

NORTH AMERICAN CULTURE – Cinema

Susan Smith Nash, Ph.D.

Overview

Often considered one of the primary cultural influencers in the world, American cinema has blended new film techniques with technologies, with directors and actors constantly innovating and responding to changing social and political pressures. Since its beginnings, American cinema has been an international endeavor, as directors, technical experts and actors from around the world participated in the development and execution of both large studio and independent film enterprises.

Origins (1890 – 1910)

Motion pictures were an example of a technology that aligned with many other technological breakthroughs at the time, and thus captivated the imagination of the public and of potential cinematographers. Edison's Kinetoscope was invented in 1888. Its invention coincided with the Second Industrial Revolution which took place during the late 19th century and early 20th century, which was marked by many different machines and devices that were characterized by motion and communication, including the automobile, the airplane, telephone, consistently delivered electricity, and the light bulb. Motion pictures brought together many of the new technologies, and in doing so, addressed a deep emotional need in the populace to understand the nature of rapid social and economic change, and to have another way to probe the limits of reality and fantasy. The earliest films explored the nature of motion (both in nature and in machines), and they ignited a previously latent desire to watch ourselves being ourselves. Almost immediately, motion pictures became a way to document reality (as photography had already established itself), and it also became a way to doctor and enhance reality, either in subtle ways, with idealized visions of men and women, or in romantic extremes, as in spectacle using special effects and elaborate costumes and sets, as in Georges Méliès's *A Trip to the Moon* (1902) and in Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903).

The Silent Years (1910 – 1927)

Launching Hollywood

The earliest films were shot in many different locations, but after careful evaluation of numerous locations, the small suburb of Los Angeles, Hollywood, was chosen due to its 320 (on average) days of sunshine, temperate climate, and wide range of settings and topography within 50 miles. The early marketing philosophy was that of the chain store, such as Woolworth's. The goal was to produce films that would be attractive to consumers in virtually all towns and cities in the U.S., and to constantly rotate the stock with shorts and feature-length films arriving in the local movie theaters every week.

Studio Systems

Early investors equipped elaborate studios that contracted with writers, producers, directors, and actors. The five main studios came to dominate the industry, even owning chains of movie theatres. These five main studios were Warner Brothers, 20th Century Fox, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Paramount, and RKO. The system worked very well, and the local movie theaters were filled with individuals who flocked to see documentary or humorous (slapstick-inspired) shorts and feature-length films often based on famous works of literature, popular novels, and historical events.

Early Silent Actors

The early film stars tended to feature actors who created easily recognizable roles. They included Mary Pickford, Gloria Swanson, Douglas Fairbanks, Buster Keaton, Rudolph Valentino, and Charlie Chaplin.

D. W. Griffith

The first highly influential director, D. W. Griffith started his career as an actor. He was more interested in the psychology of the impact of film on the audience and soon turned to directing where he could experiment with film narrative, lighting, and the setting up of shots in order to create scenes of great emotional intensity. As an experimenter and innovator, Griffith was unparalleled. His use of multiple shots,

multiple cameras, and creative editing were groundbreaking. He used his techniques not only to portray emotions and to elicit responses, but also to create a genre of depth and complexity, with the potential of multiple interpretations. Some of his techniques included montage, juxtaposition, and quick cuts from one close-up to another. His most famous film was *The Birth of a Nation* (1915).

The Pre-World War II Sound Years

The Introduction of Sound

Sound had the effect of introducing a kind of hyper-reality, with sounds of nature as well as a soundtrack which would intensify emotions and lead the viewer to certain assumptions about reality or relationships. The first "talkie" featured Al Jolson as *The Jazz Singer* in 1927. The first cartoon was Walt Disney's *Alice's Wonderland* (1924). The first cartoons with sound were by Walt Disney and were *Galloping Gaucho* and *Steamboat Willie* (Mickey Mouse). Sergei Eisenstein's *Potemkin* introduced the idea of montage, which was ground-breaking.

Comedy

During the depths of the Great Depression, the local movie theatres became a place of great unity and solace. Comedy played an important role, with routines drawn from slapstick and physical comedy. They included *L'il Rascals*, *Laurel and Hardy*, and Shirley Temple's movies. The films often featured hapless everymen in the roles, which had the effect of democratizing the downturn, and cheering for the underdog (which was almost always the mirror self of the audience, onto which they projected their feelings and experienced deep identification).

Screwball Comedies

A subgenre which flourished during the 1930s, screwball comedies took the war of the sexes (as in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*) and often blended it with social commentary, as in *Nothing Sacred* which juxtaposed the idle rich with a tramp (who happened to be an educated businessman who lost his fortune in the crash). *It Happened One Night* (1934) likewise dealt with the extreme income inequality of the Great Depression. In it, Claudette Colbert, an heiress, runs away from her wedding and then happens to encounter a relatively impecunious reporter, Clark Gable, who plans to bring her back for the reward. It is one of the first films to feature a road trip, and it shows the early motels (cabins) and cross-country highways. Carole Lombard, Cary Grant, William Powell, Claudette Colbert, Clark Gable, and Katherine Hepburn acted in many of them. The most well-known include *It Happened One Night*, *Bringing Up Baby*, *His Girl Friday*, *My Many Godfrey*, *The Awful Truth*, *Nothing Sacred*, and *My Favorite Wife*.

Film Noir

Deeply influenced by German Romanticism and the work of directors such as the German Fritz Lang, whose *M* (1931) explored the dark psychology of a child murderer, writers and directors explored alienation, the impact of urban environments, obsessions, desire, hidden behaviors under cover at night, flawed antiheroes, heartless heroines, and an unknowable labyrinthine city. For the viewer, the experience was one of extreme identification with the protagonist, who found himself or herself in a dark battle to survive, both psychologically and physically. Film techniques of extreme chiaroscuro, quick cuts, and unusual camera angles typify film noir.

Post-World War II

Support for the War Effort

During World War II, the film industry worked closely with the government in order to boost morale, encourage cooperation with rationing, and to support all aspects of the war effort. In many ways, the films helped define the notion of "The American Way of Life" and to solidify the notion of "American exceptionalism." Some were overtly xenophobic, but others solidified the careers of well-respected directors, including Frank Capra, William Wyler, John Huston, and John Ford. In the meantime, film and acetate were rationed, resulting in a vastly reduced output of films. The reduced output by Hollywood and European filmmakers opened the door for the Mexican film industry to flower. Examples include *Casablanca* (1942) and *The Great Dictator* (1940).

Science Fiction in a Post-Hiroshima World

Movies that addressed the newly-discovered horrors of nuclear war were very popular with American audiences, who flocked to science fiction and horror movies featuring creatures exposed to radiation, who mutated into monstrous yet pitifully devoid of self-determination creatures. Movies such as *Godzilla*, *Swamp Thing*, and *Rodan* took the classic narrative of positive transformation and twisted into a dark, ugly antithesis, and innocent creatures, people, and animals transformed into ghastly monsters after contact with radiation. Others such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and *Bride of Frankenstein* explored what it means to be human, and the insalubrious consequences of excessive desire.

The Western

As in the case of literature, the American West became the great canvas upon which to paint the American identity, first of expansiveness and boundlessness, and then later of a “can-do” attitude which meant overcoming adversity, focusing on an overarching vision, and enduring great sacrifice. Clashes between the so-called cowboys and Indians were somewhat representational of historical events, but were more accurately considered the visual manifestation of a persistent post-war dialectic; the self in collision with the “Other” and the necessity of adopting a stoic stance in the face of world that could never achieve its utopian promise, thus necessitating a personal honor code, translating into existentialism. Examples include *High Noon* (1952), *Shane* (1953), and *Rio Bravo* (1959).

Golden Age Studio Directors

The studio system encouraged directors to develop their own signature styles, and also to work with some of the same actors. The results were often predictable in a way that allowed the studios to create recognizable brands. A few of the most distinguished included John Ford, Henry Hathaway, King Vidor, Howard Hawks, Billy Wilder, Elia Kazan.

1960s and 1970s

Method Acting

Popularized in the 1950s, and utilized throughout the 1960s and 70s, “method acting” developed by Konstantin Stanislavski involved an exploration into the psychology of the character. Almost a fusion of Freudian psychology and Zen Buddhism, the goal was “to be” the character and consciously leaving behind all notions of the actor’s own particular identity or sense of self. Some of the actors who were practitioners of method acting included Marilyn Monroe, Marlon Brando, Montgomery Clift, Robert DeNiro, and Elizabeth Taylor in movies such as *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Night of the Iguana*. Directors included Elia Kazan and David Ayer. While the final results could be intensely cathartic for the audience, the actors often suffered deep psychological trauma, which led many to consider the technique to be highly risky.

Auteur Directors / Art House Films

The influence of foreign “art house” cinema was dramatic, beginning in Europe and then finding expression as well in Japan, Mexico, and then in the U.S. Opposing the commerciality of the studio system in the U.S., the “art house” films were deliberately experimental and included many of the techniques found in modernist and post-modernist art and photography. The directors took aesthetic risks and experimented with camera angles, lighting, pace, with innovative mise-en-scene. Notable films include Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (1960) and *8 1/2* (1963), Jean-Luc Godard's *A Bout De Souffle* (1960) (aka *Breathless*) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ybl_R34ODHo, Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'Avventura* (1960) and *Blow-Up* (1966) <https://youtu.be/j7u22W4K0Xw>, Francois Truffaut's *Shoot the Piano Player* (1960) and *Jules Et Jim* (1962) <https://youtu.be/tjd6Eg9APAs> and <https://youtu.be/UkGFRwmakGQ>

Rebels and Questions

Political instability coupled with the pervasive apocalyptic undercurrents of a world with nuclear proliferation and proxy wars (such as Vietnam), led to the rise of movies that addressed youth, rebellion, disenchantment, and an interminable and ultimately fruitless quest for truth and eternal verities. For example, *Dr. Strangelove or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964, US/UK, d.

Stanley Kubrick) lampooned the Cold War, using apocalyptic gallows humor that reflected the mood of the Cold War and opened the door to anti-war films. *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967, d. Arthur Penn) a crime spree combined with “buddy film” and road trip film appealed to the anti-authority mood of the times. Perhaps the film that best captured the angst of the youth, *The Graduate* (1967, d. Mike Nichols) was a coming of age film in a time when coming of age did not seem to be a wonderful entrance to adulthood, but a journey into an inescapable trap where the older generation lived in a state of bankrupt morality.

1980s and 1990s

Buddy Movies

The “road film” and buddy movies found a resurgence as they became journeys of discovery, often with bittersweet and ambiguous denouements (*Dogma* and *Something Wild*), and even more often with dark encounters with one’s own monsters of violence and thwarted sexuality (*Thelma and Louise*, and *Natural Born Killers*).

MTV Impact

The arrival of MTV and music videos had an immediate impact on films in the 1980s, most notably with *Flashdance*, where reality is built in flashes around music, dancing, and quick-cuts, and the music video itself has the power to hyper-idealize reality and instill relentless longing.

Continued Ascendancy of the Independents

The “art house” and “auteur” films of the 1950s and 60s carved a pathway for filmmakers, directors, and actors who wanted to experiment and push the boundaries of the genre. In the 1980s and through the 2000s, independent film was treated with respect, albeit not always commercially viable, through many small independent film festivals, the largest and most prestigious being that of Robert Redford’s Sundance Film Festival. Further, distribution via the Internet made it possible for larger audiences to view independent films. Independent films began exerting a very significant influence as they tackled some of the topics that were previously taboo, and they used different kinds of film-making techniques. The small space is intensely democratic and validates alternative viewpoints, including those regarding gender, social class, outsider art, the “invisible,” making the independent film space a philosophical one of becoming and constant reification, and re-reification. Some of the most influential independent films of the 1980s and 1990s include *The Usual Suspects* (1995), *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), *Clerks* (1994), *The River’s Edge*, *sex, lies, and videotape*, and *This Is Spinal Tap*.

The 2000s

Reality Television Influences Feature Films

The “faux” documentary, or at the very least, the technique of using hand-held cameras and recreating the energy and seeming spontaneity of a reality television show translated to feature-length films, resulting in a genre that persuades through its feeling of authenticity. The approach made it easy to incorporate sympathetic viewpoints toward groups that would be marginalized or ignored altogether in traditional film-making. Examples include *Little Miss Sunshine* and *The Florida Project*.

Technological Advances: Extreme Animation

The blockbuster movies of the 2000s were dominated by those based on comics, superhero graphic novels, and Japanese anime. Technology using extremely detailed and convincing animation reached new heights with *Avatar* (2009). Superhero films often turned into franchises and included *Batman*, *Superman*, *Spider-Man*, *Captain America*, and *The Avengers*.

Dystopian Futures, or a Dystopian “Now”?

Science fiction is almost always the place where dystopian visions express themselves, and the films from the 2000s continued the tradition, with a slight alteration. In movies such as *1984* and *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the dystopian world took place in the future. In the 2000s, movies such as *V for Vendetta* and *The Minority Report*, suggest that constant surveillance and a repressive government already occur. A deep distrust of artificial intelligence, either in its pure form (as in *AI*) or in robots / robotics (*Wall-E*) continues to be expressed in films. Actually, fear of robots and androids is nothing new,

beginning with Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, then moving to such movies as *I, Robot* and *Blade Runner* (androids, rather than robots, but they are the same).

The Future

The traditional power-brokers of Hollywood have lost ground to companies that control means of distribution. History seems to be repeating itself as companies such as Netflix, Amazon, and Google (YouTube) not only make films available to audiences, they also invest in the production of the movies. Traditional Hollywood has marginalized itself with increasingly unpopular political / ideological stances, as well as the revelation of pervasive abuses of power (manifesting as sexual assault in many cases). In an attempt to self-police, actors and directors have been ejected from positions of honor and prominence. It will be interesting to see if there will be a kind of restoration of the Hays Code. It is unlikely that the moral clean-up will extend to the films themselves, either from "traditional Hollywood" or the cloud-based upstarts, primarily because the goal is commercial (rather than being church or governmentally-based), and such enterprises usually pander to the lowest common denominator. Commercially-driven film may be mindless as a whole, but at least the outputs are not strictly propagandistic or repressive as may be the case if the film industry is controlled by a single government or church.



The Florida Project (d. Sean Baker, 2017)

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/b/b2/The_Florida_Project.jpg

Discussion/Questions

1. Early experiments in motion pictures were often surprisingly avant-garde and modern when viewed by eyes more than a hundred years later. They focused on the repetition of motion, without sound, seemed to explore the nature of life and being. Describe a few of the early "motion pictures" in the U.S. and Europe and explain how they might have captured the imagination of early theatre-goers.

2. "Pre-Code" Hollywood consisted of movies that often unflinchingly addressed the real-life behaviors of people, and the genre was used for exploring new ways of taking theatrical productions to middle America. The long-standing clash of values between the world of the music halls, vaudeville, and theatre and polite society were magnified as Hollywood talent and investment largely came from the often scandalous worlds of the traveling theatres, musicals, and vaudeville. Explain how Hollywood sought to invent a unified front and to purify itself by establishing codes of decency in the films, and also by tightly controlling the perception that the public had of its stars.

3. The arrival of the technology for making videos with a soundtrack (talkies), and then the advent of color led to an explosion of creativity in the 1930s and 1940s. Describe how the talkies were used to create soundtracks that heightened emotion (through musical scores), and how musicals became popular. Then, identify directors and their movies that took full advantage of color, such as in the case of Busby Berkeley's elaborate music and dance productions, almost hallucinogenic travel / dream scenes (The Wizard of Oz), and animation (Fantasia).

4. The 1960s were a time of youth-centric rebellion, Cold War tensions, and clashes of values and newly-emerging groups that identified themselves with movements, philosophies, and mindsets. Describe the influence of individualism (as in the case of "auteur" or "art house" films), and identify examples of where and how "art house" entered the mainstream for mass consumption by large audiences.

Readings

Arnheim, Rudolf (1957) Film As Art. Berkeley: U of California P: http://www.en.adambrothnek.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Arnheim_Rudolf_Film_as_Art1.pdf

Britannica (2018). History of the motion picture. <https://www.britannica.com/art/history-of-the-motion-picture>

Hayward, Susan (2013) Cinema Studies, the Key Concepts. 4th edition. London: Routledge.

Lights Film School. (2016) What Makes an Independent Film "Independent"? <https://www.lightsfilmschool.com/blog/what-is-an-independent-film>

M Libraries (2017). 8.2 The History of Movies. <https://open.lib.umn.edu/mediaandculture/chapter/8-2-the-history-of-movies/>

Mendrala, Jim (2011) A brief History of Film and Digital Cinema. <http://www.tech-notes.tv/Dig-Cine/Digitalcinema.html>

O'Neill, Edward. (1999) Oxford History of World Cinema. Oxford: Oxford UP.