

Chapter 17

Classic Hollywood

Objectives: The objective of this chapter is to introduce the students to the ‘golden age’ of Hollywood, the major trends and names associated with that period.

Key words: Hays code, Affirmative-consequential model’, studio system, linear narrative

Background

In this chapter, we will take a journey through the classic Hollywood period, a time which is also termed as the “Golden Age” of Hollywood. This period is so referred to because of the extravaganzas produced at that time by major studios, starring major stars. Some of the epic blockbusters of the early period of the golden age (1915-1935) are *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), Cecil B. De Mille’s *The Cheat* (1915), Theda Bara’s *A Fool There Was*, *Madame Butterfly* (all in 1915) with the latter starring Mary Pickford, and several films of ‘Fatty’ Arbuckle. Charlie Chaplin is a major star of this period, signifying the beginning of a time when stars became economic assets. Lets understand the key features, events and people of this period.

Production Code

MPPDA (Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America) 1922, headed by Will Hays, an ultraconservative Republican ;

A Self-regulatory trade organization, formed by Hollywood producers

Hays Code of 1934 became a rigid form of censorship;

Hollywood's famed "golden age" began with the Code and ended with its demise.

To work around the Code, filmmakers resorted making religious epics. *The Ten Commandments* (Paramount production, 1923), for example, was drenched in sex-and violence. This became a successful formula for religious epics, and soon other features followed suite: *King of Kings* (1927), *Cleopatra* (1934) and *Samson and Delilah* (1949).

Plot structure in classic Hollywood cinema

In classic films of Hollywood, events were organized around a basic structure with a beginning-middle and end. Events had a causes and effect relationship. It was absolutely essential to offer a closure to resolve the disruption and restore the equilibrium. Whatever the genre, the plot offered a closure and a message that was central to dominant ideology. Events develop following a linear structure. Temporal-spatial coherence was the preconditions to achieve verisimilitude. In short, classic Hollywood period aspired to create a fictional world that was understandable and believable. Events are propelled through the agency of the fictional individuals and filmmakers used well-rounded characters with certain traits.

- *Cecil B De Mille* (1881-1959)

The most famous ‘showman’ from the classic Hollywood period who incarnated all the values of Hollywood. One of his earliest films is *The Squaw Man* (the first feature length Western ever made by Hollywood; 1914). A series of patriotic films followed, *The Little American* (1917); *Joan the Woman* (1917); *Till I Come Back to You* (1918). Some of the early De Mille films fall into the genre of ‘Comedy of manners’: *Old Wives for New* (1918); *Don’t Change your Husband* (1919); *Why Change Your Wife* (1920).

The Studio system:

The studio during the Golden Years of Hollywood was a well-oiled machinery, and one of its tasks was to regularly produce stars. One reason for the enormous popularity of films was the existence and presence of stars, Studio machinery worked hard to build up stars and their images. Matinee idols, as they were called by studios and media, had specific images which were lapped up by the worshipping public. Thus, John Barrymore, Douglas Fairbanks, Rudolph Valentino, Mary Pickford, Norma Shearer, Gloria Swanson, and Greta Garbo became the ultimate stars.

Stars were the most precious commodities for a studio, someone who would lure the public inside the film theatres. Jeanine Basinger observes, ‘Great stars from the early years of silent film hadn’t been formed by this machine. They were hired by the business for their talent, or their beauty, or their skills...From 1930s onward, regardless of experience, actors and actresses understood that being employed in the movies meant being subjected to the star-making machine to some degree for some period. No star escaped it.’ (p. 19).

Magna Opera and high-cost films were very often commercially and critically successful. Irving Thalberg’s *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1935), *Camille* (1936) and *Gone with the Wind* (1939) were some of the major blockbusters of the 30s. *Benhur*’s (1959) success encouraged 20th Century Fox to make another big-budget epic, *Cleopatra* (1963) which went enormously over budget, and nearly led the studio to bankruptcy. Though *The Sound of Music* (1965) was a success, the winds of changes were around the corner with the New Hollywood cinema.

- MGM

MGM was managed by Louis B Mayer (1885-1957) with Irving Thalberg as the production manager; along with David O Selznick (producer *Gone with the Wind*, *Rebecca*, *Duel in the Sun*) they produced some of the greatest films. Thalberg introduced the preview screenings to gauge whether a film required rewriting or reshooting. This encouraged the system of teamwork in the studio. MGM was the most prosperous and most prolific studio at one point and had most of the biggest directors & stars under contract. MGM publicity: "More stars than there are in Heaven." Some of the greatest MGM films of this period are: *Anna Christie* (1930), *Grand Hotel* (1932), *Anna Karenina* (1935), *Camille* (1937), *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* (1939), *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), and *Gone with the Wind* (1939), the ultimate American national epic.

David O Selznick was the most influential producer of this period who made successful films such as *Gone with the Wind*, *Rebecca*, *Duel in the Sun*, *Spellbound*, and *A Star is Born*.

- Paramount

Paramount studio was founded in 1916, and rapidly progressed under Adolf Zukor. The studio was very European in its approach. Most of the directors, technicians, etc had come from Germany. Some of the early successes of this studio included Rudolph Valentino's *The Sheik*, (1921) and *Blood and Sand*, (1922); Josef von Sternberg's *Morocco* (1930); *Shanghai Express* (1932); *The Devil is a Woman* (1935), all with Marlene Dietrich; Marx Brothers' comedies: *Animal Crackers* (1930), *Monkey Business* (1931), *Duck Soup* (1933); and Ernst Lubitsch's musical comedies and comedy of manners, *Monte Carlo* (1930), *Ninotchka* (1939).

- Warner Brothers:

Warner Brothers was a family run studio with Jack Warner as the in-charge of production. WB imposed a strict code of production efficiency on its directors, technicians, and stars and their directors were expected to produce at least 5 pictures a year. The studio made fast-paced narratives. Some of the most famous films of this period made by the Studio belong to the gangster genre including, *Little Caesar* (1930); *The Public Enemy* (1931) and *I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932). Its line up of great directors included Max Reinhardt, Michael Curtiz, Mervyn LeRoy. The studio also produced the first talking picture *The Jazz Singer* (1927)

- 20th Century -Fox

Daryl F. Zanuck was the Vice President of the studio. The studio's early successes were *What Price Glory* (1926) and Murnau's *Sunrise* (1927). One of the studio's important directors was John Ford, who made *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939), *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), and *How Green was my Valley* (1941). Post-war, Fox focused on making realistic films that were often gritty. In the 1930s Shirley Temple was their most bankable star and later Will Rogers became their star performer. From 50s onwards, the studio employed stars such as Marlon Brando, Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell.

- Columbia Pictures

The studio was founded by Henry Cohn (1891-1958). For the most part of the 30s, Columbia supplied the bigger studios with low-budget features for double bills, few stars, and modest production values. Columbia occasionally invited successful directors from other studios to make a picture for them. Two such examples were *Only Angels have Wings* (1939); *His Girl Friday* (1940) both directed by Howard Hawks. For a long time, the studio's auteur was Frank Capra (1897-1991), a Sicilian immigrant and Columbia's star director. Capra believed that movies are "fantasies of good will." After his early comedies, he settled down in the role of a preacher of the true American Way. His films are impossibly utopian, sentimental and populist, reinforcing traditional values and cozy optimism. His heroes are typically simple and folksy overcoming corrupt city sophisticates, and politicians. Film historians consider his works to be morally trite, out of touch with reality.

The studio's major films are: *It Happened one Night* (1934), *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (Gary Cooper, 1936), *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), *Meet John Doe* (1941) and *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946). Capra was commissioned by the US Army Chief of Staff to make a 7 part documentary series *Why We Fight*. At one stage he attempted to form his own company, Liberty Films, with George Stevens and William Wyler but the company was soon sold. Capra's autobiography is *The Name Above the Title* (1971). His influence has been acknowledged on John Ford, Satyajit Ray, Ozu. He was a 3 times Academy Award winner for direction and was awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award in 1982.

- RKO

One of its most prominent owners was Howard Hughes (1905-76). RKO became the home of the Fred Astaire-Ginger Rogers musicals. The studio also did successful literary adaptations: *Little Women* (George Cukor, 1933), *Of Human Bondage* (1934), and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1938).

Some of the most important directors of these studios were:

- *William Wyler* (1902-81)

Wyler began his career working with Gregg Toland (cinematographer for Citizen Kane) and like Toland employed deep focus and concentrated on background details. Wyler is remembered for his elegant approach and sensitive treatment towards filmmaking. His works are: *Jezebel* (1938), *Wuthering Heights* (1939), *The Letter* (1941), and *The Little Foxes* (1941), *Mrs. Miniver* (1942), *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) and *The Heiress* (1949). Wyler successfully tackled genre films, film noir, Westerns and romantic comedy, *Roman Holiday* (1953) being his most popular one in this category. Wyler's grandest achievement was *Ben-Hur* (1959), an epic that earned 11 Academy Awards.

- *Billy Wilder* (1906-2002)

Born in Austria, Wilder left Germany because of his Jewish background and moved to Hollywood in 1934. His most famous films are renowned for their misanthropic cynicism and skepticism, and are today considered melodramatic and unsubtle.

David Thomson encapsulates Wilder as, ‘look at the films repeatedly and only a few things emerge---the dislike of people, the flinching from women, the show of smart skills, the compromise and the superiority, and the flair for riveting , grisly moments.’ (p. 940).

Sunset Boulevard (1950)

A film about film, this classic noir presents Hollywood as a phony dream factory. In fact, so brutal was the portrayal of the film industry that Louis B Meyer wanted Billy Wilder to be tarred. The film ends with the popular lines by the faded and deluded actress, played by Gloria Swanson, “All Right, Mr. De Mille, I’m ready for my close-up.” Wilder’s list of films are: *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Ace in the Hole* (1951), *Sabrina* (1954), *The Seven Year Itch* (1955), *Some Like it Hot* (1959), *The Apartment* (1960), and *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* (1960).

- *George Stevens* (1904-75)

Stevens’ films are particularly noted for the portrayal of the outsider as the protagonist and interrogation of American Dream. These are the stories of repressed longings, more complex than simple morality, utopian stories. Though highly regarded by his peers, the Cahier critics and Andrew Sarris were dismissive of him. One of his most popular films is the adventure yarn *Gunga Din* (Cary Grant, 1939), based on the Rudyard Kipling poem. Stevens' second postwar film, *A Place in the Sun* (1951), was an adaptation of Dreiser’s "An American Tragedy," updated to contemporary America. It is widely felt that no one had ever used close-ups the way Stevens had in *A Place*. *Shane* (1953) and *Giant* (1956) are two of his most enduring films.

- *Elia Kazan* (1909-2003)

One of the founders of the Actors Studio, Kazan was a keen supporter of the Method and was actively involved with the Group Theatre in New York. He achieved success on stage and soon moved to Hollywood. Most of his films are adaptations of plays and novels. His collaboration with the Group resulted in his waking up to the theme of social realism and with deep sympathy for the working class. At the time of Kazan’s testimony in 1952, no one was closer to the Director than playwright Arthur Miller. Kazan had directed two of Miller’s

plays: *All My Sons* (1947) and *Death of a Salesman* (1949). Miller had written a screenplay about the Brooklyn waterfront, "The Hook," for Kazan to direct. When Kazan named names, their friendship was irrevocably torn.

The idea of a 'misfit' and an 'outsider' is a recurring one in Kazan's work: *On the Waterfront* (1954), *East of Eden* (1955), *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947), *A Face In the Crowd* (1957), *Viva Zapata!* (1952), *Baby Doll* (1956), *Wild River* (1960), *Splendour in the Grass* (1961), and *The Last Tycoon* (1976).

- *George Cukor*(1899-1983)

In a long career, Cukor tried his hands with thrillers, screwball romantic comedies, and even musicals. Often labeled as a "woman's director," (possibly because he was gay), he had a knack of drawing excellent performances from his leading ladies, particularly Katherine Hepburn. Cukor's *David Copperfield* (1935) is often considered the best adaptation of Charles Dickens' novel. He directed Garbo in her most famous role, Marguerite Gautier in *Camille* (1937), based on Alexander Dumas' novel. His other works include *The Philadelphia Story* (1940), *Gaslight* (1944), Judy Garland version of *A Star Is Born*, *Let's Make Love* (1960), *Something's Got to Give* (uncompleted), and *My Fair Lady* (for which he won the Academy Award for Best Direction, 1964).

- *Nicholas Ray* (1911-79)

Jean-Luc Godard had once declared, "Cinema is Nicholas Ray." Indeed the auteurs of the French New Wave were fascinated by Ray's works. Ray studied under Frank Lloyd Wright and later claimed that if Wright could be detected anywhere in his movies it was in "my liking for Cinemascope." Ray became immersed in the left-wing Theatre of Action-which brought him in touch with Elia Kazan. Ray's well-known works include, *They Live by Night* (1948), *In a Lonely Place* (1950), *Johnny Guitar* (1954), *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) and *Lighting Over water* (1980).

Classic narrative was considered as a literary form. The story demands a satisfactory closure where all the loose ends would be neatly tied up. A key concept here is the 'Affirmative-consequential model', which means to be goal-oriented and leading to something logical. The narrative followed a 'cause-effect' link. Editing is defined as a juxtaposition of individual shots. During the very early years of cinema, films consisted of single shots and required no editing. Classic narrative follows the continuity editing style where editing predominantly remains invisible. Classic narrative insists on individual shots ordered according to the temporal sequence of events, thus helping in causal logic (one thing linked to another). This creates a coherent and credible space and characters. You may note that during the classic Hollywood periods, actors' bodies/faces filled the screen with plenty of close up shots. We also find several scenes exchange of looks between characters and use of shot/reverse-shot. The introduction of KEM Universal editing table by the end of the 60s led to several improvements in the editing process.

In the Golden years of Hollywood, screenplay followed the classic 3 Act structure and producers dictated terms and interfered with the process. Screenwriters were mainly journalists, novelists (Faulkner, Tennessee Williams) or best-selling authors (James Cain, Dashiell Hammett). For a long time (and it still does), Indian cinema too followed a similar 3 act structure. Ben Hecht was one of the most important screenwriters of this period. A journalist turned screenwriter, he was known as “Shakespeare of Hollywood.”

The cinematography of classic Hollywood films consists of close ups, dissolves and fades-in. Classic Hollywood is also known to use lighting in ways to make their stars look more luminous than they were. Filmmakers used iris shots (nowadays occasionally used by Martin Scorsese as a homage) to denote a cut. Deep focus cinematography came in prominence from 1940s onwards. As Greg Toland points out: ‘Its keynote (was) realism...both Welles and I felt this, and felt that if it was possible, the picture should be brought to the screen in such a way that the audience would feel it was looking at reality’ (in Pam Cook, 140).

The 50s witnessed the rise of the anti-hero – figures like James Dean, Montgomery Clift, Paul Newman and Marlon Brando. They played flawed heroes who could be angst ridden, selfish, gold-diggers. These heroes did not occupy a higher moral ground as the heroes of the 40s but explored the darker shades of human personality. Marlon Brando, Elvis Presley and James Dean changed the way young men could be seen in popular culture. Not only were they more feminine, brooding, introspective, but also exuded an aura of confusion (their social position, sexuality) and ambiguity about themselves. They embodied “Protest masculinity” protesting against socio-cultural conformity and prescriptive behavior. This generation of actors, notably, Montgomery Clift, Brando, and James Dean were trained in Method acting, ushering in a new style of acting style.

By the mid-sixties major studios started collapsing under their own weight. This was exacerbated by the popularity of the television, hefty star salaries and mismanagement by the studio executives. In the next few chapters, we will see how this old order gave way to the new.

Suggested readings:

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Suggested websites

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