

Hollywood in the 1930s

(September 26, 2005)

- Howard Hawks, *Bringing Up Baby* (1938)
- The introduction of sound (1927)
- The Great Depression (starts 1929)
- 1930s Hollywood Genres
 - Musical
 - Crime film
 - Screwball comedy
- The studio system
- The Hays code
- Major directors (Howard Hawks, John Ford, Josef von Sternberg, and others)

The Transition to Sound

- *The Jazz Singer* (Oct 6, 1927)
- *The Lights of New York* (1928): first “all-talkie”
- US movie theaters converted for sound by the end of 1929
- A somewhat slower transition in Europe
- Slower still in USSR and in Japan

Economics of the Transition

- Huge expenses of the conversion
 - Studios go into massive debt, 1928-1929
 - Expanded involvement of Wall Street financiers in Hollywood
- The Great Depression (starting Oct 1929)
- Hollywood remains prosperous until 1932
- Cost-cutting and the studio system
 - Rationalization of expenses
 - Vertical integration of the film industry (production/distribution/exhibition)

New Genres

(with some examples)

- The musical
 - Busby Berkeley (*42nd Street*, Warner Bros, 1933)
 - Fred Astaire/Ginger Rogers (*Swing Time*, RKO, George Stevens, 1936)
- The Crime Film
 - *Little Caesar* (starring Edward G. Robinson, dir. Mervyn LeRoy, Warner Bros, 1930)
 - *The Public Enemy* (starring James Cagney, dir. William Wellman, 1931)
- Screwball Comedy (1934-1944)

The Hollywood Studio System

- Vertical integration of the movie business
- Comprehensive production facilities
- Standardized, assembly-line mode of production
- The 5 majors own their own theater chains
- Blind bidding and block booking for independent theaters
- Guaranteed runs, guaranteed profit

How the Studios Worked

- Projects initiated from top down
- Studio bosses buy properties, choose stars, assign writers & directors
- Multiple writers often used on each project
- Directors often had no say in pre- and post-production
- Occasional internal production units
- Frequent direct intervention by studio head in all aspects of production

Economics of the Studios

- Vertical integration guaranteed stability
- Niche markets (B-movies, newsreels, cartoons, etc)
- Struggles between Hollywood moguls and East Coast money men (e.g. Louis Meyer vs. Nick Schenk at MGM)
- Studios default on loans in early 1930s (leading to consolidation and cost-cutting measures)
- Partial recovery in mid-to-late 1930s
- Big profits in the War boom of the early 1940s

The Studios

- The five majors
 - MGM
 - Paramount
 - Warner Bros
 - 20th Century Fox
 - RKO
- The three minors (don't own theater chains)
 - Universal
 - Columbia
 - United Artists
- Others
 - Disney
 - Poverty row (Republic, Monogram, etc)
 - Ethnic cinema

MGM

- In Charge: Louis B. Mayer, Irving Thalberg
- Directors: George Cukor, Frank Borzage
- Actresses: Greta Garbo, Joan Crawford, Norma Shearer, Myrna Loy, Jean Harlow
- Actors: Clark Gable, Robert Taylor, William Powell, Walter Pidgeon, Melvyn Douglas, Spencer Tracy, Mickey Rooney, James Stewart
- Some Typical Films: *Grand Hotel*, *Camille*, *Dinner at Eight*, *Mutiny on the Bounty*, *Thin Man* series of films, *The Wizard of Oz*
- Known For: glitz and glamour

Paramount

- In Charge: Adolph Zukor, Barney Balaban
- Directors: Cecil B. DeMille, Ernst Lubitsch, Josef von Sternberg, Rouben Mamoulian, Mitchell Leisen, Dorothy Arzner
- Actresses: Marlene Dietrich, Mae West, Claudette Colbert, Sylvia Sydney
- Actors: Maurice Chevalier, Marx Bros, Gary Cooper, Cary Grant, Ray Milland, George Raft
- Some Typical Films: *Trouble in Paradise*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *Death Takes a Holiday*, *Easy Living*
- Known For: European sophistication

Warner Brothers

- In Charge: Jack & Harry Warner, Hal Willis
- Directors: Michael Curtiz, Mervyn LeRoy, Busby Berkeley
- Actresses: Bette Davis, Joan Blondell, Barbara Stanwyck
- Actors: James Cagney, Edward G. Robinson, Paul Muni, Erroll Flynn, Humphrey Bogart
- Some Typical Films: *Little Caesar*, *Public Enemy*, *42nd Street*, *I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang*, *The Roaring Twenties*, *The Life of Emile Zola*
- Known For: Working-class grittiness. Also musicals and biopics

20th Century Fox

- In Charge: Darryl Zanuck
- Directors: John Ford
- Actresses: Shirley Temple, Loretta Young
- Actors: Henry Fonda, Charles Boyer
- Some Typical Films: *Young Mr. Lincoln*, *Drums Along the Mohawk*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *How Green Was My Valley*, Shirley Temple films, Charlie Chan films
- Known For: John Ford films, Shirley Temple films

RKO

- In Charge: kept changing through the 30s
- Directors: most often on loan from other studios (e.g. John Ford, George Cukor, Howard Hawks)
- Actresses: Katherine Hepburn, Ginger Rogers
- Actors: Fred Astaire
- Some Typical Films: *King Kong*, Astaire and Rogers musicals
- Known For: stylish and sophisticated musicals (Astaire & Rogers); also literary adaptations, plus *King Kong*. This is the studio that allowed Orson Welles to make *Citizen Kane*

Universal

- In Charge: Carl Laemmle, then various others
- Directors: James Whale, Todd Browning, Karl Freund, John Stahl, Lewis Milestone
- Actresses: Deanna Durbin
- Actors: Boris Karloff, Bela Lugosi
- Some Typical Films: *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *Imitation of Life*
- Known For: Horror; also melodrama

Columbia

- In Charge: Harry Cohn
- Directors: Frank Capra
- Actresses: Jean Arthur (plus many on loan from the majors)
- Actors: Ronald Coleman (plus many on loan from the majors)
- Some Typical Films: *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, *It Happened One Night*, *His Girl Friday*
- Known For: Frank Capra, screwball comedies

United Artists

- UA was not really a studio; it was involved in distribution only, working with independent productions
- Charlie Chaplin (part owner of UA)
 - *City Lights*
 - *Modern Times*
- Samuel Goldwyn (classy features)
 - *Stella Dallas*
 - *Wuthering Heights* (& other William Wyler films)
- Alexander Korda (British; costume dramas)
 - *The Private Life of Henry VIII*
 - *Rembrandt*

Others

- David O. Selznick (blockbusters)
 - *A Star Is Born* (through United Artists)
 - *Gone With The Wind* (with MGM)
- Walt Disney
 - Animation only in the 1930s
 - Pioneer in sound and color cartoons
 - *Silly Symphonies* (shorts; 1928-1933)
 - *Snow White & the Seven Dwarfs* (1937)
 - *Pinocchio* (1940)
 - *Fantasia* (1940)

“Poverty Row” & Ethnic Cinema

- B-studios in the 1930s
 - B-films for the bottom halves of double bills
 - Sold at flat rate (little risk, but little profit)
- African American films
 - Oscar Micheaux (*Within Our Gates*, *Body and Soul*, *A Murder in Harlem*, *Lying Lips*)
 - Spencer Williams (*Blood of Jesus*, *Go Down Death*, *Dirty Gertie From Harlem USA*)
- Yiddish-language films
 - Sidney Goldin (*Mayn Yiddishe Mame*, *His Wife’s Lover*)
 - Joseph Green (*Yidl Mitn Fidl*, *The Dybbuk*)
 - Edgar Ulmer (*Green Fields*, *The Singing Blacksmith*, *The Light Ahead*)

The Hays Code (1934)

- No depictions of extramarital sex
- No sexual displays (like “excessive and lustful kissing”) even for married couples
- No “profanity”
- No nudity
- No criticism of organized religion
- No explicit depictions of violence or crime
- All criminality must be punished

Screwball Comedy

- Verbal comedy, now possible with the coming of sound
- Sexuality, expressed via euphemism & insinuation
- Fast, witty repartee
- Wacky, oddball behavior
- Battle of the sexes, on equal terms
- Crossing class, as well as gender, differences
- Some typical examples
 - *20th Century* (1934, Howard Hawks, Carol Lombard & John Barrymore)
 - *It Happened One Night* (1934, Frank Capra, Clark Gable & Claudette Colbert)
 - *The Awful Truth* (1937, Leo McCarey, Cary Grant & Irene Dunne)
 - *His Girl Friday* (1940, Howard Hawks, Cary Grant & Rosalind Russell)

Howard Hawks (1896-1977)

- First film, *The Road to Glory* (1926)
- Last film, *Rio Lobo* (1970)
- Worked wholly within Hollywood system, but freelance, for a succession of studios
- Films in many different genres
- “Yet all these films... exhibit the same thematic preoccupations, the same recurring motifs and incidents, the same visual style and tempo.” (Peter Wollen)
- “Adventure dramas” vs. “crazy comedies.”

Bringing Up Baby

- Both slapstick and verbal repartee
- Lots of fast dialogue, and almost no non-diegetic music
- Comedy: world turned upside down
 - Connecticut (the country) vs. New York City
 - Outdoors vs. indoors
 - Game-playing vs. serious work (museum)
 - Liberation from social convention & responsibility
 - Reversion to the childish and the animal
- Gender reversal
 - Hepburn chases Grant, instead of the reverse
 - “I just went gay all of a sudden”

Hepburn and Grant

- Both actors play against their usual personas
 - Grant (David) abandons his usual suavity
 - Hepburn (Susan) undermines her previous haughtiness
- Everything Susan does tends to humiliate David, or to make him ridiculous instead of dignified...
- ... but he eventually realizes that he likes this; it offers him an escape from the high seriousness represented by his fiancée, Miss Swallow
- Social class: it's Susan's wealth that allows her to get away with everything
 - Fantasies of wealth during the Depression

Additional Features

- Improvisation: both in Hepburn's character and in the overall nature of the film
- Manic, hysterical, an exhaustingly fast pace
- Symmetries (in contrast to the improvisation)
 - two leopards
 - two pets (George and Baby)
 - two cages (animal cage and jail)
 - etc.
- Double entendres in the dialogue
- Physical props (the intercostal clavicle, the mistaken hand bag, the butterfly net, etc).