FIFTH EDITION

HOLLYWOOD'S AMERICA

Understanding History Through Film

Edited by STEVEN MINTZ, RANDY ROBERTS and DAVID WELKY

WILEY Blackwell

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My Little Chickadee (1940). Universal Studios. Directed by Edward F. Cline. Courtesy of Jerry Murbach, www.doctormacro.info.

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Preface

Anyone who wishes to know about the United States would do well to go to the movies. Films represent much more than mere mass entertainment. Movies – even bad movies – are important sociological and cultural documents. Like any popular commercial art form, movies are highly sensitive barometers that both reflect and influence public attitudes. Since the beginning of twentieth century, films have recorded and even shaped American values, beliefs, and behavior.

Hollywood's America has two fundamental goals. The first is to use feature films to examine the central themes of twentieth- and twenty-first-century American culture. The book begins with a concise introduction that presents the history of American film against a backdrop of broader changes in popular culture since the late nineteenth century. It is then followed by a series of interpretive essays that examine how specific films, film genres, and developments within the film industry illuminate important aspects of American political, economic, and social life. These interpretive essays are supplemented with primary sources that offer first-hand looks at the movies' connection with the larger world. It concludes with an up-to-date bibliography of American film history.

As we shall see, the history of the movies is inextricably intertwined with broader themes and issues in American cultural history, such as the transition from Victorian culture, with its emphasis on refinement, self-control, and moralism, to modern mass culture. Popular films offer a valuable vehicle for examining public responses to the social disorder and dislocations of the Depression, the fears of domestic subversion of the late 1940s and early 1950s, the cultural and moral upheavals of the 1960s, the meaning and significance of the Vietnam War, and the growing multiculturalism within the United States. Through their plots, their characters, and their dramatization of ethical issues, movies have captured the changing nature of American culture.

The book's second aim is to help students develop tools for reading and interpreting visual texts. In a society in which visual images have become a dominant mode of entertainment and persuasion, used to promote both products and politicians, the ability to analyze visual texts may be as important as a facility with the written word.

Motion pictures contain a distinct set of rules and grammar that demands the same critical thinking and analytical skills one uses to read written texts. To analyze a poem, one must understand patterns of rhyme and rhythm and a poet's use of sound and imagery. Likewise, to interpret a film, one must understand how filmmakers use camerawork, editing devices, lighting, set design, and narrative to construct their text.

The films examined in this book are feature films – not documentaries or avant-garde or underground films. These are the classic movies that made Americans laugh and weep, shriek with terror, and tremble with excitement. They offered wit, suspense, romance, thrills, highlife, and lowlife. Highbrow critics might dismiss most Hollywood films as schlock, but these movies gave audiences more pleasure than any other art form and taught truly fundamental lessons dealing with intimacy, tenderness, initiation, lust, conflict, guilt, and loyalty. It was from the silver screen that Americans received their most intensive – if highly distorted – picture of their country's past, the lifestyles of the rich and famous, and the underside of American life.

For more than one hundred years, films have been the most influential instrument of mass culture in the United States. As America's "dream factory," which manufactures fantasies and cultural myths much as a Detroit automaker produces cars, Hollywood has shaped the very way that Americans look at the world. Hollywood's films have played a pivotal role in "modernizing" American values. They have been instrumental in shaping Americans' deepest presuppositions about masculinity, femininity, race, ethnicity, and sexuality. Movies have helped form Americans' self-image, and have provided unifying symbols in a society fragmented along lines of race, class, ethnicity, region, and gender. In certain respects subversive of traditional cultural values, movie culture created a mythic fantasy world that has helped Americans adapt to an ever-changing society.

Introduction

The Social and Cultural History of American Film

One night a year America shuts down. All across the United States tens of millions of people press the buttons on their remote controls, sit back in their easy chairs, monitor their Twitter feeds, and become the world's largest congregation, watching a key event in the country's civic religion – the Oscars. Even though movie attendance has fallen steeply – to just one-third of what it was at the time of the first Academy Awards ceremony in 1927 – Americans still gawk at the limousines as they pull up to the Dolby Theater in Los Angeles, gaze at the stars' tuxedoes and gowns, and wait impatiently for a memorable moment – a naked streaker racing across the stage or a controversial acceptance speech.

Americans watch the Academy Awards presentations for many reasons: to briefly see a more human side of their favorite movie stars; to pit their judgment against that of the 6,000 members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences; to partake in the trashy pleasure of watching the glitziest extravaganza that Hollywood is capable of producing. But the Academy Awards ceremony also offers something more: it gives Americans a chance to recognize the movies that entertained them, engaged their emotions, expressed their deepest hopes and aspirations, and responded most successfully to their anxieties and fears. From *All Quiet on the Western Front* – a graphic portrait of the horrors and futility of war that came to embody the pacifism of the late 1920s and early 1930s – to *12 Years a Slave* – a gut-wrenching take on race, power, and history – Oscar winners and nominees have offered a vivid record of shifting American values.

Of all the products of popular culture, none is more sharply etched in our collective imagination than the movies. Most Americans instantly recognize images produced by the movies: Charlie Chaplin, the starving prospector in *The Gold Rush*, eating his shoe, treating the laces like spaghetti. James Cagney, the gun-toting gangster in *Public Enemy*, shoving a grapefruit into the side of Mae Clarke's face. Paul Muni, the jobless

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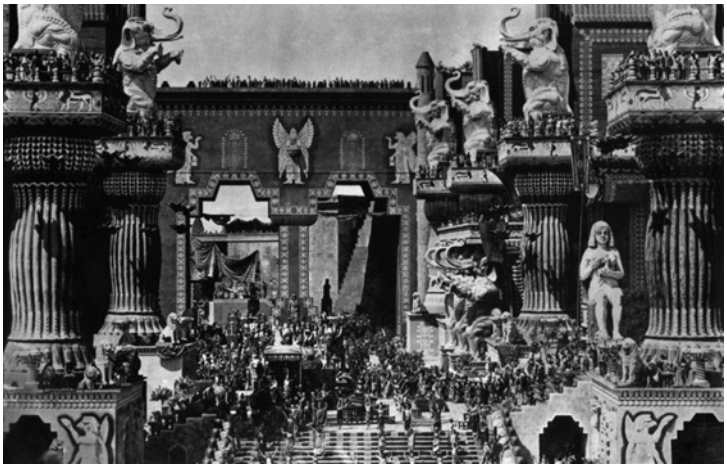
World War I veteran in *I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*, who is asked how he lives and replies, "I steal." Gloria Swanson, the fading movie goddess in *Sunset Boulevard*, belittling suggestions that she is no longer a big star: "It's the pictures that got small." Even those who have never seen *King Kong* or *Casablanca* or *The Godfather* respond instantly to the advertisements, parodies, and TV skits that use those films' dialogue, images, and characters.



Intolerance (1916). Wark Producing Corp. Directed by D.W. Griffith. Courtesy of Jerry Murbach, www.doctormacro.info.

The Immigrant (1917). Mutual Film Corporation. Directed by Charles Chaplin. Mutual Film Corporation.

Movies are key cultural artifacts that offer a window into American cultural and social history. A mixture of art, business, and popular entertainment, the movies provide a host of insights into Americans' shifting ideals, fantasies, and preoccupations. Like any cultural artifact, the movies can be approached in a variety of ways. Cultural historians have treated movies as sociological documents that record the look and mood of particular historical settings; as ideological constructs that advance particular political or moral values or myths; as psychological texts that speak to individual and social anxieties and tensions; as cultural documents that present particular images of gender, ethnicity, class, romance, and violence; and as visual texts that offer complex levels of meaning and seeing.

This book offers examples of how to interpret classic American films as artifacts of a shifting American culture. It begins with a concise summary and interpretation of film history that locates the evolution of the movie industry against a broader backdrop of American cultural and social history.

The Birth of Modern Culture

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, a New York neurologist named George M. Beard coined the term "neurasthenia" to describe a psychological ailment that afflicted a growing number of Americans. Neurasthenia's symptoms included "nervous dyspepsia, insomnia, hysteria, hypochondria, asthma, sick-headache, skin rashes, hay fever, premature baldness, inebriety, hot and cold flashes, nervous exhaustion, brain-collapse, or forms of 'elementary insanity.'" Among those who suffered from neurasthenia-like ailments at some point were Theodore Roosevelt, settlement house founder Jane Addams, psychologist William James, painter Frederic Remington, and novelists Owen Wister and Theodore Dreiser.

According to medical experts, neurasthenia's underlying cause was "over-civilization." Stress, overstimulation, the frantic pace of modern life, and emotional repression produced debilitating bouts of depression or attacks of anxiety and nervous prostration. Fears of "over-civilization" pervaded late nineteenth-century American culture. Many worried that urban life was producing a generation of pathetic, pampered, physically and morally enfeebled 98-pound weaklings – a far cry from the stalwart Americans who had tamed a continent. A sharply falling birth rate sparked fears that the native-born middle class was committing "race suicide." A host of therapies promised to relieve the symptoms of neurasthenia, including the precursors of modern tranquilizers (like Dr. Hammond's Nerve and Brain Pills). Sears even sold an electrical contraption called the Heidelberg Electric Belt, designed to reduce anxiety by sending electric shocks to the genitals. Many physicians prescribed physical exercise for men and rest cures for women. But the main way that late nineteenth-century Americans responded to the pressures, stresses, and restrictions of modern life was by turning to sports, outdoor activities, and popular culture for release.

Most American history classes describe the wrenching economic transformations of the late nineteenth century, the consolidation of industry, the integration of the national economy, and the rise of the corporation. But few Americans realize that this

period also saw the birth of modern culture – a culture that still pervades our world today.

The last years of the nineteenth century witnessed a profound shift in American values away from the Victorian emphasis on self-denial and self-restraint toward a new culture based on personal self-fulfillment, leisure, and sensual satisfaction. A culture oriented toward words was supplanted by a new visual culture oriented toward images. A genteel culture, stressing eternal truths and high moral ideals, was overtaken by a new emphasis on realism, energy, and excitement. Above all, a culture deeply divided by class, gender, religion, ethnicity, and locality gave way to a vibrant, commercialized mass culture that provided all Americans with standardized entertainment and information.

The revolt against Victorianism

The 1890s witnessed a momentous change in American values. During that decade, Americans were engaged in a full-scale revolt against a stifling Victorian code of propriety and the confining routine of urban, industrial life. This revolt was apparent, as historian John Higham has shown, in a growing preoccupation with strength, virility, and energy. Victorian values, stressing self-control and domesticity, gave way to a craving for what Theodore Roosevelt called "the strenuous life." The new mood could be seen in a rage for competitive athletics and team sports. It was in the 1890s that boxing became the nation's most popular sport, that basketball was invented, that football swept the nation's college campuses, and that golf, track, and wrestling became popular pastimes. The celebration of vigor and virility could also be seen in a new enthusiasm for outdoor activities such as hiking, hunting, fishing, mountain climbing, camping, and bicycling.

A new bold, energetic spirit was also apparent in popular music, in a craze for ragtime, jazz, and patriotic military marches. The cult of toughness and virility appeared in the growth of aggressive nationalism (culminating in 1898 in America's "Splendid Little War" against Spain), the condemnation of sissies and stuffed shirts, and the growing popularity of aggressively masculine Western novels like Owen Wister's *The Virginian*. Toward the end of the century, the New Woman – personified by the tall, athletic Gibson Girl – supplanted the frail, submissive Victorian woman as a cultural ideal. "New women" began working outside the home in rapidly increasing numbers, attending high school and college, and pressing for the vote. American culture was rapidly morphing from its genteel roots into something wilder, freer, and more "modern."

The shift in values from a Victorian emphasis on civilized cultivation to a new stress on leisure and self-fulfillment is dramatically illustrated by the rise of the modern amusement park. During the mid-nineteenth century, urban reformers responded to the rapid growth of cities by pressing for the construction of parks to serve as rural retreats in the midst of urban jungles. Frederick Law Olmsted, the designer of New York City's Central Park, believed that the park's bucolic calm would instill the values of sobriety and self-control in the urban masses.

But by the end of the century it was clear that the urban masses wanted more excitement. This was clearly seen at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 in

Chicago, where the most popular area was the boisterous, rowdy Midway. Here, visitors rode the Ferris wheel and watched "Little Egypt" perform exotic dances. Entrepreneurs were quick to satisfy the public's desire for fast-paced entertainment. During the 1890s, a series of popular amusement parks opened in Coney Island. Unlike Central Park, Coney Island glorified adventure. It offered exotic, dreamland landscapes and a free, loose social environment. At Coney Island men could remove their coats and ties, and both sexes could enjoy rare personal freedom.

Coney Island also encouraged new values. If Central Park reinforced self-control and delayed gratification, Coney Island stressed the emerging consumer-oriented values of extravagance, gaiety, abandon, revelry, and instant gratification. It attracted working-class Americans, many of them recent immigrants, who longed for at least a taste of the "good life." If a person could never hope to own a mansion in Newport, he could for a few dimes experience the exotic pleasures of Luna Park or Dreamland Park.

Even the rides in the amusement parks were designed to create illusions and break down reality. Mirrors distorted people's images and rides threw them off balance. At Luna Park, the "Witching Waves" simulated the bobbing of a ship at high sea, and the "Tickler" featured spinning circular cars that threw riders together. At the end of the nineteenth century, Americans, rejecting oppressive Victorian norms and the restrictions of urban and industrial life, felt a craving for intense physical experience. In part, this desire be would met through sports, athletics, and out-of-doors activities. But it would primarily be met vicariously – through mass culture. Craving more intense physical and emotional experiences, eager to escape the confining boundaries of genteel culture, Americans turned to new kinds of newspapers and magazines, new forms of commercial entertainment, and, above all, the movies.

The rise of mass communications

The 1890s and 1900s were critical decades in the emergence of modern American mass culture. It was in those years that the modern instruments of mass communication – the mass-circulation metropolitan newspaper, the best-seller, the mass-market magazine, national advertising campaigns, and the movies – emerged. It was also in those years that American culture made a critical shift to commercialized forms of entertainment.

The urban tabloid was the first instrument of modern mass culture. Pioneered by Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* and William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal*, these popular newspapers differed dramatically from the staid, upper-class newspapers that dominated late nineteenth-century journalism: They featured banner headlines; a multitude of photographs and cartoons; an emphasis on local news, crime and scandal, society news, and sports; and large ads, which made up half of a paper's content compared to just 30 percent in earlier newspapers. To make them easier to read on a subway or streetcar, page size was cut, stories shortened, and the text heavily illustrated with drawings and photographs.

Entertainment was a stock-in-trade of yellow journalism (named from the "Yellow Kid" comic strip that appeared in Hearst's *Journal*). Among the innovations introduced by yellow journalists were the first color comic strips, advice columns, women's

pages, fashion pages, and sports pages. By using simple words, a lively style, and abundant illustrations, yellow journalism could reach a mass audience that included many immigrants who understood little English. By 1905, Pulitzer's *World* boasted a circulation of 2 million.

Also during the 1890s, the world of magazine publishing was revolutionized by the rise of the country's first mass-circulation national magazines. After the Civil War, the magazine field was dominated by a small number of sedate magazines, like *The Atlantic*, *Harper's*, and *Scribner's*, written for "gentle" readers with highly intellectual tastes. The poetry, serious fiction, and wood engravings that filled these monthlies' pages rigidly conformed to upper-class Victorian standards of taste. These magazines embodied what the philosopher George Santayana called the "genteel tradition": the idea that art and literature should reinforce morality, not portray reality. Art and literature, the custodians of culture believed, should transcend the real and uphold the ideal. Poet James Russell Lowell spoke for other genteel writers when he said that no man should describe any activity that would make his wife or daughter blush.

The founders of the nation's first mass-circulation magazines considered the older "quality" magazines stale and elitist. In contrast, their magazines featured practical advice, popular science, gossip, human interest stories, celebrity profiles, interviews, "muckraking" investigations, pictures, articles on timely topics, and a profusion of ads. Instead of cultivating a select audience, the new magazines sought to maximize circulation, which, in turn, attracted advertising that kept the magazine's price low. By 1900, the nation's largest magazine, the *Ladies' Home Journal*, reached 850,000 subscribers – more than eight times the readership of *Scribner's* or *Harper's*.

The end of the nineteenth century also marked a critical turning point in the history of book publishing, as marketing wizards like Frank Doubleday organized the first national book promotional campaigns, created the modern best-seller, and transformed popular writers like Jack London into celebrities. The world of the Victorian man of letters, the defender of "Culture" against "Anarchy," had ended.

In 1898, the National Biscuit Company (Nabisco) launched the first million-dollar national advertising campaign. It succeeded in making Uneeda biscuits and their waterproof "In-Er-Seal" box popular household items. During the 1880s and 1890s, patent medicine manufacturers, department stores, and producers of low-price, packaged consumer goods (including Campbell Soups, Heinz Ketchup, and Quaker Oats), developed modern advertising techniques. Where earlier advertisers made little use of brand names, illustrations, or trademarks, the new ads employed snappy slogans and colorful packages. As early as 1900, advertisements began using psychology to arouse consumer demand by suggesting that a product would contribute to the consumer's social and psychic well-being. For purchases to be promoted, observed a trade journal in 1890, a consumer "must be aroused, excited, terrified." Listerine mouthwash promised to cure "halitosis"; Scott tissue claimed to prevent infections caused by harsh toilet paper.

By stressing instant gratification and personal fulfillment, modern advertisers helped undermine the Victorian ethos of thrift, self-denial, delayed gratification, and hard work. In various ways, advertising transformed Americans from "savers" to "spenders" and urged them to satisfy their desire for luxury.

The creators of the modern instruments of mass culture tended to share a common element in their background. Most were "outsiders" – recent immigrants or Southerners, Midwesterners, or Westerners. Joseph Pulitzer was an Austrian Jew. The pioneering "new" magazine editors Edward W. Bok and Samuel Sidney McClure were also first-generation immigrants. Where the "genteel tradition" was dominated by men and women from Boston's Brahmin culture or upper-class New York, the men who created modern mass culture had their initial training in daily newspapers, commerce, and popular entertainment and, as a result, were more in touch with popular tastes. As outsiders, the creators of mass culture betrayed an almost voyeuristic interest in what they called the "romance of real life": with high life, low life, power, and status.

The new forms of popular culture that they helped create shared a common style: simple, direct, realistic, and colloquial. The 1890s were the years when a florid Victorian style was overthrown by a new "realistic" aesthetic. At various levels of American culture, writers and artists rebelled against the moralism and sentimentality of Victorian culture by portraying life objectively and truthfully, without idealization or avoidance of the ugly. The quest for realism took a variety of guises, whether in the naturalism of writers like Theodore Dreiser and Stephen Crane, with their nightmarish depictions of urban poverty and exploitation; the paintings of the "ashcan" school of art, with its vivid portraits of tenements and congested streets; or the forceful, colorful prose of tabloid reporters and muckraking journalists, who lifted the Victorian veil of reticence surrounding such topics as sex, political corruption, and industrial working conditions.

The most influential innovations in mass culture would take place after the turn of the century. Although Thomas Edison first successfully projected moving pictures on a screen in 1896, it would not be until 1903 that the first American movie to tell a story, Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery*, demonstrated the commercial appeal of motion pictures. And while Guglielmo Marconi showed the possibility of wireless communication in 1895, commercial radio broadcasting did not begin until 1920. Commercial television broadcasts only started in 1939. These new instruments of mass communications would reach audiences of unprecedented size. As early as 1922, the movies sold 40 million tickets a week and radios could be found in 3 million homes.

The emergence of these modern forms of mass communications had far-reaching social effects. They broke down the isolation of local neighborhoods and communities and ensured that for the first time all Americans, regardless of their class, ethnicity, or locality, shared standardized information and entertainment.

Commercialized leisure

Of all the differences between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, one of the most striking involves the rapid growth of commercialized entertainment. For much of the nineteenth century, commercial amusements were viewed as suspect. Drawing on the Puritan criticisms of play and recreation and a republican ideology that was hostile to luxury, hedonism, and extravagance, American Victorians associated theaters, dance halls, circuses, and organized sports with such vices as gambling, swearing, drinking,

and immoral sexual behavior. In the late nineteenth century, however, a new outlook that revered leisure and play began to challenge Victorian prejudices.

During the first 20 years of the new century, attendance at professional baseball games doubled. Vaudeville, too, increased in popularity, featuring singing, dancing, skits, comics, acrobats, and magicians. Amusement parks, penny arcades, dance halls, and other commercial amusements flourished. As early as 1910, when there were 10,000 movie theaters, the movies had become the nation's most popular form of commercial entertainment.

The rise of these new kinds of commercialized amusements radically reshaped the nature of American leisure activities. Earlier in the nineteenth century, as Kathy Peiss has shown, leisure activities were sharply segregated by gender, class, and ethnicity. The wealthy attended their own exclusive theaters, concert halls, museums, restaurants, and sporting clubs. For the working class, leisure and amusement were rooted in particular ethnic communities and neighborhoods, each with its own saloons, churches, fraternal organizations, and organized sports. Men and women participated in radically different kinds of leisure activities. Many men (particularly bachelors and immigrants) relaxed in barber shops, billiard halls, and bowling alleys; joined volunteer fire companies or militias; and patronized saloons, gambling halls, and race tracks. Women took part in church activities and socialized with neighbors and relatives.

After 1880, as incomes rose and leisure time expanded, new commercialized forms of cross-class, mixed-sex amusements proliferated. Entertainment became a major industry. Vaudeville theaters attracted women as well as men. The young, in particular, increasingly sought pleasure, escape, and the freedom to experiment in mixed-sex relationships in relatively inexpensive amusement parks, dance halls, urban nightclubs, and, above all, nickelodeons and movie theaters, free of parental control.

The transformation of Coney Island from a center of male vice – of brothels, saloons, and gambling dens – into the nation's first modern amusement park, complete with Ferris wheels, hootchie-kootchie girls, restaurants, and concert halls – symbolized the emergence of a new leisure culture that emphasized excitement, glamour, fashion, and romance. Its informality and sheer excitement attracted people of every class.

If Coney Island offered an escape from an oppressive urban landscape to an exotic one, the new motion picture industry would offer an even less expensive, more convenient escape. During the early twentieth century it quickly developed into the country's most popular and influential form of art and entertainment.

The Birth of the Movies

Beside Macy's Department Store in Herald Square in New York City there is a plaque commemorating the first public showing of a motion picture on a screen in the United States. It was here, on April 23, 1896, where Koster and Bial's Music Hall once stood, that Thomas Alva Edison presented a show which included scenes of the surf breaking on a beach, a comic boxing exhibition, and two young women dancing. A review in the *New York Times* described the exhibition as "wonderfully real and singularly exhilarating."

The pre-history of motion pictures

For centuries, people had wrestled with the problem of realistically reproducing moving images. A discovery by Ptolemy in the second century provided the first step. He noticed that there is a slight imperfection in human perception: the retina retains an image for a fraction of a second after the image has changed or disappeared. Because of this phenomenon, known as the "persistence of vision," a person would merge a rapid succession of individual images into the illusion of continuous motion.

The first successful efforts to project lifelike images on a screen took place in the mid-seventeenth century. By 1659, a Dutch scientist named Christiaan Huygens had invented the magic lantern, the forerunner of the modern slide projector, which he used to project medical drawings before an audience. A magic lantern used sunlight (or another light source) to illuminate a hand-painted glass transparency and project it through a simple lens. In the 1790s, the Belgian Etienne Gaspar Robert terrified audiences with fantasmagoric exhibitions, which used magic lanterns to project images of phantoms and apparitions of the dead. By the mid-nineteenth century, illustrated lectures and dramatic readings had become common. To create the illusion of motion, magic lantern operators used multiple lanterns and mirrors to move the image.

The first true moving images appeared in the 1820s, when the concept of the persistence of vision was used to create children's toys and other simple entertainments. The thaumatrope, which appeared in 1826, was a simple disk with separate images printed on each side (for example, a bird on one side and a cage on the other). When rapidly spun, the images appeared to blend together (so that the bird seemed to be inside the cage). In 1834 an Austrian military officer, Baron Franz von Uchatius, developed a more sophisticated device called the "Phenakistoscope." It consisted of a disk, with a series of slots along its edge, which was printed with a series of slightly differing pictures. When the disk was spun in front of a mirror and the viewer looked through the slots, the pictures appeared to move. A simpler way to display movement was the flip book, which became popular by the late 1860s. Each page showed a subject in a subtly different position. When a reader flipped the book's pages, the pictures gave the illusion of movement.

These early devices were not very satisfactory. The slides used in early magic lanterns had to be painted by hand. The pictures displayed by the Phenakistoscope or flip books could not be viewed by more than one person at a time. The solution to these problems lay in photography. In 1826, a French inventor named Joseph Nicéphore Niépce made the first true photograph. He placed a camera obscura (a box with a tiny opening on one side that admitted light) at his window and exposed a metal plate coated with light-sensitive chemicals for eight hours. During the 1830s another French inventor, Louis Daguerre, improved Niépce's technique and created the daguerreotype, the first popular form of photography.

Unfortunately, the daguerreotype was not very useful to the inventors who wanted to produce motion pictures. The process used expensive copper plates coated with silver and required a subject to remain motionless for 15 to 30 seconds. During the mid-nineteenth century, however, two key technical advances radically improved the photographic process. The first was the replacement of copper plates with less expensive glass plates, light-sensitive paper, and, in 1880, flexible film. The second

advance involved the development of new film coatings that significantly reduced exposure time and gave photographers greater mobility. By the late 1870s, the introduction of "dry-process plates" using gelatin emulsion reduced exposure time to just one-twenty-fifth of a second and freed photographers from having to immediately process their prints.

The first successful photographs of motion grew out of a California railroad tycoon's $25,000 bet. In 1872, California governor Leland Stanford hired a photographer named Eadweard Muybridge to help settle a bet. An avid horse breeder, Stanford had wagered that a galloping horse lifts all four hoofs off the ground simultaneously. In 1878, the English-born photographer lined up 24 cameras along the edge of a race track, with strings attached to the shutters. When the horse ran by, it tripped the shutters, producing 24 closely spaced pictures that proved Stanford's contention.

Four years later a French physiologist, Etienne-Jules Marey, became the first person to take pictures of motion with a single camera. Marey built his camera in the shape of a rifle. At the end of the barrel, he placed a circular photographic plate. A small motor rotated the plate after Marey snapped the shutter. With his camera, Marey could take 12 pictures per second.

In 1887, Thomas Edison gave William K.L. Dickson, one of his leading inventors, the task of developing a motion picture apparatus. Edison envisioned a machine "that should do for the eye what the phonograph did for the ear." Dickson initially modeled his device on Edison's phonograph, placing tiny pictures on a revolving drum. A light inside the drum was supposed to illuminate the pictures. Then he decided to use the flexible celluloid film that George Eastman had invented in 1880 and had begun to use in his Kodak camera. Dickson added perforations to the edge of the film strip to help it feed evenly into his camera.

To display their films, Dickson and Edison devised a coin-operated peepshow device called a "kinetoscope." Because the kinetoscope could only hold 50 feet of film, its films lasted just 35 to 40 seconds. This was too brief to tell a story; the first kinetoscope films were simply scenes of everyday life, like the first film, "Fred Ott's Sneeze," or reenactments of historical events, photographed bits of vaudeville routines, and pictures of well-known celebrities. Nevertheless, the kinetoscope was an instant success. By 1894 coin-operated kinetoscopes had begun to appear in hotels, department stores, saloons, and amusement arcades called nickelodeons.

Eager to maximize his profits, Edison showed no interest in building a movie projector. "If we make this screen machine," he argued, "it will spoil everything." As a result, Edison's competitors would take the lead in developing screen projection.

In devising a practical movie projector, inventors faced a serious technical problem: the projector had to be capable of stopping a frame momentarily, so that the image could be clearly fixed in the viewer's retina, and then advance the film quickly between frames. Two French brothers, Auguste and Louis Lumière, solved this problem by borrowing from the design of a sewing machine, which holds the material still during stitching before advancing it forward. In 1894, the Lumière brothers introduced the portable motion picture camera and projector.

Finally recognizing the potential of the motion picture projector, Edison entered into an agreement with a Washington DC realtor, Thomas Armat, who had designed a

workable projector. In April 1896 the two men unveiled the Vitascope and presented the first motion pictures on a public screen in the United States.

Competition in the early movie industry was fierce. Moviemakers launched over 200 patent infringement suits designed to force their competitors out of the industry. To protect profits and bring order to the industry, Edison spearheaded the creation of the Motion Picture Patents Company in 1909, consisting of six American companies and two French firms. Members of the trust agreed that only they had the right to make, print, or distribute cameras, projectors, or films. The trust also negotiated an exclusive agreement with Eastman Kodak for commercial-quality film stock.

Led by Carl Laemmle, later the founder of Universal Pictures, independent distributors and exhibitors filed a restraint of trade lawsuit under the Sherman Anti-Trust Act. A court ruled in the independents' behalf in 1915, and the decision was affirmed by a higher court in 1918. Yet even before the courts ruled in their favor, the independents broke the power of the trust in the marketplace. The trust viewed movies, in the famous words of director Erich von Stroheim, as so many sausages to be ground out as quickly as possible and rented at 10 cents a foot. But the independent moviemakers succeeded in defeating the trust with two potent weapons: the introduction of longer films that told complex stories, and the emergence of the star system.

During film's first decade – from 1896 to 1905 – movies were little more than a novelty, often used as a "chaser" that signaled the end of a show in a vaudeville theater. These early films are utterly unlike anything seen today. They lasted just 7 to 10 minutes – too brief to tell anything more than the simplest story. They used a cast of anonymous actors for the simple reason that the camera was set back so far that it was impossible to clearly make out anyone's face. As late as 1908, a movie actor made no more than $8 a day and received no credit on the screen.

In 1905, hundreds of little movie theaters opened, called nickelodeons, since they sold admission nickel by nickel. By 1908 there were an estimated 8,000 to 10,000 nickelodeons. Contrary to popular belief, the nickelodeon's audience was not confined to the poor, the young, or the immigrant. From the start, theaters were situated in rural areas and in middle-class as well as working-class neighborhoods. Nevertheless, the movies attracted unprecedented audiences as a result of their low admission prices, "democratic" seating arrangements, convenient time schedules (films were shown again and again), and lack of spoken dialogue, which allowed non-English-speaking immigrants to enjoy films.

By 1907, narrative films were becoming more common. But most films still emphasized stunts and chases and real-life events, such as scenes of yacht races or train crashes, and were rented or sold by the foot regardless of subject matter. Exhibitors were expected to assemble scenes together to form a larger show.

The formation of the movie trust ushered in a period of rationalization within the film industry. Cameras and projecting equipment were standardized; film rental fees were fixed; theaters were upgraded; and the practice of selling films outright ended, which improved the quality of movies by removing damaged prints from circulation. This was also a period of intense artistic and technical innovation, as pioneering directors like David Wark Griffith and others created a new language of film and revolutionized screen narrative.

With just six months of film experience, Griffith, a former stage actor, was hired as a director by the Biograph Company and promised $50 a week and one-twentieth of a cent for every foot of film sold to a rental exchange. Each week, Griffith turned out two or three one-reelers (one reel contained about ten minutes' worth of film). While earlier directors had used such cinematic devices as close-ups, slow motion, and fade-ins and fade-outs, Griffith refined these techniques into a wholly new style of storytelling, distinct from live theater.

Griffith's approach to movie storytelling has been aptly called "photographic realism." This is not to say that he merely wished to record a story accurately. Rather, he sought to convey the illusion of realism. He used editing to convey simultaneous events or the passage of time. He demanded that his performers act in a lifelike manner, avoiding the broad, exaggerated gestures and pantomiming of emotions that characterized the nineteenth-century stage. He wanted his performers to take on a role rather than directly addressing the camera. Above all, he used close-ups, lighting, editing, and framing and other cinematic techniques to build suspense and other emotions and to focus the audience's attention on individual performers.

By focusing the camera on particular actors and actresses, Griffith inadvertently encouraged the development of the star system. As early as 1910, newspapers were deluged with requests for actors' names. Most studios kept their identities secret, fearing the salary demands of popular performers. But the film trust's leading opponent, Carl Laemmle, was convinced that the key to financial stability lay in producing films featuring popular stars. As one industry observer put it, "In the 'star' your producer gets not only a 'production' value … but a 'trademark' value, and an 'insurance' value which are … very potent in guaranteeing the sale of this product." In 1910 Laemmle created the first star when he lured Florence Lawrence, the most popular anonymous actress, away from Biograph, and launched an unprecedented publicity campaign on her behalf. As the star system emerged, salaries soared. Actress Mary Pickford's salary jumped from less than $400 a week in 1914 to $10,000 a week in 1916.

Meanwhile, an influx of feature-length films from Europe, which attracted premium admission prices, led a New York nickelodeon owner named Adolph Zukor to produce four- and five-reel films featuring readily identifiable stars. By 1916, Zukor had taken control of Paramount Pictures, a movie distributor, and instituted the practice of "block booking," requiring theaters to book a number of films rather than just a single film. Within a few years, Zukor's company had achieved vertical integration. Paramount not only produced films, but also distributed them and owned the theaters that exhibited them.

During the second decade of the twentieth century, immigrants like Laemmle and Zukor came to dominate the movie business. Unlike Edison and the other American-born, Protestant businessmen who had controlled the early film industry, these immigrant entrepreneurs had an innate sense of what the public wanted to see. Virtually all of these new producers had emigrated to the United States from central Europe and were Jewish. Not part of the Victorian ethos that still held sway in "respectable" Protestant America, they willingly exploited ribald humor and sex in their films. Less conservative than the American-born producers, they experimented with such innovations as the star system and feature-length productions. Since many had come to the film industry from the garment and fur trades, where fashions change

rapidly and the successful businessman is one who stays in constant touch with the latest styles, they tried to give the public what it wanted. As Samuel Goldwyn, one of the leading moguls, noted,

> If the audience don't like a picture, they have a good reason. The public is never wrong. I don't go for all this thing that when I have a failure, it is because the audience doesn't have the taste or education, or isn't sensitive enough. The public pays money. It wants to be entertained. That's all I know.

With this philosophy the outsiders wrestled control over the industry away from the American-born producers.

During the 1920s and 1930s, a small group of film companies consolidated their control. Known as the "Big Five" – Paramount, Warner Bros., RKO, 20th Century-Fox, and Loew's (MGM) – and the "Little Three" – Universal, Columbia, and United Artists – they formed fully integrated companies. With the exception of United Artists, which was solely a distributor, the "majors" owned their own production facilities, ran their own worldwide distribution networks, and controlled theater chains that were committed to showing the company's products. And at the head of each major studio was a powerful mogul. Such giants as Adolph Zukor, William Fox, Louis B. Mayer, Samuel Goldwyn, Carl Laemmle, Harry Cohn, Joseph Schenck, and the Warner brothers determined what the public was going to see. It was their vision – patriotic, sentimental, secular, and generally politically conservative – which millions of Americans shared weekly at local movie theaters. And as expressed by such producers as Irving Thalberg, Darryl F. Zanuck, and David O. Selznick, it was a powerful vision indeed.

American film in the silent era

Some film historians, like Lewis Jacobs and David Robinson, have argued that early silent films revolved around "characteristically working-class settings," and expressed the interests of the poor in their struggles with the rich and powerful. Other scholars maintain that early movies drew largely upon conventions, stock characters, and routines derived from vaudeville, popular melodrama, Wild West shows, comic strips, and other forms of late nineteenth-century popular entertainment. Given the fact that thousands of films were released during the silent era and relatively few have survived, it is dangerous to generalize about movie content. Nevertheless, certain statements about these films do seem warranted.

American films were born in an age of reform, and many early silent movies took as their subject matter the major social and moral issues of the Progressive era: birth control, child labor, divorce, immigration, political corruption, poverty, prisons, prostitution, and women's suffrage. The tone of these films varied widely. Some were realistic and straightforward, others treated their subjects with sentimentality or humor, and many transformed complex social issues into personal melodramas. Yet there can be no doubt that many silent films dealt at least obliquely with the dominant issues of the time.

Although many Americans today think of the films of the silent era as relics of a more innocent age, serious social and political themes lurked "behind the mask

of innocence." As Kevin Brownlow has demonstrated, despite their well-dressed tramps and child-like waifs, many early silent films were preoccupied with such broad issues as the causes of crime, the nature of political corruption, shifting sexual norms, and the changing role of women. The silent screen offered vivid glimpses of urban tenements and ethnic ghettoes. Cinematic gangsters, loan sharks, drug addicts, and panderers provided a graphic record of "how the other half lives."

In addition, many early films were laced with anti-authoritarianism, poking fun at bumbling cops, corrupt politicians, and intrusive upper-class reformers. Highly physical slapstick comedy offered a particularly potent vehicle of social criticism, spoofing the pretensions of the wealthy and presenting sympathetic portraits of the poor. Mack Sennett, one of the most influential directors of silent comedy, later recalled the themes of his films: "I especially liked the reduction of authority to absurdity, the notion that sex could be funny, and the bold insults hurled at Pretension."

Many films of the early silent era dealt with gender relations. Before 1905, as Kathy Peiss has argued, movie screens were filled with salacious sexual imagery and risqué humor drawn from burlesque halls and vaudeville theaters. Early films offered glimpses of women disrobing or of passionate kisses. As the movies' female audience grew, sexual titillation and voyeurism persisted. But an ever-increasing number of films dealt with the changing work and sexual roles of women in a more sophisticated manner. While D.W. Griffith's films presented an idealized picture of the frail Victorian child-woman, and showed an almost obsessive preoccupation with female honor and chastity, other silent movies presented quite different images of femininity. These included the exotic, sexually aggressive vamp; the athletic, energetic "serial queen"; the street-smart urban working gal; and the cigarette-smoking, alcohol-drinking chorus girl.

In the late 1910s and the 1920s, as Lary May has demonstrated, the movies began shedding their Victorian moralism, sentimentality, and reformism in favor of glamour, sophistication, exoticism, urbanity, and sex appeal. New kinds of movie stars appeared: the mysterious sex goddess, personified by Greta Garbo; the passionate, hot-blooded Latin lover, epitomized by Rudolph Valentino; and the flapper, first brought to the screen by Colleen Moore, with her bobbed hair, skimpy skirts, and incandescent vivacity. New genres also appeared: swashbuckling adventures; sophisticated sex comedies revolving around the issue of marital fidelity; romantic dramas examining the manners and morals of the well-bred and well-to-do; and tales of "flaming youth" and the new sexual freedom.

During the 1920s a sociologist named Herbert Blumer interviewed students and young workers to assess the impact of motion pictures on their lives. He concluded that movies reoriented their minds away from ethnic and working-class communities toward a broader consumer culture. Observed one high-school student: "The day-dreams instigated by the movies consist of clothes, ideas on furnishings and manners." Said an African American student: "The movies have often made me dissatisfied with my neighborhood because when I see a movie, the beautiful castle, palace … and beautiful house, I wish my home was something like these." Hollywood not only expressed popular values, aspirations, and fantasies, it also promoted cultural change.

The movies as a cultural battleground

Reformers of the Progressive era took a highly ambivalent view of the movies. Some praised movies as a benign alternative to the saloon. Others viewed nickelodeons and movie theaters as breeding grounds of crime and sexual promiscuity. In 1907, the *Chicago Tribune* threw its editorial weight against the movies, declaring that they were "without a redeeming feature to warrant their existence … ministering to the lowest passions of childhood." That year, Chicago established the nation's first censorship board, to protect its population "against the evil influence of obscene and immoral representations." Also in 1907, and again in 1908, New York's mayor, under pressure from various religious and reform groups, temporarily closed all of the city's nickelodeons and movie theaters.

Many middle-class vice crusaders sought to regulate the new medium. A presidential study concluded that films encouraged "illicit lovemaking and iniquity." A Worcester, Massachusetts, newspaper described the city's movie theaters as centers of delinquent activity, and reported that female gang members "confessed that their early tendencies toward evil came from seeing moving pictures." Several bills were introduced in Congress calling for movie censorship.

The drive to censor films spread, especially after a 1915 Supreme Court ruling that movies were not protected by the First Amendment because they "were a business pure and simple … not to be regarded as part of the press of the country or as organs of public opinion." Eager to combat the trend toward local censorship, movie manufacturers worked with moral reformers in New York to establish the voluntary National Board of Censorship of Motion Pictures in 1909, to review the movies' treatment of violence, drugs, prostitution, and, above all, sexual immorality (such as "over-passionate love scenes; stimulating close dancing; unnecessary bedroom scenes in negligee; excessively low-cut gowns; [and] undue or suggestive display of the person").

After World War I a series of sex scandals renewed threats of censorship or boycotts. Director William Desmond Taylor was found murdered under suspicious circumstances. Actor Wallace Reid committed suicide amid allegations of drug addiction. Comedian Fatty Arbuckle was acquitted of rape and complicity in murder. To clean up Hollywood's image, the industry banned Arbuckle and a number of other individuals implicated in scandals and appointed Will Hays, President Warren Harding's Postmaster General, to head their trade organization. Hays introduced a voluntary, and largely ignored, code of moral standards.

The rise of Hollywood and the arrival of sound

In cinema's earliest days, the film industry was based in the nation's theatrical center, New York. Most films were made in New York or New Jersey, although a few were shot in Chicago, Florida, and elsewhere. Beginning in 1908, however, a growing number of filmmakers located in southern California, drawn by cheap land and labor, the ready accessibility of varied scenery, and an ideal climate for year-round outdoor filming. Contrary to popular mythology, moviemakers did not move to Hollywood to escape the film trust; the first studio to move to Hollywood, Selig, was actually a trust member.

By the early 1920s, Hollywood had become the world's film capital. Hollywood bolstered its position as world leader by recruiting many of Europe's most talented actors and actresses, such as Greta Garbo and Hedy Lamarr, directors such as Ernst Lubitsch and Josef von Sternberg, as well as camera operators, lighting technicians, and set designers. By the end of the decade, Hollywood claimed to be the nation's fifth largest industry, attracting 83 cents out of every dollar Americans spent on amusement.

Hollywood symbolized "the new morality" of the 1920s, mixing extravagance, glamour, hedonism, and fun. Where else but Hollywood would an actress like Gloria Swanson bathe in a solid gold bathtub, or a screen cowboy like Tom Mix have his name raised atop his house in six-foot-high letters?

During the 1920s, movie attendance soared. By the middle of the decade 50 million people a week went to the movies, the equivalent of half the nation's population. In Chicago in 1929, theaters had enough seats for half the city's residents to attend a movie each day.

As attendance rose, the moviegoing experience underwent a profound change. During the twentieth century's first two decades, moviegoing tended to conform to class and ethnic divisions. Urban workers attended movie houses in their own working-class and ethnic neighborhoods, where admission was extremely inexpensive (averaging just 7 cents during the 1910s), and a movie was often accompanied by an amateur talent show or a performance by a local ethnic troupe. These working-class theaters were rowdy, high-spirited centers of neighborhood sociability where mothers brought their babies and audiences cheered, jeered, shouted, whistled, and stamped their feet.

The theaters patronized by the middle class were quite different. Late in the new century's first decade, theaters in downtown or middle-class neighborhoods became increasingly luxurious. At first many of these theaters were designed in the same styles as many other public buildings, but by around 1915 movie houses began featuring French Renaissance, Egyptian, Moorish, and other exotic decors. The Strand Theater in Worcester, Massachusetts, boasted "red plush seats," "luxurious carpets," "rich velour curtains," "finely appointed toilet rooms," and a $15,000 pipe organ. Unlike the working-class movie houses, which showed films continuously, these high-class theaters had specific show times and well-groomed, uniformed ushers enforcing standards of decorum.

During the late 1920s independent neighborhood theaters catering to a distinct working-class audience were bought up by regional and national chains. As a result, the moviegoing experience became standardized, with working-class and middle-class theaters offering the same programs. Especially after the introduction of the "talkies," many working-class movie houses shut down, unable to meet the cost of converting to sound.

For decades, engineers had searched for a practical technology to add synchronized recorded sound to the movies. In the 1890s, Thomas Edison tried unsuccessfully to popularize the kinetophone, which combined a kinetoscope with a phonograph. In 1923 Lee De Forest, an American inventor, demonstrated the practicality of placing a soundtrack directly on a film strip, presenting a newsreel interview with President Calvin Coolidge and musical accompaniments to several films. But the film industry showed remarkably little interest in sound, despite the growing popularity of radio. Hollywood feared the high cost of converting to sound technology.