



# THE MUSEUM OF WESTERN FILM HISTORY

## The Early Years of an Industry (1900 – 1930) A Brief Introduction to Movie Industry

The movie industry began in 1888 with the work of Louis Le Prince, and up until 1903 films had consisted of one-reelers that usually lasted from between 10 to 12 minutes. The running time represented the amount of film that could be wound onto a camera's standard reel, hence the term. Edwin S. Porter was a former projectionist and exhibitor who had taken charge of motion-picture production at Thomas Edison's company in 1901. He fully realized the potential of motion pictures as an entertainment medium and began making longer films that told a story. As with the films of Georges Méliès, these required multiple shots that could be edited into a narrative sequence.

The most famous work of early movies, [\*The Great Train Robbery\*](#) (1903) is credited with establishing the movies as a commercial entertainment medium. It was notable for rapid shifts of location, including action on a moving train. Although there had previously been short films that referenced the Wild West or paid homage to it, ***The Great Train Robbery* marked the birth of the western genre.**

Many movies and television programs and series were filmed at movie ranches, primarily in Southern California, often within the 35-mile limit to avoid union travel stipends. Some were owned by the studios, but others were independent.

The 1920s saw a vast expansion of Hollywood film making and worldwide film going. Throughout the decade, film production increasingly focused on the feature film rather than the "short" or "two-reeler." This is a change that had begun with the long [\*D.W. Griffith\*](#) epics of the mid-1910s. In Hollywood, numerous small studios were taken over and made a part of larger studios, creating the Studio System that would run American film making until the 1960s. MGM (founded in the middle of the decade) and Paramount were the highest-grossing studios during the period, with Fox, Universal, United Artists, and Warner Brothers making up a large part of the remaining market.



Even the earliest films were organized into genres or types, with instantly-recognizable storylines, settings, costumes, and characters flourished during the decade. The major genre emphasis was on swashbucklers, historical extravaganzas, melodramas, mysteries, comedies and westerns (such as Cruze's, [\*The Covered Wagon\*](#) (1923) **considered the first epic western.** Modern romantic comedy flourished during the decade. Stars such as Douglas Fairbanks, Ramon Novarro, Pola Negri, Nazimova, Greta Garbo, Mary Pickford, Lilian Gish, Francis X. Bushman, Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, Lon Chaney, Rudolph Valentino, John Gilbert, Clara Bow, Gloria Swanson, Joan Crawford, George O'Brien and John Barrymore created some of their most memorable roles and films during the period.

Stylistically, the influence of German Expressionism, Soviet Montage Editing, and Realism made profound aesthetic changes to film over the course of the decade. A more artistic approach to composition on the screen shifted filmmaking away from its earlier obsession with showing the world "as it is."

By the mid-to-late-1920s, the silent "art film" was on the rise with some of the greatest silent film achievements, such as Josef von Sternberg's *Underworld* (1927) and *The Last Command* (1928), King Vidor's *The Crowd* (1928), and F. W. Murnau's *Sunrise* (1927). Erich von Stroheim's ultra-realist films such as *Greed* (1924) also had a big influence.

Throughout most of the decade, silent films were the predominant product of the film industry, having evolved from vaudevillian roots. But the films were becoming bigger (or longer), costlier, and more polished. They were being manufactured, assembly-line style, in Hollywood's 'entertainment factories,' in which production was broken down and organized into its various components (writing, costuming, makeup, directing, etc.). [The transition to sound-on-film technology occurred mid-decade with the talkies developed in 1926-1927, following experimental techniques begun in the late 1910s. Fox Studios and the Warner Brothers were crucial in the development and acceptance of the technology of sound in motion pictures.](#)

With sound, the concept of the musical appeared immediately, as in *The Jazz Singer* of 1927, because silent films had been accompanied by music for years when projected in theaters. Sound also greatly changed the Hollywood approach to storytelling, with more dependence on dialogue and less creative use of the visual element.

Also, in 1927, the [International Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences](#) was formed. Later, "International" was removed from the name. Today, The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences is most famous for its annual presentation of The Academy Awards, also known as the Oscars.

By the end of the decade, there were [20 Hollywood studios](#), and the demand for films was greater than ever. Most people are unaware that the greatest output of feature films in the US occurred in the 1920s and 1930s (averaging about 800 film releases in a year) - nowadays, it is remarkable when production exceeds 500 films in a year.

### **The Major Film Studios: The Big Five**

1920-1930 was the decade between the end of the Great War and the Depression following the Stock Market crash. Film theaters and studios were not initially affected in this decade by the Crash in late 1929. The basic patterns and foundations of the film industry (and its economic organization) were established in the 1920s. The studio system was essentially born with long-term contracts for stars, lavish production values, and increasingly rigid control of directors and stars by the studio's production chief and in-house publicity departments. After World War I and into the early 1920s, America was the leading producer of films in the world - using Thomas Ince's "factory system" of production, although the system did limit the creativity of many directors. Production was in the hands of the major studios (that really flourished after 1927 for almost 20 years), and the star system was burgeoning.

Originally, in the earliest years of the motion picture industry, production, distribution, and exhibition were separately controlled. When the industry rapidly grew, these functions became integrated under one directorship to maximize profits, something called vertical integration. There were eight major (and minor) studios (see below) that dominated the industry. They were the ones that had most successfully consolidated and integrated all aspects of a film's development. By 1929, the film-making firms that were to rule and monopolize Hollywood for the next half-century were the giants or the majors, sometimes

dubbed The Big Five. They produced more than 90 percent of the fiction films in America and distributed their films both nationally and internationally. Each studio somewhat differentiated its products from other studios.

## The Big Five Studios



1. **Warner Bros. Pictures** was incorporated in 1923 by Polish brothers (Jack, Harry, Albert, and Sam). In 1925, Warner Brothers merged with First National, forming Warner Bros.-First National Pictures.

2. **Adolph Zukor's Famous Players** (1912) and Jesse Lasky's Feature Play - merged in 1916 to form Famous Players-Lasky Corporation. It spent \$1 million on United Studios' property (on Marathon Street) in 1926. The Famous Players-Lasky Corporation became Paramount studios in 1927, and was officially named Paramount Pictures in 1935.



3. **RKO (Radio-Keith-Orpheum)** Pictures, evolved from the Mutual Film Corporation (1912), was established in 1928 as a subsidiary of RCA. It was formed by RCA, Keith-Orpheum Theaters, and the FBO Company (Film Booker's Organization) - which was owned by Joseph P. Kennedy (who had already purchased what remained of Mutual).

4. Marcus Loew of Loew's, Inc., was the parent firm of what eventually became **Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer**. Metro Pictures Corporation was a production company founded in 1916 by Richard A. Rowland and Louis B. Mayer. In 1918, Mayer left this partnership to start up his own production company in 1918, called Louis B. Mayer Pictures. In 1920, Metro Pictures Corporation (with its already-acquired Goldwyn Pictures Corporation) was purchased by early theater exhibitor Marcus Loew of Loew's Inc. In another acquisition, Loew merged his Metro-Goldwyn production company with Louis B. Mayer Pictures. The famous MGM lion roar in the studio's opening logo was first recorded and viewed in a film in 1928.



5. **Fox Film Corporation**/Foundation, was founded in 1912 by NY nickelodeon owner William Fox (originally a garment industry worker). Its first film was *Life's Shop Window* (1914). In 1935, it became 20th-Century Fox, formed from the merger of two companies: 20th Century Pictures Company (founded in 1933 by Darryl F. Zanuck, the head of production at Warners and Joseph Schenck, brother of Nicholas Schenk, president of Loew's, the parent company of MGM) Fox Film became most known for Fox Movietone news and then B-westerns; it was also famous for Shirley Temple films in the mid-30s and Betty Grable musicals in the 40s.



The Big-Five studios had vast studios with elaborate sets for film production. They owned their own film-exhibiting theatres (about 50% of the seating capacity in the US in mostly first-run houses in major cities), as well as production and distribution facilities. They distributed their films to this network of studio-owned, first-run theaters (or movie palaces), mostly in urban areas, which charged high ticket prices and drew huge audiences. They required blind or block bookings of films, whereby theatre owners were required to rent a block of films (often cheaply-made, less-desirable B-pictures) in order for the studio to agree to distribute the one prestige A-level picture that the theatre owner wanted to exhibit. This technique set the terms for a film's release and patterns of exhibition and

guaranteed success for the studio's productions.

Note: Monopolistic studio control lasted twenty years until the late 1940s, when a federal decree (in U.S. vs. Paramount) ordered the studios to divest their theatres, similar to the rulings against the MPPC - the Edison Trust.

### **The Minor Film Studios: The Little Three**

Three smaller, minor studios were dubbed The Little Three, because each of them lacked one of the three elements required in vertical integration - owning their own theaters:

1. **Universal Pictures**, (or Universal Film Manufacturing Co) was founded by Carl Laemmle in 1912. It was formed from a merger of Laemmle's own IMP - Independent Motion Picture Company (founded in 1909) with Bison 101, the U. S. production facilities of French studio Éclair, Nestor Film Co., and several other film companies.



2. **United Artists** was formed in 1919 by movie industry icons Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, Sr., Charlie Chaplin, and director D.W. Griffith as an independent company to produce and distribute their films. United Artists utilized an 18-acre property owned by Pickford and Fairbanks, known as the Pickford-Fairbanks Studio, and later named United Artists Studio in the 1920s.

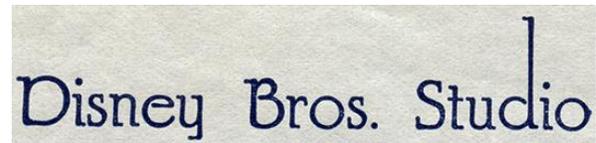
3. **Columbia Pictures** was originally the C.B.C. Film Sales Corporation founded in 1920 by brothers Jack and Harry Cohn, and Joseph Brandt, and officially named Columbia in 1924.



### **"Poverty Row" Studios and Other Independents:**

Other studios or independents also existed in a shabby area in Hollywood dubbed "Poverty Row" (Sunset Blvd. and Gower Street) where cheap, independent pictures were made with low budgets, stock footage, and second-tier actors. It was the site of Harry and Jack Cohn's new business, the C.B.C. Film Sales Company (later becoming Columbia Pictures). Many of the films of the independents were either horror films, westerns, science-fiction, or thrillers:

Disney Studios - specializing in animation; Walt and Roy Disney originally opened their first studio in 1923 in Los Angeles in the back of the Holly-Vermont Realty office, and called it Disney Bros. Studio; in a few years, they opened a new facility in downtown LA; in the late 30s, they relocated to a 51-acre lot in Burbank, and changed their name to Walt Disney Productions



**Monogram Picture Corporation** - Rayart Pictures, which had taken over the old Selig Studio in Echo Park in 1924, became Monogram Pictures in 1930; it was founded by W. Ray Johnston to make mostly inexpensive Westerns and series (Charlie Chan, the Bowery Boys, etc.)

[Selznick International Pictures](#) / David O. Selznick - it was formed in 1935 and headed up by David O. Selznick (previously the head of production at RKO), the son of independent film producer Lewis J. Selznick, the founder of Selznick Pictures



[Samuel Goldwyn Pictures](#) - headed up by independent film producer Samuel L. Goldwyn

[Republic Pictures](#) - founded in 1935 by the merger of smaller "poverty row" studios: Consolidated Film Industries, Mascot, Monogram and Liberty, and headed by Herbert Yates of Consolidated



### Extravagant Movie Palaces:

The 1920s was also the decade of the "Picture Palaces": large urban and luxurious theaters that could seat 1-2,000 guests at a time, with full orchestral accompaniment and very decorative design (often a mix of Italian, Spanish, and Baroque styles). These picture palaces were often owned by the studios and used to premier and first-run their major films.



The 3,300-seat Strand Theater opened in 1914 in New York City, marking the end of the nickelodeon era and the beginning of an age of the luxurious movie palaces. By 1920, there were more than 20,000 movie houses operating in the US. The largest theatre in the world (with over 6,000 seats), the Roxy Theater (dubbed "The Cathedral of the Motion Picture"), opened in New York City in 1927, with a 6,200 seat capacity. It was opened by impresario Samuel Lionel "Roxy" Rothafel at a cost of \$10

million. The first feature film shown at the Roxy Theater was UA's *The Love(s) of Sunya* (1927) starring Gloria Swanson (she claimed that it was her personal favorite film) and John Boles. The Roxy was finally closed in 1960 and was unchallenged as a showplace until Radio City Music Hall opened five years later.

Grauman's Theatres: Grauman's Chinese Theatre Impresario Sid Grauman built a number of movie palaces in the Los Angeles area in this time period:



The Million Dollar Theater (on S. Broadway in downtown Los Angeles), the first movie palace in Los Angeles, opened in February, 1918 with 2,345 seats, and premiered the William S. Hart western *film The Silent Man* (1917)

The Egyptian Theatre (on Hollywood Boulevard) opened in 1922 with 1,760 seats; it was the first major movie palace outside of downtown Los Angeles, and noted as having Hollywood's first movie premiere; its opening film was *Robin Hood* (1922) that starred Douglas Fairbanks; the theatre's creation was inspired by the discovery of King Tut's tomb that same year





The now-famous Chinese Theater, with 2,258 seats, opened in Hollywood (on Hollywood Boulevard) in May, 1927 with the premiere of Cecil B. De Mille's *King of Kings* (1927).

Note: [The Hays Code](#)

The Hays Code and the end of the Pre-Code era: In response to a number of scandals in the 1920s, the studios adopted a series of guidelines known as the "Hays Code", after its creator Will H. Hays. Hays was the head of the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors Association, which would later be renamed as the Motion Picture Association of America in 1945. Starting in 1927, Hays began compiling a list of topics which he thought Hollywood should avoid. The code was revealed and implemented in 1930, but it was not until 1934, with the establishment of the Production Code Administration, that it was significantly enforced. Due to this delay in enforcement capability, the Pre-Code era of Hollywood is technically considered to last until 1934, despite the code itself being unveiled in 1930.

The specific date in which the Pre-Code era ends could be considered July 1, 1934. According to an amendment made on June 13, 1934, all films released after July 1 of that year had to receive a PCA certificate of approval.

After this, the code was stringently enforced, though various forbidden subjects became less taboo and thus regulations regarding them were gradually relaxed. The code would remain in effect until 1968, when it was abandoned entirely. It was then replaced by the familiar letter rating system.

Links:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Major\\_film\\_studio#The\\_majors\\_before\\_the\\_Golden\\_Age](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Major_film_studio#The_majors_before_the_Golden_Age)

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