

Film in the Twenties

by *Alan Fisher*

The history of film has been traditionally recounted in decades. Frequently, the end of a decade has seen Hollywood and the world film community in transition. The introduction of sound in the 1930's, the onset of World War II in 1939 with its subsequent remobilization of the film industry and the Cold War paranoia in the late 1940's, all affected the development of the film. Likewise, the turmoil of the 1960's, with its anti-Vietnam protests and counter-culture would also influence film production as the perpetually-nervous film industry twisted to satisfy what it understood to be public expectation.

This history-by-calendar approach is at its least satisfactory when applied to the beginning of the period commonly called "the Twenties." A recent study of film historian Richard Kozarski's views this period as beginning not in 1920 but in 1915 with the victory of the independent film producers over the Patent Trust companies. (Kozarski, *An Evening's Entertainment*, p.63)

The Trust companies had attempted to use their control of camera and projector manufacture to control nationwide film production and distribution. The court decision against them and their refusal to abandon the one-reel film left the market for longer films to the independents who would establish what come to be know as the studio system based in Hollywood. The European film had been crippled in World War I, leaving the American film dominant throughout the world. Across America public enthusiasm for film swelled, and audiences crammed into newly-built 2,500 seat theaters. Hollywood's success attracted Wall Street financing, and American business accepted the movies as a member of the financial community.

The way of euphoria was not to last. Scandal, economic competition from radio plus artistic challenge from Europe would soon appear. This would be followed by the panicked introduction of sound during which much that was worthwhile in the silent film would be abandoned.

The Studio System

By 1920 the movie industry had stabilized. Hollywood controlled the market, but it did not completely dominate production. Alternate centers in Northern California and New York still existed, and a few of them were expanding. (Kozarski, *An Evening's Entertainment*, p.112) However, Hollywood had become synonymous with the movies in the public mind.

The collapse of the Trust had thrown the film industry into flux. Studios appeared and disappeared with amazing speed. Triangle Studios despite distribution agreements with D. W. Griffith, Mac Sennett and Thomas Ince, lasted only three years. The market for films was bullish, but competition was fierce. The key to survival was distribution. Studios needed access to theaters. The heads of the Hollywood Studios had entered the movies as distributors and exhibitors, and they understood that side of the business. Men like Paramount's Adolph Zukor knew how to market films, and they succeeded where others with more artistic talent failed.

Zukor pioneered the practice of block bookings. In order to get films by Mary Pickford or other Paramount stars, theater owners had to agree to rent large orders of other Paramount films irregardless of quality. Theater owners chaffed but hungry for hit films accepted the terms. The practice spread to other studios. (John Douglas Eames, *The Paramount Story*, p.9)

Zukor was also the first to negotiate large scale loans from Wall Street. As Wall Street money became available to Hollywood, the business world took notice. By 1920, the movies with Hollywood as its major production center had come to be considered a major industry.

In 1917, Zukor merged with Jesse Lasky's Famous Players. Lasky had built a studio in Hollywood in 1914 and with Cecil B. DeMille as director produced a major feature-length hit, *The Squaw Man*. But Zukor was the driving force behind the partnership. He lured Mary Pickford away from Universal. By 1926 Paramount had outgrown its original studio and begun renovating the larger one it had acquired. The original studio was converted into a miniature golf course. (David Robinson, ed., *Movies of the Silent Years*, p.43)

By 1920, Hollywood studios had taken on their modern form. At the top were the majors, amply-financed studios producing fifty to a hundred films per year. In addition to Paramount, the majors included First National, United Artists, and by 1924 following the

merger of Metro, Goldwyn and Mayer, MGM.

First National had formed as result of a distributors' revolt against Zukor's block booking tactics just as in the previous decade Zukor and others had entered film distribution in retaliation against the Trust. First National quickly took revenge by hiring Mary Pickford away from Zukor and also signing Chaplin to an eight picture deal.

United Artists, though considered a major, was an anomaly. It was founded in 1919 by four of the industry's greatest names, D. W. Griffith, Chaplin, Pickford and Douglass Fairbanks. Their bankable names insured financing for their own productions and bookings at the large picture palaces that were springing up in big cities across the country. However, the studio lacked links to smaller and regional theaters. Also, Chaplin, Griffith and Pickford owed pictures to other studios which they had to complete before they could make pictures for United Artists.

Chaplin was not free from his First National obligations until 1923. For his first United Artist production, he chose to direct but not appear in an artistically ambitious drama, *A Woman of Paris*. Well-received critically, the movie was a box office flop. Chaplin petulantly withdrew it from circulation and did not rerelease it until the 1970's.

As a performer, Chaplin remained beloved by the audience. Back in the role of the Little Tramp in 1925, he made possibly his best film, *The Gold Rush*. It contains the classic scene in which Chaplin cooks one of his shoes for himself and his starving partner.

"The scene is perhaps his most famous comic invention—the eating of a boot with all the airs of a gourmet, picking the nails as if they were the bones of some dainty game bird and treating the laces as spaghetti." (David Robinson, editor, *Movies of the Silent Years*, p. 175)

D. W. Griffith, the director who "invented the narrative cinema" (David A. Cook, *A History of the Narrative Cinema*, p.59) was beginning a slow decline, but Mary Pickford and her real life husband Douglass Fairbanks would remain stars until the end of the 1920's. Pickford was eventually to feel trapped in the little-girl roles her fans insisted she play. After her 1926 hit *Sparrows*, she would try adult roles. By the end of decade she had lost much of her following.

Fairbanks had no qualms about repeating the role of the good-humored adventurer in films like *The Thief of Baghdad* (1920), *The Black Pirate* (1927) and *The Man in the Iron Mask* (1929). His career, however, would also end in the early 1930's as he seemed to lose interest in moviemaking with the coming of sound.

A step below the majors were Universal and Fox (later Twentieth Century Fox). Both were owned by men who had been influential in battling the Trust and who had established themselves early in Hollywood when property was cheap. However, these studios lacked solid distribution networks. Lamelle remained in New York, and allowed operations at the Hollywood studio to become disorganized with most production units semi-autonomous. Lamelle, who had pioneered the star system, now refused to pay the salaries to draw big names. Fox was more ambitious, yet his timing was poor. Anticipating Zukor, he made overtures to Wall Street in 1917 but was unsuccessful. By the end of the 1920's both men would lose control of their studios.

Below Universal and Fox were a number of minor independent studios operating with limited capital. Two of these, Warner Brothers and Columbia, would become major studios in the future.

Films of the 1920's

A full history of the 1920's cinema is beyond the scope of this paper. The four films discussed below are representative of trends of the decade.

1. *The Ten Commandments* – 1923

Directed by Cecil B. DeMille, this two-part film showed the Biblical escape of the Jews from ancient Egypt plus a modern story showing the harm caused when the hero violates one of the commandments.

Ironically, the film was a direct result of the scandals which had rocked Hollywood from 1921-1923. In 1921, Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle, a three-hundred pound comedian with a following second only to Chaplin's, was arrested for the rape and murder of a starlet at a party Arbuckle had thrown at a Hollywood hotel. After three trials, Arbuckle was found not guilty, but his career was ruined. A year later, William Desmond Taylor, was found shot to death at his home. Two leading actresses, both lovers of Taylor's, were questioned in the director's death. One of the actresses, Mabel Normand, had been a star at Keystone and a co-star of Chaplin's. Then actress Barbara Lamar died from a heroin overdose. The final shock came with the death of Wallace Reid in 1923. Reid, who had risen to stardom playing clean-cut young men, was revealed to have been a morphine addict.

Reid's death sent shock waves across the country. Ministers forbade their followers to attend films. To avoid outside censorship, studio owners offered Will Hays, a prestigious

judge, a life position overseeing Hollywood morality. Hays, who had been a member of the scandal-ridden Harding administration, accepted a fat fee and became an apologist for Hollywood.

Film did in fact undergo a change because of the scandals, but the changes came from inside Hollywood. Depictions of wild parties and amoral behavior ceased for a while. Then DeMille, who had popularized the bathroom scene in films like *Don't Change Your Husband* hit upon a formula to show sin and get away with it. Lust and violence could be provided throughout the movie if it were punished, however briefly at the end. In *The Ten Commandments* the wild celebration around the Golden Calf is staged like an orgy, but finally Moses appears to chastize the revelers. DeMille had found a way to have his cake and eat it, too.

The Ten Commandments succeeded as entertainment, but it was also a triumph of hypocrisy.

2. *Greed* – 1925

The premiere of *Greed*, although a major film by a celebrity director, proved to be a footnote to a struggle between two of the most famous Hollywood figures, director Erich Von Stroheim and MGM Chief of Production Irving Thalberg.

The film, based on a novel by Frank Norris, had originally been shot with obsessive care by Stroheim in a ten-hour version. It told a tawdry story of a dentist driven to murder by both heredity and environment. Stroheim went wildly overbudget, recreating turn-of-the-century San Francisco in minute detail. For the final scenes he took the entire crew to Death Valley and forced them to work in 100° C temperatures.

Stroheim offered to cut the film, but it was taken away by Thalberg. A two-hour version was issued. He and Stroheim had fought before. In 1922 at Universal, Thalberg, the new production chief, had recut Stroheim's *Foolish Wives* from four to two hours. Stroheim then left Universal to MGM with a promise of creative freedom. But in 1925, Thalberg moved to MGM, and the two immediately began to clash over *Greed*.

Stroheim was perhaps in need of discipline. He was obsessive and self-destructive. It is unlikely that his cut of *Greed* would have been more successful than Thalberg's. The film was attacked as anti-American, and surprisingly, bombed internationally. However, Thalberg, still in his mid-20's, was determined to make an example of Stroheim and demonstrate that the executive and production ends and not the artistic would control the film industry. Thalberg destroyed the original negative of *Greed* in a final blow against

Stroeheim.

Despite its failure at the box office, *Greed* is now considered a classic.

“At one-fifth it’s original length *Greed* is a fragmentary masterpiece with vast gaps in continuity bridged by lengthy titles, but it is a masterpiece nonetheless. Because Von Stroeheim was a master of the long take and built up his most powerful effects within shots rather than by editing between them, many of the film’s greatest sequences have survived. *Greed* is overwhelming in its psychological intensity. The viewer is totally emersed in the reality of the film. (David Cook, *A History of the Narrative Film*, pp.227-8)

3. *The Big Parade* – 1925

As Griffith lost touch with his audience, the America of his films continued to be portrayed by young directors King Vidor and Henry King.

In 1925, Vidor made the definitive World War I movie, *The Big Parade*. It was the first film to show the war from the viewpoint of the ordinary soldier. Vidor was a populist and portrayed individuals and their relationship to the masses.

“A good demonstration of this point: from the moment of his joining up, we see the hero become, in Vidor’s words, one of the mob. Yet he remains the point of contact with the larger story. Another example of the same counterpointing occurs in celebrated sequence where Jim’s French girlfriend pushes her way through the massed ranks of soldiers to say goodbye to her man.” (Robinson, p.102)

The film was also a tremendous success for John Gilbert who played the hero. Vidor, a naturalist, would later abandon the use of stars in several key films like *The Crowd* (1928) and *Our Daily Bread* (1933). At first he wanted an unknown for the role of Jim Apperson, then reluctantly under studio pressure accepted Gilbert, who after Rudolph Valentino was the leading romantic lead of his day. Gilbert’s performance was acclaimed both for the war scenes and the famous scene where he teaches his French girlfriend to chew gum.

4. *The General* – 1925

The 1920’ has been called the Golden Age Comedy. Its stars were trained acrobats and members who like Chaplin had begun their careers in music halls or vaudeville. Unlike other actors who had to adapt themselves to roles, they each had a carefully-defined comic persona that they used in film after film.

Buster Keaton in his movies always portrayed a taciturn, expressionless young man with a knack of getting in the way of both people and things that he would then dodge with

seeming ease and a stone-faced expression. His movies were filled with flying rocks, collapsing buildings, speeding cars and angry mobs. These effects were not included at the expense of narrative buildup and characterization.

In *The General* Keaton plays a Southern train engineer during the Civil War who seeks to recover a stolen train from Union soldiers who have inadvertently kidnapped his girlfriend. The gags multiply as Keaton has to man the entire train alone as he escapes with his girlfriend who insists on tidying up both him and the train.

“The General is an anthology of the greatest railway gags, and its invention are still pillaged by other comedians. A whole series of gags are developed from Johnnie’s problems as he runs out of boiler fuel. When all seems lost, he passes under a bridge, occupied by the enemy. As they pelt his train with logs, he gratefully retrieves them to stoke his engine.” (Robinson, p.180)

Keaton was his own director and stuntman. As an auteur his reputation surpasses Chaplin’s today. *The General* was based on a real Civil War incident. Keaton strove for accuracy, and the film is said to have the quality of Matthew Brady war photos. The gags, which are woven into the narrative, were complicated and dangerous but presented with an engineer’s precision.

By the 1930’s, emotional problems and alcoholism would cripple Keaton and like Von Stroheim he would finish his career as an actor. In the 1960’s his reputation would be resurrected, fortunately while he was still alive. Today he is considered a true film genius.

The International Cinema

Neither England nor France played a dominant role in the 1920’s cinema, although each provided a director of importance. In England in 1925 Alfred Hitchcock released his first characteristic film, *The Lodger*. Its story of a man mistaken for Jack the Ripper foreshadows later films. Rene Clair burst onto the French film scene in 1923 with his surrealistic short, *Enter-Acte*. He followed this two years later with the comedy hit, *An Italian Straw Hat*, whose hero on his wedding day must search through Paris for a replacement for a woman’s hat that his horse has eaten.

During World War I, the German government had consolidated film production into a single studio UFA (Universal Film Actien Gesellschaft). By 1920, its production units were in full swing and in Europe were Hollywood’s only real competition.

In 1919, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* introduced German expressionism to the world.

This story of a murderous sleepwalker and a possibly mad doctor was shot against dimly-lit painted sets which helped create a feeling of nightmare. The film's tone expressed the pessimism of post-war Germany.

For the next five years expressionism, fantasy and folklore, often with sinister undertones, were staples of the German cinema. The films of Fritz Lang stood out. Lang made films about spies (*Spione*, 1920), mad master criminals (*Dr. Mabuse the Gambler*, part I and II, 1921-22), German Legends (*Die Niebulungen*, 1923-24), future society (*Metropolis*, 1925) and child muder (*M*, 1929). His films were masterly shot. Lang used his sense of architecture and lighting to create a sense of predestination in which his charcters are trapped by fate.

By the mid-20's the public taste for expressionism had begun to fade. In 1925, F.W.Murnau's *The Last Laugh* created a new genre, the "Kammerspiel" or realistic film. In *The Last Laugh* a pompous doorman's life collapses when on losing his job he must surrender his uniform. The camera records his decline with warmth and humor. The film was followed by other increasingly dark-toned, naturalistic films. Here the films of G.W.Pabst stand out including *Joyless Street*, with Greta Garbo in 1925 just prior to her departure to Hollywood and *Pandora's Box* with Louise Brooks in 1928.

By the late 1920's, many of the great names of the German cinema began to emigrate to Hollywood, Ernst Lubitch, Murnau and cameraman Karl Fruend among them. Lubitch would become a master of sophisticated comedy, and German lighting and decor would influence Hollywood.

At the end of the twenties, the West or at least its intellectuals and filmmakers discovered to their amazement that a film revolution had taken place in Russia. Supported by Lenin who realized the propaganda value of films, Moscow film schools survived the bleakest period of the revolution. The most important of these was headed by Les Khuleshov who advanced a theory of montage in which individual shots were juxtaposed against each other to create emotional reactions. These theories were expanded on by Khuleshov's student Sergei Eisenstein who expounded them in legthy texts on film. In 1924 Eisenstein began to put his ideas into practice with the movie *Strike*. The next year he made a great leap forward with *The Battleship Potemkin*.

The Battleship Potemkin celebrated the revolt on a merchant ship at Odessa that sparked off the failed 1905 revolution. Its portrayal of a massacre on huge outdoor steps leading to Odessa harbor is one of the most famous scenes ever filmed.

"Eisenstein created cinematic metaphor in the timing of the massacre sequence itself.

Even though the rate of cutting in this scene is terrifically accelerated, it takes much longer for the massacre to occur than it would in reality. By drawing out the montage process, Eisenstein manages to suggest a much greater magnitude than we witness on the screen.” (Cook, p.168)

Ironically, *Potemkin* was coolly received in Russia where party hardliners charged it was too concerned with aestheticism. Its reputation was to recover, helped by praise from abroad. It received strong support from Douglass Fairbanks and Mary Pickford who while visiting Russia in 1926 proclaimed *The Battleship Potemkin* the best film they had ever seen.

By 1930, Japan had a flourishing cinema featuring two genres. The first, the “Jidai-geki” concerned period documentaries set before 1868. The second, “the Shomin-geki” dealt with lower-middle class drama. The silent film was to hang on in Japan well into the 1930’s, partially because of the conservatism of directors and also due to resistance of the “benshi,” commentators in the theater who translated dialogue cards and explained the stories to viewers.

Unfortunately, many of the films produced at this time have been destroyed through earthquakes, fire, bombings and improper storage. A history of the Japanese cinema in the 1920’s must remain tentative.

The Coming of Sound

The 1920’s was a heady time for the cinema, but it was not secure. In 1922, ticket sales were dropping. The scandals had driven customers away as had competition from radio and the growing availability of the family car.

By 1925, a bumper year for great films, the situation has eased. However, competition within the industry would keep it from falling into complacency.

Warner Brothers, a minor studio whose major moneymakers were films starring an ill-tempered German shepherd called Rin Tin Tin, purchased a sophisticated sound-on-disc system from Western Electric. The next year they used it to provide sound accompaniment to a John Barrymore film called *Don Juan*. Hollywood felt the tremors, but on August 27, 1927, the earthquake hit. Warners released *The Jazz Singer* with Al Jolson. For two-thirds of its length, it was a silent film with titles with only the musical numbers recorded. Then after a song Al Jolson turned and stunned audiences by saying the ungrammatical sentence “Hey, you ain’t seen nothing yet.”

What followed was the quickest retooling of a major industry in history. On July 28, 1928, the first all-talking picture *The Lights of New York* was released. Silent films were changed over to talkies, or in the case of Howard Hughes's *Hell Angels* completely reshot. Theater owners welcomed the change since it allowed them to dispense with expensive orchestras. By 1927, only a handful of the films released would be silent.

Although quick, the transition was clumsy. Sound men without experience in shooting films were given free rein in the studios. To eliminate camera noise, cameras were placed inside sound-proof booths, thereby rendering them immobile. Stars were forced to submit to voice tests and vocal lessons.

"Long queues of screen actors and actresses lined up for these tests, and as they were herded forward to face their destiny, fear was paramount, although here and there you could catch a cocky expression of confidence from one who had had prior stage experience or harboured no doubt of passing the test." (Robinson, p.216)

The camera did not remain immobile long. In 1928 Raoul Walsh, using Fox's new sound-on-film process, shot a western, *In Old Arizona* outdoors, proving the sound booth unnecessary. By 1929, the invention of the overhead microphone boom further freed the camera. In 1931 the practice of dubbing the sound after shooting was introduced.

Hollywood and world cinema had grasped that the sound film was a new art form, and that the silent film was dead. By 1929, the worst sound film was outdrawing the best silent film. Chaplin only remained an exception. His *City Lights* featuring his Little Tramp character was a hit in 1930. Yet the future of film clearly lay with sound. The popularity would carry Hollywood through the worst of the early depression.

Yet there was much to regret. The silent film had been built on pantomime and expressive visuals. It had been an international art form accessible throughout the world. It seemed to be reaching for a new peaks of creativity when the advent of sound cut short.

The year 1930 marks the end of a definitive moment in the history of film.

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