in 1925, making it one of the strongest of the Little Five. The company had a small stable of prestige directors: John Ford, Raoul Walsh, F. W. Murnau, and Frank Borzage.

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Warner Bros. was smaller, possessing neither theaters nor a distribution wing. It scored a considerable success, however, with a series of films starring a German shepherd, Rin-Tin-Tin. More surprisingly, Warners hired German director Ernst Lubitsch, and he made several important films there. In 1924, Warners drew on Wall Street investors' new willingness to put money into the film industry. It began a major expansion, acquiring theaters and other assets. The firm's investment in new sound technology would thrust it to the forefront of the industry within a few years.

The two other members of the Little Five were relatively small firms. The short-lived Producers Distributing Corporation (1924–1928) was notable mainly for producing a series of Cecil B. De Mille's films after he left Famous Players-Lasky in 1925. The Film Booking Office was formed in 1922 and turned out popular action films. In 1929, it became the basis for the production portion of a much more important new firm, RKO.

Standing apart from these eight firms was United Artists (UA), formed by Mary Pickford, Charles Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks, and D. W. Griffith in 1919. UA was a distribution firm, owning neither production facilities nor theaters. It existed to distribute films produced independently by its four owners, who each had a small production company. Prior contractual commitments by the four founders delayed the firm's initial releases for a year, and Chaplin's first UA film, *A Woman of Paris* (1923), was not a hit. In 1924, producer Joseph Schenck took over management of UA. By adding stars Rudolph Valentino, Norma Talmadge,

Buster Keaton, and Gloria Swanson, as well as prestigious producer Samuel Goldwyn, Schenck stepped up the rate of release of UA films. However, UA still failed to make a profit in most years.

THE MOTION PICTURE PRODUCERS AND DISTRIBUTORS OF AMERICA

As the American film industry expanded, so too did efforts on the part of various social groups to increase censorship. By the late 1910s and early 1920s, there was call for a national censorship law, and more local boards were formed. Many postwar films exploited Roaring Twenties subject matter: bootleg liquor, jazz, flappers, and wild parties. Cecil B. De Mille's sex comedies presented adultery as frivolous, even glamorous. Erich von Stroheim's *Blind Husbands* (1919) similarly treated a married woman's flirtation as a fascinating violation of social norms.

Soon a series of scandals focused attention on the less palatable aspects of the lifestyles of famous filmmakers, including sex scandals and flagrant violations of the new Prohibition law. Mary Pickford's image as America's sweetheart received a blow in 1920 when she divorced her first husband to marry Douglas Fairbanks. In 1921, comedian Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle was charged with manslaughter when a young actress died during a drunken party; although he was acquitted, the charges wrecked his career. The following year, director William Desmond Taylor was mysteriously murdered in circumstances that revealed his affairs with several well-known actresses. In 1923, the handsome, athletic star Wallace Reid died of morphine addiction. The public increasingly viewed Hollywood as promoting excess and decadence.

Partly in an effort to avoid government censorship and clean up Hollywood's image, the main studios formed a trade organization, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA). To head it, in 1922 they hired Will Hays, then postmaster general under Warren Harding. Hays had proved his flair for publicity by chairing the Republican National Committee. That flair, combined with his access to powerful figures in Washington and his Presbyterian background, made him useful to the film industry.

Hays's strategy was to push the producers to eliminate the offensive content of their films and to include morals clauses in studio contracts. Despite Arbuckle's acquittal, Hays banned his films. In 1924, the MPPDA issued the "Formula," a vague document urging studios to avoid the "kind of picture which should not be produced." Predictably, it had little effect, and in 1927 the Hays office (as the MPPDA came to be known) adopted the more explicit "Don'ts and Be Carefuls" list. "Don'ts" included "the illegal traffic in drugs," "licentious or suggestive nudity," and "ridicule of the clergy." "Be Carefuls" involved "the use of the flag," "brutality and possible gruesomeness," "methods of smuggling," and "deliberate seduction of girls." The list dealt as much with the depiction of how crimes were committed as with sexual content. Producers continued to circumvent the guidelines, however, and in the early 1930s the list would be replaced by the much more elaborate Production Code (see Chapter 10).

Although the Hays Office is usually thought of as a strategy to block domestic censorship, it also served the industry in other ways. The MPPDA gathered information on film markets at home and abroad, keeping up, for example, with censorship rules in various countries. Hays established a foreign department that battled several European quotas aimed largely at American exports. In 1926,

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Hays's group convinced Congress to form the Motion Picture Division of the Department of Commerce. That division helped sell American films abroad by gathering information and bringing more pressure against harmful regulations. Indeed, the formation of the MPPDA provided a clear signal that motion pictures had become a major American industry.

STUDIO FILMMAKING

Style and Technological Changes

The expansion and consolidation of the Hollywood film industry was paralleled by a polishing of the classical continuity style that had developed in the 1910s.

By the 1920s, the big production firms had *dark studios* that kept out all sunlight and allowed entire scenes to be illuminated by artificial lights. Scenes' backgrounds were kept inconspicuous with a low *fill light*, while the main figures were outlined with a glow of *backlight*, usually cast from the rear top of the set (7.2). The *key*, or brightest light, came from one side of the camera, while a dimmer secondary light from the other side created fill that softened shadows and kept backgrounds visible but inconspicuous. This *three-point lighting system* (fill, backlighting, and key) became standard in Hollywood cinematography. It created glamorous, consistent compositions from shot to shot.



7.2 Light coming from the upper rear of the set outlines the characters in *The Marriage Circle*.

By the 1920s, the continuity editing system had become sophisticated indeed. Eyeline matches, cut-ins, and small variations of framing could successively reveal the most important portions of a scene's space. In John Ford's 1920 Western *Just Pals*, for example, a mother waits in anguish as her son supposedly drowns a litter of unwanted kittens. In fact, he only pretends that he has killed them. This complex action is gradually revealed without intertitles through a series of carefully framed details observed by the heroine (7.3–7.11).



7.3 Walking near town, the heroine of *Just Pals* pauses and looks off left.



7.4 An eyeline match reveals what she sees, a little boy with a bag by a fence, looking off right (*Just Pals*).



7.5 Another cut takes us to a medium shot of the boy's mother, also by the fence, weeping (*Just Pals*).



7.6 A second shot of the boy shows him looking through the fence apprehensively and beginning to empty the bag onto the ground (*Just Pals*).



7.7 A cut to the ground shows a litter of kittens falling out of the bag (*Just Pals*).



7.8 A long shot shows the whole space: the mother and son are by a river, and he throws the empty bag into the water (*Just Pals*).



7.9 We see the bag hit the water in a closer view (*Just Pals*).



7.10 The long-shot framing shows the pair moving away, the boy comforting his mother, who has not turned around to watch any of his actions (*Just Pals*).



7.11 After seven shots of their actions, we return to a closer view of the heroine, reacting in horror (*Just Pals*).

By the late 1910s, most of the major technological innovations in American filmmaking had been made. One distinct change in the next decade was a new approach to cinematography. Before about 1919, most films were shot with a hard-edge, sharp-focus look. Then some filmmakers began to place gauzy fabrics or filters in front of their lenses to create soft, blurry images. Special lenses could keep the foreground action in focus while making the background less distinct. This technique enhanced the classical narrative style by concentrating the spectator's attention on the main action while deemphasizing less important elements. The result of such techniques was the *soft style* of cinematography, used most extensively during the 1920s and 1930s. This style derived from still photography and especially the Pictorialist school, pioneered by such photographers as Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Steichen early in the century.

D. W. Griffith was one of the early proponents of this style. He worked with cinematographer Hendrik Sartov, who had begun as a still photographer, to film soft-focus shots of Lillian Gish and some landscapes in *Broken Blossoms* (1919). They further explored the approach in *Way Down East* (1920; 7.12, 7.13). The soft style was dominant by the early sound era and remained prominent until a new hard-edged style became fashionable in the 1940s.



7.12 A shimmering soft-focus land-scape shot in *Way Down East* resembles high-art still photographs of the period.



7.13 Soft-focus cinematography in *Way Down East*, soft also considerably enhanced glamorous shots, as in this medium close-up of Lillian Gish.

Another major innovation of this era came with the gradual adoption of a new *panchromatic* type of film stock. The film stock used previously had been *orthochromatic*; that is, it was sensitive only to the purple, blue, and green portions of the visible spectrum. Yellow and red light barely registered on it, so objects of these colors appeared nearly black in the finished film. For example, the lips of actors wearing ordinary red lipstick appear very dark in many silent films. Purple and blue registered on the film stock as nearly white, so it was difficult to photograph cloudy skies: a blue sky with clouds simply washed out to a uniform white.

Panchromatic film stock, available by the early 1910s, registered the whole range of the visible spectrum, from purple to red, with nearly equal sensitivity. Thus it could record a sky with the clouds visible against the blue background, or red lips as shades of gray. But panchromatic stock had problems as well: it was expensive, it deteriorated quickly if not used right away, and it demanded much greater illumination to expose a satisfactory image. During the 1910s and early 1920s, it was primarily used outdoors in bright sunlight for landscape shots (to capture cloud scenes) or indoors for studio close-ups that could be brightly lit. By 1925, Eastman Kodak had made its panchromatic motion-picture stock

cheaper and stabler; soon the stock was also made more sensitive, requiring less light for proper exposure. By 1927, the Hollywood studios were quickly switching over to panchromatic stock. The result was not a radical change in the

look of films, but panchromatic did permit filmmakers to make shots of actors who were not wearing makeup and to shoot a greater variety of subjects without having to worry about using special filters or adjusting costume colors. Panchromatic soon became the standard internationally.

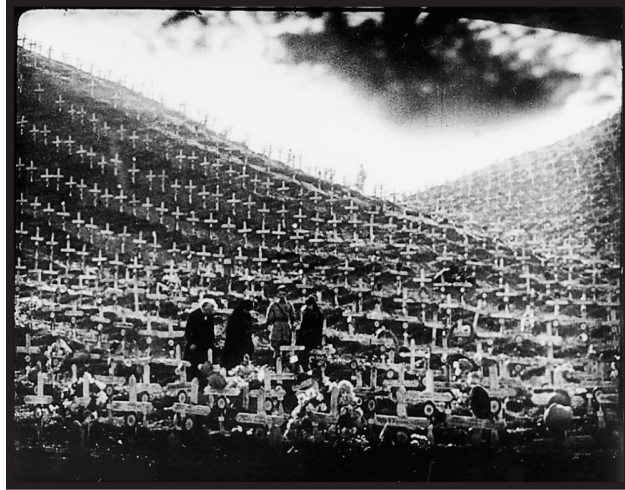
In the years after World War I, the technical sophistication of the Hollywood studios was the envy of the world. In addition, income from the huge American exhibition market and from expanded exports allowed higher budgets especially for the most prestigious films. These could cost in the neighborhood of ten times more than comparable films made in Europe.

Such resources, in combination with the fully formulated classical Hollywood style, gave filmmakers considerable flexibility. They could apply the same stylistic methods to many types of movies.

During the 1920s, a new generation of filmmakers came to the fore, and they would dominate American filmmaking over three decades. Some, like John Ford and King Vidor, had started directing on a modest scale in the 1910s, but they now rose to fame. Similarly, although a few stars of earlier years remained popular, new ones now came forward. Older genres developed, as when slapstick comedies and Westerns, typically relegated to short subjects, became more respected. New genres also appeared, such as the antiwar film.

Big-Budget Films of the 1920s

A film that reflected the growth of Hollywood and its newly ambitious productions was *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, directed by Rex Ingram and released in 1921. It was a big-budget project, running over two hours and based on a recent best-selling novel. Ingram, who had directed several minor films, was given considerable control over the project and created an epic picture that was a huge success. The film deals with a South American family's changing fortunes during World War I, and it took a different attitude toward the conflict than earlier war films had. Although it still showed the Germans as evil "Huns," it presented the conflict as destructive rather than glorious (7.14). This anti-war stance would be common in other films of the decade.



7.14 The final scene of *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* shows a military cemetery with innumerable crosses, suggesting the horrors of war.

The film's triumph was, however, probably mainly due to its stars, Rudolph Valentino and Alice Terry, who played the doomed central couple. They rose to immediate stardom (7.15). Valentino was hired by Paramount and became a matinee idol, popularizing the "Latin lover" in such films as *Blood and Sand* (1922, Fred Niblo). His early death in 1926 provoked frenzied grief among his fans.



7.15 Glamorous photography in *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* helped make Rudolph Valentino and Alice Terry stars.

Cecil B. De Mille had been extraordinarily prolific from 1914 on. During the 1920s, he moved on to more sumptuous films at Paramount. One of his primary genres was the sex comedy, often starring Gloria Swanson, one of

the era's top stars. De Mille's sophisticated comedies helped earn Hollywood a reputation for being risqué. He exploited expensive women's fashions, rich decors, and sexually provocative situations, as in *Why Change Your Wife?* (1920; 7.16, 7.17).



7.16, 7.17 In *Why Change Your Wife?* Gloria Swanson plays a mousy wife who saves her marriage to Thomas Meighan by adopting a daring wardrobe.

When his work came under fire from censorship groups, De Mille responded with films that mixed steamy melodrama with religious subject matter. *The Ten Commandments* (1923) had an introductory story depicting a young man who scoffs at morality and vows to break all the commandments; the main part of the film was an historical epic showing Moses leading the Jews out of Egypt (7.18). De Mille's biggest religious production of this era was *The King of Kings* (1927), controversial for its onscreen depiction of Christ. In the sound era, De Mille would become identified with historical and religious epics.



7.18 The Egyptian forces set out in pursuit of the fleeing Israelites in front of a massive set in *The Ten Commandments*.

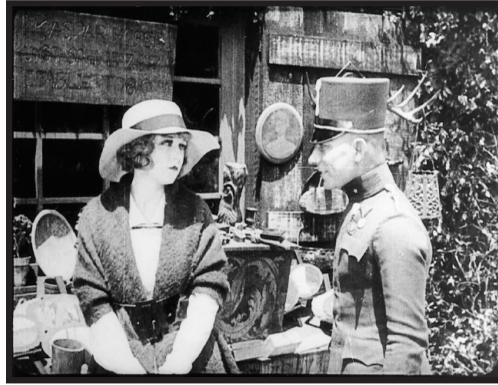
Similarly, after D. W. Griffith cofounded UA, he made several large-scale historical films. Just as he had been inspired by Italian epics like *Cabiria* to make *The Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance*, now he was influenced by Ernst Lubitsch's postwar German films. Griffith's greatest success of the era was *Orphans of the Storm* (1922), set during the French Revolution. It starred the Gish sisters, Lillian and Dorothy, both affiliated with Griffith since the early 1910s (7.19). Lillian's career in particular flourished during this decade, as she worked with such major directors as King Vidor (*La Bohème*, 1926) and Victor Sjöström. Griffith made another historical epic, *America* (1924), concerning the American Revolutionary War. His next film, however, was quite different: a naturalistic tale of difficulties in postwar Germany called *Isn't Life Wonderful* (1924). Griffith's

mid-1920s films were increasingly unprofitable, and he soon abandoned independent production to make a few films for Paramount. He completed two films in the early sound era, including the ambitious *Abraham Lincoln* (1930), but then was forced into retirement until his death in 1948.



7.19 A poignant moment in *Orphans of the Storm*, as the two separated sisters briefly encounter and then lose each other again in the streets of Paris.

As Griffith's case suggests, not all filmmakers who commanded large budgets in Hollywood during the 1920s fit comfortably into its efficient system. Erich von Stroheim had begun in the mid-1910s as an assistant to Griffith. He also acted, typically playing the "evil Hun" figure in World War I films. Universal elevated him to director in 1919 with *Blind Husbands*, the story of a couple on a mountaineering holiday; the wife is nearly seduced away from her complacent husband by a scoundrel, played by von Stroheim (7.20). The success of this film led Universal to give von Stroheim a larger budget for his second film, *Foolish Wives* (1922), in which he played another predatory role. Von Stroheim exceeded the budget considerably, partly by building a large set reproducing Monte Carlo on the studio backlot. Universal turned this to its advantage by advertising *Foolish Wives* as the first million-dollar movie. More problematically, von Stroheim's first version ran over six hours. The studio pared it down to roughly two and a half hours.



7.20 Erich von Stroheim as the villainous seducer (termed by publicists “the man you love to hate”) in *Blind Husbands*.

Von Stroheim’s Hollywood career involved several such problems with excessive length and budgets. Producer Irving Thalberg replaced him when cost overruns threatened his next project, *The Merry-Go-Round* (1923). Von Stroheim then moved to the independent production firm Goldwyn to make *Greed*, an adaptation of Frank Norris’s naturalistic novel *McTeague* ran nine hours. Von Stroheim cut it by about half. By now the Goldwyn company had become part of MGM, and Thalberg took the film away from von Stroheim and reedited again. The final version, ran about two hours, shorn of one major plot line and many scenes. This story of an uneducated dentist and his miserly wife was filled with naturalistic touches and was perceived as grim, even sordid, by most critics and audiences (7.21). The excised footage was apparently destroyed, and *Greed* remains one of the great mutilated films.



7.21 The ending of *Greed*, with the protagonist trapped in Death Valley and killing his old enemy, manifests the bleak tone that made *Greed* unpopular with its initial audiences.

Von Stroheim achieved brief success at MGM by filling *The Merry Widow* (1925) with sexual subject matter. He then moved to Paramount to make *The Wedding March* (1928), yet another film in which he starred as a seducer, this time nearly redeemed by love. Again von Stroheim contemplated a lengthy film that he hoped to release as two features; the studio reduced it to one, which did poor business. Von Stroheim's last major Hollywood project, an independent production for Gloria Swanson, was *Queen Kelly* (1928-1929), which was unfinished and only much later restored and shown. Von Stroheim ceased to direct in the sound era, but he acted in many important films, including Jean Renoir's *Grand Illusion* (1937).

New Investment and Blockbusters

During the mid-1920s, Wall Street investment allowed the Hollywood studios to produce even more big-budget films. Epic films followed the trend typified by *The Ten Commandments*, with colossal sets and lavish costume design. The newly formed MGM was particularly committed to prestige pictures. It undertook one of the decade's most ambitious projects, an adaptation of General Lew Wallace's bestselling novel *Ben-Hur*. The production had originated in 1922 at the Goldwyn company, and the planners tried to give the film authenticity by filming on location in Italy—where, incidentally, labor costs were lower. Shooting in Italy, however, lacked the efficiency of studio work, and one accident during the filming of a naval battle may have caused the deaths of some extras. In 1924, MGM inherited the project when it absorbed Goldwyn. The process of completing the film was long and troubled. *Ben-Hur* finally appeared in 1926. Its chariot race was filmed in huge sets; a battery of cameras covered the action from many angles, permitting a breakneck pace in the editing (7.22).



7.22 Large sets and trick photography recreated Rome's Circus Maximus for the chariot race in *Ben-Hur*.

MGM also made an important pacifist war film, *The Big Parade* (1925). Its director, King Vidor, had learned his craft by studying the emerging Hollywood style in his

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hometown theater in Texas. He began his career by acting in and directing minor films in the 1910s. Moving to MGM when it formed in 1924, he worked in several genres. His *Wine of Youth* (1924) was a subtle story of three generations of women: a wise grandmother looks on helplessly as her daughter nearly divorces, and her granddaughter takes this as a cue that she can settle for love outside marriage.

The Big Parade was a much more ambitious project. It starred John Gilbert, the main romantic idol of the period after Valentino's death, as a rich young man who volunteers during World War I. The early portion of the story depicts his time behind the lines, as he falls in love with a French farm woman (7.23). An abrupt switch moves the film into epic scenes of the war (7.24). But, even more than *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, *The Big Parade* depicts the horrors of war. Now German soldiers are seen simply as other human victims of the combat. Alone in a foxhole with a dying German boy, the hero finds himself unable to kill the lad and instead lights him a cigarette. Other war films of the late 1920s and the 1930s followed this pattern, portraying war as grim and unglorious. *The Big Parade* became the first film to run more than a year on Broadway, and its success

abroad was enormous. Vidor made a very different sort of film with *The Crowd* (1928). A working-class woman marries a clerk, but they nearly break up when one of their children dies in a traffic accident. *The Crowd* stood apart from most Hollywood films in its nonglamorous depiction of everyday life.



7.23 The hero and heroine's romantic interlude ends as they are wrenched apart when he must leave for the front in *The Big Parade*.



7.24 The “big parade” of men and equipment moving up to the front (*The Big Parade*).

Other studios carried on the trend toward big-budget films. In 1927, Paramount released *Wings* (William Wellman), another bittersweet tale of World War I, centering on two friends, Jack and David, who love the same girl and become pilots together. Jack fails to realize that his neighbor, Mary, is in love with him, and she follows him to France as a Red Cross driver. Mary was played

by Clara Bow, who enjoyed a brief but intense period of stardom from the mid-1920s to early 1930s. She epitomized the Jazz Age flapper, with an uninhibited natural sexuality; her most famous film, *It* (1927, Clarence Badger), earned her the name the “It girl” (“It” being a current euphemism for sex appeal).

Wings, like *The Big Parade*, combined its romantic elements with spectacular battle footage. Portable cameras were mounted on airplanes to capture aerial combats with an immediacy that trick photography could not equal (7.25). Its careful use of motifs and sophisticated use of continuity editing, three-point lighting, and camera movement made *Wings* the epitome of late silent filmmaking in Hollywood. When the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences was formed in 1927 and began giving out annual awards (later dubbed “Oscars”), *Wings* was the first winner as best picture.



7.25 In *Wings*, the death of a German pilot and the attacking American plane in the background were filmed in the air without trick photography.

Genres and Directors

After UA was started in 1919, Douglas Fairbanks was the first of its founders to release a film through the new company. *His Majesty, the American* (1919, Joseph Henabery) was one of the unpretentious, clever comedies that made Fairbanks a star. Soon, however, he moved from comedy to a more ambitious costume picture, *The Mark of Zorro* (1920, Fred Niblo). It retained the star’s comic flair but was longer and emphasized on historical atmosphere, a conventional

romance, dueling, and other dangerous stunts (7.26). *The Mark of Zorro* was so successful that Fairbanks gave up comedy and concentrated on swashbucklers such as *The Three Musketeers* (1921, Fred Niblo), *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924, Raoul Walsh), and *The Black Pirate* (1926, Albert Parker). Fairbanks was one of the most consistently popular stars of the 1920s, though his success dissipated in the early sound era.



7.26 Douglas Fairbanks, as Zorro, soars over a host of pursuers in *The Mark of Zorro*.

Fairbanks had been unusual as a silent comedian who worked exclusively in features from the beginning of his film career in 1915. In the 1920s, however, several of the great slapstick stars of the earlier period also aspired to work in longer films (see box).

1920s COMEDY IN HOLLYWOOD

During the 1910s, most comedies that were based on physical action, or slapstick, were shorts that accompanied more prestigious features (though the popular comic stars often proved bigger draws). During the 1920s, feature-length slapstick comedies became more common. Stars like Charles Chaplin, Harold Lloyd, and Buster Keaton concentrated on

creating stronger stories that would support their elaborate physical gags. With their mastery of purely visual action, these comedians developed one of the most prominent and enduring genres of the decade.

Charles Chaplin continued to make hugely successful films in the early 1920s, when his contract with First National kept him from releasing through UA. In 1914, Chaplin had appeared in the first slapstick feature, *Tillie's Punctured Romance*, but subsequently he concentrated on shorts. In 1921, he returned to features with extraordinary success in *The Kid*. Here Chaplin played the familiar Little Tramp but shared the spotlight with the expressive child actor Jackie Coogan, who appeared as a foundling whom the Tramp raises (**7.27**).



7.27 In *The Kid*, the Little Tramp coaches the foundling on tactics of street fighting, unaware that the rival's muscular father is looking on.

Chaplin soon became even more ambitious, making a drama, *A Woman of Paris*, in which he played only a walk-on role. This bitterly ironic romance satirized high society. Its droll, even risqué, humor (**7.28**) influenced other directors of sophisticated comedies. The public, however, stayed away from a Chaplin film without the Little Tramp. Chaplin brought back that beloved character in two very popular features, *The Gold Rush* (1925) and *The Circus* (1927).



7.28 The heroine's rich lover fetches one of his own handkerchiefs from a drawer in her apartment, a touch that establishes their intimate relationship visually, in *A Woman of Paris*.

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Harold Lloyd quickly joined the vogue for slapstick features. Using the “glasses” character he had developed in the late teens, he made *A Sailor-Made Man* (1921, Fred Newmeyer), the story of a brash young man who wins his love through a series of adventures. Although Lloyd starred in various types of comedies, he is best remembered for his “thrill” pictures. In *Safety Last!* (1923, Newmeyer and Sam Taylor), he played an ambitious young man who has to climb the side of a skyscraper as a publicity stunt for the store where he works (**7.29**). Some of Lloyd's films of this era featured him as the bumbling small-town boy who becomes a hero when confronted with a great challenge, as in *Girl Shy* (1924, Newmeyer and Taylor), *The Freshman* (1925, Newmeyer and Taylor), and *The Kid Brother* (1927, Ted Wilde). Lloyd's career lasted into the early sound era, but eventually the aging actor did not fit his youthful image, and he retired.



7.29 In *Safety Last*, Harold Lloyd created one of the most memorable comic images of the cinema when he dangled from a clock above the street.

Buster Keaton's show-business career began when as a child he joined his parents' vaudeville act. In the late 1910s, he moved into films as an actor in Fatty Arbuckle's short films of the late 1910s. When Arbuckle shifted to features in the early 1920s, Keaton took over his film production unit and directed and starred in a series of popular two-reelers. His trademark was his refusal to smile, and he became known as "the Great Stone Face." Keaton's early films revealed a taste for bizarre humor that bordered at times on Surrealism (7.30).



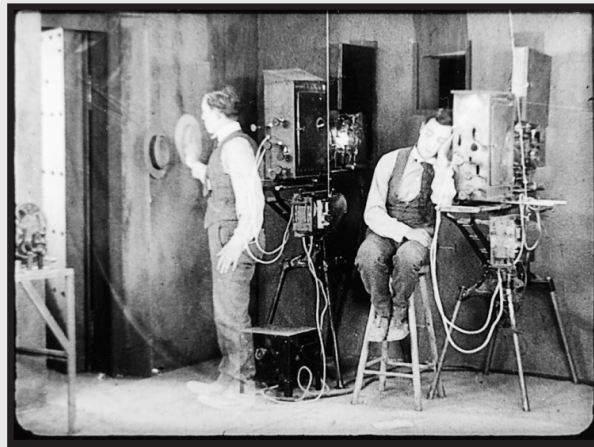
7.30 Trapped on a horse-drawn moving van in a passing police parade, the hero calmly lights his cigarette with a bomb tossed by an anarchist in *Cops* (1922, codirected by Keaton and Eddie Cline).

Keaton soon moved into features, though his offbeat humor and complex plots made him less popular than his main rivals, Chaplin and Lloyd. His first feature-length hit was *The Navigator* (1924, codirected with Donald Crisp), a story of a couple cast adrift alone on a huge

ocean liner. Keaton was fond of stories that exploited the cinematic medium, as in *Sherlock Jr.* (1924), which contained an elaborate film-within-a-film dream sequence (7.31). Keaton's finest film may be *The General* (1927, codirected

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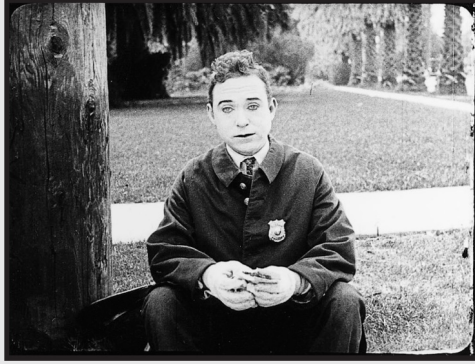
directed by Clyde Bruckman), a story of a daring rescue during the Civil War. Keaton and Bruckman created an almost perfectly balanced plot structure, evoked period detail, and staged elaborate gags within single shots. Nonetheless, *The General* was not a success.



7.31 The hero of *Sherlock Jr.*, a projectionist, dreams while his superimposed dream image goes out to enter the film being shown in the theater.

In 1928, Keaton moved to MGM, where he made one film that was up to his old standard—*The Cameraman* (1928, Edward Sedgwick, Jr.). After the coming of sound, however, he was not allowed his customary freedom in improvising gags on the set. Keaton's career gradually declined in the early 1930s, when MGM began costarring him with more aggressive comics like Jimmy Durante. From the mid-1930s, Keaton played in many minor films and took small roles, but his career never revived before his death in 1966.

Harry Langdon came to the cinema somewhat later than the other major comics of this era. From 1924 to 1927, he made short comedies for Mack Sennett. In these he developed his typical persona, one quite different from those of his rivals. Langdon cultivated a baby-faced image, playing naive characters who react slowly to whatever happens to them (7.32). By the mid-1920s, he also began making features: *Tramp, Tramp, Tramp* (1926, Harry Edwards), *The Strong Man* (1926, Frank Capra), and *Long Pants* (1927, Capra). Langdon continued to appear in small roles into the 1940s, but, as with many other comics of this era, his appeal came primarily through visual humor.



7.32 In a long take in *The Luck o' the Foolish* (1924, Harry Edwards), Harry Langdon slowly eats a sandwich, registering his dawning realization that a shingle has accidentally fallen into it.

Although these major actors entered features, the comic short remained a popular part of theater programs. The most important producers of shorts remained Hal Roach, who had discovered Harold Lloyd, and Mack Sennett, formerly of Keystone. Under their guidance, a new generation of stars emerged. The most famous of these were Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, who had worked separately in minor comedies for years before being teamed by Roach in *Putting Pants on Philip* (1927). This short film about an American (Hardy) trying to deal with the turmoil caused by his aggressively flirtatious, kilt-wearing Scottish cousin (Laurel) remains one of their most hilarious (**7.33**). Unlike some other silent comedians, Laurel and Hardy made an effortless transition to sound, and Roach graduated them to feature films in 1931.



7.33 *Putting Pants on Philip*: Stan Laurel as Philip gets upset at the idea of a tailor measuring him for a new pair of pants.

Another star of this period was Charley Chase, who worked for Sennett. Chase was a thin, ordinary-looking man with a small moustache who depended not so much on his comic appearance as on his talent for staging elaborate gags and chases (7.34). Comics from the teens who had played supporting roles in Chaplin's and other stars' films, such as Chester Conklin and Mack Swain, now acquired series of their own under Sennett.



7.34 Charley hides behind a life-size female puppet that he uses to flirt with a blackmailer in *Fluttering Hearts* (1927).

Another genre that gained in prestige during the 1920s was the Western. Previously, Westerns had been cheap, short features shown primarily in small-town theaters. Then, in 1923, Paramount released *The Covered Wagon* (James Cruze), an epic of the westward trip of a wagon train. With a large cast, including major stars, and a thrilling scene of the wagons crossing a river, the film was a hit. The low-budget Western continued to be a staple of Hollywood production, but for decades the large-scale Western would command respect.

John Ford had made his start directing stylish, modest Westerns (p. 64). *Just Pals* (1920) was an unconventional film, the story of a loafer in a small town who befriends a homeless boy and eventually becomes a hero by exposing a local embezzler (7.3-7.11). In 1921, he moved from Universal to the Fox Film Corporation. His first major success there was *The Iron Horse* (1924), a high-budget Western made in the wake of *The Covered Wagon*. This story of the building of the first transcontinental railroad exploited Ford's feeling for

landscape (7.35). He soon became Fox's top director, working in a variety of genres. Ford's other Western at Fox was *3 Bad Men* (1926), with an impressive land-rush sequence. Surprisingly, he did not return to the genre until *Stagecoach* (1939), but he was identified with Westerns throughout his long career.



7.35 A dynamic composition in depth against distant mountains as Indians ambush a supply train in John Ford's *The Iron Horse*.

Frank Borzage had also directed a number of low-budget Westerns during the 1910s. These include *The Gun Woman* (1918), the story of a rugged dance-hall owner who shoots the man she loves when he turns out to be a stagecoach bandit. Like Ford, Borzage moved into more prestigious filmmaking at the larger studios during the 1920s, though he quickly abandoned Westerns. Today he is often thought of in connection with melodramas, such as *Humoresque* (1920), a sentimental account of a Jewish violinist wounded in World War I. Some of Borzage's best films of the decade, however, were in other genres. *The Circle* (1925, MGM) was a sophisticated romantic comedy. In 1924, Borzage moved to Fox, where he joined Ford as a leading director. His first film there, *Lazybones* (1925), was a rambling, low-key comedy about a lazy young man who—unlike most Hollywood protagonists—has no goals but sacrifices his already shaky reputation to raise a child for the sister of the woman he loves.

After *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* was shown in the United States in 1921, horror films gradually became a minor American genre. Universal pioneered this type of film, primarily because one of its main stars was Lon Chaney. Chaney was a master of makeup—"the Man of a Thousand Faces"—and had a flair for macabre roles. He played Quasimodo in the original adaptation of *The Hunchback of Notre*

Dame (1923, Wallace Worsley), for which Universal built extravagant sets recreating medieval Paris, and the Phantom in the 1925 version of *The Phantom of the Opera* (Rupert Julian). Chaney's most consistently disturbing films, however, were made at MGM with director Tod Browning, whose taste for stories with perverse twists matched his own. In *The Unknown* (1927), for example, Chaney played a circus knife thrower, Alonzo, who pretends to be armless as part of his act. His beautiful partner (played by the young Joan Crawford) has a pathological fear of being touched by men and trusts only Alonzo. To gain her lasting love, he actually has his arms amputated, only to discover that she has now fallen in love with another man (7.36). Chaney died prematurely in 1930, but Browning went on in the 1930s to make some notable horror films, such as *Dracula* (1931) and *Freaks* (1932). The horror film also received a boost in the late 1920s, when more German directors began moving to Hollywood.



7.36 Lon Chaney as the protagonist of *The Unknown* sits with his feet, instead of his hands, on the table.

The gangster genre had not been particularly important in American filmmaking before the mid-1920s. There had been some films about petty gang crime, such as Griffith's *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912) and Walsh's *Regeneration* (1915). The rise of organized crime associated with Prohibition, however, helped make the flashily dressed, heavily armed gangster a prominent image in Hollywood films. One film did a great deal to establish the genre: Josef von Sternberg's *Underworld* (1927), made for Paramount.

Von Sternberg had started by independently producing and directing a gloomy naturalistic drama, *The Salvation Hunters* (1925), on a shoestring budget. It was championed by Charles Chaplin, but it failed at the box office. Von Sternberg codirected a few features without being credited. In 1927 he had his breakthrough film with *Underworld*. It was a big hit, in part due to its offbeat stars. Its odd hero is a homely, lumbering jewel thief, played by George Bancroft. He picks up a drunken Britisher (Clive Brook) and makes him into a refined assistant. The hero's world-weary mistress (Evelyn Brent) falls in love with the Britisher. Von Sternberg filmed this story with the dense, dazzling cinematography that was to become his hallmark (7.37). Von Sternberg went on to make another quirky gangster film starring Bancroft, an early talkie called *Thunderbolt* (1929). He also worked in other genres during the 1920s. *The Docks of New York* (1928) was a sordid story of a ship's stoker (Bancroft again) and a prostitute redeemed by each other's love; again the crowded scenery and textured, atmospheric lighting set von Sternberg's work apart. *The Docks of New York* prefigured the romantic melodramas that were to be the director's specialty in the 1930s.



7.37 Josef von Sternberg used backlight and smoke to create this atmospheric moment as the protagonist of *Underworld* guns down a rival. The film's style anticipated the later brooding *films noirs* ("dark films") of the 1940s.

Another unconventional director of this period was William C. de Mille, who has been overshadowed by his brother Cecil B. (the two spelled their family names differently). A former playwright, William made several distinctive films during the decade after World War I, mostly centering on gentle idiosyncratic

characters. In *Conrad in Quest of His Youth* (1920), for example, a British soldier returns from India to find himself without any aim in life. In an amusing scene, he reunites his cousins in an attempt to recreate exactly their childhood existence. *Miss Lulu Bett* deals with a plain spinster forced into a subservient position to earn her keep with her sister's family. Jolted out of her unquestioning acceptance by a false marriage to a bigamist, she rebels (7.38).



7.38 In *Miss Lulu Bett*, Lulu's brother-in-law complains about her buying a small plant out of her meager earnings.

One isolated, but noteworthy, talent of the period was Karl Brown, a cinematographer who had worked with Griffith in the 1920s. For Paramount he directed *Stark Love* (1927), a film outstanding for its realism. *Stark Love* was a rural drama, filmed entirely on location in North Carolina with nonactors. It went against gender stereotypes of the period, telling the story of a backwoods culture in which women are utterly oppressed. A young man receives a scholarship but gives it up to send a neighbor girl to college in his place (7.39). After *Stark Love*, Brown returned to cinematography.



7.39 Location photography in a scene where the hero of *Stark Love* teaches the heroine to read.

Unconventional films were not ruled out in Hollywood, but they had to make money. The American production companies also proved their willingness to experiment by importing many successful foreign filmmakers.

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Foreign Filmmakers in Hollywood

Before 1920, a few directors from abroad came to work in the American industry, mostly from France. Éclair's Maurice Tourneur made the move in 1914, Pathé's Albert Capellani in 1915, and Gaumont's Léonce Perret in 1917. The 1920s, however, were the first decade during which American firms systematically sought foreign talent and in which émigrés had a major influence on Hollywood filmmaking.

As important filmmaking trends emerged in Sweden, France, Germany, and elsewhere in Europe, American studio executives realized that these countries could be a source of fresh talent. Moreover, hiring the best European personnel was a way of ensuring that no country would grow powerful enough to challenge Hollywood in world film markets.

American firms also bought the rights to European plays and literary works and in some cases brought their authors to work as scriptwriters in the United States. A Paramount advertisement boasted

Every form of printed or spoken drama that might be suitable for Paramount Pictures is examined. Everything useful published in Italian, Spanish, German or French is steadily translated. Synopses are made of every stage play produced in America, Paris, Berlin, Vienna, London and Rome.¹

Studio representatives regularly visited Europe and viewed the latest films, looking for promising stars and filmmakers. In 1925, MGM executives who had seen *The Story of Gösta Berling* in Berlin signed its two stars, Greta Garbo and Lars Hansen, to contracts and also brought its director, Mauritz Stiller, to Hollywood. Similarly, Harry Warner saw two of Hungarian director Mihály Kertész's early films in London and wired him an offer that led to his lengthy career at Warner Bros. under the name Michael Curtiz. Since Germany had the most prominent foreign film industry, the largest number of émigré filmmakers came from that country.

Lubitsch Comes to Hollywood The regular flow of European talent to Hollywood began after Ernst Lubitsch's *Madame DuBarry* was released in the United States (as *Passion*, see p. 88) to great success. Star Pola Negri was soon acquired by Paramount. Lubitsch followed her to Hollywood in 1923. Already the most successful director in Germany, Lubitsch quickly adapted his style to incorporate the classical approach. He became one of the most highly respected filmmakers in Hollywood. Mary Pickford asked him to direct her in her 1923 production, *Rosita*. Although it allowed Pickford many amusing scenes, the film had the grandiose manner of Lubitsch's German pictures (7.40).

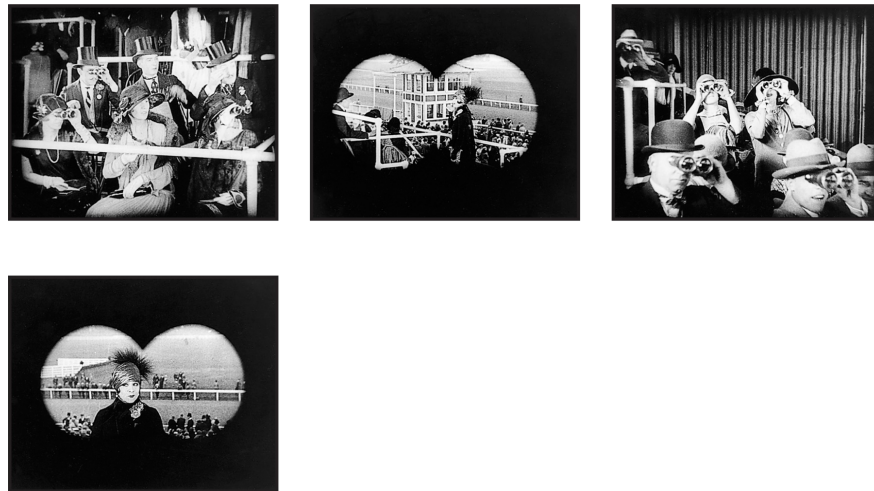


7.40 The large sets and deep stagings of *Rosita* made it more a Lubitsch film than a Mary Pickford star vehicle.

Despite *Rosita*'s success, UA was in financial difficulties and could not fund further Lubitsch productions. Surprisingly, he moved to Warner Bros. and became the minor studio's most prestigious director. Inspired by Chaplin's *A Woman of Paris*, he made a series of sophisticated society comedies that hinted at sexual appetites and rivalries bubbling behind polite veneers. This suggestiveness and Lubitsch's clever visual jokes became known as "the Lubitsch touch." He mastered continuity editing and could indicate characters' attitudes simply by how they shifted position in the frame or through the directions of their glances from shot to shot (7.41–7.44). Lubitsch's main films for Warner Bros. were *The Marriage Circle*

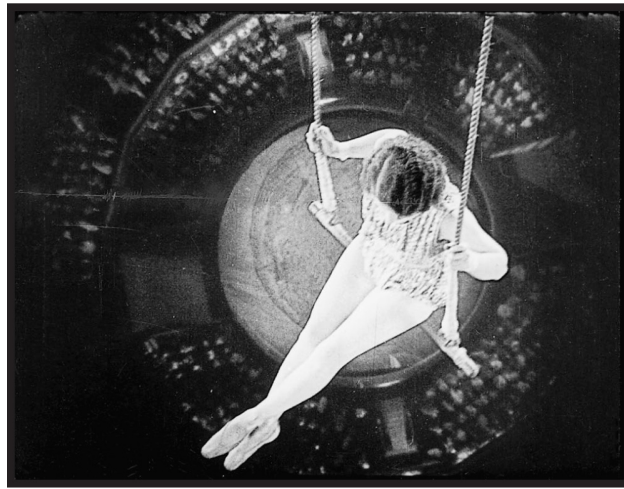
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(1924; see 7.2), *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1925), and *So This Is Paris* (1926). He also returned to his old genre, the historical film, with *The Student Prince in Old Heidelberg* (1927) at MGM and *The Patriot* at Paramount (1928). He later proved to be one of the most imaginative directors of the early sound era.



7.41–7.44 Four shots from the racetrack scene of *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1925), during which the views of various characters through binoculars reveal their attitudes toward a woman of shady reputation.

The Scandinavians Come to America Hollywood, and specifically MGM, also picked up on the important Scandinavian directors of the 1910s and early 1920s (pp. 52–56). The studio imported Benjamin Christensen, whose first American film, appropriately enough, was *The Devil's Circus* (1926); it harked back to the circus genre that had been so common in Scandinavian films of the 1910s (7.45). Christensen went on to make several gothic thrillers, most notably *Seven Footprints to Satan* (1929) before returning to Denmark.



7.45 This trapeze scene in *The Devil's Circus* exemplifies the kinds of “European” special effects and daring camera angles the Hollywood cinema was beginning to adopt in the mid-1920s.

Mauritz Stiller was hired by MGM after the success of *The Story of Gösta Berling* in Berlin. With him went Greta Garbo, whom Stiller had discovered. MGM set the pair to work on *The Torrent*, but Stiller’s eccentricities and inability to conform to strict accounting methods soon led to his replacement. German producer Erich Pommer, then working in a brief stint at Paramount, hired him to make *Hotel Imperial*, starring Pola Negri. This was Stiller’s most notable Hollywood production, including some “Germanic” camera movements that involved placing the camera on an elaborate elevator system. It did not recapture the wit or intensity of his Swedish films, however, and after a few more aborted projects, Stiller returned to Sweden, where he died in 1928.

In 1923, Victor Sjöström also accepted an offer from MGM, which renamed him Victor Seastrom. His first American film, *Name the Man*, was a bit stiff but contained several shots that displayed feeling for natural environments. *He Who*

Gets Slapped (1924) was a vehicle for Lon Chaney; another Scandinavian-influenced circus film, it proved highly popular. Seastrom then made two films starring Lillian Gish, who had recently come to MGM after her long association with Griffith. She wanted Seastrom to

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direct an adaptation of *The Scarlet Letter*. He seemed perfectly suited to Nathaniel Hawthorne's tale of love and retribution. His sense of landscape emerged even more strongly here (7.46). Similarly, the performances of Gish and Swedish actor Lars Hansen were strong, but MGM insisted on a comic subplot that vitiated the austere drama.



7.46 The Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale walks through a forest of stumps in *The Scarlet Letter*.

Gish and Hansen starred again in Seastrom's final American film, *The Wind* (1928). The story involves a woman who moves to the desolate, windswept Western frontier to marry a naive rancher. She kills and buries a would-be rapist but then is driven to the brink of madness by visions of the wind uncovering his body. Despite a hopeful ending imposed by the studio, *The Wind* was a powerful, bleak film. Its grimness and its release as a silent film when sound was coming in doomed it to failure, however, and Seastrom returned to Sweden, to his original name, and to a long career acting in sound films.

European Directors at Universal Universal, one of the larger studios among the Little Five, lent prestige to its production output by hiring several European directors. Among these was Paul Fejos, a Hungarian who had made his mark in Hollywood by directing an experimental independent feature, *The Last Moment*

(1927). It consisted primarily of a drowning man's final vision, portrayed in a lengthy, rapidly edited passage almost certainly influenced by the French Impressionist style. *Lonesome* (1928) was a simple story of a working-class couple's romance, portrayed with a naturalism that was unusual for Hollywood. His next film, the elaborate early musical *Broadway* (1929) used a huge Expressionist-style nightclub set through which the camera swooped on a giant crane built for this production (7.47). After a few minor Hollywood projects, including the foreign-language versions of some early talkies, Fejos returned to work in various European countries in the 1930s.



7.47 In *Broadway*, the camera pulls far back from the hero during a musical number in the Expressionistic nightclub.

Universal also hired Paul Leni, director of one of the main German Expressionist films, *Waxworks*. Leni's dark, vaguely expressionist adaptation of the hit Broadway gothic thriller *The Cat and the Canary* (1927) became an enormous success. *The Man Who Laughs* (1928) was a big-budget historical epic with overtones of the horror genre. It starred German actor Conrad Veidt in an Expressionist performance as a man whose mouth has been cut into a permanent grotesque grin. These two films reinforced Universal's orientation toward horror films—a tendency that had begun with *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *The Phantom of the Opera* and which was to intensify in the sound era with such films as *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*. Leni's death in 1929, however, meant that others would take over the exploration of the genre.

Murnau and His Influence at Fox Aside from Lubitsch, F. W. Murnau was the most prestigious European director to come to Hollywood in the 1920s. Fox hired him in 1925, in the wake of the critical acclaim for *The Last Laugh*. Murnau lingered at Ufa only long enough to make *Faust* (1926). Fox allowed him an enormous budget to make its biggest picture of 1927, *Sunrise*. Scripted by Carl Mayer, who had written so many German Expressionist and Kammerspiel films, and designed by Rochus Gliese, who had worked with Murnau in Germany, the film was virtually a German film made in America. It was a simple but intense psychological drama of a farmer who plans to murder his wife in order to run away with his lover from the city. The film was full of Germanic mise-en-scène with Expressionist touches (7.48). Even the American stars, Janet Gaynor and George O'Brien, were induced to give Expressionist-style performances.



7.48 Deep space and skewed false perspectives create an Expressionist composition in *Sunrise*.

Sunrise was perhaps too sophisticated to be really popular. Its huge city sets (7.49) made it so costly that it

did only moderately well for Fox. As a result, Murnau's fortunes declined. He went on to increasingly modest projects: *Four Devils* (1929), yet another circus film, now lost; and *City Girl* (1930), a part-talkie that was taken out of Murnau's control and altered. His last film began as a collaboration with documentarist Robert Flaherty (pp. 164–165). They worked on a fiction film about Tahiti, *Tabu*

(1931). After Flaherty abandoned the project, Murnau completed a flawed but beautiful love story made on location in the South Seas. He died in a car accident shortly before the film's release.



7.49 The huge city square constructed for *Sunrise* (with help from German false-perspective techniques that made it seem even larger).

Despite Murnau's lack of popular success during his Hollywood career, *Sunrise* had an enormous impact on American filmmakers, especially at Fox. Both John Ford and Frank Borzage were encouraged to imitate it. Ford's sentimental World War I drama *Four Sons* (1928) looks very much like a German film, and signs of Ufa's studio-bound style were to crop up in his sound films, such as *The Informer* (1935) and *The Fugitive* (1947).

Borzage's late-1920s films show even more directly the influence of Murnau's work. Borzage's *7th Heaven* is an affecting melodrama about a forlorn Parisian prostitute, Diane, and a woman-hating sewer cleaner, Chico, who gradually gain each other's love only to be separated by World War I. None of the film crew was European, but the set designs by Harry Oliver incorporated the sorts of false-perspective backgrounds that Murnau had used in *Sunrise* and some of his German films (7.50). German-style virtuoso camera movements were imitated, most spectacularly in a vertical shot made from an elevator (7.51).



7.50 Diane and her sister in their garret apartment in *7th Heaven*. The upwardly slanting floor shows the influence of German set design.



7.51 In *7th Heaven*, an elevator allows the camera to move with Diane and Chico seven flights up as they approach his apartment, which their love transforms into “heaven.”

Borzage followed up the tremendous success of *7th Heaven* with a similar film, *Street Angel* (1928), starring the same actors, Janet Gaynor and Charles Farrell. They

became the ideal romantic couple of the late 1920s. She won the first Best Actress award from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for these two films and *Sunrise* (at a time when an actor’s entire year’s output could be

nominated). They starred together again in Borzage's film *Lucky Star* (1929), a dark, romantic love story that again displayed German influence and remained one of the rare Hollywood films with a wheelchair-bound hero.

European films, and especially those from Germany, also affected Hollywood filmmaking more generally. *Flesh and the Devil* (1926), directed by the well-established filmmaker Clarence Brown, was full of fancy camera movement, subjective camera effects, and other techniques derived from European avant-garde cinema (7.52). It also starred the single most successful of the imported European stars, Greta Garbo. Here she was teamed with matinee idol John Gilbert (7.53). *Flesh and the Devil* was only one production of the 1920s to borrow from European cinema. Many other Hollywood films of the late 1920s and the 1930s also reflected influences from European films, particularly those of the French Impressionist, German Expressionist, and Soviet Montage movements.



7.52 The duel scene in *Flesh and the Devil*, handled with a rapid tracking movement back from a silhouetted scene. The opponents end offscreen at either side, with puffs of smoke coming into the frame, briefly leaving the result uncertain.



7.53 In *Flesh and the Devil*, a tiny spotlight created a romantic moment as John Gilbert lights a cigarette for Greta Garbo; the pair were cast as lovers in several more films.

FILMS FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN AUDIENCES

In Chapters 4 through 6, we saw how alternatives to classical Hollywood cinema arose in the form of stylistic movements. Other alternatives to mainstream Hollywood fare also appeared. In the United States, such alternatives have usually been specialty films aimed at specific audiences. During the silent era, a small circuit of theaters for African American audiences developed, along with a number of regional producers making films with all-black casts.

In 1915, the release of Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* led to many protests and boycotts on the part of African Americans. Some envisioned the creation of black-controlled production firms that could provide an alternative perspective on race relations. A few sporadic attempts at production were initiated during the latter half of the 1910s, but the results were usually short films that were relegated to a minor role on programs. They either showed positive images of black heroism during World War I or perpetuated traditional black comic stereotypes.

During the 1920s, black roles in mainstream Hollywood films were minor and still based on stereotypes. African Americans usually appeared as servants, wastrels, comic children, and the like. Black actors seldom found regular work and had to fill in with other jobs, usually menial, to survive.

As moviegoers, African Americans had little choice but to attend theaters that showed films designed for white audiences. Most theaters in the United States were segregated. In the South, laws required that exhibitors separate their white

and black patrons. In the North, despite civil-rights statutes in many localities, the practice was for the races to sit in different parts of auditoriums. Some theaters, usually owned by whites, were in black neighborhoods and catered to local viewers. In such theaters, any films with black-oriented subject matter proved popular.

There were even a small number of films produced specifically for African American audiences. These used all-black casts, even though the directors and other filmmakers were usually white. The most prominent company of this kind in the 1920s was the Colored Players, which made several films, including two particularly significant

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ones. *The Scar of Shame* (1927, Frank Perugini) dealt with the effects of environment and upbringing on black people's aspirations. The hero, a struggling composer, strives to live a respectable middle-class existence; he is "a credit to his race," despite the attempts of sordid characters to corrupt him (7.54).



7.54 The conservatively dressed hero of *Scar of Shame* confronts the villainous gambler, marked by his sporty checked suit.

The Colored Players also made a less preachy film that has survived, *Ten Nights in a Barroom* (1926, Charles S. Gilpin), an adaptation of a classic stage melodrama that had traditionally been played by white casts. Its complex flashback structure tells the story of a drunkard who reforms when he

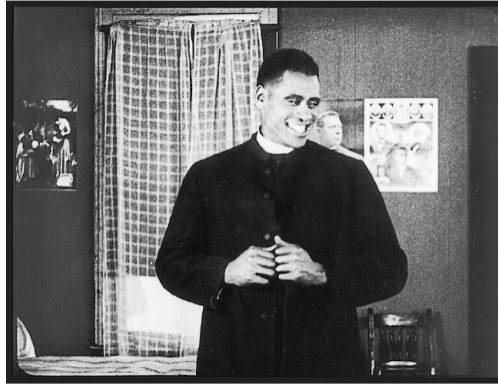
accidentally contributes to the death of his daughter in a barroom brawl (7.55). Despite its low budget, *Ten Nights in a Barroom* was skillfully lit and edited in the classical style.



7.55 The hero of *Ten Nights in a Barroom* holds his fatally wounded daughter.

In rare cases, black filmmakers were able to work behind the camera. Oscar Micheaux was for several decades the most successful African American producer-director. He began as a homesteader in South Dakota, where he wrote novels and sold them door to door to his white neighbors. He used the same method to sell stock to adapt his writings into films, creating the Micheaux Book and Film Company in 1918. Over the next decade, he made thirty films, concentrating on such topics as lynching, the Ku Klux Klan, and interracial marriage.

The energetic and determined Micheaux worked quickly with low budgets, and his films have a rough, disjunctive style that boldly depicts black concerns on the screen. *Body and Soul* (1924) explores the issue of the religious exploitation of poor blacks. Paul Robeson, one of the most successful black actors and singers of the century, plays a false preacher who extorts money and seduces women (7.56). Micheaux went bankrupt in the late 1920s and had to resort to white financing in the sound era. Nevertheless, he continued to average a film a year up to 1940 and made one more in 1948. Although much of his work is lost, Micheaux demonstrated that a black director could make films for black audiences.



7.56 Paul Robeson as the villain in *Body and Soul*.

The opportunities for African Americans would improve somewhat during the sound era. Talented black entertainers were in greater demand in musicals, and major studios experimented with all-black casts. As we shall see in Chapter 9, one of the most important early sound films, King Vidor's *Hallelujah!*, attempted to explore African American culture (pp. 177–178).

THE ANIMATED PART OF THE PROGRAM

The basic techniques of animated films had been invented during the 1910s (pp. 31–32), and the post-World War I period saw a boom in animation. New independent animation studios appeared, creating greater output and applying a division of labor that made the process of animation more efficient. Typically, head animators laid out the basic poses for the scene, the “in-betweeners” filled in the movements with additional drawings, other workers traced the drawings onto cels, still others filled in with paint, and a cinematographer photographed the images frame by frame. The result could be a series of cartoons released monthly or even biweekly.

Most animation companies produced series with continuing characters or themes. These films would be

released through an independent distributor, but that distributor might sign a contract with one of the big Hollywood firms to put the cartoons on its own program. The most successful independent distributor of this era was Margaret J.

Winkler Mintz. By the early 1920s, she was financing and releasing the decade's three most popular series: the Fleischer brothers' "Out of the Inkwell" films, the cartoons based on Bud Fisher's beloved "Mutt and Jeff" comics, and some of Walt Disney's earliest efforts.

The Fleischer brothers, Max and Dave, had experimented with a new film technique called *rotoscoping* in the mid-1910s. The rotoscope allowed a filmmaker to take live-action films, project each frame onto a piece of paper, and trace the outlines of its figures. Although the rotoscope was patented in 1915, World War I delayed further development of it. After the war, the brothers returned to the device, using it to animate cartoon figures. They used a live-action prologue for each film in their series, featuring Max Fleischer as a cartoonist who creates Koko, a clown who pops "out of the inkwell." The first cartoon was released in late 1919, and several others followed sporadically through 1920.

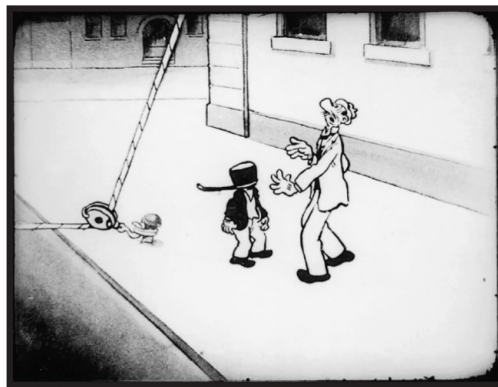
Rotoscoping was not intended to increase efficiency, as earlier inventions in cartooning were. Instead, by tracing the action one image at a time on cels, the cartoonist could easily produce characters that moved naturally *as whole figures*, rather than stiffly, moving only one or a few parts of their bodies, as in the slash and other simple cel systems (p. 66). The Fleischer's new character, Koko the Clown, swung his limbs through space freely, and his loose outfit swirled about him as he went (7.57).



7.57 In *The Clown's Little Brother* (1920), Koko struts across the frame in a rotoscoped motion that seemed effortless and lively in the context of 1910s animation.

The Fleischers also employed the standard techniques of cels, slashing, and retracing, but rotoscoping gave these devices new freedom. The “Out of the Inkwell” series prospered during the 1920s. In the early sound era, however, the Fleischers replaced Koko with the equally popular Betty Boop and Popeye.

The “Mutt and Jeff” series had begun as a comic strip in 1911. Its hapless stars were two moustached fellows, one tall, one short. The strip’s artist, Bud Fisher, agreed in 1916 to allow the celebrated strip to be animated. His name was invariably given as the creator of the cartoon series, even though over the years animation veterans actually drew the cartoons. Distributor Mintz contracted the series for release through Fox, and it remained popular through the 1920s (7.58).



7.58 Mutt’s attempts to help Jeff get out of the pot attached to his head soon leads to dizzy escapades on a half-built skyscraper in *Where Am I?* (1925).

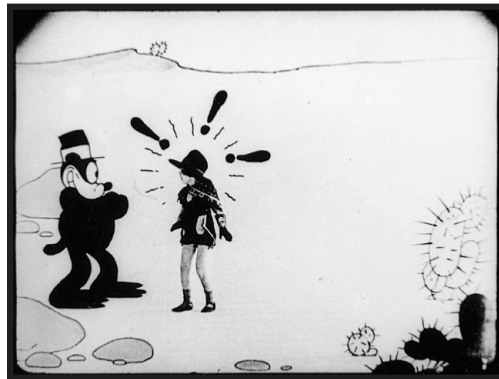
The young Walt Disney and his friend Ub Iwerks started their own commercial-arts firm in Kansas City in 1919. Failing to make money, they then worked for an ad agency, creating simple animated films. There they started “Newman’s Laugh-O-Grams,” a series of short animated films for local exhibition. After this venture also failed, Disney moved to Hollywood. In 1923, he received backing from Mintz to create a series of “Alice Comedies,” which proved to be his first success. With his brother Roy, he formed the Disney Brothers Studios, which would eventually grow into one of the world’s biggest entertainment conglomerates.

During the 1920s, the staff of the firm included several of the major animators who would create series for Warner Bros. and MGM in the 1930s: Hugh Harman, Rudolf Ising, and Isadore “Friz” Freleng. They all worked on the

Alice series, which combined live action and cartoon images (7.59). In 1927, the Disney studio switched to full animation with the “Oswald the Rabbit” series. In a legal battle, however, Charles Mintz, husband of Disney’s distributor, seized control of the character. Walt’s solution was to invent a new character called Mickey Mouse. The first two Mickey cartoons failed to find a distributor. A third, *Steamboat Willie*, incorporated the new sound

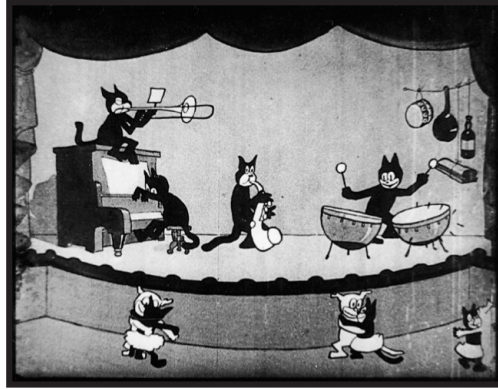
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technology and proved a huge hit. It helped catapult Disney to the head of the animation business in the 1930s.



7.59 In *Alice in the Woolly West* (1926), animated exclamation points express the live-action heroine’s astonishment as she confronts the world of cartoon characters.

Other series of this period proved highly popular. Paul Terry, who had worked at various animation studios during the 1910s, started his own firm, Fables Pictures Inc., in 1921. He launched a series called “Aesop’s Fables.” For these modern retellings of the classic fables Terry used a virtual assembly-line division of labor to turn out one film per week; the results were amusing but usually conventional (7.60). Terry left the company in 1928 to create Terrytoons, a firm he ran until 1955, when he sold it to television producers.



7.60 The nightclub in which the protagonist fritters away his paycheck in *The Spendthrift* (1922), with the moral “A spendthrift blames everybody but himself for his misfortune.”

The most popular series of the 1920s starred Felix the Cat. Its nominal creator, Pat Sullivan, had opened his own studio in 1915, making ads and animated films. He began making Felix cartoons for Paramount around 1918. Although Sullivan signed all the films, the head of animation was actually Otto Messmer, who originated the character of Felix and handled the animation process. Mintz signed to distribute the series in 1922. The films were hugely successful, partly through the appeal of the feline hero and partly through the flexible animation style. In these films, Felix’s tail could fly off his body and become a question mark or a cane for him to lean on (7.61). By the mid-1920s, the films had achieved a huge audience. Sullivan was also a pioneer in the use of tie-in products like dolls to further exploit the success of his cartoon character. Like most of the major animated series of the 1920s, Felix did not carry over well into the sound era.



7.61 Felix politely tips his ears in *Felix the Cat in Futuritzzy* (1928).

The US film industry's push into foreign markets during World War I gave it an enormous economic base for its expansion and consolidation in the 1920s. Most national film industries were too small to offer significant resistance to American domination. Yet the cinema continued to be an international phenomenon, and many countries managed to make at least a few films of their own. Some European countries were strong enough to support national industries and even to consider banding together to challenge American power. Moreover, for the first time, filmmakers in several countries were creating short experimental films that challenged the classical narrative approach of Hollywood cinema.

REFERENCE

1. Advertisement, Paramount Pictures, *Photoplay* 19, no. 4 (March 1921): 4.

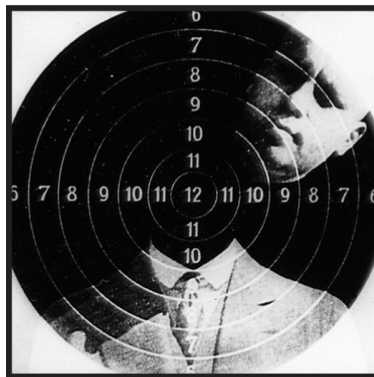
We discuss some topics in this chapter further on our blog, *Observations on Film Art*:

On Ford in the 1920s: "Everybody's Irish"

On Von Sternberg's three final silents: "Never too late silents"

CHAPTER 8

INTERNATIONAL TRENDS OF THE 1920s



Ghosts Before Breakfast



The Passion of Joan of Arc

As we saw in Chapters 4 to 6, major alternatives to the classical filmmaking style of Hollywood arose in the years after World War I: French Impressionism, German Expressionism, and Soviet Montage. These three movements occurred within the context of a general reaction against the domination of international markets by Hollywood films. Some European companies united to resist American encroachment. At the same time, artists in other media and dedicated filmmakers worked outside the commercial establishment to create alternative types of cinema, both experimental and documentary. Less dramatically, several countries tried to compete with the United States by producing films more regularly.

“FILM EUROPE”

Directly after World War I, nations competed against each other as well as against Hollywood, hoping to prosper in the international film market. The German government fostered the growth of its film industry by continuing the wartime ban on imported films. In France, despite many efforts, adverse conditions kept production low. For a few years, Italy continued to produce many films but could not regain its strong pre-1914 position. Other countries sought to establish even a small amount of steady production.

Postwar Animosity Fades

This competition was exacerbated by lingering animosities. Great Britain and France were determined to block German films from being shown abroad. Theater owners in both countries agreed not to show German films

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after the war, for a period of five years in Britain and for fifteen in France. Unofficial boycotts existed in Belgium and other countries that had suffered during the war.

Yet by 1921, glowing reviews of German films such as Lubitsch's *Madame DuBarry* and Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* made French and British audiences feel that they were missing important developments. Louis Delluc held

a Paris screening of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (at a charity benefit, to forestall objections). It created a sensation, and a distributor quickly bought the French rights. *Caligari* opened in March 1922 and became an enormous hit. The exhibitors' ban was forgotten, and a vogue for German Expressionist films developed (8.1). In late 1922, *Madame DuBarry* premiered in London, breaking that country's boycott. Postwar hostility was waning.



8.1 A 1922 French advertisement for F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* called it "more powerful than *Caligari*."

Moreover, by the early 1920s, European producers realized that American competition was too great for any one country to counter. The United States, with around 15,000 theaters, was the world's largest film market. American producers garnered a huge, predictable income from domestic rentals alone. They could afford to sell films cheaply abroad because most foreign income was pure profit. Commentators noted, however, that if the movie theaters of all European countries were gathered into a single continental market, it would be comparable in size to that of the United States. What if European film industries could

cooperate by guaranteeing to import each other's films? European films might make as much money as Hollywood films did. Then their budgets could be raised, their production values would improve, and they might even be able to compete with American films in other world markets. This idea was gradually formulated as the "pan-European" cinema, or "Film Europe."

Concrete Steps toward Cooperation

During 1922 and 1923, European film trade journals were calling for such cooperation, and, in 1924, the first steps were taken to create a practical cooperation among European producing nations. Erich Pommer, head of the powerful German company Ufa, concluded a pact with Louis Aubert, a major Parisian distributor. Ufa agreed to release in Germany French films provided by the Aubert company, in exchange for Aubert's distribution of Ufa films in France. Previously, French-German deals had meant the sale of a film or two, but now mutual distribution became regular. Pommer declared: "It is imperative to create a system of regular trade which will enable the producers to amortise their films rapidly. It is necessary to create 'European films,' which will no longer be French, English, Italian, or German films, but entirely 'continental' films."¹ The Ufa-Aubert agreement provided the model for later transactions. Exchange of films among France, Germany, Britain, and other countries increased during the second half of the 1920s.

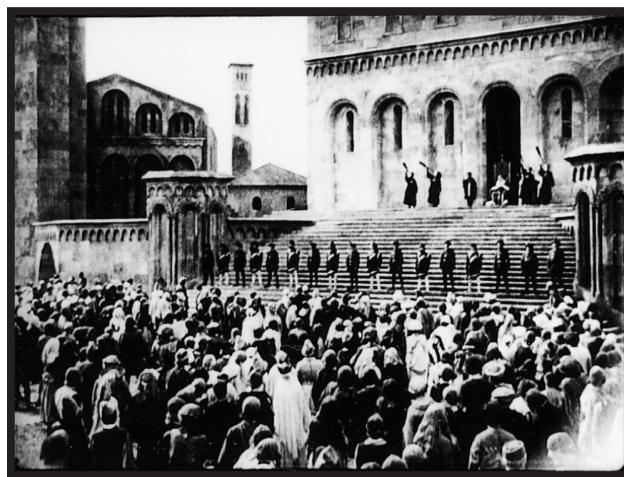
Firms across Europe devised tactics for making "European films." They imported stars, directors, and other personnel to give an international flavor to their output. Similarly, a coproduction, in which a film would be financed and made by companies in two countries, guaranteed release in at least those two markets. Two firms contributing financing plus a larger market meant projects could have higher budgets and better compete with Hollywood's films.

For example, British producer-director Graham Wilcox made *Decameron Nights* (1924), with Ufa providing its studio facilities and half the financing (8.2). Actors from several countries participated, including American star Lionel Barrymore, English actress Ivy Close, and Werner Krauss (famous as Dr. Caligari). The result was highly popular in several countries, including the United

States. Producers and filmmakers from abroad often worked in Germany, since the production facilities there were the best in Europe. In 1924, the young Alfred Hitchcock

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began his career as a designer on British films made at Ufa, where he watched Murnau working on *The Last Laugh* (p. 94). His first two films as a director, *The Pleasure Garden* (1925) and *The Mountain Eagle* (1926), were British-German coproductions shot in Berlin.



8.2 Ufa's large, technically sophisticated studios permitted the construction of epic-style sets of Renaissance Venice for the British-German coproduction, *Decameron Nights*.

Success Cut Short

By mid-decade, Germany's film industry was the leader in an increasingly cooperative pan-European effort. To be sure, many big coproductions failed to gain the anticipated international success, since cautious producers tended to use standard formulas. "International appeal" also too often meant imitations of Hollywood-style films, with a loss of the distinctive national qualities that attracted viewers to movies like *Caligari* and *Potemkin*. Coproductions and international casts, however, gradually made European films more competitive internationally. Cross-border arrangements created Spanish-French, German-Swedish, and other multinational films.

The Film Europe effort also led to import quotas in some countries. After Germany lifted its import ban in 1921, it had strictly limited the number of films admitted to the country. In 1925, it changed to a system whereby a distributor could import one film for every German film it had circulated the previous year. In 1928, France introduced a less ambitious limit of seven imported films for each French one distributed.

In 1927, Great Britain instituted a cautious quota calling for a small percentage of British footage to be distributed and exhibited in the United Kingdom. Over the years, this percentage was to increase gradually, allowing the production sector to grow to meet the demand. Even countries with more limited production created quotas. In Portugal, one-tenth of screen time had to be reserved for domestic films—usually newsreels or travelogues preceding an imported feature. Although these quotas were purportedly directed against all imported films, it was common knowledge that their main target was Hollywood films. Such quotas bolstered the Film Europe drive.

Between 1924 and 1927, the Europeans, led by Germany, Britain, and France, built the base for a continental market. Slowly their efforts reduced the number of American film imports and replaced them with European ones. This table shows the percentage of feature films released in Germany, France, and Britain in 1926 and 1929, by the main countries of origin.

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN	PERCENT OF FILMS RELEASED IN					
	GERMANY		FRANCE		BRITAIN	
	1926	1929	1926	1929	1926	1929
United States	45	33	79	48	84	75
Germany	39	45	6	30	6	9
France	4	4	10	12	3	2
Britain	0.4	4	0.4	6	5	13

Germany, already the strongest film industry, benefited most from cooperative efforts. France, struggling in a production crisis, gained least; the decline in American films there was largely offset by other imports. Still, Film

Europe might gradually have improved Europe's situation had the effort continued.

Abrupt changes cut it short. Most important was the introduction of sound in 1929. Dialogue created language barriers, and each country's producers began to hope that they could succeed locally because English-language imports would decline. Several countries did benefit from audiences' desire for sound films in their own languages, and some national industries became major forces as a result of sound. Competitiveness among European nations reappeared.

In addition, the Great Depression began to hit Europe in 1929. Faced by hard times, many businesses and governments became more nationalistic and less interested in international cooperation. The rise of extreme left-wing and right-wing dictatorships in Europe and Asia increased divisiveness and territorial rivalries, a trend that would eventually lead to another global war. Film Europe was moribund by the early 1930s, but some of its effects lingered. Some films still circulated internationally, and firms collaborated on coproductions.

THE “INTERNATIONAL STYLE”

The Blending of Stylistic Traits

Stylistic influences also circulated among countries. French Impressionism, German Expressionism, and Soviet Montage began as largely national trends, but soon the filmmakers exploring these styles became aware of each other's work. By the mid-1920s, an international avant-garde style blended traits of all three movements.

Caligari's success in France in 1922 led French directors to add Expressionist touches to their work. Impressionist director Marcel L'Herbier told two parallel stories of famous characters in *Don Juan et Faust* (1923), using Expressionist-style sets and costumes in the Faust scenes (8.3). In 1928, Jean Epstein combined Impressionist camera techniques with Expressionist set design to create an eerie, portentous tone in *The Fall of the House of Usher*, based on Edgar Allan Poe's story (8.4).



8.3 Expressionist mise-en-scène in L'Herbier's *Don Juan et Faust*.



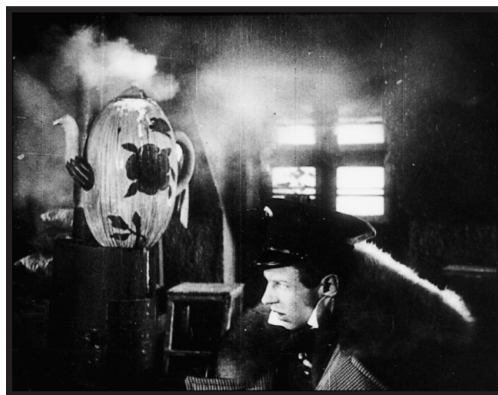
8.4 A corner in a room of Usher's mansion in Epstein's *The Fall of the House of Usher* displays the influence of German Expressionism.

At the same time, French Impressionist traits of subjective camera devices were cropping up in German films. Karl Grune's *The Street*, an early example of the street film (p. 99), used multiple superimpositions to show the protagonist's visions (8.5). *The Last Laugh* and *Variety* popularized subjective cinematographic effects that had originated in France (see 5.23–5.25). By the mid-1920s, the boundaries between the French Impressionist and German Expressionist movements were blurred.



8.5 In *The Street*, Impressionist-style superimpositions depict the hero's visions of delights that await him in the city.

The Montage movement started somewhat later, but imported films soon allowed Soviet directors to pick up on European stylistic trends. The rapid rhythmic editing pioneered by Epstein and Abel Gance in 1923 was pushed further by Soviet filmmakers after 1926 (p. 116). Grigori Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg's 1926 adaptation of Gogol's *The Cloak* contained exaggerations in the acting and mise-en-scène that were reminiscent of Expressionist films (8.6). In turn, from 1926 onward, Soviet Montage films wielded influence abroad. Leftist filmmakers in Germany embraced the Soviet style to make politically charged cinema. A shot from the final march scene in *Mutter Krausens Fahrt ins Glück* ("Mother Krausen's Journey to Happiness," 1929, Piel Jutzi; 8.7) echoes the climactic demonstration scene in Pudovkin's *Mother* (see 6.46). Soviet influence intensified in the 1930s, when leftist filmmaking responded to the rise of Fascism.



8.6 *The Cloak* contains grotesque elements that recall German Expressionism, such as this giant steaming teapot that heralds the beginning of a strange dream sequence.



8.7 In *Mutter Krausens Fahrt ins Glück*, a low angle isolates the major characters against the sky in Soviet Montage fashion as they march in protest.

French, German, and Soviet techniques had an impact in many countries. Two of the most notable English directors of the 1920s reflected the influence of French Impressionism. Anthony Asquith's second feature, *Underground* (1928), used a freely moving camera and several subjective superimpositions to tell a story of love and jealousy in a working-class milieu (8.8). Alfred Hitchcock's boxing picture, *The Ring* (1927), demonstrated his absorption of Impressionist techniques in its many subjective passages (8.9). Hitchcock also acknowledged his debts to German Expressionism, an influence evident in *The Lodger* (1926). For decades, he would draw on avant-garde techniques he learned in the 1920s.



8.8 As the heroine (not shown) of *Underground* looks up at a building, a superimposition reminiscent of French Impressionism conveys her vision of the villain.



8.9 In *The Ring*, Hitchcock used distorting mirrors in this shot of dancers to suggest the hero's mental turmoil during a party.

The international influence of the commercial avant-garde reached as far as Japan. By the 1920s, Japan was absorbing European modernism in its arts, primarily literature and painting. Futurism, Expressionism, Dada, and Surrealism were all welcomed. One young filmmaker, Teinosuke Kinugasa, was already well established in commercial production, having made over thirty low-budget pictures. He was also associated with modernist writers in Tokyo. In 1926 with their help, he independently produced a bizarre film. *A Page of Madness* carried Expressionist and Impressionist techniques to new extremes. Taking a cue from *Caligari*, Kinugasa set the action in a

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madhouse, with distorting camera devices and Expressionist mise-en-scène frequently reflecting the deranged visions of the inmates (**8.10**; compare this with shots from *Caligari* and other German Expressionist films in Chapter 5). The plot that motivates these strange scenes is full of flashbacks and fantasy passages. Kinugasa's next film, *Crossroads* (1928), was less difficult but still reflected influences from European avant-garde films. It was the first Japanese feature to receive a significant release in Europe.



8.10 An enigmatic scene in *A Page of Madness*, in which an inmate obsessed with dancing appears in an elaborate costume, performing in an Expressionist set containing a whirling, striped ball.

Carl Dreyer: European Director

The epitome of the international director of the late silent era was Carl Dreyer. He began in Denmark as a journalist and then worked as a scriptwriter at Nordisk from 1913 on, when the company was still a powerful force (p. 25). Dreyer's first film as a director, *The President* (1919), used traditional Scandinavian elements, including eye-catching sets (**8.11**), a relatively austere style, and dramatic lighting. His second film, *Leaves from Satan's Book* (1920), was also made for Nordisk; influenced by D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance*, it told a series of stories of suffering and faith.



8.11 In *The President* and other early films, Dreyer often calls as much attention to the set and incidental props as to the main action (compare with 3.14).

At this point, one of the pioneers of Nordisk, Lau Lauritzen, departed, and the company declined. Both Dreyer and Benjamin Christensen left to work in Sweden for Svenska, Christensen making *Witchcraft through the Ages* while Dreyer did a bittersweet comedy, *The Parson's Widow* (1920). Over the next few years, Dreyer moved between Denmark and Germany, making *Michael* (1924) at the Ufa studio. Back in Denmark, he moved to the rising Palladium firm and made *Thou Shalt Honor Thy Wife* (aka *The Master of the House*, 1925). This chamber comedy shows a family deceiving an autocratic husband in order to make him realize how he has bullied his wife. It established Dreyer's reputation internationally and particularly in France. After a brief sojourn in Norway making a Norse-Swedish coproduction, Dreyer was hired by the

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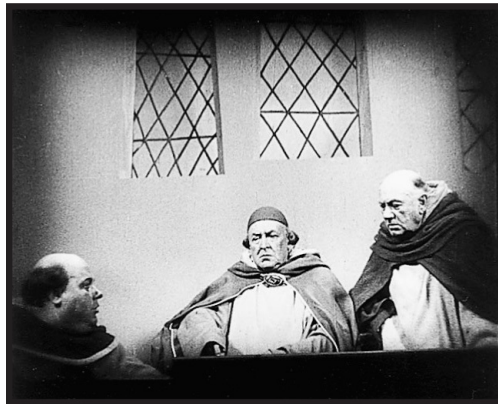
prestigious Société Générale de Films (which was also producing Gance's *Napoléon*) to make a film in France.

The result was perhaps the greatest of all international-style silent films, *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928). The cast and crew represented a mixture of nationalities. The Danish director supervised Hungarian cinematographer Rudolph Maté and designer Hermann Warm, who had worked on *Caligari* and other German Expressionist films. Most of the cast was French.

Joan of Arc blended influences from the French, German, and Soviet avant-garde movements into a fresh, daring style. Concentrating on Joan's trial and execution, Dreyer used many close-ups, often decentered and filmed against blank white backgrounds. The dizzying spatial relations emphasized the actors' faces. Dreyer used the newly available panchromatic film stock (pp. 128-129), which allowed for the actors to do without makeup. In the close framings, the images revealed every facial detail. Renée Falconetti gave a sincere, intense performance as Joan (8.12). The sparse settings contained touches of muted Expressionist design (8.13), and the dynamic low framings and the accelerated subjective editing in the torture-chamber scene suggested the influence of Soviet Montage and French Impressionism.



8.12 A decentered close-up against a blank background in *The Passion of Joan of Arc* both disconcerts and allows us to watch Falconetti's moving performance in the title role.



8.13 Mismatched windows in the courtroom set of *The Passion of Joan of Arc* recall Hermann Warm's earlier career in German Expressionist filmmaking.

Despite criticisms that *Joan of Arc* depended too much on lengthy conversations for a silent film, it was widely hailed as a masterpiece. The producer, however, was in financial difficulties after *Napoléon*'s extravagances and was unable to support another Dreyer project. Since Danish production was deteriorating, Dreyer turned to a strategy common among experimental filmmakers: he found a patron. A rich nobleman underwrote *Vampyr* (1932) in exchange for being allowed to play its protagonist.

As the name suggests, *Vampyr* is a horror film, but it bears little resemblance to such Hollywood examples of that genre as *Dracula* (which Universal had produced the previous year). Instead of presenting bats, wolves, and clear-cut rules about vampires' behavior, this film evokes unexplained, barely glimpsed

terrors. A tourist who stays at a country inn in a foggy landscape encounters a series of supernatural events as he wanders around the neighborhood (8.14). He finds that the illness of a local landowner's daughter seems to be connected with her mysterious doctor and a sinister old lady who appears at intervals. The protagonist's investigation brings on a dream in which he imagines himself dead (8.15). Many scenes in *Vampyr* give a sense of dreadful events occurring just offscreen, with the camera tracking and panning just too late to catch them. Dreyer used lighting, misty landscapes, and camera movement to enhance the macabre atmosphere.



8.14 In *Vampyr*, the hero trails the disembodied shadow of a wooden-legged man and sees it rejoin its owner.



8.15 This shot shows the “dead” protagonist's point of view through a window in his coffin as the vampiric old woman he has been investigating peers down at him (*Vampyr*).

Vampyr was so different from other films of the period that it was greeted with incomprehension. It marked the end of Dreyer's international wanderings. He returned to

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Denmark and, unable to find backing for another project, resumed life as a journalist. During World War II, he recommenced feature filmmaking.

FILM EXPERIMENTS OUTSIDE THE MAINSTREAM INDUSTRY

As specialized art films became distinct from the popular entertainment cinema during the 1920s, an even more radical type of filmmaking appeared. This was *experimental*, or independent avant-garde, cinema. Experimental films were usually short, and they were produced outside the film industry. Indeed, they were often deliberate attempts to undercut the conventions of commercial narrative filmmaking.

To support their work, filmmakers might use their own money, find a rich patron, or work part-time within the mainstream industry. Moreover, the ciné-clubs and specialized theaters that had arisen to promote and exhibit art cinema also provided venues for more experimental cinema (see box). As with other types of alternative filmmaking, experimental trends emerged soon after World War I as isolated phenomena in different countries before becoming more international.

During the early decades of the century, painters and writers innovated a wide variety of modernist styles, including Cubism, abstract art, Futurism, Dadaism, and Surrealism. In many cases, artists already established in these movements made one or two films. In other cases, young filmmakers became enchanted with the idea of creating an alternative, noncommercial cinema.

During the 1910s, a few experimental films resulted from these stylistic movements, but none of these is known to survive. Even before 1910, Italian artists Bruno Corra and Arnaldo Ginna reportedly made short films using hand-

colored abstract shapes. In 1914, a group of Russian Futurist painters made a parodic film called *Drama in the Futurists' Cabaret No. 13*, but little is known about this intriguing work.

A few Futurist films were made in Italy. One was *Vita futurista* ("Futurist Life"), by a group of Futurist artists during 1916 and 1917. The movement was concerned with celebrating the new "machine age." Artists avoided conventional logic and were fascinated with capturing rapid actions, even portraying successive events as happening simultaneously. *Vita futurista* consisted of several unconnected, absurd segments, including the painter Giacomo Balla's courting and marrying a chair. Surviving illustrations show that the film used distorting mirrors and superimpositions in ways that may have anticipated the French Impressionists and later avant-garde filmmakers. A commercial producer made two films directed by Anton Bragaglia, a Futurist photographer: *Il perfido canto* and *Thais* (both 1916). The first, which Bragaglia claimed contained innovative techniques, is lost. *Thais* survives, but it is less radical than the others, using a continuing narrative and sets, blurred focus, and costume designs that lend it a mildly Futuristic look.

Lacking sufficient evidence about these early experimental films, we must start our account of the independent avant-garde cinema with the 1920s. There were six major trends in experimental filmmaking: abstract animation, Dada-related production, Surrealism, cinéma pur, lyrical documentaries, and experimental narrative.

Abstract Animation

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, artists had moved toward works with increasingly nonobjective styles. Sometimes only the title enabled the viewer to tell what the shapes in a painting represented. In 1910, Wassily Kandinsky's *Abstract Watercolor* made the final break: the painting contained shapes and colors, but it depicted nothing. Other artists quickly followed suit, and pictorial abstraction became one of the major trends of modern art.

The nonrepresentational style took some time to make its way into film. In the late 1910s in Germany, a few artists believed that since film was a visual art like painting, its purest form would be abstract. One of them, Hans Richter, had studied art and worked with an Expressionist group. During World War I, Richter encountered a group of Dadaists in Switzerland, including a Swedish artist, Viking Eggeling, who had also lived in Germany. Eggeling was fascinated with the idea of using art as a universal means of spiritual communication. Richter and Eggeling returned to Germany, and each worked on “scrolls,” long strips of paper containing slightly different drawings. Both sought ways of transforming these into moving images that would be a sort of “visual music.” The pair was allowed to use Ufa’s facilities, and from 1920 to 1921, they experimented with animating short strips of frames photographed from the scrolls. Richter claims to have made the first abstract animated film, *Rhythmus 21*, in 1921, but it was not shown publicly until years later.

The earliest abstract animated film was apparently made in Germany by Walter Ruttmann. Ruttmann had also studied as a painter, working in abstract and

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Expressionist styles. From an early date, however, he was also interested in film. In 1913, he condemned the Autorenfilm (pp. 46–47) as a pointless attempt to inject quality into the cinema by drawing on literature:

THE SPREAD OF “ART CINEMA” INSTITUTIONS

During the years after World War I, French Impressionist and German Expressionist films led many observers to distinguish between mainstream commercial cinema and a separate *art cinema*. Valid or not, the distinction has been widely used ever since.

Art films, with their more limited appeal, gave rise to a new set of institutions during the 1920s—what one historian has termed “the alternative cinema network.”² Intellectually oriented journals, ciné-clubs, small art cinemas, exhibitions, and lectures all aimed at

promoting film as an art form. Filmmakers often supported these endeavors, writing essays, lecturing clubs and art houses, and even making films aimed solely at these small, elite venues.

The origins of this network can be traced to Louis Delluc, who wrote theoretical essays and criticism for a serious fan magazine called *Le Film*, which he edited from 1917 to 1918. In it he championed early Impressionist films by Abel Gance and Marcel L'Herbier and published the latter's first theoretical writings on the cinema. In 1919, Delluc called for the formation of a ciné-club devoted to artistic films, and in 1920 he started *Le Journal de Ciné-Club*. After three sporadic meetings of the first ciné-club, Delluc started another journal, *Cinéa*, which he later sold to finance his shoestring filmmaking. It became *Cinéa-Ciné pour tous* and published many essays by the Impressionists and by critics sympathetic to the movement.

In 1921, the author Ricciotto Canudo organized the Club des Amis du Septième Art ("Club of Friends of the Seventh Art"), known as CASA. The membership included artists and critics from Paris's artistic elite, and the meetings mixed discussions of films with programs of music, poetry readings, and dance: film had gained a high-art cachet.

Canudo tirelessly promoted the cinema, and, through his connections in the Paris art world, he persuaded the prestigious annual arts exhibition, the Salon d'Automne, to devote two evenings to the cinema annually from 1921 to 1923. These evenings included lectures and clips from important films—often from the French Impressionist and German Expressionist movements. Despite Canudo's premature death in late 1923, and the subsequent decline of CASA, his colleagues continued his work. In 1924, the cinema moved up another step in respectability when a Paris art gallery, the Musée Galliera, held an exhibition on the art of the French cinema. Besides offering lectures and screenings, the exhibit displayed designs, posters, photographs, costumes, and other artifacts from recent French films—again, many of them Impressionist in style.

The climax of cinema's participation in exhibitions came in 1925, when one of this century's major art events, the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes, was held in Paris. This exposition was like a world's fair of decorative arts, and it popularized the modernist Art Deco style throughout the world. The cinema had its own gallery space, and a new film society was formed to show major recent films. Again, the Impressionists' work featured prominently.

Alternative cinema networks appeared in other countries as well. In 1924, a prestigious German art show, the *Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung*, included a cinema section consisting of original set designs and models. Many Expressionist films, like *Caligari* and *Destiny*, were

represented. The following year, a large exposition devoted entirely to photography and the cinema was held in Berlin. The Kino und Photo Ausstellung (or Kipho), mixed commerce and art. The big companies publicized forthcoming films, and visitors saw displays of German Expressionist film design, including the full-sized dragon from *The Nibelungen*.

In keeping with the Film Europe effort, exhibitions in the later 1920s were more international. A major event in the Hague in 1928, the Internationale Tentoonstelling op Filmgebied, helped introduce the young Soviet Montage movement more fully to Europeans. In 1929, the Deutsche Werkbund organized a big exposition in Stuttgart, Film und Foto. Here several programs of features and shorts surveyed the history of the avant-garde cinema, from *Caligari* on. By the end of the silent era, the important art films were already gaining the status of classics.

Another major component of the alternative cinema network appeared in 1924, when Jean Tedesco opened the first of Paris's *salles spécialisées* ("specialized theaters," known today as *art theaters*). Tedesco, a critic, had bought Delluc's magazine *Cinéa* and transformed it into *Cinéa-Ciné pour tous*. He had long campaigned for a theater that would revive classics and show new offbeat films. His Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier created a repertory of classics that were shown in rotation; a few films that could find no commercial distributor premiered there. In 1928, that theater even produced Renoir's Impressionist film *The Little Match Girl*. By the second half of the 1920s, there were several specialized cinemas like the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier, as well as a growing number of ciné-clubs in Paris and provincial towns. Soon ciné-clubs and small specialized cinemas could be found abroad.

In 1925, a group of London intellectuals, including Iris Barry, who later headed the Museum of Modern Art's film archive, and filmmaker Ivor Montagu, started the Film Society. It showed old films, imports without distributors, and,

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especially, given England's strict censorship laws, films that were not approved for public screening. The Film Society and other clubs became vital in showing banned Soviet films in Britain. The group lasted until 1938. By the early 1930s, some art cinemas, including the long-lived Academy, had made it easier to see special-interest films and film clubs existed in many parts of Britain.

The art-cinema trend reached the United States in 1925, when Symon Gould began the Film Arts Guild, renting a small New York theater for Sunday matinees of imported films. Within the next three years, the guild was able to move to full-time screenings, and additional art

cinemas opened in New York and other cities. In 1928, the Filmarte opened in Hollywood, giving filmmakers there increased access to European avant-garde cinema. These theaters initially relied heavily on Expressionist and other German films, both new and old. Late in the decade, Soviet films became a staple of art-house programs. Émigré moviegoers helped support these theaters, and by the early 1930s, there was a healthy alternative cinema market in the United States.

Ciné-clubs and art theaters spread to Belgium, Japan, Spain, and many other countries. A filmmaker who failed to find a distributor could deal directly with these groups, shipping prints around the globe. As long as films remained fairly cheap to make, this limited circulation could generate a modest profit.

A growing number of journals promoted art films. Tedesco's *Cinéa-Ciné pour tous* continued to offer a forum for discussion of Impressionism and other artistic tendencies. It was supplemented by other French journals, including *L'Art Cinématographique*, which published only eight issues but served as an important outlet for Impressionist theory. The main international periodical of the era, *Close Up*, ran from 1927 to 1933. Its driving forces were editor Kenneth Macpherson and his wife Bryher, wealthy Britishers living in Switzerland. Frequent contributors included their friends, notably the American poet H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), who wrote passionate, personal accounts of European art films. *Close Up* championed unconventional cinema of all types, including the films of G. W. Pabst and the Soviet cinema, on which Bryher wrote the first book in English. Many small journals came and went during this period.

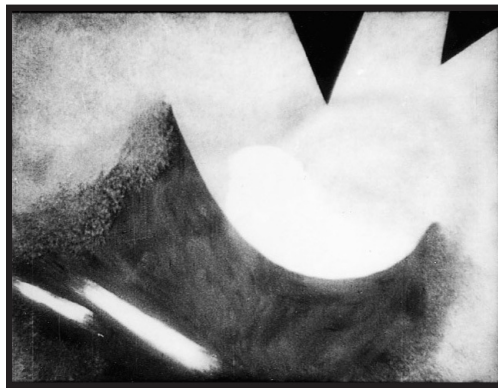
Art theaters, clubs, expositions, and publications helped support alternative types of films. Moreover, they affected decisions about which films would be saved as classics. During the 1930s, several major archives were formed, including the National Film Archive in London, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the Cinémathèque Française in Paris. Most people working in these archives were sympathetic to alternative movements of the 1920s. Thus many films of this era were preserved, revived, and circulated in later decades.

You can't turn film into a work of art by augmenting and exalting it with "quality." You can gather together the best mimes in the world, you can let them perform in the most exquisite paradise, you can adorn the

programs of your film dramas with the names of the most eminent poets—art will never result *that way*. A work of art will result only if it is born of the possibilities and demands of its material.³

Ruttmann's attitude would be shared by many experimental filmmakers in the 1920s. In 1918, he too became intrigued with the idea of “moving paintings” and began to cast about for a means of creating them through film.

Apparently knowing little of commercial animation techniques, Ruttmann painted with oil on glass, wiping off portions of the wet paint and repainting them. He photographed each change from above with illumination placed beneath the glass. His *Lichtspiel Opus 1* was previewed in Frankfurt in early April 1921 and given a gala premiere in Berlin later that month. Ruttmann went on to make three similar short films, *Lichtspiel Opus 2* (1921), *Ruttmann Opus 3* (1924), and *Ruttmann Opus 4* (1925). (These are now known as *Opus 1*, *Opus 2*, and so on.) In each, abstract forms grow, shrink, and transmute in a lively fashion (8.16). Ruttmann intended that his films be shown with original musical scores and with hand-coloring. These delightful short films earned him commissions to make theatrical commercials and special sequences in feature films, such as Kriemhild's “Dream of the Falcon” in Fritz Lang's *Siegfried*.



8.16 In *Opus 2*, Ruttmann creates subtle gradations of texture as abstract shapes slide across each other, blending and separating rhythmically.

In the meantime, Richter had managed to make three similar short animated films, the *Rhythmus* series (tentatively dated 1921, 1923, and 1925). His partner, Eggeling, met an experienced animator, Erna Niemeyer; she traced his scroll drawings and photographed them to make *Symphonie diagonale* (*Diagonal Symphony*). Eggeling saw his images as the equivalent of music, dictating that the short film be shown without any sound accompaniment (8.17). *Diagonal Symphony* was first shown in late 1924, a year before Eggeling died.



8.17 In *Diagonal Symphony*, complicated curved shapes swirl around the basic diagonal motif that organizes the abstract patterns throughout the film.

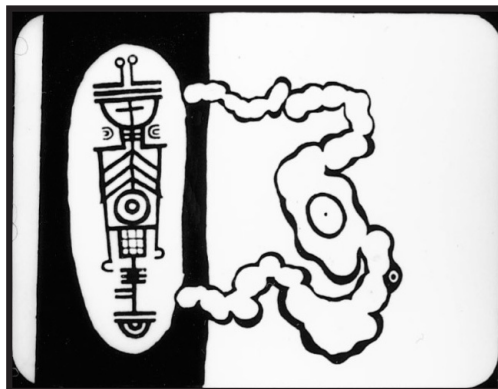
The technique of abstract animation influenced commercial cinema, most notably in the work of a distinctive filmmaker, Lotte Reiniger. Trained as an actress during the 1910s, she was also skilled at cutting out delicate silhouettes. During the early 1920s, she did special-effects sequences and advertisements. From 1923 to 1926, she created her most important film, *The Adventures of Prince Achmed*, assisted by Ruttmann and others. *Prince Achmed* was the first major animated feature (preceding Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*). *Prince Achmed* told an Arabian Nights fairy tale by means of silhouette figures photographed against subtly shaded backgrounds (8.18). Reiniger made such silhouette fantasy films for decades in several countries.



8.18 In *The Adventures of Prince Achmed*, shades of gray suggest the depth in a setting; the moving figures consist of jointed silhouette puppets.

On May 3, 1925, an important matinee of abstract films was held at an Ufa theater in Berlin. It included *Diagonal Symphony*, three of Ruttmann's *Opus* shorts, and Richter's *Rhythmus* series. Also on the program were two French films, René Clair's *Entr'acte* and Dudley Murphy and Fernand Léger's *Ballet mécanique* (see 8.28). German filmmakers recognized a fresh experimental impulse. Richter and Ruttmann abandoned abstract animation to make films using real objects, and the tradition nearly disappeared at this point.

It resurfaced unexpectedly in 1929. The London Film Society provided a young New Zealander, the abstract painter and poet Len Lye, with the funds for a short film. The drawings occupied Lye from 1927 to 1929, while he supported himself as a curtain drawer in a theater. *Tusalava*, which premiered at the Film Society in 1929, baffled most spectators with its esoteric imagery (8.19). Despite the film's reception, Lye went on to become one of the most important abstract animators of the sound era.



8.19 Len Lye based the abstract figures in *Tusalava* on Australian Aboriginal art.

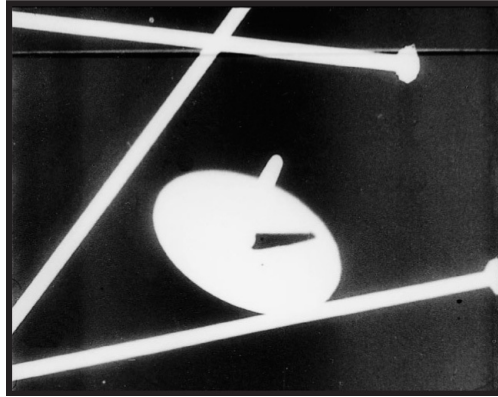
Dada Filmmaking

Dada was a movement that attracted artists in all media. It began around 1915, as a result of artists' sense of the vast, meaningless loss of life in World War I. Artists in New York, Zurich, France, and Germany proposed to sweep aside traditional values and to elevate an absurdist view of

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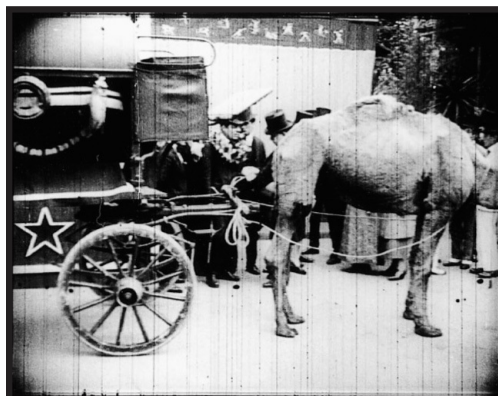
the world. They would base artistic creativity on randomness and imagination. Max Ernst displayed an artwork and provided a hatchet so that spectators could demolish it. Marcel Duchamp invented "ready-made" artwork, in which a found object is placed in a museum and labeled; in 1917, he created a scandal by signing a urinal "R. Mutt" and trying to enter it in a prestigious show. Dadaists were fascinated by *collage*, the technique of assembling disparate elements in bizarre juxtapositions. Ernst, for example, made collages by pasting together scraps of illustrations from advertisements and technical manuals.

Under the leadership of poet Tristan Tzara, Dadaist publications, exhibitions, and performances flourished during the late 1910s and early 1920s. The performance "soirées" included such events as poetry readings in which several passages were performed simultaneously. On July 7, 1923, the last major Dada event, the "Soirée du 'Coeur à Barbe'" ("Soirée of the 'Bearded Heart'"), included three short films: *Manhatta* by American artists Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand (see 8.34), one of Richter's *Rhythmus* abstract works, and the American artist Man Ray's first film, the ironically titled *Le Retour à la raison* ("Return to Reason"). The element of chance certainly entered into the creation of *Le Retour à la raison*, since Tzara gave Ray only twenty-four hours' notice that he was to make a film for the program. Ray combined some hastily shot live footage with stretches of "Rayograms" (8.20). The soirée proved a mixed success, since Tzara's rivals, led by poet André Breton, provoked a riot in the audience.



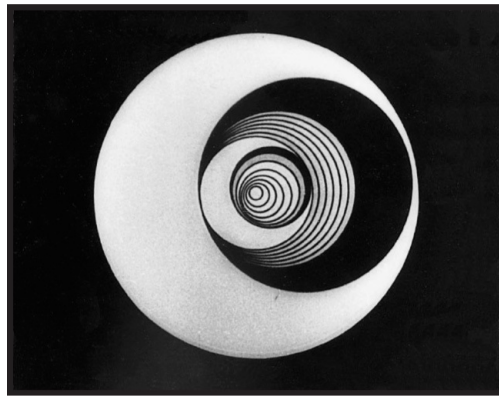
8.20 Man Ray created “Rayo-gram” images without a camera by scattering objects like pins and tacks directly on the film strip, exposing it briefly to light, and developing the result (*Le Retour à la raison*).

This riot was symptomatic of the disagreements that were already bringing Dada to an end. By 1922, it was in serious decline, but key Dada films were still to come. In late 1924, Dada artist Francis Picabia staged his ballet *Relâche* (meaning “performance called off”). Signs in the auditorium bore such statements as “If you are not satisfied, go to hell.” During the intermission (or *entr’acte*), René Clair’s short film *Entr’acte* was shown, with accompaniment by composer Erik Satie, who had done the music for the entire show. The evening began with a brief film prologue (seen as the opening segment of modern prints of *Entr’acte*) in which Satie and Picabia leap in slow motion into a scene and fire a cannon directly at the audience. The rest of the film, appearing during the intermission, consisted of unconnected, wildly irrational scenes (8.21). Picabia summed up the Dada view when he characterized Clair’s film: “*Entr’acte* does not believe in very much, in the pleasure of life, perhaps; it believes in the pleasure of inventing, it respects nothing except the desire to *burst out laughing*.”⁴



8.21 Clair's Dadaist fantasy *Entr'acte* concludes with an irreverent funeral scene in which the hearse is pulled, often at dizzying speed and over roller-coaster tracks, by a camel.

Dada artist Marcel Duchamp made one foray into cinema during this era. By 1913, Duchamp had moved away from abstract painting to experiment with such forms as ready-mades and kinetic sculptures. The latter included a series of motor-driven spinning discs. With the help of Man Ray, Duchamp filmed some of these discs to create *Anémic cinéma* in 1926. This brief film undercuts traditional notions of cinema as a visual, narrative art. All its shots show either turning abstract discs (**8.22**) or discs with sentences containing elaborate French puns. By emphasizing simple shapes and writing, Duchamp created an “anemic” style. (*Anémic* is also an anagram for *cinéma*.)



8.22 One of the spinning discs that create the “anemic” form of *Anémic cinéma*.

Entr'acte and other Dada films were on the 1925 Berlin program, and they convinced German filmmakers like Ruttmann and Richter that modernist style could be created in films without completely abstract, painted images. Richter, who had been linked with virtually every major modern art movement, dabbled in Dada. In his *Ghosts before Breakfast* (1928), special effects show objects rebelling against their normal uses. In reverse motion, cups shatter and reassemble. Bowler hats take on a life of their own and fly through the air, and the ordinary laws of nature seem to be suspended (**8.23**).



8.23 In *Ghosts before Breakfast*, a man's head flies off his body as a target is superimposed over him.

Riven by internal dissension, the European Dada movement was largely over by 1922. Many of its members formed another group, the Surrealists.

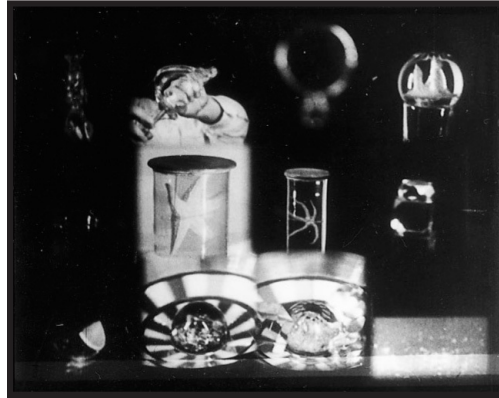
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Surrealism

Surrealism resembled Dada in many ways, particularly in its disdain for orthodox art. Like Dada, Surrealism sought startling juxtapositions. André Breton, who led the break with the Dadaists and the creation of Surrealism, cited an image from a work by the Comte de Lautréamont: “Beautiful as the unexpected meeting, on a dissection table, of a sewing machine and an umbrella.”⁵ The movement was influenced by the emerging theories of psychoanalysis. Rather than depending on pure chance for the creation of artworks, Surrealists sought to tap the unconscious mind. They wanted to render the incoherent narratives of dreams directly in language or images, without the interference of conscious thought processes. Max Ernst, Salvador Dalí, Joan Miró, and Paul Klee were important Surrealist artists.

The ideal Surrealist film differed from Dada works in that it would not be a humorous, chaotic assemblage of events. Instead, it would trace a disturbing, often sexually charged story that followed the inexplicable logic of a dream. With a patron's backing, Dadaist Man Ray moved into Surrealism with *Emak Bakia* (1927), which used many film tricks to suggest a woman's mental state. At the end she is seen in a famous image, her eyes closed, with eyeballs painted on them; she opens her eyes and smiles at the camera. Many Surrealists denounced the

film as containing too little narrative. Ray's next film, *L'Étoile de mer* ("The Starfish," 1927), hinted at a story based on a script by Surrealist poet Robert Desnos. It shows a couple in love, interspersed with random shots of starfish, trains, and other objects (8.24).



8.24 Man Ray's *L'Étoile de mer* uses split-screen cinematography to create Surrealist juxtapositions of starfish in jars, roulette wheels, and other objects.

Germaine Dulac, who had already worked extensively in regular feature filmmaking and French Impressionism, turned briefly to Surrealism, directing a screenplay by poet Antonin Artaud. The result was *The Seashell and the Clergyman* (1928), which combines Impressionist techniques of cinematography with the disjointed narrative logic of Surrealism. A clergyman carrying a large seashell smashes laboratory beakers; an officer intrudes and breaks the shell, to the clergyman's horror. The rest of the film consists of the priest's pursuing a beautiful woman through an incongruous series of settings. His love seems to be perpetually thwarted by the intervention of the officer (8.25). The initial screening of the film provoked a riot at the small Studio des Ursulines theater, though it is still not clear whether the instigators were Artaud's enemies or his friends, protesting Dulac's softening of the Surrealist tone of the scenario.



8.25 A split-screen technique creates a bizarre effect in *The Seashell and the Clergyman*: the officer, dressed in baby clothes, seems to split in two.

Perhaps the quintessential Surrealist film was created in 1928 by novice director Luis Buñuel. A Spanish

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film enthusiast and modernist poet, Buñuel had come to France and been hired as an assistant by Jean Epstein. Working in collaboration with Salvador Dalí, he made *Un Chien andalou* (“An Andalusian Dog”). Its basic story concerned a quarrel between two lovers, but the time scheme and logic are impossible. The film begins with a sequence in which a man inexplicably slices the heroine’s eye with a razor—yet she appears, unharmed, in the next scene. As the quarrel goes on, ants crawl from a hole in a man’s hand, the hero hauls a piano stuffed with rotting mules’ carcasses across a room, and a pair of hands protrudes through the wall to shake a cocktail (**8.26**). Throughout, intertitles announce meaningless intervals of time passing, as when “sixteen years earlier” appears within an action that continues without pause.



8.26 In *Un Chien andalou*, a doorbell is inexplicably represented by hands shaking a cocktail.

Dalí and Buñuel followed this film with a longer, even more provocative one, *L'Age d'or* ("The Age of Gold," 1930). The tenuous plot concerns two lovers kept apart by the woman's wealthy parents and a disapproving society. An early scene shows a pompous seaside ceremony in which presiding bishops wither to skeletons. Later, a man who is shot falls up to the ceiling, and the heroine sucks on the toes of a statue to express her sexual frustration. The film teems with erotic imagery (8.27), and the ending portrays a figure clearly intended to represent Christ emerging from a sadistic orgy. *L'Age d'or* provoked riots during its initial screenings and was banned. It remained almost impossible to see for over four decades.

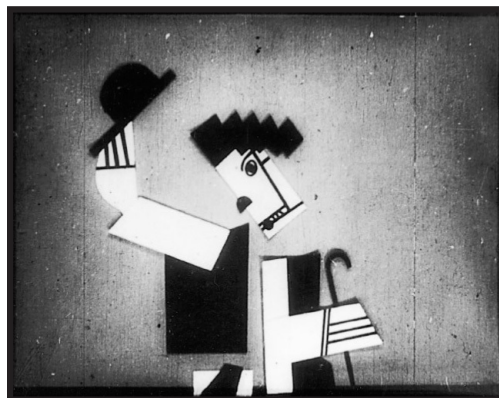


8.27 During an elegant party, the heroine of *L'Age d'or* finds an ox in her bed.

During the early 1930s, Surrealism as a unified movement was breaking up. Some artists became involved in leftist or anarchist politics, and Dalí earned their wrath through his fascination with Hitler. By 1933, the European phase of the movement was over, but, as with Dada, Surrealism's influence was felt strongly in the era after World War II.

Cinéma Pur

In 1924, a casual collaboration of artists resulted in an abstract film that did not use animated drawings but rather everyday objects and rhythmic editing. American set designer Dudley Murphy had decided to mount a series of “visual symphonies,” the first of which was a rather literal-minded ballet film, *Danse macabre* (1922). In Paris, he encountered Man Ray and modernist poet Ezra Pound, who inspired him to do a more abstract work. Ray shot some footage, but the French painter Fernand Léger completed the filming of *Ballet mécanique*. Murphy did the cinematography, and Léger directed a complex film juxtaposing shots of objects like pot lids and machine parts with images of his own paintings. There were prismatic shots of women's faces, as well as an innovative shot of a washerwoman climbing a flight of steps, repeated identically many times. Léger aspired to make a film about Charlie Chaplin, and he opened and closed *Ballet mécanique* with an animated figure of the comedian in his own painting style (8.28).



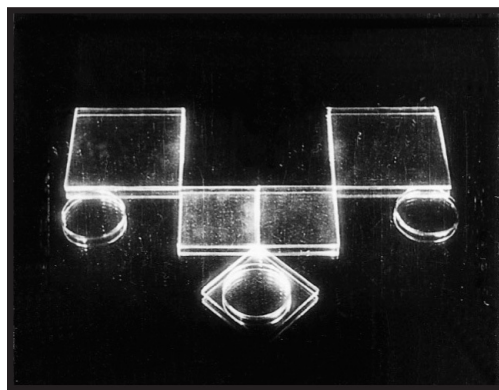
8.28 Murphy and Léger's *Ballet mécanique* pays tribute to Chaplin with a moving puppet designed by Léger.

In the wake of works like *Ballet mécanique*, some filmmakers realized that they could organize nonnarrative films around abstract visual qualities of the physical world. Since commercial cinema, especially that of Hollywood, was strongly associated with narrative, such abstract films seemed untainted, owing nothing to literary or theatrical influences. These filmmakers were not unified by membership in any modernist movement, like Dada or Surrealism. Indeed, they largely avoided the irreverence of Dada and the psychic explorations of Surrealism. These diverse, widely scattered filmmakers wanted to reduce film to its most basic elements in order to create lyricism and pure form.

Indeed, French proponents of this approach soon termed it *cinéma pur*, or “pure cinema.” One of these was

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Henri Chomette, who had worked as an assistant director for commercial filmmakers like Jacques de Baroncelli and Jacques Feyder. In 1925, a rich count commissioned an experimental short, *Jeux des reflets et de la vitesse* (“The Play of Reflections and Speed,” 1925). For the “speed” portion Chomette mounted his camera at various angles on a moving subway car, often filming in fast motion. He juxtaposed these shots with views of a series of shiny objects. His next film, *Cinq minutes de cinéma pur* (“Five Minutes of Pure Cinema,” 1926), was made for the growing circuit of specialized cinemas (8.29; compare with 8.17). After these two films, Chomette became a commercial director.



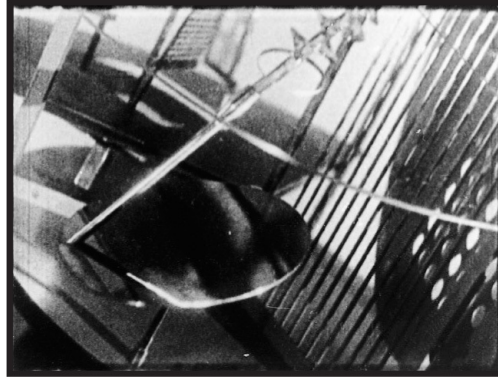
8.29 *Cinq minutes de cinema pur* begins by dissolving among shots of glass objects in changing patterns against a black background.

Following her venture into Surrealism, Germaine Dulac embraced cinéma pur in *Disque 927* (1928), *Thème et variations* (1928), and *Arabesque* (1929). As the titles suggest, Dulac equated her short, lyrical studies to musical pieces (8.30, 8.31). With the coming of sound, Dulac could not finance her films independently, and, unwilling to return to mainstream filmmaking, she worked primarily in newsreels after 1929.



8.30, 8.31 *Thème et variations* alternates machine parts and plants (not shown) with a ballerina's dance, suggesting an abstract graphic similarity between different kinds of movements and shapes.

The concept of pure cinema surfaced in other countries, though seldom under that name. Some photographers experimented briefly with cinema. *László*, a Hungarian photographer and sculptor, created several films. Among these was *Lichtspiel, schwarz-weiss-grau* ("Play of Light, Black-White-Gray," 1930), made while he was teaching at the Bauhaus. The title is a pun: *Lichtspiel* means both "movie" and "play of light" (8.32). American photographer Ralph Steiner's *H₂O* (1929) consisted of increasingly abstract images of water (8.33). Steiner made two similar films and then went on to photograph some of the most important documentaries of the next decade. The pure-cinema impulse has had a strong influence on experimental filmmakers since the 1920s.



8.32 Filming one of his own kinetic sculptures, the *Light-Space Modulator*, Moholy-Nagy created shifting patterns of shadows and reflected light, produced by its moving metallic parts, for *Lichtspiel, schwarz-weiss-grau*.



8.33 In this shot from Steiner's *H₂O*, the reflections on the surface of the water create an image so abstract that we can barely recognize its subject.

Lyrical Documentaries: The City Symphony

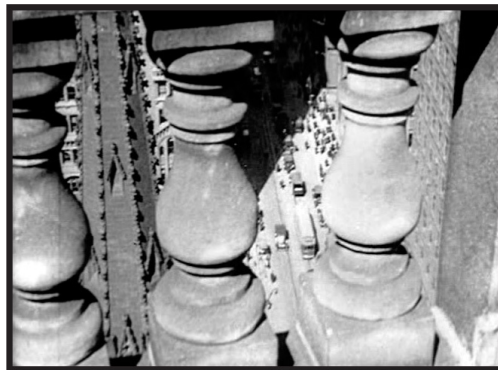
Some filmmakers experimented by taking their cameras outdoors and capturing poetic aspects of urban landscapes. Their films formed another new genre, the *city symphony*. These works were part documentary, part experimental film.

The earliest known city symphony, and, indeed, perhaps the first experimental film made in the United States, was created by modern artist Charles Sheeler and photographer Paul Strand in 1920. It was shown as a scenic short in a commercial theater in New York the following year under the title *New York the Magnificent*, but the filmmakers later dubbed it *Manhatta*, the title by which it

came to be known. The pair filmed scenes near the Battery Park area of Manhattan, creating evocative, often nearly abstract views of the city (8.34). Although the film had

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little distribution initially, it was revived in art theaters during the second half of the decade and probably inspired later filmmaking.



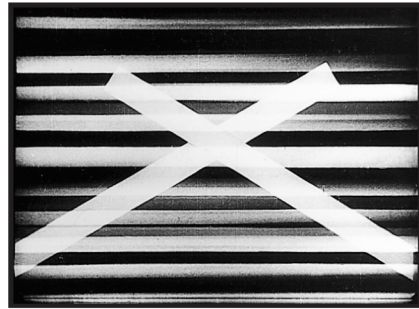
8.34 A dramatic view of the street far below through a balustrade in *Manhatta*.

By that era, the city symphony had become more common. In 1925, Brazilian director Alberto Cavalcanti, working in France, made *Rien que les heures* ("Nothing but the Hours," 1926). It juxtaposes two different types of material: candid documentary shots and staged scenes. Shopkeepers open their shutters, patrons eat at cafés, a pimp kills a woman, an old lady staggers through the streets (8.35). Cavalcanti refuses to develop any of these situations into a coherent plot, instead weaving together motifs to suggest the passage of time all over Paris.



8.35 A drunken, perhaps dying, old woman wandering the streets forms one motif in *Rien que les heures*.

Cavalcanti's film was followed by Walter Ruttmann's feature, *Berlin: die Sinfonie der Grossstadt* (*Berlin, Symphony of a Great City*, 1927). It also provided a cross section of life in a city during one day. Coming from the tradition of abstract animation, Ruttmann begins the film with some geometric shapes, matching them graphically with documentary images (8.36, 8.37). Subsequent shots explore the abstract qualities of machines, building façades, store-window displays, and the like. Ruttmann includes social commentary, as when he cuts from a homeless woman with her children to plates of food in a fancy restaurant. *Berlin* circulated widely in commercial theaters and was one of the silent era's most influential documentaries.



8.36, 8.37 In *Berlin*, Ruttmann cuts from an abstract moving image of bars forming an “X” to a similar composition created by a railroad crossing gate.

The poetic city symphony proved fertile ground for young filmmakers working for the art-cinema and ciné-club circuit. For example, the Dutch documentarist Joris Ivens began as cofounder of a major club, the Filmliga, in Amsterdam in 1927. His first completed film was a lyrical, abstract study of a drawbridge, *The Bridge* (1928). Its success in art-film circles led to other films, including *Rain* (1929). *Rain* explores the changing look of Amsterdam before, during, and after a shower: the sheen of water on tile roofs and windows and the spatter of raindrops in the canals and in puddles (8.38). Again, *Rain* was well received among art-cinema audiences across Europe and inspired many imitations.



8.38 Ivens captures the effects of the last few drops of a shower in a puddle on a brick pavement in *Rain*.

The city-symphony genre was diverse. The film might be lyrical, displaying the effects of wind and water. Henri Storck, who had formed the ciné-club for the Belgian seaside town of Ostende, recorded the town's summertime sights in his *Images d'Ostende* (1929). In contrast, Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* commented on Soviet society by weaving together several cities in a "day-in-the-life-of" documentary. Vertov demonstrated the power of the cinema by showing the filmmaking process within his film and by using extensive special effects (see 6.51). The city symphony has proved an enduring genre among documentarists and experimental filmmakers.

Experimental Narrative

By the late 1920s, filmmakers in several countries were using the techniques and styles of the independent experimental cinema to question narrative conventions. In the United States, some experimental directors adapted techniques from German Expressionism and French Impressionism into cinematic forms suited to low-budget, independent production. During the late 1920s, noncommercial European filmmakers pushed both narrative and abstract techniques still further.

In the United States, some filmmakers outside the commercial industry wanted to treat film as a modern art. Few of the more radical experimental films made in Europe during this era were shown in America, however. Experimental filmmakers were inspired mainly by German Expressionist and French Impressionist films.

Like Dreyer, Robert Florey was an international director, though on a more modest scale. Born in France, he was thoroughly familiar with both the Impressionist and the Expressionist movements. He came to Hollywood in 1921, serving as United Artists' technical adviser on French subjects and eventually directing minor features. In 1927, he turned to experimental filmmaking, directing the short *The Life and Death of 9413—a Hollywood Extra* (aka *Life and Death of a Hollywood Extra*). This ingenious film, made for a reported \$100, combined close shots of actors against black backgrounds with stylized miniature scenes, made of simple paper cut-outs and erector-set objects, shot with an ordinary light on a kitchen table (8.39). The film was a witty satire on Hollywood's uncaring treatment of aspiring talent. Florey's cinematographer, Gregg Toland, went on to photograph many major films, including *Citizen Kane*. The special effects were devised by Slavko Vorkapich, another émigré fascinated with avant-garde technique; during the 1930s, he created elaborate montage sequences for several Hollywood movies. Florey went on to make three more experimental shorts. The only one that survives, *The Love of Zero* (1928), contains many innovative camera techniques. Florey soon moved back into commercial production, directing many stylish middle- and low-budget features, ranging from the Marx Brothers' first film, *The Cocoanuts* (1929), to the horror film *Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1932). Some of these show the influence of German Expressionism.

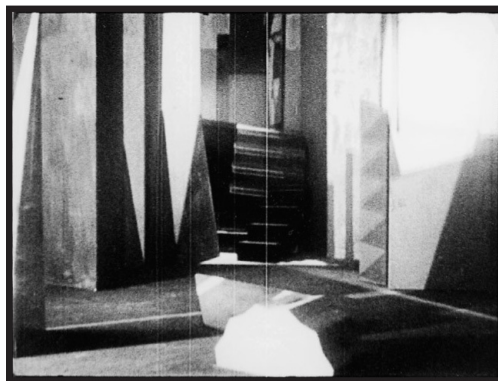


8.39 A split-screen effect in *The Life and Death of 9413—a Hollywood Extra* juxtaposes the hero's naive face with his abstract vision of Hollywood.

Almost simultaneously, some filmmakers hit on the idea of using German Expressionism to bring stories by Edgar Allan Poe to the screen. Amateur director Charles Klein's *The Tell-Tale Heart* (1928) imitated *Caligari* by explicitly presenting its story as the vision of an insane man (8.40). Klein's film circulated among the newly formed art cinemas. In Rochester, New York, two film and photography enthusiasts, James Sibley Watson and Melville Webber, codirected *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928). This film's oblique narrative technique depends on the spectator's foreknowledge of Poe's story. Impressionist-style subjective camera techniques and Expressionist decor are combined in an attempt to capture the eerie atmosphere of the original (8.41). Watson and Webber went on to make an even more obscure story, *Lot in Sodom* (1933), replete with superimpositions, painted faces, and black backgrounds.



8.40 The hero of *The Tell-Tale Heart* sits on the floor of his apartment, the design of which is modeled on that of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*.



8.41 An Expressionist set, apparently depicting a crypt, in *The Fall of the House of Usher*.

A few European works pushed even further in exploring narrative conventions. In 1930, the short feature *Borderline* was created by the group around the international intellectual journal *Close Up* (p. 155). Its editor, Kenneth Macpherson, directed, and the poet H. D. was one of the actors. *Borderline* centers on two couples, one black, one white, living in a small Swiss town. When the white man begins an affair with the black woman, sexual and racial tensions escalate. The film mixes objective and subjective scenes without clear-cut transitions. The African American stage actor and singer Paul Robeson played the black husband, and H. D. gave an intense performance as the jealous white woman. Dynamic compositions reflected the influence of the Soviet cinema (8.42), but the film was unique in its elliptical style. It remained the *Close Up* group's only completed experiment.



8.42 Paul Robeson in *Borderline*.

The Belgian Charles Dekeukeleire discovered the cinema through the work of the French Impressionists. After working as a critic, he turned to filmmaking in 1927, just as the ciné-club movement was spreading. Planning, shooting, and even processing his own footage, he made four silent experimental films over the next few years. Outstanding among these were *Impatience* (1929) and *Histoire de detective* ("Detective Story," 1930), bold films that had little precedent in any artistic tradition. *Impatience* lasts nearly forty-five minutes but consists of relentless repetitions of only four elements: a woman (alternately naked and dressed in a motorcyclist's outfit), a motorcycle, mountain scenery, and a set of three swinging abstract blocks. No two of these elements is ever seen in the same

shot. Although the film seems to hint at a minimal narrative situation (perhaps the woman is riding the motorcycle through the mountains?), it simply shows us the same sorts of shots over and over (8.43).



8.43 *Impatience* seems to suggest a narrative situation, yet its insistent repetition of shots like this one of the woman against a blank background also forces us to see it as abstract.

Histoire de détective is even more complex. Purportedly a film made by a detective investigating why a man has lost all interest in life, it consists mainly of lengthy written passages, punctuated by banal images of the lives of the man and his wife, which add little to the intertitles. In a period when cinematic stories were supposed to be told visually, Dekeukeleire's film was widely condemned. He made one more silent film, *Flamme blanche* ("White Flame," 1931), a semidocumentary story of police brutality during a Communist party rally. Faced with an uncomprehending reaction to his work, Dekeukeleire turned to documentary filmmaking during the sound era. His two silent masterpieces, however, were indications of how far experimental films could go in defying the norms of narrative cinema.

Independent avant-garde cinema depended on the fact that silent filmmaking was relatively inexpensive. The advent of sound increased costs considerably, and even ciné-clubs and art cinemas usually preferred to show sound films. The rise of Fascism led several experimental directors to move toward political documentaries. Still, the tradition of experimentation outside commercial institutions continued, albeit in changed form, in the 1930s and beyond.

DOCUMENTARY FEATURES GAIN PROMINENCE

Before the 1920s, documentary filmmaking had largely been confined to newsreels and scenic shorts. Occasional feature-length documentaries had been made, but these had not established the genre as significant. During the 1920s, however, the documentary achieved new stature as it increasingly became identified with artistic cinema. We can distinguish three main tendencies in the documentaries of this era: the exotic film, the attempt at direct recording of reality, and the compilation documentary.

The exotic documentary came dramatically to public attention in 1922 with the release of Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*. An explorer and prospector in Alaska and Canada, Flaherty determined to make a feature film following the life of an Eskimo family. Eventually, in 1920, a fur company agreed to finance the venture. Flaherty spent sixteen months in the region of Hudson Bay, filming Nanook and his wife and son. Every scene was planned in advance, with Nanook making many suggestions about what sorts of action to include (8.44). Flaherty balanced authenticity with arranged scenes, as when the Eskimos built an oversize igloo with one side open so that the family could be filmed going to bed.



8.44 Carefully staged action in *Nanook of the North* as the hero prepares to launch his kayak and join his friends in the hunt.

The major Hollywood film firms refused to distribute *Nanook*, but the independent Pathé Exchange released it. It met with great success, in part because of the engaging personality of its hero. As a result, Paramount supported Flaherty in an expedition to Samoa to direct a similar film, *Moana*. He set out in

1923, only to find that the natives had adopted Western-style customs. Flaherty persuaded his “actors” to return to traditional clothing and, in order to inject drama into the film, to reenact an obsolete tattoo ritual. Flaherty had by now fallen into his lifelong habit of running far beyond schedule and shooting immense amounts of footage. *Moana* was not ready for release until 1926 and did not duplicate the success of *Nanook*. Flaherty would not complete another film for eight years.

Nanook’s triumph also enabled the producer- director-photographer team of Ernest B. Schoedsack and Merian Cooper to create their first feature, *Grass: A Nation’s Battle for Life* (1925). Financed and distributed by Paramount, it recorded a dangerous migration of Iranian nomads seeking pastures for their flocks (8.45). *Grass* was popular enough to permit Schoedsack and Cooper to make *Chang* (1928), a staged account, shot on location, of a peasant family battling dangers in their native Siamese jungle. *Chang* reflected a move toward fiction-based filmmaking, and Schoedsack and Cooper were to push their interest in exoticism completely into fiction by producing the immensely successful *King Kong* in 1933.



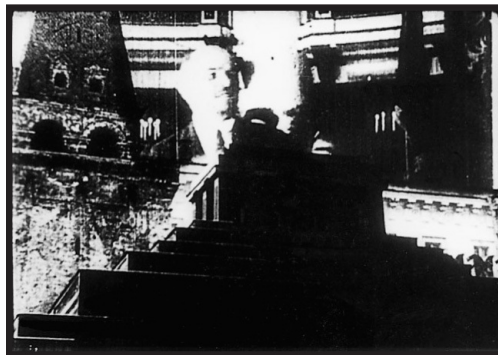
8.45 A documentary spectacle as thousands of nomads brave frigid mountains in a search for pastureland in *Grass*.

The documentary form was particularly important in the Soviet Union. There all three types of documentary—exoticism, recording of reality, and compilation—found expression.

Dziga Vertov had taken charge of Soviet newsreel filmmaking during the Russian Revolution. By the early 1920s, he had formulated his theory of the “kino eye,” claiming that the camera lens, because of its recording abilities, was superior to the human eye. He put this claim to the test in 1922, establishing a new newsreel series, *Kino-Pravda*. (The name was derived from the national Bolshevik newspaper, *Pravda* [“Truth”], started by Lenin in 1912.) Each installment of the newsreel focused on two or three episodes of current events or ordinary life. Vertov also, however, believed that special effects were part of the camera’s superior ability to report the truth. Thus he often used split-screen effects or superimpositions to

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comment on his subjects (8.46). Vertov also made feature-length documentaries, mixing footage photographed directly from life with special effects that conveyed ideological points (see 6.51). When sound was introduced in the Soviet Union, Vertov insisted on having a mobile recording machine that could be taken on location in factories and mines for use in making *Enthusiasm* (1931), a documentary on the First Five-Year Plan in steel production.



8.46 In *Kino-Pravda* (number 21, 1925), Lenin’s face is superimposed in the sky above his tomb.

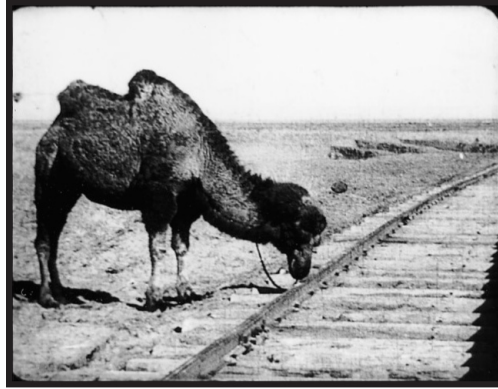
During this era, Soviet filmmaker Esfir Shub virtually single-handedly invented the compilation film. She had reedited foreign films for Soviet release during the early 1920s. Her real interest, however, was in documentary. She aspired to assemble scenes from old newsreels into new films. The Soviet authorities refused to give her access to such footage until 1926. Among the old reels, she found the home movies of Tsar Nicholas II, around which she based

The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty (1927; **8.47**). The favorable reception of this film allowed her to make two additional features: *The Great Road* (1927), on the Russian Revolution, and *The Russia of Nicholas II and Leo Tolstoy* (1928), on the prerevolutionary era. Having used much of the footage she had discovered, Shub continued her career as an editor in the sound era.



8.47 In *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*, Esfir Shub includes newsreel footage of the destruction of the statue of Tsar Alexander III in Moscow in 1921.

Aware of the many ethnic groups living in the new Soviet Union, directors fostered an exoticism not unlike that of Flaherty's *Nanook*. In 1929, Viktor Turin made *Turksib*, chronicling the epic construction of the Turkestan-Siberian railway. Although the film emphasized the achievements of the Soviet state, it also recorded the reactions of the indigenous peoples living along the railway's route (**8.48**). This exotic appeal made *Turksib* popular on the art-cinema circuit in the West. Similarly, in *Salt for Svanetia* (1930) Mikhail Kalatozov recorded in sparse but beautiful detail the efforts to bring salt to a remote mountain village near the Black and Caspian Seas.



8.48 The new railroad is used to tether a camel in *Turksib*.

The work of Flaherty, Schoedsack and Cooper, Vertov, Shub, and others would have a considerable impact during the 1930s, when the documentary format became more prominent.

COMMERCIAL FILMMAKING INTERNATIONALLY

As we emphasized in Part One, the cinema has always been an international phenomenon. Even while Hollywood dominated world markets and some countries developed distinctive styles, hundreds of other films aimed at a popular market continued to be made annually worldwide. Some countries' industries imitated Hollywood cinema fairly directly, while a few devised recognizable (though not avant-garde) styles. Several countries that previously had only sporadic production began making films more regularly, while production in some declined.

Japan

One of the most powerful studio systems grew up in Japan, where filmmakers forged a distinctive style. The first studios were built during the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905). Japan's victory in the conflict established it as a world power. Soon industrial growth intensified. Japan supplied the warring nations of Europe

with matériel and began dominating Asia with consumer goods. US films entered the market, but Japanese audiences, though fond of American films, preferred the domestic product and sustained local production.

The two most powerful companies were Nikkatsu and Shochiku. Nikkatsu (short for Nippon Katsudo Shashin) was organized in 1912 out of several smaller firms. Shochiku was founded in 1920 by two brothers who ran a conglomerate of kabuki theaters and vaudeville houses. Both Nikkatsu and Shochiku were vertically integrated, owning distribution companies and theaters. The industry gained a professional identity by forming a trade association and by publishing a film magazine, *Kinema Jumbo* ("Movie Times").

In September 1923, an earthquake devastated Tokyo, but the movie business emerged stronger than before. In rebuilding theaters, exhibitors expanded and modernized them. Japanese exhibitors profited from American imports.

Shooting a feature in two weeks or less, Shochiku, Nikkatsu, and dozens of smaller studios pumped out 600 to 800 films per year. By 1928, Japan was producing more films than any other country, a position it would hold for a decade and reassume after World War II. Production was sustained through tight vertical integration, the big firms' investments in other entertainment businesses, and an eager urban audience.

As in other countries, the earliest Japanese features drew upon indigenous theater. The two major genres were the *jidai-geki*, or historical film, and the *gendai-geki*, or the film of contemporary life. Jidai-geki borrowed heavily from the kabuki theater, particularly in the swordfight films (*chambara*) featuring bold samurai and acrobatic action. Gendai-geki films were typically melodramas of romance or family life, influenced by the *shimpa* theater, which was modeled on nineteenth-century European drama. All genres adhered to the kabuki convention of having women's roles played by men.

Film exhibition also bore the marks of traditional theater. Exhibitors had to compete with kabuki performances, which consumed half a day or more. Movie programs in the largest cities tended to be long, sometimes running over five hours. In addition, all films were accompanied by a commentator, the *katsuben* or *benshi*. Standing near the screen, the benshi (usually a man) would explain the

action, imitate the dialogue of all the characters, and comment on their behavior. Carrying on the tradition of onstage narrators in kabuki and puppet theater, the benshi added the excitement of live performance to the film show. Some benshi became stars, attracting audiences regardless of what film was playing.

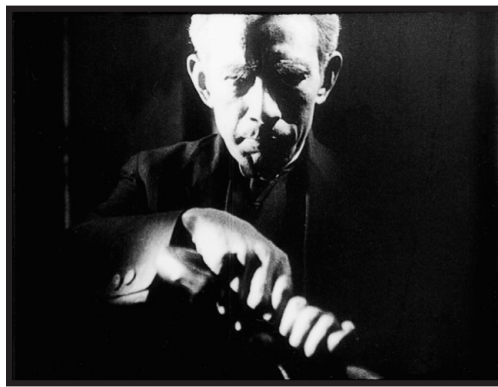
After World War I, companies cast off theatrical traditions and started to modernize their films. In the early 1920s, women began playing female parts. The fast-paced US imports encouraged directors to break with the predominant long-shot style. Directors adopted Hollywood continuity principles, and close-ups and shot/reverse-shot editing became widespread. The jidai-geki directors, notably Masahiro Makino, intensified action sequences by using American-style rapid editing. Some directors, such as Kaoru Osanai and Minoru Murata in their *Souls on the Road* (1921), blended theatrical performance with more American-style cutting and flashback construction.

New genres sprang up as well. With the modern reconstruction of Tokyo after the 1923 earthquake, the urban comedy of manners became an important genre. American imports also accelerated modernization, as when Yutaka Abe modeled *Woman Who Touched the Legs* (1926) on Lubitsch's *The Marriage Circle* (1924). A genre of *sarariman* ("salaryman") comedies portrayed the tribulations of the downtrodden company employee trying to succeed.

The few films that survive from this period indicate that, despite low budgets, Japan's studios created one of the world's most innovative cinemas. Kinugasa's *A Page of Madness* (pp. 150-151) represents an experimental extreme, but mainstream films also displayed great pictorial dynamism. Swordfight scenes relied on fast-motion, abrupt cutting, hand-held camera movements, and carefully choreographed swordplay (8.49); and many films flaunted deep-space compositions and striking angles and lighting (8.50). The imaginative storytelling and style pioneered in the 1920s would be elaborated in the outstanding accomplishments of Japanese cinema in the following decade.



8.49 Dynamic swordfighting in *Komatsu Riyuzo* (1930).



8.50 The blind factory owner in *Town of Love* (1928, Tomotaka Tasaka) is given hard crosslighting.

Great Britain

In the postwar years, the British film industry also optimistically set out to compete with Hollywood, largely by imitating its methods. Pioneer producer-director Cecil Hepworth expanded his company in 1919, and a few other important firms, such as Stoll and Ideal, both formed during the war, made ambitious films that they hoped would be released in the United States. Among these, Hepworth was the main figure to make distinctively British films. As he put it, “It was always in the back of my mind from the very beginning that *I was to make English pictures, with all the English countryside for background and with English atmosphere and English idiom throughout.*”⁶ His own favorite was *Comin’ Thro’ the Rye* (1924), which exploited the beauties of the English countryside to tell an old-fashioned love story (8.51). Despite its location photography, however, the film proved unable to compete with the livelier Hollywood films that still

commanded around 90 percent of British screen time. Shortly after its completion, Hepworth's firm was bankrupt, and he turned to running a film laboratory. As we have seen, the young man who would become England's most famous director, Alfred Hitchcock, was making films that were more European than British in style (p. 150).



8.51 The rye field Hepworth planted for *Comin' Thro' the Rye*. Its cycle, from plowing to harvesting, creates a bucolic background for key scenes of the central love story.

Other British filmmakers, imitating Hollywood films but unable to command the high budgets of American productions, also found it difficult to compete. By the mid-1920s, production slumped. Finally, in 1927, the government passed a quota to support British production. Investment picked up slowly in the last years of the decade, though the expenses connected with the introduction of sound in 1929 set the recovery back somewhat. The growth of the British industry into a mature studio system would occur during the 1930s.

Italy

A somewhat similar situation existed in Italy after the war. Initially producers tried to revive the palmy days of Italian prewar production, mostly by relying on the formulas of that period. Expensive costume pictures remained a staple. In 1923, the Unione Cinematografica Italiana (UCI), a large firm started four years earlier, produced a lavish remake of the 1913 hit *Quo Vadis?* Drawing on tactics associated with the budding Film Europe movement, UCI brought in a German,

Georg Jacoby, to codirect with Gabriellino D'Annunzio. A German cinematographer was also imported, and the cast was multinational (8.52). The film's lukewarm reception suggested that epics would not regain Italy its former glory. Further attempts were made, however. In 1924, one of the most important Italian directors, Augusto Genina, made *Cirano di Bergerac*, from Edmond Rostand's play *Cyrano de Bergerac*. The producers took the unusual step of adding hand-stenciled color to the entire lengthy feature (Color Plate 8.1). Another genre prominent in this period was the strongman film, including *Maciste all'inferno* ("Maciste in Hell," 1926).



8.52 German Emil Jannings—one of the foreign actors imported for *Quo Vadis?*—as Nero.

The competition from American and other imported films was too great, however. During the early 1920s, Italian films made up only 6 percent of those screened. In 1926, output sank to a mere twenty features.

In 1922, the government was taken over by the Fascist party, whose leader, Benito Mussolini, considered the cinema "the strongest weapon" of the state. In 1923, the government formed L'Unione Cinematografica Educativa (LUCE) to make documentaries. Fiction films responded little to the Fascist regime, however, until the 1930s.

One notable event occurred at the end of the silent era. Alessandro Blasetti, the leader of a group of young critics and theorists who opposed the continued reliance on old formulas, made his first film, *Sole* ("Sun") in 1929. For this tale of the reclamation of marshes for farmland, Blasetti drew heavily on influences from Soviet Montage films and other European avant-garde cinema. The brief surviving portion displays rapid editing for maximum conflict, subjective techniques, and

unusual camera angles, all combined with dazzling photography of the marshland settings. Blasetti's film received considerable praise as the first major Fascist fiction film. During the next few years, when the introduction of sound and increasing government support revived Italian filmmaking, he became one of Italy's most important directors.

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Some Smaller Producing Countries

A number of countries began producing on a more stable basis. Often their films were inexpensively made and designed primarily for the domestic market. Such industries continued to draw heavily on national literature and to use local scenery and customs to set their films apart from the dominant Hollywood product.

For example, although films had regularly been made in Czechoslovakia since 1908, the first well-equipped filmmaking studio was not built until 1921. In 1924, actor-director Karel Lamač constructed a second, the Kavalírka studios. Here Lamač made *The Good Soldier Schweik* (1926), which helped create a national film tradition. It was based on Jaroslav Hašek's popular satire on militarism: Lamač chose a few episodes from the sprawling tale and found an actor who resembled the Schweik of the original illustrations (8.53).



8.53 The bumbling hero of *The Good Soldier Schweik* stands to attention after squatting in an open-air latrine. A passing officer awards him a medal, prompting him to comment, "This shows that, no matter where, luck can smile on a soldier."

Spanish cinema also expanded slightly during this period. During the 1910s, Spanish films were usually adaptations of plays. Small firms came and went, as investors dabbled in producing a film or two. During the 1920s, longer lasting filmmaking companies formed, notably Film Española. Among its most prolific and popular directors was José Buchs. His *Curro Vargas* (1923), a costume picture set in the nineteenth century, typifies small national film production (8.54, 8.55). Spanish audiences enjoyed seeing locally made films, and production rose to fifty-nine features in 1928. The coming of sound, however, temporarily brought the industry to a virtual standstill.



8.54, 8.55 *Curro Vargas* mixes picturesque exterior locales with interior sets built on old-fashioned open-air stages, as when the hero moves from the street to a starkly sunlight room.

Production was even more sporadic in Belgium, but a few small companies made occasional features. In 1919, André Jacquemin formed a firm, Le Film Cinématographique Belge, which produced the feature *Le Portrait de l'amiral* (1922, directed by François Le Forestier). Adapted from a Belgian novel, the film used local settings to enhance its appeal (8.56). Although this film was aimed mainly at the domestic audience, it also did well in other French-speaking markets.



8.56 Location shooting in Brussels in *Le Portrait de l'amiral*.

Occasionally, a firm in a smaller producing country would make a big-budget costume picture in order to break into the world market. The Austrian producer Alexander Joseph “Sascha” Kolowrat-Krakowsky took this tack. He had formed the Sascha firm in 1914. In 1918, Kolowrat

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visited the United States to study production methods. He decided that making spectacles was the way to succeed in the Austrian and even the US markets. He produced two big-budget spectacles, *Sodom and Gomorrah* (1922) and *Die Sklavenkönigin* (*Moon of Israel*, 1924), both directed by Hungarian Mihály Kertész. (By the end of the decade, he would go to work in Hollywood under the name Michael Curtiz, directing many films, including *Casablanca*.) *Die Sklavenkönigin* was a typical epic designed for international appeal. Based on an adventure novel by H. Rider Haggard, it highlighted crowds of extras and large sets (8.57), as well as impressive special effects depicting Moses parting the Red Sea. Such films occasionally succeeded on world markets, but they were not enough to form the basis for regular production in a minor industry.



8.57 An Egyptian crowd scene in *Die Sklavenkönigin*.

The introduction of sound at the end of the decade massively altered many countries filmmaking, sometimes adversely, sometimes positively.

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5. Quoted in Patrick Waldberg, *Surrealism* (New York: McGraw-Hill, n.d.), pp. 24-25.
6. Cecil Hepworth, *Came the Dawn: Memories of a Film Pioneer* (London: Phoenix House, 1951), p. 144. Emphasis in original.

We discuss some topics in this chapter further on our blog, *Observations on Film Art*:

PART

THREE

**THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOUND
CINEMA, 1926–1945**



Source: Warner Brothers Studio

Two major social upheavals dominated the period from 1930 to 1945: the Great Depression and World War II.

On October 29, 1929—Black Tuesday—the Wall Street Crash signaled the beginning of the Depression in America. The slump quickly spread to other countries and lasted through most of the 1930s. Countless workers lost their jobs, banks failed in record numbers, farms were foreclosed, manufacturing declined, and currencies plunged in value. Fierce competition on international markets shattered the cooperative spirit that had been developing among European countries during the 1920s.

These economic disturbances took place in a threatening political climate. Italy had had a Fascist government since 1922. In 1933, Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany, instituting the Nazi regime. The Japanese government was also moving to the extreme right and asserted its imperialist goals by invading Manchuria in 1931. In many countries, socialist parties' resistance to the spread of Fascist led to political polarization.

The United States and its Western European allies tried to appease Hitler, but Germany's invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, precipitated World War II. The German-Italian-Japanese Axis powers would battle the United States, Western European countries, and other Allies until 1945. Although the war caused massive destruction in some parts of the world, it boosted the US economy, as the country recovered from the Depression partly by expanding its armaments industry.

The spread of sound in the cinema coincided with the early years of the Great Depression. Warner Bros. had successfully added music and sound effects to some of its films in 1926 and 1927. By 1929, sound had been adopted throughout the American studios, and theaters were quickly being converted. During that same year, early American sound films were enjoying long runs in European capitals.

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Inventors in several countries had been working simultaneously on sound systems, and sound was introduced in various ways around the world. Crude sound equipment initially rendered many films static and talky. From the beginning, however, resourceful filmmakers injected visual and auditory interest into their sound pictures (Chapter 9).

During the 1930s, most of the big Hollywood companies encountered financial difficulties; some went bankrupt. Nevertheless, they continued to make hundreds of films a year and to develop new technologies and genres (Chapter 10).

Sound boosted some national film industries. Britain built up a studio system that imitated Hollywood's. Japan developed its own successful variant of the Hollywood system and managed to control its domestic market. India's already

healthy production sector grew during the 1930s by offering its diverse population films in regional languages and containing musical sequences (Chapter 11).

The politically extreme regimes of the period, both right wing and left wing, led some governments to take control of entire film industries. The Soviet Union completed its consolidation of its nationalized industry, instituting strict policies for subject matter and style. The Nazis moved more circumspectly but also gradually absorbed the German film business and installed strict censorship. The Italian government adopted a different approach, offering financial incentives to film companies and encouraging them to provide the public with light entertainment (Chapter 12).

The French cinema remained in its ongoing crisis. Its patchwork of small production companies did not form a coherent studio system. Some individual filmmakers created a lyrical style known as Poetic Realism. During the middle of the decade, leftists made optimistic films in support of the short-lived Popular Front government. Once the war began, however, Germany quickly overran much of France, and French filmmakers who did not go into exile found themselves working under the tight control of Nazi occupiers (Chapter 13).

The growing power of Fascist regimes resulted in a move toward political documentary in Western countries, where some governments sponsored factual films. A few experimental filmmakers were able to continue working independently, creating works that remained far outside mainstream cinema (Chapter 14).

CHAPTER 9

THE INTRODUCTION OF SOUND



The Star Witness



Leibelei

Most silent films were accompanied by live music, ranging from a piano or an organ to a full orchestra. Sound effects were roughly matched to the screen action. In addition, from the cinema's beginning, inventors attempted to join the image to mechanically reproduced sound, usually on phonograph records. These systems had little success before the mid-1920s, primarily because sound and image proved difficult to synchronize and because amplifiers and loudspeakers were inadequate for theater auditoriums.

The introduction of synchronized sound is often dated from 1927, when Warner Bros. released the enormously successful *The Jazz Singer*. But the process of inventing and disseminating sound technology occurred at different rates in different countries and involved many competing systems and patents.

Sound also affected style. Some critics and directors feared that extensive dialogue scenes in adapted plays would eliminate the flexible camera movements and editing of the silent era (see "Notes and Queries" online). Most filmmakers soon realized, however, that sound, used imaginatively, offered a valuable new stylistic resource. In 1933, Alfred Hitchcock commented on the difference between musical accompaniment for silent films and musical scores in sound films: "I was greatly interested in music and films in the silent days, and I have always believed that the coming of sound opened up a great new opportunity. The accompanying music came at last entirely under the control of the people who made the picture."¹ Now sound and image could be combined in predictable ways during production.

SOUND IN THE UNITED STATES

Of the three countries that dominated the world's conversion to sound—the United States, Germany, and the USSR—the US film industry was the first to move successfully into sound production. Film executives had long anticipated the introduction of sound. But which system would be technically viable and profitable? Several alternatives were put on the market.

Lee de Forest first demonstrated his Phonofilm in 1923. This *sound-on-film* process converted sound into light waves reproduced on a photographic strip running alongside the images on regular 35mm film (see the left edge of 9.9). This system offered synchronization advantages. If the film broke and was repaired, the same number of frames of image and sound would be cut out. Since de Forest was determined to be independent, his company remained small, though the sale of Phonofilm patent rights abroad promoted the spread of sound in some countries.

During the 1910s and early 1920s, Western Electric, a subsidiary of one of the world's largest companies, American Telephone & Telegraph, was developing recording systems, amplifiers, and loudspeakers. Heavily funded researchers combined these components so that sound on phonograph records could be kept in satisfactory synchronization with the images. In 1925, Western Electric marketed its *sound-on-disc* system, but most Hollywood studios were too cautious to adopt it.

Warner Bros. and Vitaphone

The Western Electric system was offered at a time when the small firm of Warner Bros. was expanding. Using Wall Street financing, Warner Bros. invested in distribution facilities and theaters, trying to become vertically integrated. It also created a radio station in Los Angeles to promote its films. The radio equipment came from Western Electric, which also managed to interest Sam Warner in its film recording system.

Initially Warner considered sound a cost-cutting substitute for live entertainment on film programs. By recording vaudeville acts and using orchestral accompaniment for features, they could save on labor in their own theaters and offer similar savings to other exhibitors. They signed major singers, comics, and other performers to exclusive contracts. Warner Bros. tested the Vitaphone process in a series of short films. The first public screening, on August 6, 1926, began with eight shorts, including a speech by Will Hays and an opera aria. The feature, *Don Juan* (Alan Crosland), starring John Barrymore, had recorded music but no dialogue. The showing was successful, and Warners made more shorts and features with music.

On October 6, 1927, *The Jazz Singer* (Alan Crosland) premiered. Most sequences had only orchestral accompaniment, but in four scenes vaudeville star Al Jolson sang and even spoke briefly (“You ain’t heard nothin’ yet”). The film’s phenomenal success suggested that sound might provide more than a cheap way of reproducing stage acts and music. Warners made more “part-talkies,” and in 1928 the first “all-talkie,” *The Lights of New York* (Bryan Foy), became another hit.

Sound-on-Film Is Adopted

Warner Bros. was first into the field of sound, but another firm was a close second. As Western Electric was developing its sound-on-disc system, two engineers, Theodore Case and Earl Sponable, created a sound-on-film system, partly based on de Forest’s Phonofilm. Fox Film Corporation invested in the Case-Sponable system. Like Warner, Fox was a small but expanding company that hoped sound would give it a competitive advantage. Fox renamed the Case-Sponable system Movietone and demonstrated it in 1927 with short films of vaudeville acts and musical numbers. The showing was a success, but Fox soon found that most big-name theatrical talent had signed contracts with Warner Bros. Fox then concentrated on sound newsreels, including highly popular coverage of Charles Lindbergh’s solo flight to Paris. Fox used a Movietone musical score for F. W. Murnau’s 1927 feature *Sunrise* (pp. 141–142) and made some part-talkies in 1928.

The next major system was another sound-on-film technology developed by the Radio Corporation of America (RCA, a subsidiary of General Electric and Westinghouse). Dubbed Photophone, it was demonstrated in early 1927 and for a short time promised to rival the most successful system to date, Warners’ Vitaphone, in becoming the industry standard.

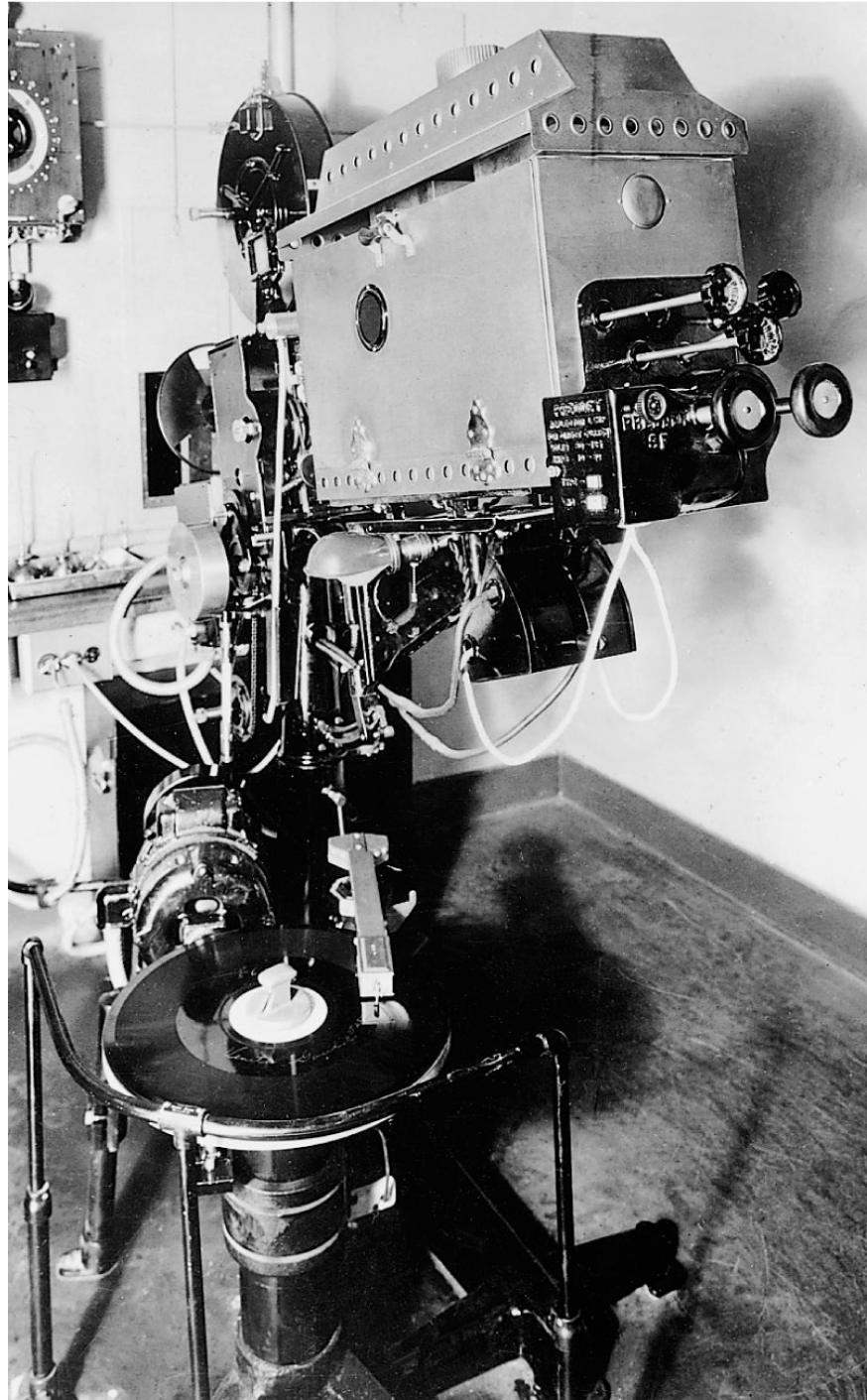
The five largest producing companies in Hollywood at this point—MGM, Universal, First National, Paramount, and Producers Distributing Corporation—proceeded cautiously in relation to sound. If firms acted individually, they might choose incompatible equipment. Since each firm’s theaters had to show other companies’ films, the lack of a common standard would hurt business. In

February 1927, they signed the Big Five Agreement, pledging to act together in adopting whichever sound system proved most advantageous. The two leading choices were the Western Electric sound-on-disc and the RCA

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sound-on-film systems. By 1928, Western Electric also had a sound-on-film technology available—and it offered more favorable contracts. The Big Five opted for Western Electric's system.

Because many theaters had already installed phonograph-style projectors, the Hollywood firms continued for a few years to release two prints of most films: some with phonograph discs and some with sound-on-film (9.1). Only Warners continued to use discs during production. In 1931, however, it joined the rest of the industry by switching to sound-on-film.



9.1 In the early years of sound, many theaters had projectors, like this Western Electric model, that could play both sound-on-disc and sound-on-film. (Source: Western Electric)

The rejected RCA system, Photophone, did not vanish. David Sarnoff, RCA's general manager, created a new vertically integrated motion-picture company. He bought the Film Booking Office, thus acquiring a distribution outlet and a studio,

and he purchased the Keith-Albee-Orpheum circuit of vaudeville houses to provide a theater chain. In October 1928, Sarnoff formed Radio-Keith-Orpheum, known as RKO. Since Photophone was compatible with the Western Electric system, many theaters in the United States bought Photophone equipment, and the system enjoyed considerable success abroad.

Once the Hollywood studios decided what systems to adopt, they quickly began installing equipment in theaters. Independent theaters often used one of the cheaper sound systems. Many smaller theaters could not afford to buy any sound equipment at all, especially since the spread of sound coincided with the onset of the Depression. As a result, many American films were released in both sound and silent versions. Still, by mid-1932, the conversion to sound was virtually complete in the United States.

Sound and Filmmaking

Filmmakers and technology workers struggled to cope with the unfamiliar, often clumsy, new technology. Microphones were insensitive and hard to move; it was difficult to mix sound tracks; and scenes frequently had to be shot by multiple cameras in soundproof booths (see box).

While many early sound films were static and full of dialogue, some filmmakers responded to the limitations imaginatively. The musical, a genre made possible by the new invention, offered opportunities for resourceful uses of sound. Even a pedestrian backstage musical like the immensely successful *The Broadway Melody* (1929, Harry Beaumont) had clever moments. The opening, set in a block of music rehearsal rooms, creates a cacophony of different pieces being played simultaneously, as well as abrupt cuts from one sound to another as the editing moves in and out of the soundproof rooms. Another show-business musical, Rouben Mamoulian's *Applause* (1929) helped restore extensive camera movements to the sound film.

Ernst Lubitsch brought the wit of his silent films to *The Love Parade* (1929), a costume musical set in a mythical Eastern European country. In a comedy of gender role reversals, Count Albert marries Queen Louise, only to discover that he has no authority, either in his marriage or in state affairs. Although the film was shot primarily in the studio, Lubitsch avoided multiple-camera shooting in

most scenes. He simply had the character complete a line a few seconds before the cut and resume speaking a few seconds into the next shot. With no dialogue carrying over the cut, sound was more easily edited.

Some musical numbers avoided multiple cameras by using the suggestive “Lubitsch touch.” As the Count stands in his window singing, “Paris, Please Stay the

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Same,” Lubitsch cuts to reverse shots showing attractive women watching him from other windows—presumably some of his many lovers. The scene switches to another window, where the Count’s valet sings another verse, and we see reverse shots of maids watching him, also with romantic overtones. Then, in yet another window, the Count’s dog barks a bit of the same tune, with female dogs emerging from nearby bushes to listen.

EARLY SOUND TECHNOLOGY AND THE CLASSICAL STYLE

Early sound technology posed stylistic problems for the film industry. The first microphones picked up any noise on the set. Cameras whirled as they filmed and had to be placed in soundproof booths. Moreover, initially all the sounds for a single scene had to be recorded at once; there was no “mixing” of sound tracks recorded separately. If music were to be heard, the instruments had to play near the set as the scene was filmed. The microphone’s placement limited the action. It was often suspended over the set on heavy rigging; a technician moved it about within a limited range, trying to point it at the actors (9.2).



9.2 In a Warner Bros. sound studio, an exterior dialogue scene for an early talkie is shot. The orchestra plays at the side, and three cameras in booths face the couple on the bench. Note the man on top of the booth, center, moving the microphone slightly to catch the pair's voices. Two additional microphones are suspended above the orchestra. Cables carry the sound from all three microphones to a sound-recording booth not visible here. (Source: Warner Brothers Studio)

The photograph below shows three cameras filming a simple scene of two people on a bench. This technique, *multicamera shooting*, was widely adopted because each scene had to be filmed straight through in its entirety. Although it would have been easier to shoot all the action in a lengthy take with one camera, filmmakers were reluctant to surrender the flexibility and emphasis that the continuity editing system had given them in the silent era. In order to be able to use devices like establishing shots, cut-ins, and shot/reverse shots and still match sound and lip movement smoothly from shot to shot, directors filmed the scene from a variety of vantage points. One camera might have a normal lens and make the long shot while another in the next booth made medium shots with a telephoto lens and a third filmed the action from a slightly different angle. At times, more than three cameras were used.

Even Warner Bros.'s Vitaphone shorts, which primarily displayed classical music and vaudeville acts, used multiple cameras to permit shot changes (**9.3**). For example, *Behind the Lines*, from the second Vitaphone program (shot in August 1926), shows popular wartime

entertainer Elsie Janis leading a group of soldiers in a series of songs; the seven-minute film's action was shot straight through, using two camera positions. The finished film cuts back and forth between these two positions (9.4, 9.5).



9.3 The crew and equipment, including four camera booths, at Warner Bros.'s Vitaphone sound studio in Brooklyn, c. 1926. The man in the dark suit, second from left, has his hand on a single microphone hanging from the ceiling. The empty set for a musical short involving a piano is visible at the rear. (Source: Warner Brothers Studio)



9.4, 9.5 In *Behind the Lines*, a perfect match on action as the view shifts from one camera to a second covering the scene: a soldier climbing onto a truck bed being used as a stage. Note the theatrical-style backdrop in Warners' sound studio.

In feature films, multiple-camera shooting did not exactly duplicate silent-film style. The presence of the bulky booths made it difficult to get precise framings; in a conversation scene, for example, one shot might be taken at an angle to the characters, while the reverse shot is in profile (9.6–9.8). Also, since the cameras tended to be lined up in front of the scene, portions of the space often overlapped between shots (9.9–9.11). Incidentally, during

the early years of sound, the track occupied part of the left of the rectangular frame used just for the image in the silent era. Thus many early sound films had square images (see 9.9). The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences soon recommended putting black strips at the top and bottom of the image to re-create a rectangular frame; this *Academy ratio* (or *Academy aperture*) remained standard until the advent of widescreen ratios in the 1950s.



9.6–9.8 In a scene from *The Lights of New York* made with multiple-camera shooting, one camera shows the Hawk and his two thugs, a second uses a telephoto lens to take a closer view of the thugs from an angle, and a third, also with a telephoto lens, frames Hawk in profile.



9.9–9.11 In *Hallelujah* (1929, King Vidor), three shots show the action from similar standpoints; note how the central character is seen at one side of the frame in the second shot and then at the other side in the third.

Other aspects of early sound technology limited filmmakers' choices. The camera booths had wheels, but these usually served to move the camera between setups. Generally they were too noisy and awkward for tracking shots. Instead, camera operators could make short panning movements through the booth windows to keep the action centered. As a result, short reframing pans became a more common stylistic feature than they had been in the silent era. The microphones initially were insensitive, and hence studios often insisted that actors take diction lessons and speak slowly and distinctly. Many early talkies move at a slow pace, and the performances seem stilted to modern ears.

Technicians worked quickly to solve such problems. Studios soon built padded metal *blimps* that silenced the camera but were far less awkward to use than booths. Next came *microphone booms*, poles that moved the microphone overhead to follow moving sources or swing from actor to actor (9.12). Perhaps most important, from 1931 on it became increasingly possible to record more than one track of sound for a scene and to mix them into a single final track. This new technology facilitated recording the nondiegetic atmospheric music for a film after its images had been shot and edited; sound effects could be added to a scene, or prerecorded songs could be played back for singers to lip-sync during the shooting. Combining and recombining sounds became as easy as selecting and arranging shots, and multiple-camera shooting ceased. During the 1930s, Hollywood moved further toward overcoming the stylistic limitations that sound had created.



9.12 William Wellman directing *The Star Witness* (1931). The camera is muffled in a studio-built blimp, and the microphone hangs on a boom above the actors.

Significantly, some filmmakers, primarily in other countries, avoided the constrictive multiple-camera shooting system or employed it sparingly. Sacrificing the polished lip synchronization and matches on action that the Hollywood technology provided, these filmmakers shot much of their footage silent and dubbed in sound later, however loosely it fit the images. This permitted camera movements, fast cutting from a wide range of angles, and other techniques seldom used in early Hollywood sound films.

Hallelujah (1929, King Vidor) circumvented stylistic obstacles in other ways. Vidor persuaded MGM to make a musical featuring only African Americans. No portable sound equipment was available, so roughly half the footage was filmed

silent on location, with sound added later. Unhampered by booths, Vidor could move the camera freely outdoors (9.13). *Hallelujah* did employ multiple-camera shooting in some scenes (see 9.9–9.11). Even these studio scenes, however, have a distinctive quality, since the actors improvised much of the dialogue, whether postsynchronized or shot directly. They often speak quickly, even interrupting each other, creating a livelier pace than that of most early talkies.



9.13 A tracking shot through a cotton field as the family sings and carries in their crop in *Hallelujah*.

Although the studio insisted on including two Irving Berlin songs, the film's sound track emphasizes African American folk music and spirituals. The performers play banjos, kazoos, and a church harmonium. Despite *Hallelujah*'s somewhat melodramatic treatment of southern black religious and sexual mores, its attempt to deal with a milieu largely neglected by Hollywood, as well as its creative use of sound, made it significant.

GERMANY CHALLENGES HOLLYWOOD

Dividing the International Pie

In 1918, three inventors came up with a German sound-on-film system, Tri-Ergon. From 1922 to 1926, they tried to introduce the process, and the giant firm Ufa took an option on it. Probably because of Ufa's mid-1920s financial woes,

however, the firm did not move into sound production.

In August 1928, several international companies pooled their sound patents, including those for Tri-Ergon, and formed the Tonbild-Syndikat (“Sound Film Syndicate”), usually referred to as Tobis. A few months later, major electronics and recording firms created a second company, Klangfilm, to promote another sound-on-film system. In March 1929, the two companies merged into Tobis-Klangfilm, soon to be the most powerful sound firm outside the United States. Spurred by news of Vitaphone’s successes, Ufa signed a contract with Tobis-Klangfilm and began building sound studios.

The interests controlling Tobis-Klangfilm, which included powerful Swiss and Dutch financial groups, were determined to compete with the American firms. When Warners opened its immensely successful *The Singing Fool* (1928, Lloyd Bacon) in Berlin in 1929, Tobis-Klangfilm obtained a court injunction to stop the film’s run. The firm claimed that the Vitaphone equipment Warners had installed in the theater infringed its patents. When it became apparent that Tobis-Klangfilm’s officials were bent on keeping American sound systems out of Germany, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) declared that all American firms would stop sending films to German theaters and stop importing German films to the United States.

This period of uncertainty slowed the German transition to sound. Producers were reluctant to make sound films, for lack of wired theaters and for fear of being unable to export to the United States. Reciprocally, exhibitors hesitated to buy expensive projection systems when there were few sound films available. The first German talkie, *The Land without Women* (Carmine Gallone) was finished in 1928, but it was not until early 1930 that sound production and exhibition accelerated. By 1935, virtually all of Germany’s theaters were wired.

In the meantime, the American firms discovered that their boycotts were not working. Both Warner Bros. and RKO started paying licensing fees to Tobis-Klangfilm in order to bring their films and equipment into Germany. Tobis-Klangfilm also set up foreign subsidiaries and made patent-sharing agreements

with sound firms in several countries. By obtaining further court orders to block American equipment shipped from Switzerland, Czechoslovakia, and elsewhere, Tobis-Klangfilm threatened to control large portions of the world market.

Soon the MPPDA and firms linked to the Western Electric system reached a settlement with Tobis-Klangfilm. On July 22, 1930, at a meeting in Paris, all parties agreed to an international cartel that would divide up the world market. Tobis-Klangfilm received exclusive rights to sell sound equipment in Germany, Scandinavia, most of Eastern and central Europe, and a few other countries. American manufacturers gained control of Canada, Australia, India, the USSR, and other regions. Some countries, such as France, remained open to free competition. Anyone distributing sound films in any territory had to pay a fee to the appropriate member of the cartel. Although there were countless patent cases and battles over high licensing fees internationally, the global sound-film cartel operated until 1939, when World War II put an end to it.

The Early Sound Era in Germany

Despite the departure of many German filmmakers for Hollywood during the 1920s, the early sound era saw a last flowering of creativity before the Nazi regime took control in 1933. Both veteran silent directors and important newcomers found imaginative ways to use sound and to retain the stylistic flexibility of the moving camera and complex editing.

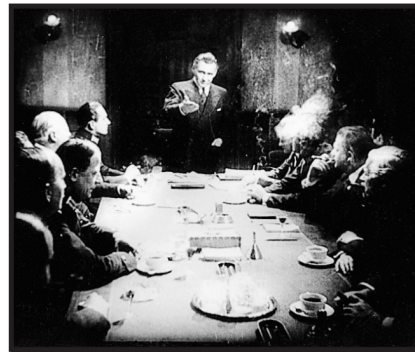
The first sound film of Fritz Lang, who had been central to the German Expressionist movement of the 1920s (pp. 91-94), was one of his finest. *M* (1931) tells the story of the search for a serial killer of children. The police dragnet so inconveniences the underworld of Berlin that the criminals decide to capture the killer. Lang chose to avoid all nondiegetic music, concentrating on dialogue and sound effects. Not lingering on any one character, he used crisp editing to move quickly among many.

Far from creating static, lengthy scenes, Lang used sound to rapidly stitch together disparate actions and locales. He experimented with *sound bridges*, carrying over the sound, particularly voices, from one scene into the next—a technique that would not be commonly used until the modern Hollywood cinema (9.14). In portraying the two manhunts, Lang used sound and image to create

parallels between the police and the highly organized criminal world by cutting back and forth between the two groups meeting (9.15, 9.16). A sonic motif also becomes an important clue: the killer's distinctive whistled tune indicates his offscreen presence and eventually leads to his capture.



9.14 In *M*, as a police psychologist dictates a profile of the unknown criminal's abnormal mental state, Lang cuts to the killer's home, where he experiments with grotesque expressions in a mirror as the psychologist's voice continues.



9.15, 9.16 A cut from a criminal boss gesturing during a conference to a police commissioner similarly gesturing creates an apparent “match on action” and draws a parallel between the two meetings (*M*).

Before leaving Germany, Lang also made a sequel to his 1922 *Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler*. In *Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse* (“The Last Will of Dr. Mabuse,” 1933), the arch-criminal Dr. Mabuse continues to run his gang from an insane asylum and even from beyond the grave.

Veteran silent director G. W. Pabst made three notable films in this early sound era: *Westfront 1918* (1930), *The Threepenny Opera* (1931), and *Kameradschaft* (“Comradeship,” 1931). Both *Westfront 1918* and *Kameradschaft* were pacifist films, pleas for international understanding in an era when nationalism and militarism were growing in Germany. The first portrays the senselessness of World War I; the second shows German miners risking their lives to save fellow French workers after a mine disaster.

Westfront 1918 creates an antiwar stance through bitter symbolism and a realistic depiction of battlefield conditions (9.17). One scene shows the protagonist, Karl, coming home on leave and finding his wife in bed with the butcher’s delivery boy. This scene uses many subtly varied framings to trace Karl’s reactions, changing from rage to bitter resignation. Only in the wrenching final scene in a field hospital full of maimed and dying soldiers does Karl, near death, forgive his wife (9.18). The film closes with a title, “The End?!” accompanied by the sound of explosions. Pabst made films in France during much of the Nazi regime (p. 256) but returned to Germany to work during World War II.



9.17 An exhausted student, sent back from the trenches for help, walks past a group of soldiers preparing coffins while a shell explodes in the background in *Westfront 1918*.



9.18 The pen-ultimate shot of *Westfront 1918* shows the dying Karl declaring he will go back to his unfaithful wife, for “we are all guilty.”

Max Ophüls, a stage director, began his film career in the early sound period. His first important work was *The Bartered Bride* (1932), an entry in a favorite German genre, the comic opera. *The Bartered Bride* used several stylistic devices that would typify Ophüls’s style, including deep staging, elaborate camera movements, and direct address to the audience. Ophüls’s first mature work was *Liebelei* (1933), in which the innocent daughter of a violinist and a dashing lieutenant fall in love. Ophüls is known for creating an intense romanticism, especially through elaborate camera movements that swirl around the characters. In one scene of *Liebelei*, the camera begins by simply following the couple as they dance (**9.19**). Then they whirl vertiginously around the camera as the background moves by (**9.20**). Finally, the camera pauses on the music box to which they have been dancing, they move away from our view (**9.21**), and the scene fades out.



9.19–9.21 In *Liebelei*, the camera dances with the characters and then discreetly loses them.

One of the most acclaimed directorial debuts of the early sound period in Germany was Leontine Sagan's *Mädchen in Uniform* ("Girls in Uniform," 1931). It deals with a sensitive girl, Manuela, sent to a private school run by

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a tyrannical headmistress (9.22). Manuela develops a crush on her only sympathetic teacher, and after blurting out her love at a party, she attempts suicide. *Mädchen in Uniform* was a rare early attempt to deal sympathetically with lesbianism.



9.22 The headmistress inspects the schoolgirls in *Mädchen in Uniform*.

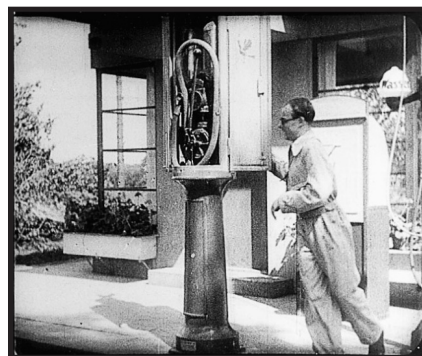
Perhaps the most successful early sound films, both on the domestic German market and internationally, were musicals. Erik Charell's *The Congress Dances* (1931) combined lavish historical costumes and sets with elaborate camera movements (9.23). Less grandiose, but no less cheerful, is *Three from the Filling*

Station (1930, Wilhelm Thiele). Early on, three friends return home to discover bailiffs repossessing all their furniture. The three dance about, singing a nonsense song, “Cuckoo,” and smilingly bidding farewell to each item as it is carried out; the scene is shot from a variety of vantage points. Finally the trio decide to move to the country, and they jump out the window into their car.



9.23 For nearly three minutes, the camera moves with the heroine of *The Congress Dances* as she rides and sings in the streets, hailed by all as she passes.

Like many important early sound films, *Three from the Filling Station* avoids multiple-camera shooting and moves the action out of the studio whenever possible. The filmmakers even built the set of the Kuckuck (“cuckoo”) gas station twice (9.24, 9.25). Scenes that could be postsynchronized or that used only music were shot in the outdoor set, while those that needed synchronized sound were shot in the studio.



9.24, 9.25 In 9.24, the three heroes dance about to a prerecorded song in the outdoor gas-station set in *Three from the Filling Station*; 9.25 shows a second set for the station, built in the studio and used for recording direct sound.

A very different sort of musical became one of the most widely seen of German sound films. Hollywood director Josef von Sternberg directed Emil Jannings (who had worked with Sternberg in Hollywood before the

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arrival of talkies forced him to return to Germany) in *The Blue Angel* (1930). The film also brought world fame to stage and film actress Marlene Dietrich.

Jannings plays Professor Rath, a repressed, unpopular high-school teacher. In the first scene, street sounds establish Rath's dreary neighborhood and his morning routine. The first break in his routine is in fact a moment of silence, when he whistles to his beloved canary and receives no response. The bird has died. Rath is plunged into a completely different world when he tries to catch some of his students at the Blue Angel, a sordid bar where they have gone to hear the sexy singer Lola-Lola. He falls in love with Lola himself, gives up his job to marry her, and becomes a clown in order to help earn money.

Von Sternberg avoided multiple-camera shooting almost entirely, yet he still managed to create dialogue scenes with excellent lip synchronization (**9.26, 9.27**). *The Blue Angel* is also famous for its realistically motivated offscreen sound. A ringing bell becomes a motif associated with Rath's routinized life. When he assigns his students a punitive essay, there is silence as they write; he opens a window, and we hear a boys' choir singing nearby. Aside from its ingenious use of sound, *The Blue Angel's* international success was due in part to Dietrich's sultry performance as Lola. It led her to a Hollywood career. There she made several important films with von Sternberg in the 1930s.



9.26, 9.27 A cut-in in *The Blue Angel* maintains lip synchronization, though the scene was shot with one camera. Note that Lola's head is in a slightly different position after the cut and that Rath is holding her powder case higher. Their poses would have remained identical across the cut with multiple-camera shooting.

By 1933, all these German directors—Lang, Pabst, Ophüls, Sagan, Charell, and Thiele—were working outside Germany, largely because the Nazi regime had gained power (see Chapter 12).

THE USSR PURSUES ITS OWN PATH TO SOUND

While Western countries struggled with incompatible systems and patent disputes, the Soviet filmmaking establishment remained relatively isolated. In 1926, two inventors, P. T. Tager and A. Shorin, independently began working on sound-on-film system. In 1929, just as the Soviet industry was arranging to obtain sound equipment from abroad, Tager and Shorin declared their systems ready. Vsevolod Pudovkin tried to use Tagefon for *A Simple Case*, but technical problems forced him to release the film silent. Dziga Vertov managed to use Shorinfon on location in his documentary feature *Enthusiasm*, but there were many difficulties, and the film, begun in 1929, was delayed until April 1931.

In 1930, the problems with the two sound systems led Soviet officials to order a set of equipment from the United States; brought and installed by an American specialist. Tager and Shorin improved their own inventions by copying that equipment. During the late 1920s and early 1930s, delegations of Soviet filmmakers traveled to Hollywood to study sound production methods.

The first Soviet sound films were released in March 1930: Abram Room's *Plan for Great Works* (a compilation documentary with postdubbed sound only) and some vaudeville and musical shorts. At that point, only two theaters were wired for sound. Following *Enthusiasm's* 1931 release, Yuri Raizman's silent Montage-style film *The Earth Thirsts* (originally 1930) was rereleased in May with a track of music, songs, and sound effects. Other silent films soon received the same treatment. New sound films also appeared: in the fall of 1931, Grigori Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg's *Alone* was released, soon followed by Sergei Yutkevich's *Golden Mountains*.

The transition to sound began during the First Five-Year Plan, when the Soviet film industry was trying to expand and become self-sufficient in all areas. Moreover, the Depression hit the Soviet Union hard; prices and demand for its principal exports, grain and other raw materials, fell sharply. A mere five sound films were produced in 1931, and the number rose to only 52 by 1939. The wiring of theaters proceeded slowly. In 1933, as the First Five-Year plan ended, only 224 of the Soviet Union's total of 27,578 cinema installations were equipped for sound projection. It was not until 1938 that sound projectors were installed in more than half of Soviet theaters. Through the

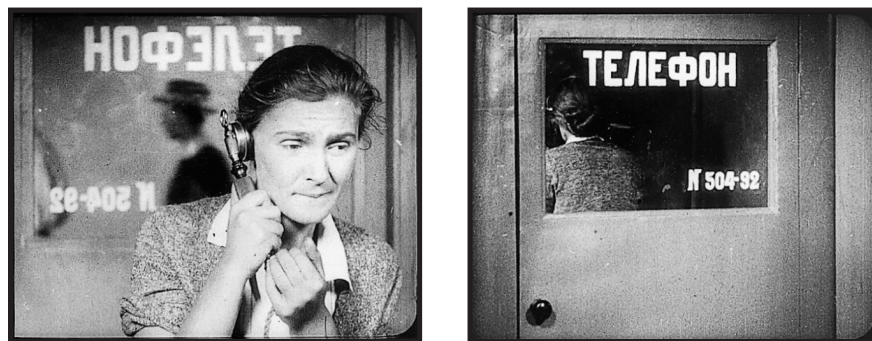
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decade most far-flung rural areas had to cope with aging and broken silent projectors. To keep the unwired theaters operating, through much of the decade the centralized distribution system re-released both Soviet and foreign imports from the 1920s, often in battered prints. By the beginning of the Soviet Union's entry into World War II in 1941, the introduction of sound was still not complete.

While many Western observers resisted sound film, fearing that dialogue-ridden scripts would ruin the artistry achieved by the silent cinema, a more flexible view emerged from the famous 1928 "Statement on Sound," signed by Sergei Eisenstein, his associate Grigori Alexandrov, and V. I. Pudovkin. Indeed, they warned against sound's "unimaginative use for 'dramas of high culture' and other photographed presentations of a theatrical order." Simply filming characters talking, they asserted, would destroy the concept of Montage, which depended on abrupt juxtapositions. But they claimed that "*Only the contrapuntal use of sound vis-à-vis the visual fragment of montage will open up new*

possibilities for the development and perfection of montage.”² That is, sound should not simply duplicate the image but should add to the image in some way: offscreen sound could add narrative information, incongruous sound effects or music could change the tone of a scene, and nondiegetic sounds could comment ironically on the action.

The filmmakers of the Montage movement welcomed sound as a way of creating juxtapositions to affect audiences more powerfully. For example, Kozintsev and Trauberg’s *Alone* had been almost completed as a silent film before they added a sound track. Rather than using simple postsynchronized dialogue and effects, they took advantage of the new technology by employing startling and contradictory sound. In one scene, the heroine makes a phone call (9.28, 9.29). As cuts move us inside and outside the phone booth, we hear an inconsistent succession of sounds: outside we hear a babble of voices and typewriters clacking in a nearby office; inside, the voices continue at the same volume level, but the typewriters are not heard. After the heroine hangs up—viewed from outside the booth—there is a sudden and unmotivated silence. At no point do we hear her voice.



9.28, 9.29 A scene in *Alone* that creates counterpoint by using contradictory sound sources.

Pudovkin’s first sound film, *Deserter* (1933), proved to be the last film of the Montage movement. It uses sound in vivid ways. In one scene the sound track is edited very rapidly. The heroine is selling a workers’ newspaper on the street; during this, a cheery nondiegetic waltz alternates with diegetic women’s voices. These sounds are heard in quicker succession, until only a single note of the music and a single word are heard, passing back and forth. Another scene uses sound ironically. At an outdoor café, a desperate man on strike tries to steal food

from a rich man's table. The shot of the rich man lasts for about half a minute with virtually no movement, yet loud, cheerful music plays (9.30). As the food arrives, the music switches to a conga rhythm for the attempted theft and the worker's expulsion. This "contrapuntal" music creates a bitter conceptual irony comparable to Eisenstein's visual treatment of the "For God and Country" sequence in *October* (6.35, 6.36).



9.30 Sound counterpoint in Pudovkin's *Deserter*.

Such experimentation with sound, however, ran counter to the official policy of Socialist Realism instituted in 1934 (see Chapter 12), and in later years sound was put to far more straightforward uses.

THE INTERNATIONAL ADOPTION OF SOUND

Synchronized sound movies were invented in just a few countries, but they soon became an international phenomenon. Three other countries produced important sound films in the early years. At the same time, language barriers were surmounted through dubbing and subtitles so that dialogue films could circulate around the world.

France

During the silent era, Léon Gaumont had persistently tried to devise a French sound system. In October 1928, Gaumont presented a program of sound shorts and a feature with postdubbed songs. Like the Warner brothers, he wanted to replace the live music and other entertainment that typically accompanied silent films. The early sound market in France, however, was dominated by American and German systems. Also in October, Paramount wired its first-run Paris theater and showed a short film starring the French music-hall star Maurice Chevalier. Other successful screenings, such as *The Jazz Singer* in January 1929, led to a race by French producers to make sound features. Since French studios were still being wired, the earliest, largely undistinguished, films were produced in London (including the first French sound feature, *Les Trois masques* ("The Three Masks," 1929) and in Berlin (e.g., *L'Amour chante*, "Singing Love," 1930).

Since France was an important market, German interests sought to capture part of the production sector. In early 1929, Tobis-Klangfilm set up a subsidiary, the Société Française des Films Sonores Tobis, in Paris. Tobis produced many major French films, including the highly influential first three sound features of René Clair, which we shall discuss shortly.

Uncertainty concerning sound led to a dip in French production. By 1930, however, most of the main studio buildings were wired, using either American or German systems or one of several minor French brands. Wiring theaters went on until 1934, since many were small and independently owned.

Despite the weakness of the French film industry during this period, several filmmakers experimented with the new technique. *La Petite Lise* ("Little Lise," 1930, Jean Grémillon) tells a simple, melodramatic story of Berthier, a convicted murderer released after a long term in a South American prison; he returns to Paris to find his fragile daughter, Lise, who has secretly become a prostitute.

Grémillon shot some scenes in the studio with synchronized dialogue, but he achieved variety by filming others silent, adding sound later. For example, in the opening scene at the prison in Cayenne, he cut freely among several striking exterior compositions of officers calling the roll (9.31). The film also makes powerful use of offscreen sound (9.32). Grémillon also experimented with auditory flashbacks and sound bridges between scenes.



9.31 In *La Petite Lise*, distant framings eliminate the problem of lip synchronization; voices could be postdubbed in an exterior scene shot silent.



9.32 Berthier's intense longing to return to Lise is conveyed simply in a lengthy shot of him staring at her picture, accompanied by the offscreen sounds of other prisoners (*La Petite Lise*).

René Clair became the most widely known of early French sound directors, as *Sous les toits de Paris* (*Under the Roofs of Paris*, 1930), *Le Million* (1930), and *À nous, la liberté!* ("For Us, Liberty," 1931) found an international audience. His imaginative use of camera movements, stretches of silence, and sonic puns helped

reassure critics who believed that sound would result in static dialogue pictures. We shall see his influence cropping up in national cinemas from Hollywood to China.

À nous, la liberté! involves two escapees from prison. Emile becomes a rich but miserable gramophone manufacturer, while Louis remains a happy, Chaplinesque hobo. The opening uses several lengthy tracking shots to show the prisoners working on an assembly line making toy horses (9.33). These shots establish camera movements and industrial tedium as important motifs. Later, the workers in Emile's factory are shown in similar shots of boring assembly lines (9.34).



9.33, 9.34 René Clair uses tracking shots to compare work in a prison and in a factory in *À nous, la liberté!*

Although *À nous, la liberté!* uses dialogue, it also employs music extensively—something many filmmakers favored in the early sound period. Clair also liked to surprise his audience by using the “wrong” sound for an object. In one scene, Louis lounges in a field overlooking the factory. We hear music and singing—the sounds of nature itself, which Louis “conducts.” A close shot of a flower trembling in the wind is accompanied by a soprano voice so that it seems to be singing (9.35).



9.35 In *À nous, la liberté!* a “singing” flower’s shape recalls the horns of the gramophones manufactured in Emile’s factory.

Clair, Grémillon, and other early sound directors like Jean Renoir laid the foundations for important French trends during the 1930s (Chapter 13).

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Great Britain

In the mid-1920s, British film theaters began imitating American practice by adding vaudeville acts and prologues to their programs. The 1928 premiere of Vitaphone shorts aroused some interest, but there was no rush to convert to sound. Even *The Jazz Singer*, in September, failed to create a stir. Jolson’s next film, *The Singing Fool*, however, opened to enormous acclaim in early 1929, and the push to wire theaters and studios began.

Western Electric’s and RCA’s were the principal systems on the market, with Tobis and local firms filling out the rest of the market. By 1933, all but the smallest British cinemas could reproduce sound.

Production companies, the weakest segment of the industry, had more trouble coping with the expense of converting to sound. The flow of investments into the British film industry after the 1927 Quota Act (p. 167) had slowed. By 1929, most of the new “quota” companies were in trouble, and their problems were compounded by the fact that their recent silent films were of little value in the big

first-run cinemas. The main exception to this pattern was British International Pictures (BIP), which had been founded in 1927 by John Maxwell. Maxwell quickly wired his Elstree studio facility with RCA equipment. Rather than aiming for the largely closed American market, as other companies did, he concentrated on Europe and the British Commonwealth countries. His first production, Alfred Hitchcock's *Blackmail*, was released in both sound and silent versions and was a big hit in 1929. BIP went on to make inexpensive sound films aimed at the British market, and the company remained profitable.

Blackmail was one of the most imaginative early sound films. Refusing to surrender the camera movement and rapid editing of the silent era, Hitchcock avoided multiple-camera shooting, finding a variety of other ways to work sound into his scenes. The opening sequence is a fast-cut episode in which the heroine's policeman boyfriend helps apprehend a criminal; the many shots of the police van speeding through the streets and the criminal trying to trick his pursuers were all shot silent, with only music added. Later, in the jail, the camera tracks forward behind the two police officers in another scene shot silent and postdubbed (9.36).



9.36 By filming the policemen from the back in *Blackmail*, Hitchcock could add their dialogue to silent footage without having to synchronize the sound with their lip movements.

Such devices functioned mainly to circumvent the problems of early sound, but Hitchcock also uses sound to enhance the drama of *Blackmail*. For example, in one scene the heroine sees a homeless man lying with outstretched hand, in a posture that reminds her of the body of the would-be rapist she has recently stabbed to death. A scream begins on the sound track, and a cut takes us immediately to the dead man's apartment, where his

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landlady is screaming upon discovering the body (9.37, 9.38). In another scene, Hitchcock holds the shot on the heroine's distraught face as a gossiping neighbor babbles on about the killing. We hear the neighbor's speech subjectively, as the heroine does, with all the words becoming inaudible except the repeated "knife ... knife ... knife." Hitchcock would continue such deft manipulations of sound throughout his career.



9.37, 9.38 A cut from one woman's back to another makes it unclear whether one or both are the source of a scream that acts as an imaginative sonic transition in *Blackmail*.

Synchronized sound also provided the basis for a series of prestigious literary and historical films that British producers hoped would gain entry into the lucrative American market.

Japan

Musical accompaniment gave most national cinemas "sound" films in the silent era, but Japan's industry was one of the few to have "talkies." The *benshi* performer was a mainstay of exhibition, sitting in the theater near the screen,

explaining the action, and vocally portraying the characters. Not surprisingly, the Japanese cinema was one of the last major film industries to convert to synchronized sound movies, and the process involved a protracted struggle.

Although Japanese inventors had tinkered with sound systems in the mid-1920s, the big firms displayed no interest until Fox exhibited Movietone films in the spring of 1929. Major urban theaters, particularly those co-owned by Hollywood companies, were quickly wired. By the end of 1930, most imported films were talkies.

Japanese production proceeded more cautiously. Financial problems of the Depression made the two major companies, Nikkatsu and Shochiku, reluctant to pay the high royalty fees demanded by US equipment suppliers. Japanese studios also feared that giving the Americans control of sound would lead to foreign domination of the market, so the studios devised their own sound technology. Nikkatsu's sound-on-disc system was tried on a few films, but it proved a failure. Shochiku's *Tsuchihashi* system, modeled on RCA's Photophone, was launched with Heinosuke Gosho's *Madam and Wife* (aka *The Neighbor's Wife and Mine*), which premiered in August 1931.

Madam and Wife is a domestic comedy that carefully integrates dialogue, music, and sound effects. A writer looking for excuses not to work is distracted by his neighbor's jazz band and the man's smoking, drinking modern wife. Gosho makes clever use of offscreen sounds (even mice), of subjective sound (the jazz dims when the writer puts cotton in his ears), and of thematic contrasts (the neighbor's wife is associated with jazz, while the writer's wife hums a traditional Japanese tune). The film also exploits the audience's fascination with American talkies. Invited next door, the writer staggers back home drunk and singing, "That's the Broadway melody!" His family is last seen walking home to the strains of "My Blue Heaven." Gosho shot the lip-synchronized scenes in multiple-camera fashion, but other passages were filmed and cut quite fluidly.

The popularity of *Madam and Wife* helped convince the film industry to convert to talkies. In 1933, Nikkatsu allied itself with Western Electric, while Shochiku stuck with its *Tsuchihashi* system. Smaller firms used sound technology to break into the market: most notable were Photo-Chemical Laboratories (PCL) and Jenkins-Ozawa (JO) both of which began talkie production in 1932. On the whole, however, sound production proceeded more slowly in Japan than in any

other major filmmaking nation. Sound films were less than half the feature output until 1935, and many of these had only music tracks. As late as 1936, one-quarter of Japanese films were silent.

The delay was due to several factors. Small firms could not sustain the costs of sound production, many rural theaters remained unwired for years, and, as in other countries, labor resisted the introduction of sound. In 1929, the powerfully unionized benshi went on strike at the theater premiering the Fox Movietone process. Producers and exhibitors sought to get rid of the benshi. When, in 1932, Shochiku fired ten benshi from major

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Tokyo theaters, their colleagues struck and won reinstatement for them. Three years of battles followed, during which sound pictures became dominant.

In 1935, when a violent benshi strike against Shochiku was settled by police intervention, the struggle ended. Many benshi took up storytelling in variety halls or in street performances. Still, even at the end of the 1930s, one might be found accompanying a silent movie in a remote rural theater or in a neighborhood screening in Hawaii. For such remote locations, the Japanese industry was still making a few silent films.

Wiring the World's Theaters for Sound

Sound spread through the world's film theaters at an uneven pace. Some small countries, especially in Eastern Europe and the Third World, produced no films, but their few theaters were wired relatively quickly. This was the case in Albania, for example, where there were a mere fourteen theaters—all showing sound films—in 1937. Venezuela had around a hundred theaters, as well as occasional open-air shows in bullrings and similar venues; even for these casual screenings, portable sound equipment was brought in.

Silent screenings lingered on in some middle-sized markets with small production sectors. In 1937, about 800 of Belgium's nearly 1,000 theaters had been equipped for sound. Only 100 more were still considered real possibilities for wiring. Belgium produced a small number of sound films, six in 1937. In Portugal, 185 of the country's 210 theaters were wired; it had one sound studio

that made four features and about a hundred shorts in the first nine months of 1937. Brazil had 1,246 theaters, 1,084 of which had sound capability; in 1937, it produced just four sound features.

Ultimately many of those theaters that had not bought sound systems by the mid-1930s went out of business. They had survived primarily by showing old silent films or silent versions of sound films, but these became increasingly hard to get. By the mid-1930s, sound films dominated international exhibition, as well as production in those countries that could afford it.

Crossing the Language Barrier

Sound filming created a problem for all producing countries: the language barrier threatened to limit export possibilities. Silent films could be translated through the simple substitution of intertitles, but talkies were another matter.

The earliest screenings of sound films explored several solutions to the problem. Sometimes films were shown abroad with no translation at all. Since sound was still a novelty, this occasionally worked, as when the German version of *The Blue Angel* met success in Paris. During the early sound era, Hollywood made several big *revue musicals*, such as *King of Jazz* (1929), that consisted of strings of musical numbers that could be enjoyed without a knowledge of English.

Because postproduction mixing of sound was cumbersome in the early years, dubbing a new sound track in a foreign language was clumsy and expensive. It involved, for example, rerecording all the music at the same time that the dialogue was put in, making lip synchronization difficult. Some dubbed films were successful in 1929, but others failed because the voices matched badly with the lip movements. Firms also added subtitles to some films, but these were often rejected as distracting. Other solutions, like eliminating the dialogue and substituting intertitles or even editing in narrators explaining the action in a different language, proved wholly unacceptable.

By 1929, many producers decided that the only way to preserve foreign markets was to reshoot additional versions of each film, with the actors speaking different languages in each. Advertised as the world's first "multilingual" film, the British production *Atlantic* was released in German and English (1929, E. A. Dupont). Similarly, the first German talkie, *Das Land ohne Frauen*, also appeared

in an English version, *The Land without Women*. In 1929, MGM set up an elaborate program of multilingual production, importing actors and directors to make French, German, and Spanish versions of its pictures. Paramount attempted to economize by producing its multilinguals in France, purchasing the Joinville studio, near Paris, in 1929. Joinville's facilities were equipped like a big Hollywood studio, and there Paramount turned out dozens of films in as many as fourteen languages. Germany's Tobis-Klangfilm also made many multilinguals.

The assumption was that multilinguals would be relatively cheap to make, since the same scripts, sets, and lighting plans could be used. As each scene was finished, a new team of actors would move in, and the same scene would be done again. The cast and crew were usually changed for each version, though in some cases directors and stars who could speak two or more languages would work on more than one version. Occasionally stars learned their lines phonetically, as when Laurel and Hardy were called upon to make Spanish versions of their films.

After about two years, it became apparent that multilinguals would not solve the language problem. Multilingual production's main drawback was that it required so

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many people to be at the studio at the same time, most just waiting their turn to work. The market for each version was too small to warrant the additional expense, and audiences did not welcome minor actors in roles made famous by stars such as Gary Cooper and Norma Shearer.

By 1931, the technique of mixing separate sound tracks after shooting had been refined. The original music and sound effects could be combined with new voices, and methods of synchronizing voice and lip movements had improved. Moreover, subtitles were accepted more widely. By 1932, dubbing and subtitles enabled talkies to cross the language barrier, and these processes have remained in use ever since.

Despite its technical problems, sound boosted film production in several countries, since audiences wanted to hear native performers speaking their own languages. France, for example, gained a bigger share of its own exhibition market than it had enjoyed during the 1920s. Many small countries in Eastern Europe and Latin America began producing more films. India, which during the 1920s

had established an extensive studio system, now expanded its production in various local languages. During the 1930s, its industry became one of the world's most prolific. We examine some of these results of the coming of sound in Chapter 11.

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CHAPTER 10

THE HOLLYWOOD STUDIO SYSTEM, 1930–1945



The Maltese Falcon



Follow the Fleet

Between 1930 and 1945, the United States economy nearly collapsed. In 1932 the Great Depression was entering its depths, unemployment reached 23.6 percent. The dollar's buying power was high—admission at some local movie theaters might be only a dime—but many people could afford only necessities.

The stock market hit its lowest level in mid-1932, just before the presidential election, and Franklin Roosevelt swept to the first of four victories by blaming the disaster on Herbert Hoover. Roosevelt's administration moved to bolster the economy. The National Recovery Administration, established in 1933, cast a lenient eye on big-business practices, such as trusts and oligopolies, while also displaying a new tolerance of labor unions. Both policies had a major impact on Hollywood. The government also fostered economic growth by financing roads, buildings, the arts, and other areas under the Works Progress Administration (WPA; established in 1935). The WPA put 8.5 million people back to work, thus building up buying power and helping industries recuperate.

Recovery was uneven. A recession during 1937 and 1938, though less severe than the original crisis, caused similar problems. By 1938, however, government intervention was pulling the country out of the Depression. The outbreak of war in parts of Europe accelerated that process.

Although the United States remained neutral until the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, armaments companies were allowed to sell abroad beginning in November 1939. America declared itself "the arsenal of democracy," selling arms to its allies around the world and then building up its own combat capability. This increased manufacturing gradually absorbed the available labor force. Although there were 3 million unemployed when the United States entered the war in 1941, by late in the war some jobs remained unfilled.

The war expanded the American economy. Between 1940 and 1944, the output of manufactured goods quadrupled. Fully 40 percent of the nation's gross national product supported the war effort, but the newly employed workers on the home front (including many who had been housewives or servants) gained purchasing power and a higher standard of living. Despite shortages of some

products, most American industries increased their sales, often by 50 percent or more. The film industry shared in this wartime boom, as movie theater attendance rose dramatically.

THE NEW STRUCTURE OF THE FILM INDUSTRY

During the silent era, the Hollywood film industry had developed into an oligopoly in which a small number of companies cooperated to close the market to competition. While the structure of this oligopoly remained relatively stable into the 1930s, the coming of sound and the onset of the Depression caused some changes.

Only one large new company was formed as a result of the coming of sound: RKO, created to exploit RCA's sound system, Photophone. Fox's successful innovation of sound-on-film led it to expand considerably during the late 1920s, but the beginning of the Depression forced Fox to cut back on its investments. Most notably, it sold its newly acquired controlling interest in First National to Warner Bros. Thus Warners, which had been a small company, grew into one of the largest firms of the 1930s.

By 1930, the Hollywood oligopoly had settled into a structure that would change little for nearly twenty years. Eight large companies dominated the industry. First were the Big Five, also called the *Majors*. In order of size, they were Paramount (formerly Famous Players-Lasky), Loew's (generally known by the name of its production subsidiary, MGM), Fox (which became 20th Century-Fox in 1935), Warner Bros., and RKO. To be a Major, a company had to be vertically integrated, owning a theater chain and having an international distribution operation. Smaller companies with few or no theaters formed Little Three, or the *Minors*: Universal, Columbia, and United Artists (UA). There were also several independent firms. Some of these (such as Samuel Goldwyn and David O. Selznick) made expensive, or "A," pictures comparable to those of the Majors. The firms (such as Republic and Monogram) making only inexpensive "B" pictures were collectively known as *Poverty Row*. We shall survey each of the Majors and Minors briefly and then look at independent production.

The Big Five

Paramount Paramount began as a distribution firm and expanded by buying up large numbers of theaters (pp. 57 and 125). This strategy succeeded in the 1920s, but once the Depression hit, the company earned far less money and owed sizable amounts on the mortgages of its theaters. As a result, Paramount declared bankruptcy in 1933 and underwent court-ordered reorganization until 1935. During that time it produced films but at a loss. In 1936, Paramount theater executive Barney Balaban became president of the entire company and made it profitable again (so successfully that he retained his post until 1964).

In the early 1930s, Paramount was known partly for its European-style productions. Josef von Sternberg made his exotic Marlene Dietrich films there, Ernst Lubitsch continued to add a sophisticated touch with his comedies, and French import Maurice Chevalier was one of its major stars. The studio also depended heavily on radio and vaudeville comedians. The Marx Brothers made their earliest, most bizarre films there (notably *Duck Soup*, directed by Leo McCarey in 1933), and Mae West's suggestive dialogue attracted both audiences and controversy.

In the second half of the decade, Balaban turned Paramount in a more mainstream direction. Bob Hope and Bing Crosby, consistently among the top box-office attractions of the World War II period, helped sustain the studio, as did tough guy Alan Ladd and comedian Betty Hutton. One of the studio's popular wartime directors, Preston Sturges, made several satirical comedies. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Cecil B. De Mille continued as a mainstay of the studio he had helped start, with a series of big-budget historical films.

Loew's/MGM Unlike Paramount, MGM did well all the way through the period from 1930 to 1945. With a smaller theater chain, it had fewer debts and was the most profitable American film firm. This was partly due to the quiet guidance of Nicholas Schenck, who managed Loew's from New York. Louis B. Mayer ran the West Coast studio on a policy of high-profile, big-budget films (supervised by Irving Thalberg until his early death in 1936), backed up by mid-range films (mostly supervised by Harry Rapf) and B pictures.

MGM's films (even the Bs) often looked more luxurious than those of other studios. Budgets for features averaged \$500,000 (significantly more than the \$400,000 Paramount and 20th Century-Fox were spending). Cedric Gibbons, head of the art department, helped create an MGM look with large, white, brightly lit sets. MGM boasted that it had under contract "more stars than there are in heaven." Important directors who worked consistently for MGM included George Cukor and Vincente Minnelli.

In the early 1930s, MGM's biggest star was the unglamorous Marie Dressler, remembered today mainly for her Oscar-winning performance in *Min and Bill* (1930) and her sardonic role in *Dinner at Eight* (1933). Later in the decade, Clark Gable, Spencer Tracy, Mickey Rooney, and Judy Garland became major drawing cards. It is a measure of MGM's emphasis on quality that Rooney, who was in A musicals like Busby Berkeley's *Strike Up the Band* (1940), could simultaneously be delegated to the relatively low-budget, but popular, "Andy Hardy" series. Greta Garbo was more a prestige star than a box-office draw in the United States, but her films did well in Europe; once the war broke out and European markets were closed to American films, MGM let her go. During the war, new stars emerged for the studio, including Greer Garson, Gene Kelly, and Katharine Hepburn—the last teaming up with Spencer Tracy.

20th Century-Fox Partly as a result of its expansion after the innovation of sound, Fox entered the Depression in worse shape than the other Majors. The company remained in trouble until 1933, when Sidney Kent, former head of distribution for Paramount, took over and helped turn the firm around. One crucial step was a merger with a smaller company, Twentieth Century, in 1935. This deal brought in Darryl F. Zanuck as head of the West Coast studio, which he ran with an iron hand.

20th Century-Fox had relatively few long-term stars. Folk humorist Will Rogers was immensely popular up to his death in 1935; skating star Sonja Henie and singer Alice Faye were both famous for a few years. But the studio's biggest draw was child-star Shirley Temple, who topped national box-office polls from 1935 to 1938. Her popularity waned as she grew up, and 20th Century-Fox's biggest wartime profits came instead from Betty Grable musicals. (A photograph

of Grable in a bathing suit was the favorite pin up among the troops.) Major directors who worked steadily at Fox during this period included Henry King and John Ford.

Warner Bros. Like Fox, Warner Bros. had been borrowing and expanding just before the Depression began. It coped with its debts not by declaring bankruptcy but by selling off some holdings and cutting costs. Harry Warner ran the company from New York, insisting on making a relatively large number of low-budget projects, resulting in modest but predictable profits.

The effects on the films were apparent. Although in total assets Warners was as big as MGM, its sets were much smaller, and its stable of popular actors—James Cagney, Bette Davis, Humphrey Bogart, Errol Flynn, and others—worked in more films. Plots were recycled frequently (the screenwriting department was known as the “echo chamber”), and the studio concentrated on creating popular genres and then mining them: the Busby Berkeley musical, the gangster film, the problem film based on current headlines, the “bio-pic,” and, once the war began, a series of successful combat films. Warners depended on prolific, solid directors such as William Wellman, Michael Curtiz, and Mervyn LeRoy to keep the releases flowing. The many Warners films of the era that have become classics attest to the ability of the studio’s filmmakers to succeed with limited resources.

RKO This was the shortest-lived of the Majors. In 1928, the Radio Corporation of America (RCA), unable to convince any studio to adopt its sound system, went into the movie-making business itself as RKO (p. 174). RKO always lagged behind the other Majors. By 1933 the firm was in bankruptcy, and it was not reorganized until 1940. At that point, the general wartime prosperity helped RKO achieve profitability, though its problems would return shortly after the war’s end.

RKO had no stable policy during this period, and it lacked big stars. Katharine Hepburn, for example, was popular during the early 1930s, but a series of indifferent and eccentric films labeled her “box-office poison.” RKO had isolated hits, such as the 1933 fantasy *King Kong*, but its only consistent moneymakers during the 1930s were Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, whose

series of musicals ran from 1934 to 1938. To a considerable extent, RKO's slim profits depended on its distribution of animated films made by an independent firm, Walt Disney.

During the early 1940s, RKO turned to adapting prestigious Broadway plays, including *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* (1940). It also hired controversial young theatrical producer Orson Welles. His *Citizen Kane* (1941) came to be remembered as the most important RKO film, though it was financially disappointing at the time. During the early 1940s, RKO's B unit, supervised by Val Lewton, produced some of the most creative low-budget films of Hollywood's

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studio era.

THE HAYS CODE: SELF-CENSORSHIP IN HOLLYWOOD

The popular image of Will Hays and other officials of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) casts them as sour puritans imposing censorship on the film industry. The reality is more complex. The MPPDA was a corporation owned jointly by the film companies themselves. One of the MPPDA's tasks was to help *avoid* official censorship from the outside.

The MPPDA was formed in 1922 to improve public relations after a series of Hollywood scandals, to provide a lobbying link to the era's sympathetic Republican administrations, and to handle foreign problems like quotas. Similar functions continued into the 1930s, but the MPPDA became more famous for its policy of industry self-censorship: the Production Code (often called the Hays Code).

The early 1930s were an age of conservatism. Many believed that lax morality during the 1920s Jazz Age had been one cause of the Depression. State and municipal film censorship boards, formed in the silent era, tightened standards. Pressure groups promoting religious beliefs, children's welfare, and the like protested against sex, violence, and other types of subject matter. In 1932 and 1933, a series of studies by the Payne Fund investigated the effects of filmgoing on audiences—particularly children.

By early 1930, outside pressure for censorship forced the MPPDA to adopt the Production Code as industry policy. The Code was an outline of moral standards governing the depiction of crime, sex, violence, and other controversial subjects. Provisions of the Code demanded, for example, that “methods of crime should not be explicitly presented” and that “sexual perversion or any inference to it is forbidden.” (In this period, “sexual perversion” referred primarily to homosexuality.) All Hollywood films were expected to obey the Code or risk local censorship. In enforcing the Code, MPPDA censors often went to absurd lengths. Even respectably married couples had to be shown sleeping in twin beds (to suit British censors), and the mildest profanity was forbidden. When *Gone with the Wind* was filmed in 1939, there was lengthy controversy before the MPPDA finally permitted Clark Gable to speak his famous departing line “Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn.”

The MPPDA’s efforts were initially resisted by the film companies. Most of the firms were in financial trouble, some moving into or near bankruptcy as theater attendance fell; they knew sex and violence could boost theater patronage. Gangster films and sex pictures, however, drew the wrath of censors and pressure groups. *The Public Enemy* (1931), *Little Caesar* (1930), and *Scarface* (1932) were seen as glorifying criminals. Although the protagonists were killed in the end, it was feared that youngsters would copy the tough-guy images of James Cagney and Edward G. Robinson. More notoriously, several films centered on women who traded sexual favors for material gain. *Baby Face* (1933) and *Red-Headed Woman* (1932) showed women attaining elegant apartments, clothes, and cars through a series of affairs. Even *Back Street* (1932, John M. Stahl), in which the heroine lives modestly and truly loves the man who keeps her, was found offensive. According to the Code’s author, the film approved “of extramarital relationship, thereby reflecting adversely on the institution of marriage and belittling its obligations.”¹

Mae West presented a formidable challenge to the MPPDA. She was a successful Broadway performer and playwright whose fame rested on sensational plays like *Sex* (1926). Although the MPPDA fought to keep her out of films, Paramount, facing bankruptcy, hired her; for a few years, she was the company’s top moneymaker. Her first star vehicle, *She Done Him Wrong* (1933, Lowell Sherman), took in many times its cost. A typical bit of dialogue occurs as the virtuous young hero chides the heroine, Lou, by asking her, “Haven’t you ever met a man that could make you happy?” Lou replies, “Sure ... lots of times.” West’s drawling delivery could make any line seem salacious.

The timing of the premiere of *She Done Him Wrong* could not have been worse. The first Payne Fund studies had just appeared. Moreover, in early 1933, the Roosevelt administration took over, severing Hays's ties to Republican officials in Washington. A national censorship law seemed to be in the offing. As a result, in March 1933, Hays pushed the film industry to enforce the Code.

Still, studios hungry for patrons tested the Code's limits. Mae West's films continued to cause problems. *Belle of the Nineties* (1934) was recut at the insistence of the New York State Censorship Board. The negotiations concerning this film coincided with mounting pressure from religious groups, especially the Catholic Legion of Decency. (The legion had a rating system that could condemn films either for young people or for all Catholics. This stigma could cause the industry considerable lost revenues.)

The danger of increased official censorship was too great to be ignored, and, in June 1934, the MPPDA established a new set of rules. Member studios releasing films without MPPDA seals of approval (**10.1**) now had to pay a \$25,000 fine. More important, a film without a seal was barred from any MPPDA member's theaters—which included most first-run houses. This rule forced most producers to comply with the Code. "Objectionable" material was still used, but it became more indirect. A strategic fade-out might hint that a couple was about to make love; extreme violence could occur offscreen; sophisticated dialogue could suggest much without violating the Code.



10.1 The seal of approval as it appeared in the 1930s at the beginning of films passed by the MPPDA.

The MPPDA may have been repressive, but it blocked potentially more extreme national censorship. In practical terms, the Code was not a tool of the prudish minds of MPPDA officials but a summary of the types of subject matter that could get movies cut by local censors or banned for Catholic viewers. The Code saved Hollywood money by pressuring filmmakers to avoid shooting scenes that would be snipped out. The MPPDA did not seek to eliminate every risqué line or violent moment. Instead, it allowed the studios to go just far enough to titillate the public without crossing the lines defined by local censorship authorities.

The Little Three

Universal Although it had an extensive distribution system and was the largest of the Little Three, Universal had constant money problems from 1930 to 1945 (and beyond). It had few major stars, and its successful filmmakers tended to move to bigger studios. Universal's early strategy was to promote new stars in visually striking horror films. The firm made stars of Bela Lugosi (*Dracula*, 1931), Boris Karloff (*Frankenstein*, 1931), and Claude Rains (*The Invisible Man*, 1933). After 1935, Universal increasingly targeted small-town audiences, building up another new star, the cheerful teenage singer Deanna Durbin. The studio relied on B series, such as the Sherlock Holmes films of the 1940s, starring Basil Rathbone, and the hugely popular slapstick films of Abbott and Costello.

Columbia Under the steady leadership of studio head Harry Cohn, Columbia weathered the Depression and remained profitable. Despite low budgets, it turned out popular films, often by borrowing stars or directors from

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bigger studios (thus avoiding the costs of keeping them under contract). The studio's most important director, Frank Capra, stayed there throughout the 1930s. His 1934 film *It Happened One Night* starred Claudette Colbert (loaned out by Paramount) and Clark Gable (by MGM); film, director, and stars all won Oscars, and the picture was one of Columbia's biggest hits.

Although several major directors worked briefly at Columbia—most notably John Ford for *The Whole Town's Talking* (1935), George Cukor for *Holiday* (1938), and Howard Hawks for *Only Angels Have Wings* (1939) and *His Girl Friday* (1940)—they did not stay. During this period, the studio depended largely on its B Westerns, Three Stooges films, and other cheaper fare.

United Artists The sound era saw the beginning of a slow decline for UA. D. W. Griffith, Mary Pickford, and Douglas Fairbanks all retired in the early to mid-1930s, and Charles Chaplin released a feature only about once every five years. UA distributed films for other prominent

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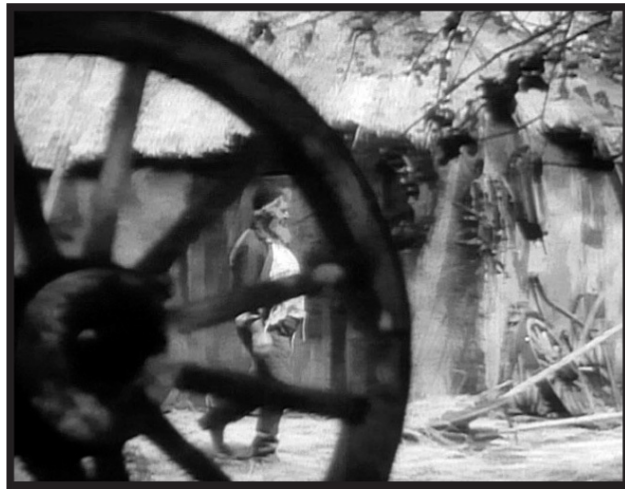
independent producers such as Alexander Korda, David O. Selznick, Walter Wanger, and Samuel Goldwyn—who all switched to other firms by the end of World War II. As a result, UA was the only company whose profits fell during most of the wartime boom years.

UA's releases from 1930 to 1945 reflect their origins from a batch of diverse independent producers. Prestigious British imports like *The Private Life of Henry VIII*, slapstick musicals with popular Broadway star Eddie Cantor, a few of Alfred Hitchcock's American films (including *Rebecca* and *Spellbound*), and some of William Wyler's finest works (*Dodsworth*, *Wuthering Heights*) provided a varied output. Unlike in the silent period, however, UA now had to fill out its feature schedule with mid-budget, or even B, pictures.

The Independents

There was little real competition among the Majors, the Minors, and the independents. Each group had a different function within the industry. The Majors provided the bulk of the A pictures for big theaters. The Minors supplied the extra films needed to fill out programs and catered to smaller theaters that did not belong to the Majors. A few independent firms made prestige films, while others, like Monogram and Republic, supplied double features with B pictures, most of them Westerns, crime thrillers, and serials.

Some small independent producers were even further removed from the Hollywood mainstream, producing low-budget films for specific ethnic groups. Oscar Micheaux (pp. 143–144) continued making films with black casts. The introduction of sound led to production in a variety of languages. In cities where there were large enclaves of Jewish immigrants, for example, there was a demand for films in Yiddish. While there had been silent films distributed with Yiddish intertitles, the talkies fostered a brief flowering of Jewish-oriented production in the 1930s. Films such as *Uncle Moses* (produced by Yiddish Talking Pictures in 1932) were shown in theaters that also exhibited movies imported from the two other centers of Yiddish filmmaking, the USSR and Poland. Plays from the lively Jewish theater scene were adapted. Edgar G. Ulmer, who had worked briefly in Hollywood, made one of the most internationally successful Yiddish films, *Green Fields* (1937; **10.2**). Like many films in this cycle, it centered on family crises and the clash between traditional values and modern urban life. The films featured frequent musical interludes. The outbreak of World War II crushed Yiddish filmmaking in Poland in 1939, and, by 1942, Yiddish-language production had ceased in the United States as well.



10.2 Ulmer adds visual interest to the low-budget *Green Fields* by placing objects in the foreground to frame the action.

Despite the limited successes of various types of independent production, it would have been virtually impossible for a new company—large or small—to gain a significant share of the film market. The Hollywood firms had created a secure,

stable situation in which they loaned one another stars, played one another's films in their theaters, and cooperated in other ways. In one of their most prominent joint actions, they worked through the MPPDA to fight outside pressure for censorship of movies (see box pp. 192-193).

EXHIBITION PRACTICE IN THE 1930s

Sound and the Depression significantly changed the way theaters presented movies. Warner Bros. initially viewed sound as a way of eliminating live orchestral accompaniment of features and stage acts in the theater. Its effort was successful, and by 1930 most theaters showed only filmed entertainment. In effect, creative control of programming had at last been taken entirely out of the hands of local theater managers, who received their complete shows in the form of films.

The Depression cut short the age of the movie palace. Many theaters no longer could afford ushers to show patrons to their seats. Seeking extra income, managers offered candy, popcorn, and beverages in the lobbies. Since many moviegoers had little to spend on entertainment, exhibitors played double and even triple features, in addition to the usual short films. The second film was often a cheap B picture, but it gave the moviegoer a sense of getting twice as much. Just as important, the double feature had an intermission during which the spectator could buy refreshments.

Managers also lured patrons with giveaways. There might be a drawing for a door prize, or a souvenir pillow might come with every ticket. Most effective were "dish nights," when each ticket came with a piece of chinaware. Families were thus encouraged to attend weekly to collect a whole set of crockery.

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As attendance expanded during World War II, some of these incentives declined. B-film production was less important, but the double feature remained, as did the concession stand. Many big movie houses had deteriorated during the Depression, but they were still ready to accommodate the renewed crowds of moviegoers.

CONTINUED INNOVATION IN HOLLYWOOD

During the 1920s, the expansion of the industry had included the formation of many technical companies and studio departments. The innovation of sound, which created such an upheaval in the business, had been one result of this growth in the technological support side of the industry. During the 1930s and 1940s, advances in filmmaking continued. Through the efforts of the studios, key manufacturers, and coordinating institutions like the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, film technology became more versatile and sophisticated.

Sound Recording

Methods of sound recording improved steadily. Early microphones were omnidirectional, picking up unwanted noise from crew and equipment. Gradually, unidirectional microphones, which could be aimed specifically at the desired sound source, were developed. While early booms to hang and move the microphone above the set had been large and clumsy, lighter booms soon made recording more flexible (10.3). By late 1932, innovations in multiple-track recording permitted music, voices, and sound effects to be registered separately and later mixed onto one track. (Songs were generally recorded first, with the singers moving their lips to a playback.) Also in 1932, identical edge numbers began to be printed on both the image and sound negatives, permitting close synchronization even of short shots.



10.3 A lightweight boom aims a small microphone directly at the actors during production of Lloyd Bacon's *San Quentin* (1937). Note the padded metal blimp enclosing the camera.

By 1932, the results of such improvements were apparent in many films. Actors no longer had to move gingerly or to slowly enunciate their dialogue, and the lugubrious pace of many early talkies gave way to a livelier rhythm. The new flexibility in sound recording is apparent in such disparate films of 1932 as *Trouble in Paradise* (Ernst Lubitsch), *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (Mervyn LeRoy), and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Rouben Mamoulian).

While early sound films had often avoided using much nondiegetic atmospheric music, multiple-track recording fostered the introduction of what came to be called the *symphonic score*, in which lengthy musical passages played under the action and dialogue. Several composers who were trained in the tradition of post-Romantic European classical music, including Max Steiner, Erich Wolfgang Korngold, Miklós Rózsa, David Raksin, and Bernard Herrmann, wrote scores to heighten moods of romance or suspense.

Steiner in particular helped establish the norms for studio music. His emphatic score for *King Kong* (1933) was an influential early use of the symphonic approach. Steiner also commonly quoted easily recognizable tunes to

emphasize a scene's meaning, as in *Sergeant York* (1940), where "Give Me That Old Time Religion" forms a motif associated with the hero's religious faith. Like many musical techniques in the sound cinema, this quotation practice derived from live accompaniment of silent films. Composers usually tried to make the music unobtrusive; like continuity editing, set design, and other techniques, most music was supposed to serve the narrative without drawing attention to itself.

Camera Movement

Many early sound films contained camera movements, but to execute them, filmmakers often had to shoot silent and add sound later or try to move the bulky camera booth. Moving shots tended to stand out from the rest of the film, which might well be made with multiple cameras. Such disparities were not good for continuity. Once camera blimps came into use (see 9.12 and 10.3), a new problem surfaced: the cameras were too heavy for traditional tripods, and they were difficult to move between shots. The solution was a strong, mobile camera support, and individual cinematographers and service firms created new versions of the sorts of dollies and cranes used at the end of the silent era.

Again, 1932 was a breakthrough year, with the introduction of the Bell & Howell Rotambulator. This was a 700-pound dolly that could raise the camera vertically from 18 inches to 7 feet, and the operator could pan, tilt, or track with ease. The Fearless Company's compact Panoram Dolly (1936) could pass through a 36-inch doorway. The spectacular tracking shots of some late 1930s and 1940s films, where the camera traverses two or more rooms of a set, depended on such equipment.

Craning movements also became more common. Universal's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1931) used the giant 50-foot crane that had been built in 1929 for *Broadway*. The famous shot of pulling back above a huge railway platform full of wounded Confederate soldiers in *Gone with the Wind* employed a building crane. Large cranes could also be used in the studio, usually to create spectacular shots in historical epics, musicals, or fantasies (10.4). In MGM's 1939 musical fantasy *The Wizard of Oz*, the camera swooped over the Munchkin City and the Yellow Brick Road. Most cranes, however, were small models suitable for unobtrusive vertical and diagonal movements.



10.4 The crane Busby Berkeley used at Warner Bros. to film elaborate musical numbers, seen here between takes of *Wonder Bar* (1934).

Technicolor

Undoubtedly the most striking innovation of this era was color filmmaking. We have seen how silent films employed various nonphotographic processes that colored the film after it had been shot. There were also several attempts to introduce photographic color processes in the silent period. The Technicolor firm's two-strip system had been used occasionally in Hollywood films during the 1920s,

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and it survived into the early sound era. It was costly to use, however, and it rendered colors mainly as pinkish orange and greenish blue (**Color Plate 10.1**).

In the early 1930s, the firm introduced a new system, so-called three-strip Technicolor. It involved attaching colored filters and prisms to the camera. The light coming into the camera lens was split and recorded on three strips of black-and-white film. One strip registered red values in the spectrum, another green, and another blue. Positive images for each strip were then made and treated with colored dyes. On a fresh strip of film, gelatin on the surface absorbed the dyes,

blending to create the original color of the scene. Having been separated from their source, the colors were combined by being absorbed into the surface of the film. (This made Technicolor prints slightly thicker than black-and-white ones.) The result was a very saturated color image.

Three-strip Technicolor was introduced publicly in a 1932 Disney short cartoon, *Flowers and Trees*. Pioneer Pictures, a small independent production firm owned by a major stockholder in Technicolor, produced a live-action musical short, *La Cucaracha*, in 1935 (**Color Plate 10.2**). It demonstrated that Technicolor could render vivid colors with live actors in the studio. That same year, the feature *Becky Sharp* (**Color Plate 10.3**) showed that color could add to the appeal of a historical drama. Technicolor's ability to produce bright, saturated colors suggested that, for some films, the extra cost (nearly 30 percent higher than that of black-and-white) was justified. (Color Plates 11.1, 15.7, and 15.10 show other examples of three-strip Technicolor.) The Majors began using color, and the Technicolor company monopolized the process, supplying all cameras, providing supervisors for each production, and processing and printing the film.

Today we regard color as a realistic element in films, but in the 1930s and 1940s, it was often associated with fantasy and spectacle. It could be used for exotic adventures like *The Garden of Allah* (1936), swashbucklers like *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1939), or musicals like *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944).

Special Effects

The term *special effects*, used in connection with the 1930s, usually conjures up thoughts of films like *King Kong* and *The Wizard of Oz*. Yet, as the president of the American Society of Cinematographers pointed out in 1943, "Ninety per cent of the trick and special effects shots in Hollywood movies are made with no thought of fooling or mystifying the audience. The great majority of camera trickery is used simply because filming the same action by conventional means would be too difficult, too expensive, or too dangerous."² Because special effects promoted ease, efficiency, and safety, they were used frequently and had a considerable influence on films of this period.

Most trick photography in the silent era was done by the cinematographer during shooting. Multiple-camera filming and other complications associated with sound led to trick work's becoming the responsibility of specialists. Studios added special-effects departments that often invented and built equipment to meet the demands of specific scenes.

Special-effects work usually involved combining separately shot images in one of two ways: through *rear projection* (also called back projection) or *optical printing*. In back projection, the actors perform in a studio set as an image filmed earlier is projected onto a screen behind them (10.5). In most scenes in which characters ride in cars, for example, the vehicle is filmed in a studio while the background landscape passes on a screen (10.6). Back projection saved money, since actors and crew did not have to go on location. (A small crew, or *second unit*, would travel to make the back-projection shots.) For example, much of the 1938 MGM film *Captains Courageous* took place on the deck of a fishing schooner, yet the actors worked entirely in the studio, with a tank of water below them and back-projected seascapes.



10.5 The actors in *The Woman in Red* (1935) sit in front of a back-projection screen, upper left, on which an ocean background will be projected during filming.



10.6 This scene from Fritz Lang's 1936 film *Fury* uses rear projection.

The optical printer offered more options for rephotographing and combining images. Essentially, an optical printer consisted of a projector aimed into the lens of a camera. Both could be moved forward and backward, different lenses could be substituted, and portions of the image could be masked off and the film reexposed. Images could be superimposed, or portions could be joined like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle; a single image could be enlarged or its speed altered.

Typically the optical printer was used to save money by filling in portions of studio sets. By blocking off a part of a frame with a *matte*, the cinematographer could leave an unexposed portion into which the special-effects expert could later insert a *matte painting* (**10.7**).



10.7 Only the lower left portion of this shot from *Queen Christina* (1932) was built on the studio backlot; the ships, water, rooftops, and sky were added with a matte painting.

Far more complex were *traveling mattes*. Here the effects cinematographer would make two or more masks for each frame of the trick passage and expose the film twice, frame by frame, using complementary masks in turn to cover portions of the film. Traveling mattes were commonly used to make *wipes*, where a line passes across the screen, removing one shot gradually as the next appears. In 1933, wipes became fashionable as a way of replacing *fades* or *dissolves* (two other transitional techniques) when RKO optical-printer expert Linwood Dunn created elaborate transitions, moving in fan, sawtooth,

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and other shapes, in *Melody Cruise* and *Flying Down to Rio* (**10.8**).



10.8 A wipe with a zigzag edge provides a transition from one shot to another in *Flying Down to Rio*.

The optical printer was often used to create *montage sequences*. These brief flurries of shots used superimpositions, calendar pages, newspaper headlines, and similar images to suggest the passage of time or the course of a lengthy action (**10.9**).



10.9 In *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, superimposed newspaper headlines create montage sequences summarizing the public's changing attitude toward of the protagonist.

There were many other types of special effects. Entire scenes could be filmed using miniatures, as in the plane takeoffs and landings in Hawks's *Only Angels Have Wings*. Frame-by-frame three-dimensional animation was used occasionally, most notably to turn small puppets into the giant ape in *King Kong*. Other tricks involved simple mechanical devices, like the trapdoor elevator and dry-ice fumes that make the Wicked Witch seem to melt in *The Wizard of Oz*.

Cinematography Styles

During the early 1930s, most cinematographers aimed for a “soft” image, based on the important stylistic trend of the 1920s (p. 128). Now, however, the soft look became less extreme but more pervasive. Camera experts used fewer obvious filters or smeared, distorting glass masks. Instead, studio laboratories typically processed film to make it look grayer and softer. Moreover, in 1931, Eastman Kodak introduced a Super Sensitive Panchromatic stock for use with the more diffused incandescent lighting necessitated by the innovation of sound (owing to

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the hiss emitted by arc lamps). Some films used a sparkling, low-contrast image to convey a sense of glamor or romance (**10.10**). Others went for a clearer focus while still avoiding sharp blacks and whites (**10.11**).

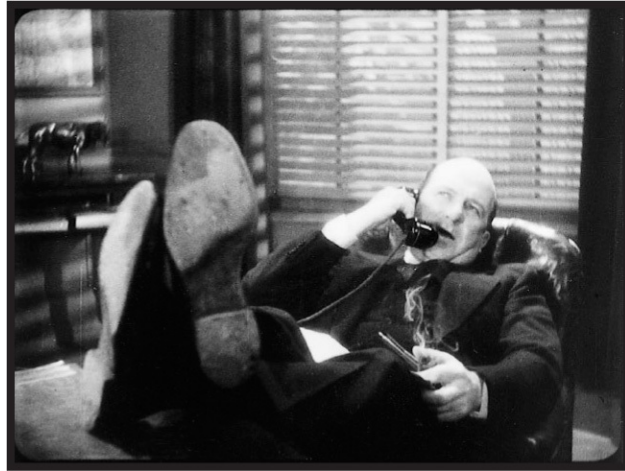


10.10 In *A Farewell to Arms* (1932, Frank Borzage), the romantic scene in which the main characters fall in love consists of soft, glittering images.



10.11 *Shanghai Express* (1932, Josef von Sternberg) employs an extensive range of soft grays to create glamorous images of Marlene Dietrich.

Most Hollywood filmmakers of the 1930s clustered actors together in a relatively shallow area and then cut among them using shot/reverse shot. Others created compositions in greater depth, sometimes with the foreground plane slightly out of focus (**10.12**) but sometimes also using deep focus (**10.13**, **10.14**). (Such depth had precedents in the silent era; compare with 7.48.)



10.12 A depth composition in *Twentieth Century* (1934, Howard Hawks).



10.13, 10.14 Deep-space compositions that keep all planes in focus, from *The Public Enemy* (1931, William Wellman) and *Only Angels Have Wings* (1939).

Director Orson Welles and cinematographer Gregg Toland took such deep-focus shots further and used them extensively in *Citizen Kane* (1941). Many of *Kane*'s depth shots used optical printing to combine sharply focused planes that had been filmed separately. Some shots, however, placed foreground elements near the lens and background elements at a considerable distance, yet kept everything in sharp focus; this occurs most spectacularly in the long take of the contract-signing scene (10.15). Welles went further in his second film, *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), for which cinematographer Stanley Cortez achieved many crisply focused depth shots without using trick photography (10.16). The influence of these visually innovative films soon spread throughout the industry. Staging in widely separated planes with deep focus became common practice (10.17).



10.15 Deep focus with one character close to the camera, a second in the middle ground, and a third in extreme depth, in *Citizen Kane*.



10.16 The ballroom scene of *The Magnificent Ambersons* presents a vast set in clear focus behind the foreground couple.



10.17 A simple shot/reverse-shot situation in *Casablanca* (1943) places Rick close to the camera in front of a sharply focused deep playing space.

Overall, technological innovations of the era from 1930 to 1945 did not fundamentally change the classical Hollywood approach to filmmaking. Narrative action and character psychology remained central, and continuity rules still aided spatial orientation. Sound, color, deep focus, and other techniques enhanced the style.

MAJOR DIRECTORS

In addition to the established directors working in Hollywood, the introduction of sound brought an influx of stage directors into the film studios; during this era, several screenwriters also joined the ranks of film directors. Moreover, the troubled political situation in Europe brought several émigrés' talents to the United States.

The Silent Veterans

Charles Chaplin opposed talking pictures. As his own producer and a phenomenally popular star, he could go on

making “silent” films, with only music and sound effects, longer than anyone else in Hollywood. His output, however, slowed considerably. He made two features without dialogue, *City Lights* (1931) and *Modern Times* (1936). The latter reflected the left-wing views that would get him into trouble with the government and the public after the war. In it, the Little Tramp loses a dreary assembly-line job, gets thrown in jail after being mistaken for the leader of a demonstration, and later joins forces with a poor young woman to seek work. Despite its concentration on Depression-era problems, it is a very funny film (**10.18**). Oddly enough, so is Chaplin’s first talkie, *The Great Dictator* (1940), a comedy on the unlikely subject of Nazi Germany. The resemblance between Hitler’s moustache and Chaplin’s had often drawn comment, and Chaplin took advantage of their physical similarities to play Hynkel, dictator of Tomania (**10.19**).



10.18 In *Modern Times*, factory worker Charlie tests a new machine that feeds the workers automatically while they stay on the job.



10.19 In *The Great Dictator*, Chaplin expresses Hynkel's lust for power by dancing with an inflatable globe, tossing it about until it bursts.

After Josef von Sternberg had directed his second sound film, *The Blue Angel*, in Germany (pp. 181-182), he returned to Hollywood with the film's star, Marlene Dietrich. They made six more films together, including *Morocco* (1930) and *Blonde Venus* (1932). While the stories were conventional melodramas, their style placed them among the era's most beautiful films. Von Sternberg's fascination with textures and dense compositions intensified. In particular, costume, lighting, and cinematography glamorized Dietrich to an extent that has seldom been equaled (see 10.11). Von Sternberg also made films without Dietrich during this period, including two somber literary adaptations, *An American Tragedy* (1931) and *Crime and Punishment* (1935).

Ernst Lubitsch adjusted quickly to sound with *The Love Parade* (p. 174). He went on to make many popular

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musicals and comedies. Foremost among these was *Trouble in Paradise* (1932). It begins with a witty scene in which an elegant couple dine together in a Venetian hotel and then discover that each is a thief out to rob the other. They fall in love and continue to ply their trade until a scheme to rob a rich woman raises problems (**10.20**). Lubitsch also directed Greta Garbo's penultimate film, *Ninotchka* (1939). Along with Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*, Lubitsch's *To Be or Not to Be* (1942) was one of the rare comedies about the Nazis.



10.20 Thief and potential victim in one of the gleaming Art Deco sets of *Trouble in Paradise*.

John Ford continued to be remarkably prolific during the 1930s, signing twenty-six films during the decade, plus several more in the early 1940s before he went into the Navy. Working principally at 20th Century-Fox, he directed some of the studio's most popular stars, making a trio of films with Will Rogers (*Dr. Bull* [1933], *Judge Priest* [1934], and *Steamboat Round the Bend* [1935]) and a costume picture, *Wee Willie Winkie* (1937), starring Shirley Temple. Despite his early concentration on Westerns, he made only one during this era, *Stagecoach* (1939), but it became one of the genre's classics. It traced the trip of a group of people through dangerous Indian territory. In this film, Ford first used the unearthly cliff formations of Monument Valley, a setting that would become his trademark in later Westerns.

That same year, Ford directed *Young Mr. Lincoln*, in which a murder case solved by Lincoln suggests the combination of simplicity and shrewdness that will eventually make him President. *How Green Was My Valley* (1941) is a richly nostalgic story of a close-knit Welsh coal-mining family's gradual disintegration. Ford created deeply emotional situations while using great stylistic restraint. Although he used conventional shot/reverse shots and cut-ins in some scenes, Ford downplayed important or sentimental moments by staying in long shot or holding quietly on a silent image of the characters in contemplation (10.21). Ford also used considerable depth in his staging and cinematography, stylistic traits that were to influence Orson Welles, who studied *Stagecoach* (10.22) before making *Citizen Kane*.



10.21 Similarly, in *How Green Was My Valley*, a composition reminiscent of D. W. Griffith's films (see 3.51) lingers over the family's silent reaction to bad news.



10.22 In *Stagecoach*, John Ford places his actors in three layers of depth and films from a slightly low camera height, techniques that Welles would carry further in *Citizen Kane*.

Howard Hawks, who had begun directing in the mid-1920s, became increasingly prominent during this era. Like Ford, he worked in a variety of genres, concentrating on succinct handling of plot and performance and displaying a mastery of rapid pacing and continuity editing. Hawks explained his approach in a typically down-to-earth fashion: "I try to tell my story as simply as possible, with the camera at eye level. I just imagine the way the story should be told and I do it. If it's a scene that I don't want anybody to monkey with or cut, I don't give them any way to cut it."³

If Ford's *Stagecoach* is the quintessential Western, then Hawks's *His Girl Friday* (1940) is a model sound comedy. The hilarious script (from Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur's play *The Front Page*) involves a newspaper editor who tries to prevent his ex-wife from giving up reporting to remarry. He lures her into trying to expose some crooked politicians who plan to execute a mentally incompetent killer in order to swing their election. Cary Grant, Rosalind Russell, and a bevy of character actors delivered the wisecracking dialogue at breakneck speed while Hawks recorded the action primarily with "invisible" shot/reverse shots and reframing movements (10.23).



10.23 Typically busy staging in *His Girl Friday* as the sheriff has Walter Burns handcuffed while a reporter babbles into a phone in the foreground.

Hawks's aviation adventure film *Only Angels Have Wings* (1939) is set in a small South American port where a flying service tries to get mail through a narrow mountain pass. Using simple resources, Hawks created an intense atmosphere of danger and romance. Much of the action takes place in and around a single building, at night

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or in a fog, as the characters wait for each returning flight (see 10.14). As often happens in Hawks films, the characters, male and female alike, have to prove themselves tough and stoic.

William Wyler had begun directing in the late silent era, making mostly inexpensive Westerns. His breakthrough came in 1936, when he began working for independent producer Samuel Goldwyn. He made *These Three* (1936), an adaptation of Lillian Hellman's play *The Children's Hour*, and several other distinguished films over the next few years. These included *Jezebel* (1938), *Wuthering Heights* (1939), and another Hellman adaptation, *The Little Foxes* (1941). On the last two, Gregg Toland was Wyler's cinematographer, and both films display deep-focus imagery similar to that of Ford's and Welles's films.

Veteran director Frank Borzage continued to specialize in sentimental melodramas. *A Farewell to Arms* (1932) adapted Hemingway's novel of an American soldier and a British nurse who fall in love during World War I. Borzage and cinematographer Charles B. Lang filmed the characters in a glimmering soft-focus style that enhanced the intense romanticism (see 10.10). By contrast, King Vidor continued to work in a variety of genres, from Westerns to melodramas. His 1937 remake of *Stella Dallas* is a classic melodrama, telling the story of a working-class woman who marries a factory owner's son. Her inability to overcome her vulgar upbringing eventually threatens her daughter's marriage to a society man (10.24).



10.24 In the famous final scene of *Stella Dallas*, Stella stands outside in the rain, weeping as she watches her daughter's wedding, and then turns to leave forever.

Raoul Walsh also worked in various genres, making several major action films in the late 1930s and early 1940s. *The Roaring Twenties* (1939), a gangster film, contrasts the lives of three World War I veterans. The film is notable partly for several spectacular montage sequences, including a representation of the stock-market crash as a ticker-tape machine that swells to huge size and shatters. *High Sierra* (1940) is the sympathetic story of a killer fleeing through the mountains to escape the police; he meets a handicapped girl whom he befriends. The film was a turning point in the career of Humphrey Bogart, who had previously played mostly villainous supporting roles; the next year he would play tough detective Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon*.

New Directors

The introduction of sound brought several stage directors from New York to Hollywood. Among these was George Cukor, who specialized in prestigious literary adaptations, such as *Camille* (1936), with Greta Garbo, and *David Copperfield* (1935), with W. C. Fields. Cukor worked mostly at MGM during this period. Rouben Mamoulian also came from Broadway; his *Applause* (1929) drew attention for its fluid camera movements. Similarly, his adaptation of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1932) begins with an unusually extended subjective tracking shot as we watch through Jekyll's eyes as he enters a lecture hall.

Another director who came from Broadway was Vincente Minnelli, who specialized in musicals. He joined MGM's musicals unit in 1940. This unit, under producer Arthur Freed, soon gathered some of the finest musical talent in Hollywood, including Judy Garland, Gene Kelly, and Fred Astaire. Minnelli did choreography for Busby Berkeley films, including *Strike Up the Band* (1940), and then graduated to directing with *Cabin in the Sky* (1943), a musical with an all-star black cast. His most celebrated film of the war period was *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944), with Garland.

Other new directors of this era appeared from the ranks of screenwriters. Preston Sturges wrote scenarios during the 1930s, working on *The Power and the Glory* (1933, William K. Howard), a film with a complex flashback structure that was a precursor to *Citizen Kane*. Sturges began directing with *The Great McGinty*

(1940), a political satire, and went on to make a string of popular comedies during the war years. In *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* (1944), for example, he poked fun at American prudishness. A young woman winds up pregnant after a

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wild party and claims that she married the father (whose name she remembers as something like “Ignatz Ratskywatsky”). When he proves hard to locate, her mild-mannered boyfriend helps her avoid disgrace by marrying her; she then bears sextuplets, and the family becomes the focus of a media furor. Despite toning down by the MPPDA, the film remains audacious. For a while, Sturges was among Paramount’s most popular directors.

CITIZEN KANE AND THE MAGNIFICENT AMBERSONS

While still a young man, Orson Welles (born 1915) was directing unusual productions of theatrical and radio plays. For example, in 1936 he staged *Macbeth* with an all-black cast and set it in a Haitian jungle. In 1938, he gained nationwide notoriety with a radio adaptation of H. G. Wells’s *The War of the Worlds*, adapting it into a series of news bulletins and panicking thousands of listeners who believed that a Martian invasion was in progress.

In 1939, Welles was put under contract by RKO. His first completed project was *Citizen Kane*, one of the most admired of all films. Welles received an extraordinary degree of control over his work, including the right to choose his cast and to edit the final film. Not surprisingly, the resulting film was controversial. It was a veiled portrait of publishing magnate William Randolph Hearst and his long-term affair with film star Marion Davies. Hearst tried to have *Kane* suppressed, but it was released in 1941, with many audiences being aware of its subtext.

Both the narrative structure and the style of *Kane* are dazzlingly complex. Beginning with the death of Charles Foster Kane, the film switches to a newsreel that sketches out his life. A reporter is assigned to discover the meaning of Kane’s mysterious last word, “Rosebud.” He interviews people who had known Kane, and a series of flashbacks reveals a contradictory, elusive personality. Ultimately the reporter’s quest fails, and the ending retains an ambiguity rare in classical Hollywood films.

Stylistically, *Kane* was flamboyant, drawing extensively on RKO's resources. For some scenes, Welles used quiet, lengthy takes. Other passages, notably the newsreel and several montage sequences, used quick cutting and abrupt changes in sound volume. To emphasize the vast spaces of some of the sets, Welles and cinematographer Gregg Toland worked at achieving deep-focus shots, placing some elements close to the camera, others at a distance (see 10.15). Many of these deep shots were made using several types of special effects (**10.25**). Optical-printer work combined several tracking shots imperceptibly into one (as in the crane shot through a nightclub skylight, where a flash of lightning blends two shots) and made the sets more impressive by combining miniatures and matte paintings with real-size sets. It has been claimed that over half of *Citizen Kane*'s shots contain special effects. The sound track was also altered substantially after filming. All these stylistic aspects of *Citizen Kane* proved highly influential during the 1940s.



10.25 In this shot from *Citizen Kane*, the large objects in the foreground were filmed separately and combined with the set and actors beyond.

Welles's second RKO feature was *The Magnificent Ambersons*. The plot does not use flashbacks, but it covers a lengthy period, the decline of a wealthy family as industrialization encroaches on a midwestern town. Welles establishes a nostalgic atmosphere in a prologue, narrated by him, which is a montage sequence depicting turn-of-the-century life. The film gradually adopts a grimmer tone as this genteel lifestyle disappears.

Stylistically, *Ambersons* takes *Kane's* techniques in less extravagant directions. Still, there are elaborate camera movements, as when Aunt Fanny has hysterics and the camera tracks through several rooms as Georgie tries to calm her. The deep-focus effects were more often done in a single exposure (see 10.16), and a larger budget allowed Welles to build entire sets and downplay optical-printer work.

After adverse audience reactions at previews, RKO took *Ambersons* out of Welles's control and cut it drastically, adding scenes made by the assistant director and editor. This truncated version was given a minor release. No complete version of the film survives, but even so it remains a masterpiece. (See "Notes and Queries" online.)

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John Huston, who had worked on the screenplays of *Jezebel* and *High Sierra*, was another scriptwriter-turned-director. Later in this chapter we shall discuss his directorial debut, *The Maltese Falcon*, as an early instance of film noir. Huston was in the military for much of the war, making some major war documentaries, and returned to Hollywood after 1945.

Orson Welles, the most influential director to emerge between 1930 and 1945, had already achieved success in a number of other fields including stage and radio (see box p. 203).

New Émigré Directors

Foreign filmmakers continued to come to Hollywood. Some were lured by higher salaries or the chance to work in the world's best-equipped studios. Increasingly, however, the spread of Fascism in Europe and the onset of World War II drove filmmakers to seek refuge in the United States.

Dissatisfied with his lack of authority in England and fascinated by the technical possibilities offered in Hollywood, Alfred Hitchcock signed a contract with David O. Selznick. His first American film, *Rebecca* (1940), was a prestigious literary adaptation and won a best-picture Academy Award, but it was not typical of the suspense films he is more famous for. Among his several wartime films was *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943). A man driven to seduce and kill rich widows visits his sister's family in a small California town. He charms

everyone, but his young niece is shattered when she ferrets out the truth about him. Through location shooting, Hitchcock created a sense of small-town normalcy in contrast to the villain's secret crimes.

The German exodus to Hollywood that had begun in the silent era accelerated after the Nazis gained power in 1933. Fritz Lang arrived in 1934. Although he was able to work fairly steadily (about a film a year up to 1956), Lang seldom had much control over his projects and never gained the prestige he had had in Germany. He worked in many genres, making Westerns, spy pictures, melodramas, and suspense films. *You Only Live Once* (1937) is the affecting story of a young ex-convict who tries to go straight but is falsely accused of a murder.

Billy Wilder had been a scriptwriter in Germany and resumed this career in Hollywood, teaming up with Charles Brackett on many screenplays, including those for *Ninotchka* and *Ball of Fire*. His first solo directorial effort was a comedy, *The Major and the Minor* (1942), and his grim study of alcoholism, *The Lost Weekend* (1945) was voted an Oscar as best picture. Although Otto Preminger was Jewish, he began in Hollywood by playing a Nazi villain. He managed, however, to slip into directing in the early 1940s. Wilder and Preminger made two of the period's classic films noirs.

GENRE INNOVATIONS AND TRANSFORMATIONS

Many genres from the silent era continued uninterrupted into the sound period. Technical changes within the industry and social changes in the world at large, however, caused some new genres to arise and some new variants to be introduced into old ones.

The Musical

The introduction of sound promoted the musical as a major genre. Some early *revue musicals* simply strung numbers together. Others, like *The Broadway Melody*, were *backstage musicals*, motivating their numbers as performances by their characters. There were also *operetta musicals*, exemplified by *The Love Parade*, which played out their stories in fantasy locales. Finally, there were *integrated*

musicals, in which the singing and dancing occurred in ordinary settings. (Backstage musicals often mixed in a few integrated numbers with those performed on stage.) The revue musical dwindled in importance, but the other types all remained popular.

A delightful example of the operetta subgenre was Rouben Mamoulian's *Love Me Tonight* (1932). The film begins with a sequence influenced by René Clair's early sound films: a Parisian street gradually comes to life in the early morning, with each rhythmic noise contributing to a beat that leads into a musical number. In a celebrated sequence, a song passes from person to person, with the scenes being linked by dissolves. The protagonist, a tailor, sings a song, "Isn't It Romantic?" (10.26), which is picked up by a composer, who in turn sings it to soldiers on a train; when the soldiers sing it around their campfire, a gypsy hears it and plays it for his friends; then it makes its way to the heroine, a princess who sings the song on the balcony of her provincial castle.

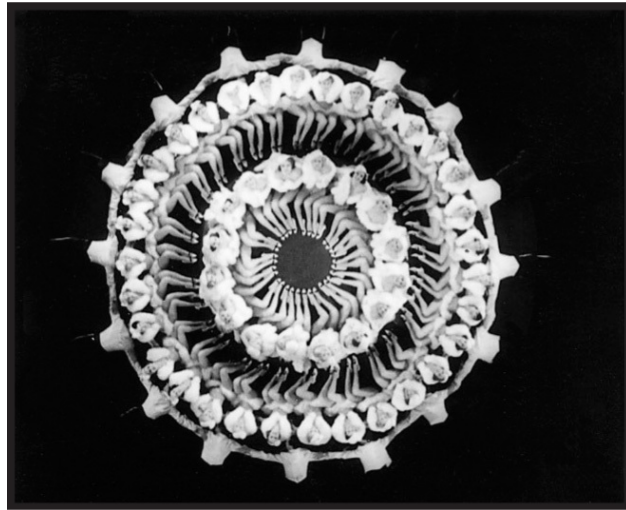
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10.26 Maurice Chevalier sings into three mirrors in *Love Me Tonight*.

The backstage musical was typified by a series of films made by Warner Bros. and choreographed by Busby Berkeley. In *42nd Street* (1933, Lloyd Bacon), the film that established many conventions of the genre, a naive chorus girl rises to sudden stardom when the lead player is injured just before the opening of a big Broadway show. The director encourages her: "All right now, I'm through, but you keep your feet on the ground, and your head on those shoulders of yours, and

Sawyer, you're going out a youngster, but you've *got* to come back a star!" And, of course, she does become a star. The stage show includes some of Berkeley's elaborate dance numbers, shot using a crane and overhead camera platform (10.27).



10.27 Busby Berkeley creates an abstract pattern by shooting a dance number from directly overhead in *42nd Street*.

Among the most popular musicals were those starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, choreographed by Hermes Pan. In *Swing Time* (1936, George Stevens), for example, Astaire plays a vaudeville hooper who courts Rogers, a dance instructor. Whether having a backstage plot or an integrated plot, Astaire-Rogers musicals were romances, and many of the dance numbers advance the couple's onscreen courtship. Despite initial misunderstandings and antagonisms, the elegant meshing of their movements shows that they are made for each other (10.28).



10.28 The “Let’s Face the Music” number in *Follow the Fleet* (1936, Mark Sandrich).

MGM also made many musicals during this era. Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland were paired in several films about teenagers putting on shows, such as *Strike Up the Band* (1940, Berkeley). Garland became a star in the glossy Technicolor fantasy *The Wizard of Oz* (1939, Victor Fleming). One of her finest films was Minnelli’s *Meet Me in St. Louis* (**Color Plate 10.4**). Another MGM star whose career began during this period was Gene Kelly, whose dance style was often boisterous and athletic, as in the “Make Way for Tomorrow” number in *Cover Girl* (for which Kelly was loaned to Columbia; 1944, Charles Vidor).

The Screwball Comedy

In *screwball comedy*, the romantic couple at the center of the story are eccentrics, often portrayed through slapstick. The films are usually set among wealthy people who can, despite the hardships of the Depression, afford to behave oddly. The romantic couple may initially be antagonistic, as in George Cukor’s *The Philadelphia Story* (1940). Or the couple’s love may cross class lines; then the wealthy parents must be converted (as in Capra’s *You Can’t Take It with You*, 1938) or thwarted (as in Cukor’s *Holiday*, 1938).

Although eccentric romantic comedies were made during the silent era, screwball comedy gained new prominence in 1934 with two very different films. Hawks’s *Twentieth Century* is utterly cynical in its treatment of its lead actors, Carole Lombard and John Barrymore. A hammy theatrical entrepreneur makes a

star of a beautiful store clerk and then seduces her. She soon behaves as theatrically in everyday life as he does; during the film's second half, set on a train, they quarrel and throw tantrums (10.29). The other major screwball comedy of 1934, Capra's *It Happened One Night*, is more sentimental. With its spoiled heroine fleeing her father in order to marry a superficial playboy, it popularized the "madcap heiress" character. A down-to-earth reporter aids the heroine in order to get a scoop, and the two fall in love (10.30). The image of a spoiled rich woman was pushed to its limits in Hawks's *Bringing Up Baby* (1938).



10.29 The protagonists compete at throwing theatrical fits in *Twentieth Century*.



10.30 The heiress relaxes as the reporter demonstrates his skill at hitch-hiking in *It Happened One Night*.

The genre developed quickly, and Capra remained one of its main exponents. In his *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), a small-town man becomes a national idol when he uses his unexpected inheritance to help dispossessed farmers. Venal lawyers try to have him declared insane, although he is only eccentric, as Capra demonstrates from the start (10.31).



10.31 In *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, the hero is more concerned with playing his tuba than with a lawyer's news of his large inheritance.

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Early films in the genre dealt with the Depression. In *It Happened One Night*, the reporter strives to regain his job by writing a story about the fugitive heiress. In *My Man Godfrey* (1936, Gregory LaCava), a homeless man hires on as a butler to an eccentric wealthy family; the characters frequently mention “forgotten men”—a Depression-era term for the unemployed, many of whom were veterans of World War I. Later in the decade, however, many screwball comedies’ plots ignored contemporary social problems, especially those of unemployment. In *Holiday* (1938, George Cukor), the hero longs to quit his lucrative job and find his purpose in life; all the film’s positive characters value individualism while despising snobbishness and wealth (10.32). *You Can’t Take It with You*, a paean to idiosyncrasies, concerns a large family who take into their home people who quit dull jobs in order to pursue personal interests.



10.32 The independent, positive characters in *Holiday* celebrate eccentricity by jokingly awarding the hero a toy giraffe.

The comedy of sexual antagonism also continued unabated. In Sturges's *The Lady Eve* (1941), a female cardsharp sets out to fleece the heir to a brewing fortune; instead, they fall in love, and when he discovers her background and rejects her, she vows revenge (**10.33**). Similarly, in *Ball of Fire* (1941, Hawks), a nightclub singer fleeing the law bamboozles a group of naive professors and then falls in love with one of them.



10.33 In *The Lady Eve*, brewing heir Charles Pike suffers the comic humiliation typical of the screwball comedy.

The screwball genre flourished between 1934 and 1945. Sturges contributed a bitter late example with *Unfaithfully Yours* (1948), in which an orchestra

conductor believes his wife has a lover and during a concert fantasizes getting free of her in three ways, each to an appropriate musical piece. Hawks made postwar screwball comedies; in *I Was a Male War Bride* (1948), a French officer suffers a series of humiliations when he must dress as a woman in order to accompany his fiancée to the United States after World War II; *Monkey Business* (1952) portrays the delirious effects of a youth serum on seemingly respectable people.

The Horror Film

During the early sound era, the horror film became a major genre. Some horror films had been made during the 1920s, mainly by Universal and usually starring Lon Chaney (p. 137). The pattern for many future films was set in 1927 with Paul Leni's popular *The Cat and the Canary*, in which a group of people meet in an isolated mansion to hear a will read.

Universal repeated such successes in its horror cycle, beginning with the vampire film *Dracula* (1931, Tod Browning). Although it betrayed its origins as a stage version of Bram Stoker's original 1897 novel and suffered from some of the slowness of early sound films, *Dracula* became a hit largely due to Bela Lugosi's performance in the title role. Shortly thereafter, James Whale's

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Frankenstein (1931) made a star of Boris Karloff, who played the monster with the help of heavy makeup. The Universal horror cycle hit its stride from 1932 to 1935. Whale made *The Old Dark House* (1932), which balanced suspense and comedy by trapping a cast of eccentrics in an isolated country home on the proverbial dark and stormy night. He also directed *The Invisible Man* (1933) and *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935).

One of the most stylish and effective of these films was *The Mummy*, directed in 1932 by Karl Freund, the German cinematographer who had shot *The Last Laugh* and many other important films during the silent era. The mummy of an ancient Egyptian priest returns to life in modern times and attempts to kill a woman he believes to be a reincarnation of his dead love (10.34). In later years, the Universal horror cycle was dissipated by formulaic repetition.



10.34 *The Mummy* uses makeup, lighting (including a tiny “pin” light reflected in the eyes), and Boris Karloff’s menacing performance to create an eerie atmosphere on a low budget.

A second significant cycle of horror films was made in RKO’s B unit during the early 1940s. Producer Val Lewton took charge of production there in 1942. A small number of directors worked under Lewton—Jacques Tourneur, Mark Robson, and Robert Wise—but the producer created a consistent tone and style for the films. Making a virtue of budget necessities, the Lewton films avoided graphic depictions of monsters or violence, concentrating instead on characters threatened by unseen terrors. In Tourneur’s *Cat People* (1942), the heroine is obsessed with a black leopard in the zoo and seems to have inherited a supernatural ability to transform into a killer cat (**10.35**). Tourneur also directed another of the Lewton unit’s most effective films, *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943). These titles were chosen by the studio and assigned to Lewton, and he and his collaborators came up with extraordinarily poetic and frightening films to fit them.



10.35 The opening scene of *Cat People*, in which the heroine sketches a leopard, typifies the simple but disturbing juxtapositions of the Val Lewton horror films.

The Social Problem Film

The Depression created a new focus on social problems, and many 1930s films dealt with them, frequently adopting a realistic style that was far from the escapism often associated with this era. In 1934, for example, King Vidor independently made *Our Daily Bread*, which portrayed a group of unemployed people who start a cooperative farm. Despite various challenges, including a drought, they eventually succeed. The scene of the group digging a long channel and irrigating their land uses editing and framing to create an exhilarating image of collective triumph somewhat reminiscent of Soviet films of the era.

Warner Bros. was particularly committed to social problem films. In *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932, Mervyn LeRoy), a World War I veteran is falsely accused of a theft. While a fugitive, he attempts to pawn his war medal, only to be shown dozens of such medals that unemployed veterans had pawned. In the end he disappears into the night, explaining how he now lives: “I steal,” an ironic suggestion that the legal system has pushed him into the underworld. *Wild Boys of the Road* (1933, William Wellman) depicts the plight of homeless orphaned and abandoned children.

Fritz Lang made one of the finest social problem films, *Fury* (1936, MGM), on the subject of lynching. While traveling to meet his fiancée, the hero is arrested in a small town and falsely accused of murder. The citizens burn down

the jail, and he is apparently killed. In fact, he survives but is so embittered that he nearly allows his attackers to be convicted of his murder. The film depicts newsreel cinematographers filming the attempted lynching. At the trial, this footage is used as evidence, and the defendants are forced to confront their own actions (10.36, 10.37).



10.36, 10.37 A newsreel image of a woman during the lynching scene and the same woman's reaction to the footage in court, in *Fury*.

John Ford contributed an important social problem film with *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), an adaptation of

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John Steinbeck's novel about displaced Oklahoma farmers during the Depression. The Joad family is driven off their land by the great drought that created the Dust Bowl in the Plains states. Traveling to California for work, they are exploited as migrant workers. They temporarily find a haven in a government-run camp that suggests the benefits of the Roosevelt administration.

After the United States entered the war, increased employment and prosperity led to fewer social problem films. The genre revived in the postwar era with such films as *Gentlemen's Agreement* (1947, Elia Kazan) and *Crossfire* (1947, Edward Dmytryk).

The Gangster Film

Somewhat related to the social problem film was the gangster genre. Although there had been occasional films about small-time street gangs in the silent era, the first major movie with a gangster protagonist was Josef von Sternberg's

Underworld (1927; p. 138). The genre became more prominent in the early 1930s with *Little Caesar* (1930, Mervyn LeRoy), *The Public Enemy* (1931, William Wellman), and *Scarface* (1932, Howard Hawks). Gangster films were topical, deriving material from the organized crime that grew up during Prohibition (1919–1933).

Gangster films centered on a ruthless criminal's rise to power. Like many films in the genre, *The Public Enemy* hinges on the contrast between two men (friends or brothers), one of whom gets an honest job while the other turns to crime. Typically, the growing status of the gangsters in these films is signaled by their increasingly expensive clothing and flashy cars (**10.38**).



10.38 After his first big payoff, the protagonist of *The Public Enemy* is measured for a new suit.

Like other gangster films, *The Public Enemy* was widely criticized for glamorizing violence. The Hays Code forbade the sympathetic depiction of criminals. Producers defended the genre by claiming that they were simply examining a social problem. *The Public Enemy* begins with a title claiming that the film seeks “to honestly depict an environment that exists today in a certain strata [sic] of American life, rather than glorify the hoodlum or the criminal.” The protagonists of these films all die violently in the end, so the studios argued that the plots showed that crime does not pay. Tom, in *The Public Enemy*, is gunned down by a rival gang (**10.39**), and his body is dumped ignominiously at his home. Similarly, the main character in *Scarface* is killed during a violent shoot-out with

police. Still, pressure groups insisted that such endings did not wipe out the impression that crime was lucrative and exciting. The release of *Scarface* was delayed, and the producers were forced to add scenes—not filmed by Hawks—of officials and reformers decrying the gangs' power and violence.



10.39 Tom mutters “I ain’t so tough” after being shot, a scene designed to deglamorize his criminal career (*The Public Enemy*).

The studios tried to avoid censorship pressures while retaining the excitement associated with the gangster genre. As a result, actors closely identified with criminal roles, such as James Cagney and Edward G. Robinson, also played tough, violent cops, as Cagney does in *G-Men* (1935, William Keighley). Or the gangster became less central, with the story focusing on other characters tempted toward a life of crime, as in *Dead End* (1938, William Wyler) and *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938, Michael Curtiz). In the latter, two friends grow up, one becoming a gangster, the other a priest; a group of children idolize the gangster. Finally the priest persuades the gangster to pretend to be terrified just before his execution so that children will be disillusioned and not take him as a role model.

Film Noir

To some extent the cynical, violent narratives of the gangster films were taken over by the *film noir*. This was a term applied by French critics in 1946 to a group of US films made during the war and released abroad in quick succession after 1945. *Noir* means “black” or “dark” but can also imply “gloomy.” Less a genre than a stylistic and narrative tendency, film noir is often considered to have started in 1941 with Huston’s *The Maltese Falcon* or even earlier with RKO’s B film *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940, Boris Ingster). Most films noirs involve crime, but the tendency crosses genres. It includes social problem films like

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Wilder’s *The Lost Weekend* and spy films like Lang’s *Ministry of Fear* (1944).

The film noir tendency derived from American hard-boiled detective fiction of the 1920s. In such harsh, tawdry novels as *Red Harvest* (1929), Dashiell Hammett reacted against traditional British detective stories, which often involved staid country-house settings and upper-class characters. Other major authors of hard-boiled fiction included Raymond Chandler and James M. Cain. Many of their novels and stories were adapted as films, starting with Hammett’s *The Maltese Falcon*. Filmic influences came from German Expressionism, French Poetic Realism (see Chapter 13), and the stylistic innovations of *Citizen Kane*.

Like their literary models, films noirs were mainly aimed at male audiences. Their protagonists are almost invariably men, usually detectives or criminals characterized by pessimism, self-doubt, or a cold, detached view of the world. Women are usually sexually alluring but treacherous, leading the protagonists into danger or using them for selfish ends. A common setting for a film noir would be a big city, especially at night; shiny, rain-slicked pavements, dark alleyways, and sleazy bars are typical milieux. Many of the films use distinctive high and low angles, low-key lighting, wide-angle lenses, and location shooting.

The Maltese Falcon established many of the conventions of the film noir. Humphrey Bogart became a major star in the role of Sam Spade, a private detective who must decide whether to turn in the treacherous femme fatale who has hired him and whom he (perhaps) loves. In a long take he bitterly explains why he must send her to prison and promises to wait for her during the many years of her sentence. Brigid is taken away in an elevator by the police, marked as the archetypal film noir heroine by the shadow on her face (10.40).



10.40 Our last view of the femme fatale of *The Maltese Falcon*.

Film noir's debt to German film of the 1920s may be reflected in the fact that four important émigrés contributed to this trend. Fritz Lang's *Dr. Mabuse der Spieler*, *M*, and other German works had anticipated film noir, and his Hollywood career continued in this same vein. In *Ministry of Fear*, the hero is released from an insane asylum after the mercy killing of his wife. Waiting for his train, he wanders into a grim charity fête and accidentally becomes enmeshed in a battle against Nazi spies. Lang's association with independent producer Walter Wanger led to two other notable wartime films noirs: *Woman in the Window* (1944) and *Scarlet Street* (1945). Robert Siodmak began making B films in Hollywood in 1941, achieving a reputation in film noir in 1944 with *Phantom Lady* and *The Suspect* (1945); after the war he would lead this tendency with such films as *The Killers* (1946).

Another German émigré, Otto Preminger, rose to fame with a major film noir. In *Laura* (1944), an embittered working-class detective investigates the murder of an advertising executive and falls in love with her through her diary and portrait. *Laura*'s flashbacks and plot twists offer an extreme case of film noir narration.

Perhaps the definitive wartime example of the film noir came from yet another émigré. The script for Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944) originated in a unique combination of hard-boiled authors, with Raymond Chandler adapting a James M. Cain novel. A woman

seduces an insurance salesman into helping her murder her husband; gradually the scheme unravels in mutual suspicions and betrayals. The film unfolds in a series of flashbacks as the dying salesman speaks into a dictaphone, confessing to his friend, an insurance investigator who is hot on his trail. Many typical traits of the film noir are present: the venality of the central characters, the voice-over narration by the insurance salesman, the somber urban setting, and the doomed romance. (Film noir was the one type of Hollywood film that permitted an unhappy ending, though abrupt—and often unconvincing—happy endings were sometimes added.) *Double Indemnity* also used a lighting motif conventional to the genre: patterned shadows cast across the scene (**10.41**).



10.41 Film noir shadows fall across the set as Walter Neff sneaks up the back stairs to his apartment in *Double Indemnity*.

The War Film

From 1930 to 1945, films about war passed through remarkable changes. The disillusionment of World War I had resulted in a pacifism that dominated films of the 1930s. (Until Pearl Harbor, most citizens opposed American entry into World War II.) Lewis Milestone's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930) was one of the most uncompromisingly pacifist films, showing a sympathetic young German hero and ending unhappily with his death. Throughout the decade, war was depicted as tragic and senseless. Warner Bros. made two versions of *Dawn Patrol* (1930, Howard Hawks; 1938, Edmund Goulding), about a commander who

agonizes over sending pilots out to be killed. Even the musical *Gold Diggers of 1933* (1933, Mervyn LeRoy) contains a song—“Remember My Forgotten Man”—about World War I veterans impoverished by the Depression.

After Pearl Harbor, however, the film industry supported the war cause wholeheartedly. Combat films often showed Americans from various ethnic backgrounds united in battling the Axis. In Hawks’s *Air Force* (1943), men named Winocki, Quincannon, and Weinberg form part of a bomber crew.

Most war films featuring the Nazis treated them simply as cold-hearted killers. Propaganda directed against the Japanese, however, was often more racist in tone, drawing upon stereotypical images. In *Objective Burma* (1945, Raoul Walsh), for example, the hero leads a division of paratroopers to recapture part of Burma from the Japanese (10.42), referred to as “monkeys” (a common racial epithet used during World War II). In one scene the GIs discover the bodies of American soldiers tortured and killed by the Japanese forces. A reporter with the group comments on the horrors he has seen in his career: “But this, this is different. This was done in cold blood by a people who, who claim to be civilized. Civilized and degenerate moral idiots! ... Wipe ’em out! Wipe ’em off the face of the earth!”



10.42 The hero of *Objective Burma* gives a journalist a cap-tured Japanese flag as a souvenir.

One of the few combat films that presented a less gung-ho image was Ford’s *They Were Expendable* (1945), a story of PT-boat sailors who fight valiantly but go down to defeat in the Philippines. Some are evacuated, but others, including one

of the protagonists, must stay behind to face capture or death. Ford, who had been in the Navy and was injured filming combat footage for his documentary *The Battle of Midway* (1942), made several realistic scenes of PT boats in combat for *They Were Expendable* (10.43). Ford later remarked of this film, “I *despise* these happy endings—with a kiss at the finish—I’ve never done that. Of course, they *were* glorious in defeat in the Philippines—they kept on fighting.”⁴ As Ford suggests, *They Were Expendable* presents a remarkably unvarnished picture of heroism.

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10.43 John Ford minimized special effects and used real boats and planes at sea for the battle scenes in *They Were Expendable*.

ANIMATION AND THE STUDIO SYSTEM

Before 1910, animated films had been novelties. By the 1930s, however, labor-saving devices had made them a part of nearly every theater’s program. Each of the Majors and Minors regularly released a cartoon series, either under contract with an independent firm or from their own animation units.

Some of these series were highly standardized, turned out by efficient, assembly-line systems. For nearly forty years after 1930, Paul Terry provided his Terrytoons biweekly for Fox/20th Century-Fox. Universal released films by

Walter Lantz from 1929 through 1972; Lantz's most famous character, Woody Woodpecker, debuted in 1941. Columbia had its own short-film division, Screen Gems, which made cartoons starring Krazy Kat, Scrappy, and others until 1949.

At the opposite end of the scale from these series were those produced by the Walt Disney Studio, an independent company devoted solely to making cartoons. Disney's enormous success in 1928 with the Mickey Mouse short *Steamboat Willie* had brought animation into the sound age and given it respectability. The studio went on centering cartoons around Mickey but also established a series of "Silly Symphonies," based on musical pieces and containing no continuing characters. *Skeleton Dance* (1928) featured a macabre celebration in a graveyard.

By 1932, Disney moved from Columbia to distribute through the prestigious UA. Critics all over the world hailed these shorts, with their fluid movements and minimal dialogue, as the answer to the problems of the all-talkie sound film. The studio was among the first to pick up on three-strip Technicolor, beginning with *Flowers and Trees* in 1932. Disney dominated the Oscars' cartoon category with such films as *The Three Little Pigs* (1933), whose song "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?" became an anthem of Depression-period America. The firm's huge staff of artists had the leisure and big budgets to create detailed, shaded backgrounds, lots of figure movement, and bright color schemes (**Color Plate 10.5**).

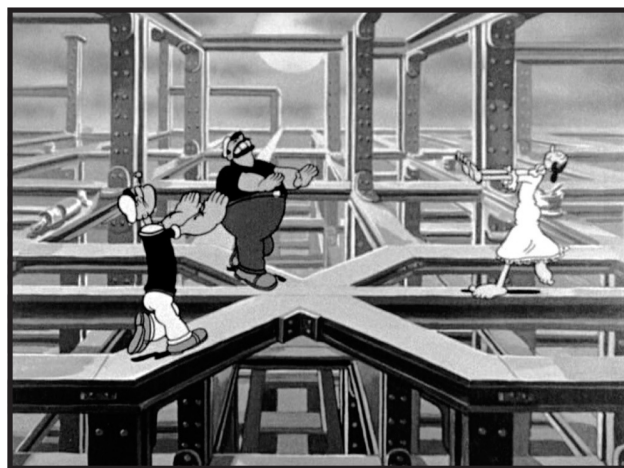
In 1937, Disney switched to RKO as a distributor—a move that bolstered that shaky firm when it released the first American feature-length cartoon, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937). Despite being terrified by the witch, children were enchanted by the dwarfs, and the film was a huge hit. The studio continued its series of popular short cartoons, starring Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Goofy, and Pluto.

It also planned several additional features. *Bambi* (1942) extended the studio's propensity for realistic backgrounds, with soft pastel paintings for the natural settings (**Color Plate 10.6**). The film also employed the new *multiplane camera* introduced in *The Old Mill* (1937). This elaborate animation stand allowed the settings and figures to be divided among layers of animation cels. These could be moved frame by frame at varying rates toward or away from the camera, giving a powerful illusion of gliding through a three-dimensional space.

The Disney studio was working at its peak during the early 1940s, making *Pinocchio* (1940) and *Dumbo* (1941) as well as *Bambi*. Part of the staff was diverted to war propaganda and informational films, but full-time work on both features and shorts resumed after 1945.

Other studios found animators who, with more limited means, could imaginatively exploit the cartoon's potential for absurdist illogic and rapid, distorted movements. In 1927, Paramount began releasing films by Max and Dave Fleischer, inventors of the "Out of the Inkwell" series (p. 145). In 1931, they introduced Betty Boop, and Koko the Clown became a supporting character. Betty was a sexy innocent wandering through a variety of adventures, sometimes encountering ghosts and monsters. The Fleischers utilized popular songs; in *Minnie the Moocher* (1932), Cab Calloway's band provides the sound track as Betty explores a scary cave.

Betty had to be toned down considerably after the Hays Code was enforced in 1934. A supporting player who had first appeared in *Popeye the Sailor*, a Betty cartoon of 1933, now became the studio's main star. The gravel-voiced Popeye, with his simple credo ("I yam what I yam and that's all what I yam") and his strengthening cans of spinach, rescued girlfriend Olive Oyl and adopted child Swee' Pea from the villainous Bluto and other menaces (**10.44**).



10.44 In *A Dream Walking* (1934), Popeye, Bluto, and Olive Oyl all end up sleepwalking on an unfinished skyscraper.

After the success of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the Fleischers released the feature-length *Gulliver's Travels* (1939), which used realistic rotoscoped movements for the hero and caricatural portrayals for the Lilliputians.

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The other Fleischer feature, *Mr. Bug Goes to Town* (aka *Hoppity Goes to Town*, 1941), achieved a more consistent stylized look. By then, however, the brothers had overextended themselves. In 1942, Paramount maneuvered them out of their own animation firm and took over the Popeye series, as well as the Superman series (1941 on). The Fleischers never regained their prominence as animators.

In 1930, Warner Bros. launched its own cartoon unit, headed by former Disney animation team Hugh Harman, Rudolf Ising, and Friz Freleng. Like many early sound cartoons, the Warner Bros. shorts were built around popular songs from the studio's feature musicals. The series was labeled "Looney Tunes," and most of the early entries starred Bosko, an African American boy.

In 1934, Harman and Ising moved to MGM, taking Bosko with them. Over the next few years, Warners hired a new generation of animators who would raise it to the top of the short-cartoon business: Frank Tashlin, Bob Clampett, Tex Avery, and Chuck Jones, who, along with Freleng, each headed a unit within the animation section. The Warners system was more casual than the usual cartoon factory, and this group swapped ideas with a team of writers in informal "jam sessions." They developed superstars Porky Pig, Daffy Duck, Bugs Bunny, and Elmer Fudd.

The Warners group did not have the resources to create detailed backgrounds or elaborate groups of moving figures to match the Disney product. Instead, the animators depended on speed, topicality, and a silly humor that contrasted with the sentimentality and cuteness of most contemporary cartoons. Avery's taste ran to wild visual puns. Clampett specialized in exaggerated reactions and dazzlingly fast motion: in trying to avoid his induction notice in *Draftee Daffy* (1943), Daffy whizzes about his house as a lightning bolt or shower of sparks (**Color Plate 10.7**).

Many Warners cartoons refer self-consciously to the fact that they are cartoons. In *You Ought to Be in Pictures* (1940, Freleng), Porky decides to become a star in live-action features and quits his job with the Warners animation unit (in

a scene with the unit's producer, Leon Schlesinger). In several Warners cartoons, a black silhouette rises up from the audience and interrupts the action; in *Thugs with Dirty Mugs*, a spectator who says he has seen the cartoon before calls the police and informs on the gangsters (**Color Plate 10.8**; note also the caricature of Warners star Edward G. Robinson). Warners shorts appealed as much to adults as to children and became immensely popular—an appeal they still retain on home video.

The same adult appeal was injected into MGM's cartoon series when Tex Avery moved there from Warner Bros. in 1942. Avery created a new repertoire of stars, including wisecracking Screwy Squirrel, unlikely superhero Droopy Dog, and an unnamed Wolf, perpetually expressing extravagant (and frustrated) lust for curvaceous heroines. Avery continued his penchant for literalizing dreadful puns, as when the wolf in *The Shooting of Dan McGoo* (1945) has one foot in the grave (a little grave complete with tombstone encloses his boot like a slipper). Avery would continue pushing cartoons to manic limits for a decade after the war.

Hollywood enjoyed great prosperity during the war. That prosperity was to continue briefly after 1945, but later in the decade new challenges would change the film industry profoundly (see Chapter 15).

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We discuss some topics in this chapter further on our blog, *Observations on Film Art*:

On Walt Disney: “Uncle Walt the artist”

On two of the best B-film series: “Charlie, meet Kentaro”

On one of the great Warner Bros. animators “Pausing and chortling: A tribute to Bob Clampett”

On style in four 1933 Columbia films: “Daises in the crevices”

On deep focus before and after *Citizen Kane*: “Foreground, background, playground” and “Welles at 101, KANE at 75 or thereabouts.”

On Preston Sturges and the Hays Code: “How he (mostly) got away with it: Matthew H. Bernstein on Preston Sturges” and “On the more or less plausible sneakiness of one Preston Sturges.”

CHAPTER 11

OTHER STUDIO SYSTEMS



Street Without End



I Was Born, But....

During the 1930s and early 1940s, Hollywood's studio system supported the most successful film industry in the world. Film industries elsewhere took other forms. In some countries, such as the USSR and Germany, state-run monopolies developed during this period (see Chapter 12). In others, like France and Mexico, small producers renting studio space put out films, often haphazardly, hoping for quick profits. Still other countries had well-developed studio systems that were either imitations of or variants on the Hollywood model. This chapter examines four countries' studio systems: Britain, Japan, India, and China.

QUOTA QUICKIES AND WARTIME PRESSURES: THE BRITISH STUDIOS

In 1936, a British trade paper commented: "When one recalls the wretched, bleak sheds, barns and huts, the mud and general discomfort of many British studios of 15 years ago, it is possible to realize the strides and opportunities of today, when physical hardships are reduced to a minimum thanks to bold and considerate planning."¹ The occasion was the opening of the Pinewood Studios, part of a construction boom in English production centers during the mid-1930s. Two decades after Hollywood cinema began to consolidate its studio system, British film companies finally expanded into a comparable, if smaller, system.

The British Film Industry Grows

What enabled the British film industry to expand at this relatively late date? Midway through the 1920s, fewer than 5 percent of the features

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released in Great Britain originated domestically. Responding to this situation, in 1927 the government passed the Quota Act. It required that distributors make at least a certain percentage of British films available and that theaters devote a minimum portion of screen time to such films. The percentages were to rise over ten years, to 20 percent by 1937.

The result was a sharp rise in the demand for British films. American companies distributing their output in the United Kingdom needed to buy or make films there to meet the quota, and English importers also needed to have a certain amount of domestic footage on offer.

The quota was largely responsible for the British cinema's expansion during the early 1930s. In fact, production increased so much that the quota was consistently exceeded. A considerable portion of production, however, was devoted to *quota quickies*—cheap, short films that barely met the legal requirements for a feature. Many quota quickies sat unseen on distributors' shelves or made up the second half of double features; spectators often walked out after seeing the American film.

The British studio system came to resemble a less stable version of Hollywood's. There were a few large, vertically integrated companies, several midsize firms that did not own theaters, and many small independent producers. Some firms, particularly the smaller ones, concentrated on quota quickies. Other British firms opted to produce films with moderate budgets, aimed at generating a modest profit solely in Britain. A few tried making expensive films, hoping to break into the American market. Although all these companies competed with each other to some extent, they formed a loose oligopoly. Bigger firms commonly rented studio space to each other and to small independents. The quota requirements made room for all.

The two main firms, Gaumont-British and British International Pictures (BIP) had been formed during the silent era but now expanded significantly. BIP's new studio (11.1) was the biggest of several in the London suburb of Elstree, which came to be called "the British Hollywood." (As with studios in Los Angeles, British studios were scattered about the outskirts of London.) Both firms practiced a division of labor similar to that used in the Hollywood system, though BIP was particularly noted for rigidly adhering to production roles and discouraging employees' creativity. Both had extensive backlots where large sets could be built (11.1, 11.2). Gaumont-British and BIP were roughly comparable to the Hollywood Majors in that both were vertically integrated, distributing films and owning theater chains.



11.1 An aerial view of British International Pictures' studio complex, built in 1926 and expanded after the coming of sound. (Source: British International Pictures)



11.2 Alfred Hitchcock, leaning on the railing in the foreground, directs *Sabotage* (1936) in one of the large street sets built for the film at Gaumont-British's Lime Grove Studios, Shepherd's Bush.

There was also a group of smaller firms, somewhat similar to Hollywood's Minors: British and Dominion (headed by Herbert Wilcox), London Film Productions (Alexander Korda), and Associated Talking Pictures

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(Basil Dean). All produced, some distributed, but none owned theaters. Wilcox made modest films in his studio at Elstree, targeting the British market. Dean called Associated Talking Pictures' Ealing facility "the studio with the team spirit," encouraging filmmakers to make high-quality pictures, often from stage plays.

Export Successes

Korda was the most prominent and influential of these producers in the early 1930s. A Hungarian émigré who had already produced and directed in Hungary, Austria, Germany, Hollywood, and France, he formed London Film in 1932 to make quota quickies for Paramount. Soon, however, he switched to a big-budget approach, hoping to crack the American market. He leased a studio and in 1933 contracted to make two films for United Artists (UA). The first, *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933, Korda) provided a breakthrough for Korda and the British film industry. The film was enormously successful at home, and its profits in the United States topped those of any previous British release. Charles Laughton won a best-actor Academy Award and became an international star. UA signed to distribute sixteen more Korda films.

Korda continued making expensive costume pictures, and some other producers imitated him. Korda's fourth film for UA, *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1935, Harold Young), was a hit second only to *Henry VIII*. Leslie Howard became known abroad for his portrayal of the seemingly foppish Sir Percy Blakeley, who secretly rescues aristocrats from the guillotine in revolutionary France (11.3). At Denham, Korda built Britain's largest studio complex in 1936. Only a few of his epics were spectacularly profitable, however. *Things to Come* (1936, William Cameron Menzies) was set in the future after a disastrous war. The high budget required for the fanciful sets and costumes prevented the film from returning its costs.



11.3 Impressive sets and crowd scenes recreated the French Revolution in Korda's production of *The Scarlet Pimpernel*.

The Private Life of Henry VIII started a brief boom in British production. Financiers eagerly provided backing, hoping for more American profits. The most significant figure to take advantage of the new prosperity was J. Arthur Rank, one of the entrepreneurs who started British National Films in 1934. He quickly moved toward vertical integration in 1935 by forming General Film Distributors and building the Pinewood Studios. (Pinewood has remained one of the world's major production centers; entries in the James Bond, Superman, Batman, Harry Potter, and Star Wars series were shot there.) Within a decade, Rank's empire became the most important force in the British film industry.

The production boom made higher-quality filmmaking possible. In 1931, Gaumont-British gained control of a smaller firm, Gainsborough. With it came the talented producer Michael Balcon, who supervised filmmaking for both companies. Despite pressure from the owners to make films with "international" appeal, Balcon favored fostering distinctive stars and directors who could make specifically British films. These often did better than some of the more expensive, but lifeless, costume films. For example, Gaumont-British made musicals starring

the popular Jessie Matthews. Her biggest international hit was *Evergreen* (1934, Victor Saville), in which she plays both the Edwardian music-hall star Harriet Green and her daughter. Years after the mother's retirement and death, the daughter masquerades as the mother, gaining enormous publicity by playing the apparently unaging, "ever green" star (11.4).



11.4 *Evergreen* began diminutive song-and-dance star Jessie Matthews's reign as queen of the British musical.

Alfred Hitchcock's Thrillers

Balcon also signed Alfred Hitchcock to a contract with Gaumont-British. Since his success with the early talkie *Blackmail* (p. 206), Hitchcock had moved from company to company, trying several genres, including comedies and even a musical. At Gaumont-British (and its subsidiary Gainsborough), he returned to his element, making six thrillers, from the *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934) to *The Lady Vanishes* (1938). Hitchcock would become identified with this genre throughout his long career.

One of Hitchcock's strengths was his ability to frame and edit shots in such a way as to allow spectators to grasp characters' thoughts. In *Sabotage* (1935), for example, there is a virtuoso scene in which a woman has just learned that her husband is a foreign agent and has accidentally caused the death of her brother. A

lengthy series of shots shows her serving dinner, while anguishing over her brother's death (11.5-11.10). Hitchcock's use of characters' points of view would remain a defining stylistic trait throughout his career.



11.5–11.10 Part of a series of shots in Hitchcock's *Sabotage* that uses subtle variations in framing and eyeline direction. The heroine glances at her brother's empty chair and is tempted to stab her husband, who caused the boy's death.

Hitchcock's thrillers were also notable for their humor. In *The 39 Steps* (1935), the innocent hero is accused of a murder and flees handcuffed to a woman who believes him guilty. This situation leads to amusing complications and, inevitably, to romance. *The Lady Vanishes* contains similar lighthearted sparring between the hero and heroine, as well as a subplot concerning a pair of obsessive cricket fans who ignore all dangers while trying to learn the outcome of the latest match.

Delightful though Hitchcock's English thrillers are, they betrayed their low budgets and technical limitations. Hitchcock wanted access to better studio facilities and to more dependable financing. In 1939, he signed a contract with David O. Selznick to make films in Hollywood. Beginning with *Rebecca* (1940), which won an Oscar for best picture, Hitchcock did well and stayed in the United States for most of his long career.

Crisis and Recovery

The British production boom suffered a severe setback in 1937. Several producers had received extensive investments and loans but had few profitable films. As a result, many sources of funding dried up, and responsible production firms suffered along with opportunists. Alexander Korda's policy of big-budget films had been only partially justified. Despite a few notable successes, the American market remained largely closed to British imports. Moreover, the Quota Act of 1927 was due for renewal. There had been much criticism of the original quota for encouraging quickies. Uncertain over what the new quota would require, producers delayed projects. Feature output sank during the crisis of 1937-1938.

This crisis triggered changes in the industry. Partly as a result of his extravagance, in late 1938 Korda lost his financial backing. London Film's main asset, the Denham studio, passed into the control of J. Arthur

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Rank's growing empire. Korda continued producing films, now having to rent space in Denham. During World War II, he spent three years in Hollywood as an independent producer; his films there included Ernst Lubitsch's satire on Nazism, *To Be or Not to Be* (1942). After the war, Korda returned to reorganize London Film Productions. He produced a number of important films up to his death in 1955, but none as influential as some of those he had made in the 1930s.

The crisis also drove Basil Dean out of film production in 1938. Michael Balcon, after spending an unsatisfying year supervising quota films for MGM, took over Associated Talking Pictures and renamed it Ealing Studios. He continued producing quality films on a small scale, a practice that would gain prominence after the war with the popular Ealing comedies.

Britain's crisis diminished after Parliament passed the Quota Act of 1938. It specified that higher-budget films would count double or in some cases triple toward satisfying quota requirements. The number of quota quickies dropped as both British and American producers attempted to make or purchase films of higher quality to gain extra quota credit.

Film magnate J. Arthur Rank had come through the crisis relatively unscathed, and he rapidly added to his holdings. In 1939, he moved further into vertical integration by purchasing part interest in Odeon Theatres, one of the largest cinema circuits in the United Kingdom. Over the next few years, Rank

acquired or built studios until his companies owned over half of Britain's production space. In 1941, he gained controlling interest in Odeon Theatres and Gaumont-British. Rank also formed Independent Producers, an umbrella company to fund the films of several small firms. From 1941 to 1947, companies in Rank's conglomerate financed about half the films made in Britain.

Owing to the high level of production in Britain during the 1930s, many negligible films were inevitably made. The quota quickies were not entirely pointless, however. For one thing, they kept employment in the film industry high, despite the Depression. For another, they provided a training ground for directors—just as films made in Hollywood's B units and Poverty Row studios did. Michael Powell, one of the most important directors of the 1940s and 1950s, had worked extensively in cheap quota films. In *The Night of the Party* (1934, Gaumont-British), using a script which he later called a “piece of junk,”² Powell scraped together a cast from the stars under contract to the studio and created a bizarre and amusing film running a mere sixty-one minutes.

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Besides the quota quickies, many solid, middle-budget films were made. These often starred music-hall performers, such as George Formby and Jack Hulbert. They had a huge following in Britain, but their brand of humor was less easily understood elsewhere. These unpretentious pictures also gave rise to significant filmmakers. For example, future director David Lean worked during the 1930s as an editor. Carol Reed got his start making films for Basil Dean's Associated Talking Pictures. His breakthrough came with the more ambitious *The Stars Look Down*, made in 1939 for a small independent firm. It drew on important traditions of British documentary and leftist filmmaking (see Chapter 14) to depict the plight of oppressed coal miners and to advocate the nationalization of the industry. At the beginning, a narrator's voice says: “This is a story of simple working people.” Location filming in Cumberland loaned the film authenticity (11.11), and the climactic coal-mine disaster was convincing, despite being shot in studio sets.



11.11 Michael Redgrave as the hero of Reed's *The Stars Look Down*, in a scene shot in a Cumberland mining village.

By the end of the 1930s, Britain's film industry had passed through its crisis, and its situation looked promising. World War II was to give it a further boost.

The Effects of the War

For the United Kingdom, the war began on September 3, 1939. Anticipating immediate German bombing, the government closed down all film showings and production. Soon it became clear that such measures were unnecessary, and theaters reopened. Military officials did, however, requisition many of the country's film studios for such wartime uses as supply warehouses. Some of the industry's personnel also went into military service.

Such problems were balanced, however, by a sharp rise in attendance, as people sought to escape the privations of wartime. Theaters stayed open even during the worst nights of the Battle of Britain in 1940, when many London citizens slept on the Underground's platforms to avoid harm from the bombing. Despite such hardships, weekly attendance rose from 19 million in 1939 to 30 million in 1945.

The Ministry of Information encouraged wartime filmmaking and even put money into some commercial films. Wartime austerity had made it undesirable to spend money on imported films. Moreover, the new quota was still in effect, and

British films were in demand. Because of lack of studio space and personnel, however, far fewer films were made during the war. From between 150 and 200 annually during the mid-1930s, production sank to just under 70 films a year.

The Ministry of Information required that all scripts be checked to make sure that they in some way supported the war effort. There was little stifling of creativity, however, because filmmakers patriotically cooperated in creating a positive image of Britain. One of the most memorable was *Went the Day Well?* (1942), produced by Ealing and directed by Alberto Cavalcanti. A Brazilian, Cavalcanti had made experimental films in France's avant-garde during the 1920s (p. 161). Moving to Britain, he worked in documentaries during the 1930s and brought a realistic touch to this tale of an imaginary infiltration of an English village by German soldiers in disguise. The villagers' actions as they gradually discover the truth and mount resistance create an affecting depiction of British resourcefulness (11.12).



11.12 Nazi infiltrators capture and imprison the villagers in the parish church in *Went the Day Well?*

Because of cutbacks on quota quickies, the average budget and quality rose. Some films were polished studio productions comparable to Hollywood's. For example, Thorold Dickinson made *Gaslight* (1940) for Rank's main production firm, British National. A melodrama concerning a wife's well-founded fears that her husband is trying to drive her mad, the film used a tight script, three-point lighting, large sets, and other Hollywood-style techniques. Indeed, a version of the same story was made in 1944 at MGM by George Cukor.

Several independent production companies came to prominence during the war. In 1942, an Italian émigré,

Filippo del Giudice, formed *Two Cities* and persuaded the renowned actor and playwright Noel Coward to script, direct, and star in a film. *In Which We Serve* centers on the crew of a British ship sunk by the Germans. While the survivors cling to a life raft, flashbacks tell their stories, focusing on the upper-class captain, a middle-class officer, and a working-class sailor.

In Which We Serve (codirected by David Lean) emphasizes the parallels among these characters. In one scene, as the captain and his wife and children picnic in the south of England, he watches a dogfight between British and German planes in the sky high above (11.13, 11.14). The wife wistfully remarks that she tries to think of the fights as games so that they won't bother her. Shortly thereafter, in a scene set in the London home of the middle-class officer, his wife and mother-in-law hear bombers approaching. The wife remarks in an annoyed tone, "Oh, there they are again," but soon a low angle shows the two women listening worriedly to the whine of a bomb (11.15). Such scenes contribute to the film's treatment of the war as a daily presence for all classes, sometimes remote and sometimes suddenly dangerous.



11.13, 11.14 The contrast of a distant aerial combat and an idyllic family picnic in *In Which We Serve*.



11.15 A parallel low-angle shot implies planes overhead as two women listen anxiously to the unseen attack on their neighborhood (*In Which We Serve*).

The popular and profitable *In Which We Serve* attracted Rank, who gained control of Two Cities in exchange for an agreement to finance its subsequent films. These included Lean's *This Happy Breed* (1944), an adaptation of Coward's play *Blithe Spirit* (1945), and Laurence Olivier's first directorial effort, a patriotic Technicolor adaptation of Shakespeare's *Henry V* (1945). Olivier began the film with a "flying" shot over an elaborate model of Renaissance London, moving down into the Globe Theatre. The opening scenes take place on a reconstruction of the Globe's stage (**Color Plate 11.1**); then, as in the play, the narrator's voice urges us to imagine the wider settings of the historical action. The bulk of the film occurs in stylized studio sets based on medieval illuminated manuscripts. The rousing Battle of Agincourt was the only portion shot entirely on location. *Henry V* celebrated England's ability to triumph against superior forces.

One small but important production firm, The Archers, was formed in 1943 by the team of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. After directing quota quickies, Powell had made his first major film, *The Edge of the World* (1937). Shot on a remote island off the western coast of Scotland, it showed how young people's migration to urban areas was depopulating the region. Hungarian-born Pressburger had scripted five Powell-directed films prior to the formation of The Archers. The most prominent of these was *49th Parallel* (1941), a war film financed by the Ministry of Information and J. Arthur Rank. It traces the episodic progress of a band of Nazi infiltrators traveling across Canada. The group's

members are gradually killed or captured as they meet resistance from a series of disparate Canadian citizens, including a French-Canadian trapper, a British aesthete (11.16), and a Canadian hitchhiker. *49th Parallel* was unusual for wartime propaganda, characterizing the German soldiers as

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fallible individuals rather than inhuman beasts and even making one of them a positive figure.



11.16 In *49th Parallel*, Leslie Howard plays a British intellectual camping in the Canadian wilderness. Nazis who invade his camp and burn his Picasso painting and copy of Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* goad him to defend democracy.

The Archers was financed initially by Rank's new Independent Producers Ltd. Rank offered Powell and Pressburger considerable freedom. Their first Archers film, *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943), followed a model British soldier through three wars. The film was somewhat critical of the current government, positing that the traditional English values of fair play that had served in earlier combats were inadequate to counter the threat of barbaric Nazis. Like *49th Parallel*, it portrayed a German character in a largely sympathetic light, maintaining his friendship with the hero despite their being on opposite sides.

Colonel Blimp was the first of fourteen films that carried the credit "Written, produced and directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger." Although Powell was the director, the phrase indicated that the two were equal partners. Their films were often extremely romantic and even melodramatic, yet outlandish

twists of narrative and style set them apart from conventional studio films. *A Canterbury Tale* (1944), for example, a patriotic story set in the traditional center of the Anglican church, weaves together three episodic narrative strands; one focuses on a local magistrate who creeps about pouring glue into the hair of young girls to keep them from distracting soldiers. The collaboration of Powell and Pressburger would remain fruitful until 1956. In general, the strength that the British film industry gained in the 1930s and during World War II continued until the early 1950s.

INNOVATION WITHIN AN INDUSTRY: THE STUDIO SYSTEM OF JAPAN

Britain's studios failed to achieve the stability of Hollywood's, but Japan's film industry succeeded. Its growth after the 1923 Tokyo earthquake and the advent of talking pictures consolidated a studio system much like America's.

Two large, vertically integrated companies, Nikkatsu and Shochiku, dominated several smaller firms. Despite the Depression and the increased expense of sound-film production, feature output remained high (400 to 500 per year in the early 1930s), and new theaters were constantly being built. Most important, Japan was virtually the only country in which US films did not overshadow the domestic product. Nikkatsu and Shochiku could profit from showing Hollywood films in their theaters while limiting American penetration of the market.

A third major player entered the game in 1934. Ichiro Kobayashi, a show-business entrepreneur who mounted extravagant stage revues, formed Toho (Tokyo Takarazuka Theater Company) by buying and merging two small companies specializing in talkies. Along with creating Toho as a production firm, Kobayashi erected movie theaters in Japan's major cities.

While bringing Toho's production up to speed, Kobayashi used imported films to build up attendance at his theaters. He also hired many major directors, such as Teinosuke Kinugasa and the swordfight specialist Masahiro Makino. Toho became Shochiku's chief competitor. Nonetheless, the two vertically integrated companies cooperated to keep Hollywood at bay. Shochiku began to

buy up smaller firms to keep pace with Toho, and the expenses of sound filming forced marginal production houses out of business. The industry consequently became more centralized in the course of the 1930s, with three majors and six to ten lesser firms.

The audience's appetite for films remained keen. The Depression was easing by the mid-1930s, and movies had become a central part of urban life. After the 1923 earthquake, the rebuilding of Tokyo had created a cosmopolitan popular culture, and the passion for Western clothes, jazz, whiskey, and fads continued throughout the 1930s. Japanese moviegoers were as familiar with Harold Lloyd and Greta Garbo as they were with their own stars.

Meanwhile, Japan embarked on ambitious military plans. The nation was Asia's dominant power, having defeated China and Russia in war and having annexed Korea. As political parties proved ineffectual, military factions gained influence in government. Some officers argued that modern Japan had to expand its markets and its sources of labor and materials. In 1931, Japan announced its imperialist aims by invading Manchuria.

The search for "national autonomy" led to government regulation of the economy under a declared "emergency"—one that was to last for thirteen years. At first, however, filmmaking and other aspects of popular culture were comparatively unaffected. Censorship was tightened somewhat, but on the whole the genres that had flourished in the 1920s continued to be exploited.

Popular Cinema of the 1930s

The historical film, *jidai-geki*, was still the realm of swordfights, chases, and heroic deaths. The directors Daisuke Ito and Masahiro Makino continued to contribute to the genre, encouraging other filmmakers to use rapid cutting and imaginatively staged fight scenes. Among the many

satires of the *chambara* (swordfight films) was Toho's *Enoken as Kondo Isamu* (11.17).



11.17 The popular vaudeville comedian Enoken plays a reluctant swordsman (*Enoken as Kondo Isamu*).

More psychologically oriented jidai-geki began to come from younger directors. The most prominent member of this group was Sadao Yamanaka. His *A Pot Worth a Million Ryo* (1935) is a warm comedy in which a gruff samurai befriends an orphan. *Humanity and Paper Balloons* (1937), Yamanaka's most famous film, shows a *ronin* (masterless samurai) unable to find work and eventually driven to suicide. Yamanaka filmed this quietly ironic tale in a distinctive manner, with low camera positions, deep perspectival framings, and somber lighting (**11.18**). This was Yamanaka's last film; drafted and sent to the Chinese front, he died there in 1938.



11.18 The atmospheric tenement setting of the opening discovery of the suicide in *Humanity and Paper Balloons*.

The *gendai-geki*, or contemporary-life film, included many genres: student and salaryman comedies, the *haha-mono* (“mother tale”), and the *shomin-geki*, films about lower-class life. From the early 1930s through the war, these and kindred genres were the bulwark of the major studios. Shochiku’s stars Kinuyo Tanaka and Shin Saburi and Toho’s Hideko Takamine and Setsuko Hara made their reputations in these unpretentious films portraying work, romance, and family life in Japan’s cities and towns.

Yasujiro Shimazu had helped create Shochiku’s “*Kamata* flavor,” an atmosphere of poignant cheerfulness associated with the *gendai-geki* made in the firm’s suburban Tokyo studio, and he continued it in such lighthearted talkies as *Our Neighbor Miss Yae* (1934). Heinosuke Gosho, formerly Shimazu’s assistant, carried on the Shochiku tradition in the early sound comedies *Madam and Wife* (1931; see p. 186) and *The Bride Talks in Her Sleep* (1933), as well as in the melodramas *The Dancing Girl of Izu* (1933) and *Woman of the Mist* (1936; **11.19**). In such films Gosho won fame as a master of the *shomin-geki*.



11.19 A young woman in love with a student discovers that he is not interested in her in *Woman of the Mist*.

Also working in the *gendai-geki* was Mikio Naruse. He started at Shochiku with salaryman films and contemporary comedies before discovering a more astringent, pessimistic tone. *Apart from You* (1933), *Nightly Dreams* (1933), and *Street without End* (1934) won critical praise despite their bleak look at prostitutes, sailors, and struggling single mothers. These melodramas established

Naruse as an outstanding director of actresses and, in lengthy dissolves and brooding close-ups, revealed his ability to build up a sense of society's suffocating pressures on women (11.20).



11.20 In *Street without End*, the young wife, spurned by her husband's family, goes to his sickbed.

Moving to Toho, Naruse quickly established himself with a series of feminine dramas. The most famous was *Wife, Be Like a Rose!* (1935), an urban comedy that modulates into harsh melodrama. Kimiko has picked out a young man to marry, but she must locate her runaway father. She talks him into returning for her wedding. The confrontation between the father and the high-strung

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mother, who secretly wants him back, shows Naruse's skill in handling complex emotional situations (11.21). The film's last shots, tracking in and out on Kimiko and her mother, abandoned by the father once more, intensify our awareness that Kimiko's marriage will be devoted to taking care of her mother. *Wife, Be Like a Rose!*—one of the few Japanese films of the 1930s to be seen in the West—won critical accolades and established Naruse as a major director.



11.21 A high-angle shot of the daughter's grief in *Wife, Be Like a Rose!*

The successes of Yamanaka, Gosho, and Naruse confirmed Japanese studios' policies of encouraging directors to specialize in certain genres and to cultivate personal styles. This practice differentiated each company's product and fed fans' interest. In addition, many of the gendai-geki directors had started in the 1920s, when genre innovations and stylistic originality were prized. As a result, Japanese films of the 1930s experimented with storytelling and technique to a degree not common in most Western sound cinema. For example, Tomu Uchida's *Police* (1933) presents a plot straight out of Warner Bros. (two old friends from the neighborhood: one a cop and the other a gangster) but enlivens it with bold compositions, bursts of handheld camerawork, and rapid intercutting between past and present.

Hiroshi Shimizu, another exponent of humanistic comedy, also displayed a distinctive style. His films centering on children (e.g., *Four Seasons of Children*, 1939) won him the most fame, but he also excelled at adult subjects, as seen in *Arigoto-San* (*Mr. Thank You*, 1936) and *Star Athlete* (1937). Shimizu's stylistic signature is the shot in which the action moves straight at or away from the viewer while the camera tracks backward or forward to keep up with the figure (**11.22**). Shochiku's flexible policy allowed Shimizu to travel across Japan in search of ideas, shooting films on location from sketchy notes rather than scripts. The arrangement proved productive: between 1924 and 1945 Shimizu directed an astonishing 130 films.



11.22 A characteristic Shimizu track-back from marching students drilling during a country outing in *Star Athlete*.

By common consent, the two most influential Japanese directors of the 1930s were Yasujiro Ozu and Kenji Mizoguchi. They contrasted in almost every way. Ozu worked only for Shochiku, whereas Mizoguchi began with Nikkatsu and became a freelance. Ozu started in comedies and shomin-geki, and he maintained an everyday humor in virtually all of his films. Mizoguchi, whose first films were melodramas, probed every situation for grim psychological and social implications. Ozu was a master of editing and static, closely framed shots, whereas Mizoguchi cultivated a style of long-shot framings, long takes, and camera movements. On the set, Ozu was quietly insistent, while Mizoguchi exploded into demonic tantrums. Ozu and Mizoguchi illustrate how the Japanese studio system permitted directors an enormous range of originality (see box).

Avoiding the strict division of labor practiced in Hollywood, Shochiku and Nikkatsu had cultivated a *cadre system* in which the director and scriptwriter had considerable control over their projects. Supervision tended to be even less stringent at smaller firms. Toho favored a *producer system*, which, like that of Hollywood in the 1930s, placed a producer in charge of several directors at the same time. While Toho films did have a somewhat glossier, mass-manufactured look, directors could still work in idiosyncratic ways at most studios before 1938. After that, they had to face the demands of a nation engaged in total war.

The Pacific War

Japan's all-out attack on China in 1937 marked the beginning of the war in the Pacific. The government banned existing political parties, tightened its alliances with Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, and mobilized the home front around a war-based economy.

Government Pressure on the Industry The film industry was slowly brought into line with the new policies. In this jingoistic atmosphere, western culture became suspect. Studios were ordered not to feature jazz, American

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dancing, or scenes that might undermine respect for authority, duty to the emperor, and love of family. In April 1939, Japan's Diet passed a law modeled on Goebbels' edicts to the Nazi industry (p. 242). The Motion Picture Law called for nationalistic films portraying patriotic conduct. The Home Ministry established the Censorship Office, which would review scripts before production and order revisions where necessary.

YASUJIRO OZU AND KENJI MIZOGUCHI IN THE 1930s

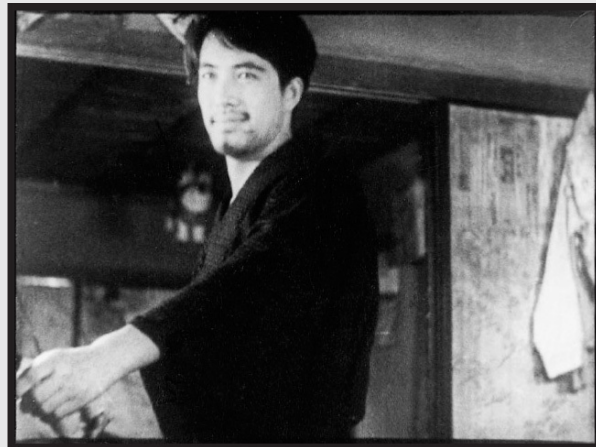
At age twenty-four Yasujiro Ozu began directing with a *jidai-geki*, but he quickly turned to the *gendai-geki*. Between 1928 and 1937, he made thirty-five features, running the gamut from student slapstick (*Days of Youth*, 1929) and the urban comedy of manners (*An Introduction to Marriage*, 1930) to the gangster movie (*Walk Cheerfully*, 1930). He consolidated his fame with three masterpieces in 1933 (*Woman of Tokyo*, *Dragnet Girl*, and *Passing Fancy*). His first sound feature was *The Only Son* (1936), a *shomin-geki* about a mother following her son to Tokyo to discover that he has not succeeded despite the education she has drudged for years to provide. Ozu characteristically followed this quietly despairing film with a lighthearted satire on the wealthy classes, *What Did the Lady Forget?* (1937).

Ozu was deeply influenced by the Hollywood cinema, particularly the social comedies of Charles Chaplin and Ernst Lubitsch and the gag comedies of Harold Lloyd. Like many Shochiku directors, he adopted the 1920s American comedy style—brief shots of actors and

details of setting, edited together crisply and concisely. But Ozu extended this style in several ways. At unexpected moments he inserted shots of unobtrusive objects or adjacent landscapes (**11.23**). In dialogue scenes, he systematically filmed from within a 360-degree circle surrounding the characters, changing the view by multiples of 45 degrees (usually 180 degrees). This strategy consistently violated Hollywood's traditional 180-degree continuity editing. Ozu edited as much for visual pattern as for dramatic emphasis; his 360-degree cutting produces close "graphic matches" between two shapes. A graphically continuous version of shot/reverse shot is shown in **11.24** and **11.25**.



11.23 A boiling teakettle punctuates the drama in Ozu's *Woman of Tokyo*.



11.24 In *Passing Fancy*, the man grabs the woman's arm as he faces her from the right.



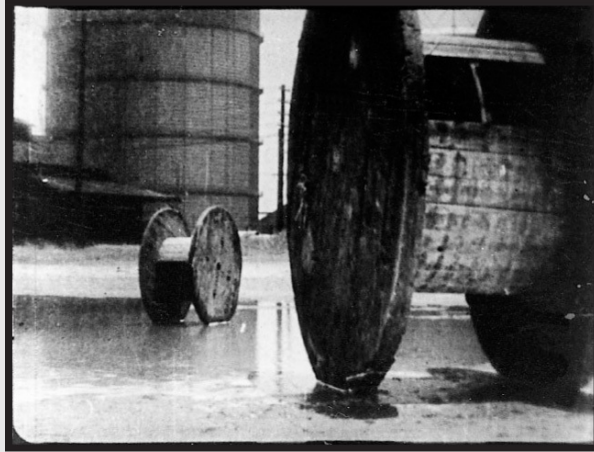
11.25 Ozu cuts to a position 180 degrees opposite, showing the man now on the left (*Passing Fancy*).

Most strikingly, Ozu refused certain resources of film technique. He was the last major director to convert to sound. He also limited his use of camera movements. Above all, he restricted his camera position by filming only from a low height, regardless of the subject. This tactic again allowed him to draw attention to the composition of the shot, balancing the dramatic value of the actor and the milieu with the purely visual design of the frame (**11.26**).



11.26 Like the previous illustrations, this frame from *The Only Son* exemplifies Ozu's low-height camera.

Ozu's style amplified his intimate dramas. His comedies, like those of Lubitsch and Lloyd, are based on embarrassment and psychological revelation, qualities that could be signaled by a judiciously placed close-up of an expression or a gesture. His social dramas, lingering on the cycle of life within an indifferent city, were intensified by enigmatic urban landscapes (**11.27**).



11.27 A cutaway to an industrial wasteland in Ozu's *Inn in Tokyo* (1935).

Several of Ozu's films mix comedy and drama so thoroughly that the style alternates between humorous commentary and poetic abstraction. *I Was Born, But ...* (1931), for instance, is at once a satire on the bootlicking

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salaryman, a comedy about brattish children, and a sober study of lost illusions. At any moment, Ozu could create a low-key pictorial joke (**11.28**). His films' poignant evocation of missed opportunities, regrets, and foreknowledge of separation is reinforced by a measured style that finds even the most mundane object an occasion for contemplation. Ozu's distinctive handling of narrative and technique influenced Yamanaka, Shimizu, and Naruse.



11.28 Shirts on a clothesline are echoed by the salaryman as he exercises in the morning in *I Was Born, But....*

Kenji Mizoguchi began directing five years before Ozu. In the high-output 1920s, his forty-two films established him as an eclectic director with artistic ambitions. He made melodramas, crime dramas, even imitations of German Expressionism, but he did not become recognized as a major director until the 1930s.

Across a variety of genres, Mizoguchi concentrated on the social dilemmas facing the Japanese woman. In *White Threads of the Waterfall* (1933), a circus entertainer works to send a poor student to school; in the end, the lovers commit suicide. In *The Downfall of Osen* (1935), a gangster's girlfriend sends a young man to medical school; after he has become successful, he finds his benefactor in a railroad station, old and demented. In *Oyuki the Madonna*, modeled on Guy de Maupassant's short story "Boule de suif" ("Tallow Ball"), a prostitute gives her life to save a rebel leader. Mizoguchi's two outstanding melodramas of the mid-1930s, *Naniwa Elegy* (1936, aka *Osaka Elegy*) and *Sisters of Gion* (1936), show women swapping sexual favors for power, only to find that men will not honor their bargains. He later saw these two bitter films as marking the beginning of his maturity: "It is only since I made *Naniwa Elegy* and *Sisters of Gion* that I have been able to portray humanity lucidly."³

Mizoguchi was drawn to situations of high emotion—men's sadistic abuse of women and children, women's distraught response to the threat of poverty or solitude, scenes of harsh bargaining and quarrels. But in filming he adopted what would, after World War II, be called a "dedramatizing" approach. His staging and framing put scenes of emotional intensity at a distance, inviting the spectator to react less viscerally to the action.

Mizoguchi thus tended to stage highly charged scenes in long shot (**11.29**). Often the characters turn away from the viewer (**11.30**), or they are hidden by a

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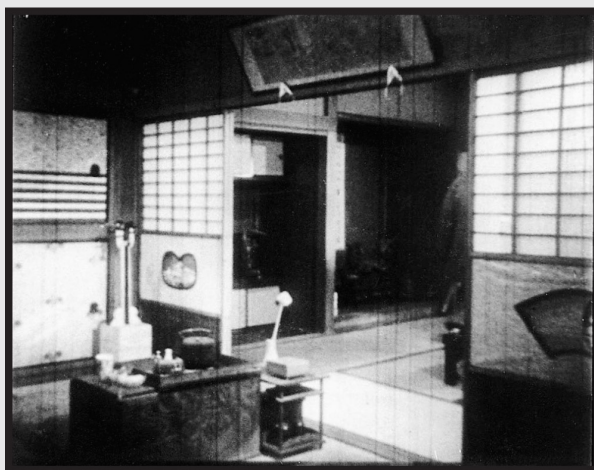
wall or a shadow (**11.31–11.33**). Only at the end of *Naniwa Elegy* and *Sisters of Gion* does Mizoguchi give us abrupt, intense close-ups of his protagonists, each woman challenging the audience to reflect on why she must suffer (**11.34**).



11.29 In *Sisters of Gion*, Umikichi learns that her sister has been taken to the hospital.



11.30 Ashamed, Ayako shrinks away from her lover, and from the viewer, in *Naniwa Elegy*.



11.31 In *The Downfall of Osen*, Osen's gangster lover goes to her with a sword and the shot stands vacant for a moment ...