

# Part I

## Origins to 1928

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## 1

## Setting the Stage

### American Film History, Origins to 1928

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The origin of almost every important cultural form is a result of converging histories and rests at the intersection of intellectual, technological, and sociological changes. In the case of the American cinema, these origins are located toward the end of the nineteenth century and pivot around a series of developments in the economic, scientific, and artistic history of the nation: the tremendous growth of cities and the arrival of millions of immigrants between 1880 and 1920; the consolidation of business and manufacturing practices that maximized production and created a new means by which to advertise goods and services; the continuation, and in some cases culmination, of experiments devoted to combining photography and motion, most notably those of French scientist Étienne-Jules Marey and American photographer Eadweard Muybridge; and the emerging power of the United States and its place within the world economy.

This period is characterized by the remarkable penetration of cinema into the life of a nation. Between 1896 and 1928, the movies were the primary force behind a unifying transformation in the United States, turning people separated by region and class, educational and ethnic background, into a national audience that, by the late 1920s, consumed the same spectacles on the East Coast as the West, and in theaters in which every seat sold for one ticket

price. To be sure, the cinema did not erase divisions of race and gender, and its democratizing impulse did not redraw the class boundaries in America. But one of the most remarkable aspects to the story of early American cinema is how it emerged at a moment when the nation could have drifted toward greater fragmentation, when the influx of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe could have created a disunited states, and how the cinema, and later radio as well, countered such forces. Indeed, it is perhaps the supreme irony of the movie industry that members of this very same immigrant population would be the ones to build and steer the industry through the first decades of the twentieth century and beyond. In the process, they, and the artists they employed, would produce a unifying set of myths that incorporated and rivaled the historical myths of the nation. Accompanied by its own icons and symbols, from movie stars to corporate logos of roaring lions and snow-capped mountains, and with its own version of holidays in the form of national premieres and award ceremonies, the movie industry created a visual language that transformed citizens into moviegoers. This language, rather quickly internalized by audiences, formed the scaffolding on which a genre-based mass medium developed. The consistent means by which time and space were organized on-screen was

accompanied by a consistent array of settings and stories: legends of the Old West, urban crime, family melodramas, slapstick comedy, and, later, tales of horror and love stories set to song and dance.

This is not to suggest that in its early years all movies were the same or their tendencies conservative – far from it. While the movies functioned as a powerful tool of assimilation, they also presented a serious challenge to the prevailing values of the nineteenth century and the white Protestantism that was its anchor. The emerging cinema helped create and represent a new American cosmopolitan society, represented the working class and its struggles, contested nineteenth-century sexual mores, and helped dislodge the cultural officials of an earlier era. One need only think of the genius of Mack Sennett and his slapstick rendering of law enforcement to see the medium's potential for undermining authority. The nickelodeon opened its doors to women and offered business opportunities to new citizens. The larger movie houses to follow, and the content of their projections, as Richard Butsch argues in the hardcover/online edition, would be shaped by, but also contribute considerably to, the reshaping of the American middle class. And yet the history of the film industry over its initial 30 years is also remarkable for the stability it achieved, for its successful instituting of a shared set of conventions with respect to on-screen content and visual style, as well as production and exhibition methods. In this sense the movies reflected many of the wider patterns of American capitalism: modest experimentation so as to differentiate product, within a system of stability that maintained levels of output and consumer expectations while seeking to maximize profits.

## The Nickelodeon Era

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This period, beginning with film's rapid journey from Kinetoscope parlor to vaudeville house to nickelodeon, as outlined by Richard Abel in the hardcover/online edition, and ending with the changeover to talkies, is characterized by several overarching factors. The first has to do with developments in the machines of moving picture photography and projection. The years of intense experimentation with the production of moving images cover the last three decades of the nineteenth century and make up their

own complex history. The name that for many years was most attached to the "invention" of the movies was Thomas Edison. But as early as the 1960s, historians began debunking the various myths around Edison's claim to be the father of the movies, setting the record straight as to how the Wizard of Menlo Park placed his name and his patent on devices and ideas, some produced under his employ, others purchased from beyond it, but all of which culminated in the most widely marketed moving picture machines. Specifically, credit has since been given to W. K. L. Dickson, who, working for Edison, developed the Kinetograph, a camera that drew film through the device at a stop-and-go speed appropriate for exposure using small perforations cut along its edges. Historians have noted that Edison's original intention was to use the movies to accompany his phonograph. Edison's first machine for watching movies was a stand-alone peep box, the Kinetoscope, which ran a 50-foot loop of film, and therefore first defined spectatorship as a solitary activity. Dickson's Kinetograph stood in stark contrast to the Cinématographe, the much lighter camera (that also functioned as a printer and projector) developed in France by the Lumière Brothers, and which may have convinced Edison that the future of the medium rested in projection. Indeed, it would be just two years between the appearance of the first Kinetoscope parlors in New York in April 1894 and the exhibition, in April 1896, of Edison's Vitascope movie projector, presumably a response to the Lumières' 1895 projection of movies in New York City. The Vitascope benefited from Edison's acquisition of a projection machine developed by C. Francis Jenkins and Thomas Armat and from the incorporation of what came to be known as the Latham Loop – developed by Woodville Latham and his sons – a technique whereby the film is pushed into a short arc before descending down past the projection bulb. The loop, which also arcs the film after projection on its way to the take-up reel, stabilizes the drag on the filmstrip to prevent it from breaking. In short, any account of the invention of the movies in America must be framed as a collaboration among individuals, some working together, some working far apart, a synthesis of ideas and experiments – with the recognition that stories about origins are often revised to fit the exigencies of history writing and of the marketplace.

The second overarching development has to do with the films themselves. In just one generation, the movies went from short actualities or simple stories, often screened as multifilm programs, to feature-length films running, in some cases, close to two hours. In the process, the film frame and the space within it became consolidated around the human figure, rather than around more abstract pursuits, and the properties of *mise-en-scène* (including set and costume design, lighting, and movement and behavior of characters), camerawork, and editing were integrated into the telling of legible and coherent narratives. Pioneer filmmakers such as Edwin S. Porter came to understand that the “basic signifying unit of film,” to use David Cook’s phrase, “the basic unit of cinematic meaning,” was not the dramatic scene but rather the shot. In other words, a given scene could be presented across an unlimited number of shots (Cook 1996, 25). Charles Musser, in the hardcover/online edition, provides a detailed analysis of Porter’s narrative innovations in such groundbreaking films as *The Execution of Czolgosz* (1901), *Jack and the Beanstalk* (1902), *The Great Train Robbery*, and *The Life of an American Fireman* (both 1903). Ordering of shots – to create the illusion of continuous action, to alternate the visual perspective on an action, or to create clear temporal markers for events unfolding on-screen – thus became the defining factor in telling a story on film. This essential concept of the shot could then be shaped by cinematographic elements such as lighting, camera angle, temporal duration, and the organization of the space within the frame. Filmmakers like D. W. Griffith, most notably, came to understand the relationship between the scale of a given shot – long, medium, or close-up – and access to the psychology of their fictional characters and thus the chains of identification between spectator and narrative action, as Charlie Keil points out in this volume. This simple insight, that greater visual intimacy was linked to understanding the emotions and motivations of the characters on-screen, opened the door to longer, more complex film narratives, complete with multiple locations and characters drawn over a longer period of time.

Over the course of hundreds of films made between 1908 and 1914, Griffith not only brought his characters closer to the camera, but also refined the use of parallel editing so as to clearly articulate the time frame of specific actions. As Tom Gunning has argued, the

language by which Griffith advanced film narration developed within a specific context, responding to pressures from the emerging industry and the society into which his films were being released (1994, 7). Griffith advanced the language of storytelling while maintaining – one might even argue enhancing – the pleasure of the senses so attractive to the earliest moviegoers: “Griffith’s films preserved a hedonistic experience, providing thrills that middle-class audiences learned to accept and desire” (Gunning 1994, 90). Griffith’s experimentation culminated in his 1915 epic, *The Birth of a Nation*, a film in which his nineteenth-century racial politics collided with his twentieth-century cinematic artistry.

Prompted in part by the importation of European films running well over an hour, the American industry expanded to include the production of multi-reel features. During the mid-teens, producers, most notably perhaps Universal and the French company Pathé, created an in-between format, the serial, in which a story would be told through weekly installments two to three reels in length. In the late 1910s and into the 1920s, the industry moved increasingly toward feature production. With one reel consisting of approximately a thousand feet of film, a four-reel feature would run (at the silent speed of 16 frames per second) roughly 48 minutes. Four- and five-reel features thus allowed the industry to offer its growing middle-class audience stories with the scope and complexity approximating that which it had come to expect on the legitimate stage.

The development of the American film language was thoroughly enfolded with the methods of mass production created to meet the almost insatiable demand for new films during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Charles Musser has argued that the development of increasingly complex narratives must be attributed not only to the industry’s desire to appease middle-class reformers, but even more to the demands of “standardization, narrative efficiency and maximization of profits” (1999, 272).

The factory system that evolved to full maturation in the 1910s came to rely increasingly on a detailed division of labor and came to recognize the need for real estate to hold studios, production facilities, and theaters; the need for the development or purchase of new technologies; and the need for vast amounts of capital to cover these and other expenses. Within two

decades of the first film exhibition, the movies had become big business.

As a consequence, the early American film industry fell prey to the logic of that system, in particular the tendency toward combinations and monopoly. In 1908, the 10 largest film production companies, led by Edison and Biograph, formed the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC). Combining the patents they held on film technology with an exclusive deal with Eastman Kodak, the Trust, as it came to be known, sought to exert full control over the production and distribution of movies. Such control was short-lived, however, as a group of independent producers – Adolph Zukor, Carl Laemmle, and William Fox – successfully resisted MPPC control and gained a foothold in the industry. Indeed, these men, whose national and religious heritage set them starkly apart from the lords of the Trust, would ultimately not only surpass their rivals, but also go on to found the American movie business as it would come to be known thereafter – Hollywood. By the time the legality of the Trust and its trade practices came before US courts, it had already lost its dominance. But it would not be the last time the movie business would be challenged by fair trade laws, and the independents of one age would become the monopolists of another. Indeed, one of the recurring tropes of American film history is the drift toward market domination by a handful of companies or the conglomeration of the film industry by even still larger corporate enterprises.

In the 1910s, the center of film production shifted from the East Coast to southern California, taking advantage of its good climate, proximity to a variety of natural locations, and, perhaps most importantly, its inexpensive real estate and nonunion labor. By 1922, over 80 percent of film production was centered in or near Los Angeles. But in some ways the movies never left New York. The studios maintained their business offices in the nation's financial capital where, starting in the mid-teens, they had established important relationships with Wall Street and the giants of American banking. Well into the 1920s, producers continued to use production facilities in and around New York. D. W. Griffith would make important films, including *Way Down East* (1920) and *Orphans of the Storm* (1921), at his studio in Mamaroneck, just north of the city. And studio back lots frequently included a New York street, complete with tenements, front stoops, and shop windows (Koszarski 1994, 102).

## Censorship Battles

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If control over the production and distribution of movies became one recurring story for the history of American film, another would be the battle over their content and exhibition. From their earliest days, the movies were a site of struggle between filmmakers and the custodians of American morality. In December 1908, New York City Mayor George McClellan ordered all nickelodeons in the city closed. It was the most dramatic official response so far to a decade's-long chorus of concerns about the moral propriety of on-screen images, their violence and sexual content, and the conditions of their exhibition. While theater owners successfully challenged McClellan's actions, the industry as a whole sought to protect itself from future incursions by moving quickly to a strategy it would pursue, in one form or another, for decades – self-regulation. Seven years after the McClellan affair, the matter went before the United States Supreme Court. During that time the industry's National Board of Censorship had been established (its name subsequently changed to the National Board of Review) in order to certify the moral status of new films and defuse local censorship.

In *Mutual Film Corporation v. Industrial Commission of Ohio*, the court found in favor of the state and declared that Ohio's power to censor film content outweighed Mutual's claims to free speech or its argument that Ohio's regulating standards were inconsistent. (The Ohio censorship mechanism had, in fact, been established at the urging of the Ohio Exhibitors League.) But the court's ruling said as much about the status of the movies at this point in history as it did about the rights of state or local review boards. The movies were first and foremost a business, the court said, and do not function as "part of the press of the country or as organs of public opinion" (Sklar 1994, 128). Producers may well have understood their product in similar terms. Their opposition to censorship came less from aspirations toward art and its protection than from aspirations for profits and the threat posed by an unevenly applied set of regionally enforced moral standards.

The content of films troubled some in local communities, particularly after the trial of Fatty Arbuckle, indicted in 1921 for manslaughter in the death of a young woman at a Hollywood party. Despite his

acquittal, the case scandalized the nation, but this and other sordid aspects of the movie business did not curtail its immense popularity. Between 1917 and 1928, the producers released an average of 600 films per year (Lewis 2008, 70). In the early teens, it was still commonplace for theaters to change their programs on a daily basis and even into the 1920s many exhibitors would have a new film playing every week. When, in 1922, the industry established its trade organization, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association (MPPDA), it did so not only to respond to the Arbuckle scandal, but also to insure the continued flow of box office dollars. With Will Hays at the helm, the MPPDA convinced state and local censorship boards that it was serious about policing the moral content of movies. The MPPDA may have helped keep censors at bay, but filmmakers would largely ignore its code of movie conduct for another decade.

## The Industry

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Between 1915 and 1928, the major filmmaking companies of the studio era were established or stabilized. Loew's (MGM), Fox, Paramount, Universal, and Warner Bros. all emerged over the course of a fiercely competitive 15 years of mergers and acquisitions. The path to vertical integration, with studios acquiring their own theaters, also led in both directions. In response to what they took to be the unfair practices of block and blind booking – rental policies first enacted by Adolph Zukor at Paramount requiring independent-owned theaters to book entire groups or blocks of the studio's films without advance knowledge of their content – those owners united to form the First National Exhibitors Circuit. From there it was a quick step for First National to move into film production, facilitated by the signing on, in 1917, of Charlie Chaplin. Zukor, in turn, bankrolled by Wall Street powerhouse Kuhn, Loeb & Co., led Paramount on a mission to acquire first-run theaters – over 300 by 1921 (Koszarski 1994, 75).

During this period, movie theaters underwent not only changes in ownership but also a fundamental change in design. The nickelodeon era had witnessed a dramatic increase in the size of exhibition venues as theaters devoted exclusively to motion pictures moved rapidly from standing-space-only storefronts, in 1905, to theaters, less than a year later, seating

several hundred as Richard Abel and Richard Butsch point out in the hardcover/online edition. In April 1914, The Strand, New York's first picture palace catering directly to the middle-class audience, opened with a seating capacity of 3,500. Many more palaces were to open across the country over the next decade, ushering in a long period of urban moviegoing amidst vast, ornately designed theaters with plush seating and sparkling chandeliers. Although not always profitable ventures for exhibitors, picture palaces survived in many cities into the 1970s, long past the time when movies were thought to need an elegant showcase.

In the same year as The Strand opened in New York City, a new mode of production became solidified in Hollywood. The central producer system, in which a detailed shooting script allowed for planning and budgeting well before a film went into production, replaced an earlier director-based approach. The director's work could now focus on approving the set design, shooting the film, and working with the editor in the assembling of a final cut. Overseeing virtually everything else – labor, props, set construction, wardrobe, players – was a producer who functioned like a general manager, someone also entrusted with the job of managing costs and estimating profits. Historians differ somewhat over the extent to which the central producer system dominated film production. Its primary phase ran from 1914 to 1931 and Thomas Ince is most often cited as the first to fully adapt these organizational practices to movie production (Staiger 1985, 136–137). Ince also was instrumental in foregrounding the importance of the script and writing of intertitles, as Torey Liepa points out in the hardcover/online edition of this series. Yet filmmakers such as D. W. Griffith, Erich von Stroheim, Cecil B. DeMille, and James Cruze, artists whose work transcended the run-of-the-mill films characterizing much of the industry's output, operated according to a method that still privileged the creative and managerial role of the director (Koszarski 1994, 110). Either way, by the mid-1920s, film production proceeded along a highly efficient path, with teams of artists and technicians working under the supervision of a handful of top executives at every studio. Those artists and executives included many women among their ranks. Indeed, the silent era is distinguished not only by the importance of women as moviegoers, but by the diverse roles women played within the industry as well. As Shelley Stamp points out in this volume

and Jane M. Gaines and Victoria Sturtevant explain in the hardcover/online edition, the popular image of women as mere extras was contradicted by the facts. Screenwriters June Mathis and Anita Loos and directors Lois Weber and Ida May Park, to name just four, played crucial roles in shaping studio stars and product. While it is certainly true that individual executives made their mark on film production, the stability of the system was, in fact, certified by its very capacity to withstand changes in management personnel.

For audiences and moviemakers, the stability of the movies was also anchored to a codified method of story construction and editing, what has come to be known as the classical system. It prescribed that narrative events be organized according to a logic of cause and effect. The result would be a unified plot, despite whatever disparate ingredients it might contain, in which characters' actions are clearly motivated and the causal chain of scenes made legible. According to Kristin Thompson, this causal unity can be found in early one-reel films but would become increasingly necessary as films grew longer and their narratives more complex (Thompson 1985, 174–175). To present the classical narrative, there emerged a consistent method for linking shots together, one that could handle the myriad temporal and spatial variables that came with telling stories through multishot films. Needless to say, these variables grew exponentially as the industry turned toward feature film production. As Thompson concludes, “The continuity rules that filmmakers devised were not natural outgrowths of cutting, but means of taming and unifying it. In a sense, what the psychological character was in the unification of the longer narrative, the continuity rules were in the unification of time and space” (Thompson 1985, 162). Those rules would come to dictate such practices as shot-reverse shot editing, the eyeline match, the match cut, and respect for the 180-degree axis of action. These techniques were implemented so as to minimize any possible disorientation introduced by cutting from one shot to another, thereby permitting the viewer's attention to remain focused on the story being told.

## Genres and Stars

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What also achieved a remarkable stability were the subject categories into which most film production

fell. Action-adventure pictures, Westerns, melodramas, and comedies dominated the silent era. Despite recurring declarations by industry analysts that Americans were tiring of cowboys on-screen, the Western remained the most popular genre of the era. In 1910, 21 percent of all American-made films were Westerns and in 1926, that figure came close to 30 percent (Buscombe 1988, 24, 427). Undoubtedly, most of these were B-films, but in the 1920s, the genre was enhanced by several epic productions – *The Covered Wagon* (1923), *The Iron Horse* (1927), a film Nicholas Baer discusses in depth in the hardcover/online edition – predecessors to a number of A-Westerns made in the next decade, such as *Cimarron* (1931), *The Big Trail* (1930), and *Union Pacific* (1939). More than any other genre, at least up to the coming of sound, the Western marked Hollywood's greatest contribution to national myth. Yet the heroic Westerner was hardly a singular character. William S. Hart's stoic, dirt-stained loner contrasted sharply with Tom Mix's clean-clad hero, but the cowboy nonetheless functioned as an exemplary figure for the celebration of white expansion into and across Western and American Indian lands.

The melodrama, and more particularly the maternal melodrama, were staples of the era. The very earliest film melodramas typically revolve around physical peril and a last-minute rescue, as in Porter's *Life of an American Fireman* and *Rescued from an Eagle's Nest* (1907) and in Griffith's shorts – including *The Adventures of Dollie* (1908) in which the title character, as a baby, is kidnapped by gypsies. Such plots, as Gerald Mast and Bruce Kawin point out, clearly were influenced by the theatrical productions of David Belasco, in which “good miraculously won out in the last 15 minutes” of plays lasting more than two hours: “Melodrama was a world of pathos, not of tragedy, of fears and tears, not of ideas” (2003, 31). But with feature-length films like Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* (a.k.a. *Broken Blossoms or The Yellow Man and the Girl*, 1919) melodrama took on much greater sophistication, in terms of both narrative complexity and richly textured visual style, albeit with a damsel generally remaining in distress. The young girl Lucy (Lillian Gish), in *Broken Blossoms*, lives with her violently abusive alcoholic father, prizefighter Battling Burrows (Donald Crisp), and is rescued by a Chinese shopkeeper, Cheng Huan (Richard Barthelmess), when she collapses on the street after her father has brutally





**Figure 1.1** Lillian Gish as the poor, vulnerable Lucy in D. W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* or *The Yellow Man and the Girl* (1919, produced by D. W. Griffith Productions).

beaten her. These two outsiders – defined as such by race, in Cheng's case, and by gender and impoverishment, in Lucy's case – develop an affectionate, Platonic bond based on past misfortunes and present vulnerabilities, with Cheng Huan nurturing and caring for Lucy until Burrows and his henchmen discover her. In this case, the last-minute rescue fails, and Lucy suffers a fatal beating. The otherwise gentle Cheng Huan obtains some measure of revenge by shooting Burrows before stabbing himself, yet his actions attest to the very fragility of tenderness and beauty in a harsh urban world. Griffith's *Way Down East* (1920) is most known, perhaps, for its iconic image of Lillian Gish lying unconscious on an ice floe as it dangerously approaches a waterfall before she is rescued. In both films parallel editing heightens suspense and creates nuanced relationships among sympathetically connected characters. Griffith's precisely calculated close-ups imbue the films with a powerful pathos so central to the genre.

*Way Down East* further exemplifies aspects of the maternal melodrama, a subgenre popular during the silent and early sound era, as Lea Jacobs points out in the hardcover/online edition of this series. Generally revolving around women who are banished from their homes and from their children when they are suspected of adultery, such films are of particular interest for their representations of motherhood and maternal suffering, and in their appeal and address to female viewers of the period (Jacobs 2012, 398). The many remakes of *Madame X* (1916), for instance, attest to an appeal that has spanned the decades (with much updating, of course) through versions in 1920, 1929, 1937, 1952, 1966, and 1994, along with several in the new millennium – as does *Stella Dallas* (1925), with its iconic 1937 remake starring Barbara Stanwyck. Another variation of the maternal melodrama, in a more updated form, centers on an erotic triangle involving a mother, her love interest or second husband, and her late-teen/early twenties daughter,

as in Ernst Lubitsch's *Three Women* (1924). These variations represent a few of the many melodramatic tropes on the silent screen, almost all of which, ultimately, depend upon the stabilizing force of a good man or a male-enforced legal system to restore order in response to imagined or actual moral transgressions.

In sharp contrast to the melodrama, no genre, perhaps, is more thoroughly associated with the silent era than comedy. To be sure, the rise of the star was a defining aspect of the movies during their first 30 years, becoming an inseparable part of genre production. As players became associated with a given genre – Douglas Fairbanks and adventure, Tom Mix and the Western, Lillian Gish and melodrama – studios recast them again and again in familiar stories, constructing on-screen personas that only fed the formula. But in the case of silent comedy, star and authorship often were combined. A film with Charlie Chaplin or Buster Keaton was also a film by Charlie Chaplin or Buster Keaton. And while Gish and Fairbanks, or Lon Chaney and Gloria Swanson might have returned frequently to similar roles, the stars of silent comedy appeared to carry the same character from film to film, story to story, as Charles J. Maland points out in this volume. Whether he was an immigrant or a pawnshop assistant, a waiter or a boxer, Chaplin was, in the dozens of films he made during the teens, the tramp.

What does it tell us about an era that its most beloved figure was a man of such little means? It seems just as remarkable that this hero, and here one can add Keaton as well, should be of diminutive stature. In the classic films of silent comedy, grace was privileged over strength, underdog ingenuity over rugged machismo. But it was more than outwitting bigger rivals or escaping hostile authorities. In the films of Chaplin, Keaton, and Harold Lloyd, there was something funny about merely surviving. This often took the form of perilous encounters with the most profound factor of the early twentieth century – mechanized life. Whether it was dodging fast cars, scaling the walls of a tall building, or working on the assembly line, silent comics kept their balance and drew laughs from anxiety in the effort to coexist with modern times.

The acrobatics of Keaton and the dance hall physicality of Chaplin point, in fact, to a quality that defined much of silent cinema – its fascination with

the body. To a great extent this would characterize the cinema throughout its history. From its athleticism, like the horseback riding of Westerns or the dueling of adventure films, to its more precise movements through dance or the far subtler but no less important gestures of smiling and posture, the body was the star of silent cinema in an era not yet overwhelmed by the voice. This was, to be more precise, a cinematic body, set to the rhythms of editing and photographed within a precise calculation of light, costume, and makeup.

What exactly makes a star performer attractive to moviegoers is one of those inestimable matters that ultimately cannot be adduced from polls. Talent, physical appeal, high-quality supporting artists and material certainly help, as does good timing. But while the list of most popular stars might have been reshuffled every few years, the economic centrality of the star was an industry fact by 1910, as Mark Lynn Anderson details in this volume. Filmmakers could solicit brand reliance by featuring stars in film after film. In turn, the professional power of the star grew tremendously. In 1916, for example, Adolph Zukor created Artcraft to handle productions starring Mary Pickford, whose career Victoria Sturtevant examines at length in the hardcover/online edition. The actress was making \$10,000 per week and taking 50 percent of the profits (Koszarski 1994, 266). Chaplin's contract with Mutual paid him \$12,884 a week and when, in 1917, he moved to First National, he became his own producer with the company advancing him \$125,000 for each film of an eight-two-reelers-in-one-year deal. After the recuperation of all costs for advertising, prints, and distribution, Chaplin would get 50 percent of the net profits (Robinson 1985, 223). Stars were even more essential as box office attractions, given the frequency with which theaters changed programs. While some special features enjoyed runs of several weeks, perhaps even months, it was common throughout this period for theaters to exhibit a film for only a week before moving on to another. Thus, stars were often the only form of reliable advertising, that is, the only aspect of a film with which audiences might be familiar before going to see it (Koszarski 1994, 35–36). Although the interests of the stars and the demands of the studios often would collide in subsequent years, the star would remain fixed as the centerpiece of virtually every quality production.



**Figure 1.2** In Charlie Chaplin's *The Immigrant* (1917, producers John Jasper, Charlie Chaplin, and Henry P. Caulfield), Charlie and Edna Purviance are roped off immediately upon arriving in "the land of liberty."

## Hollywood and World Cinema

The rise of the silent film star coincided with the emergence of American film on the world market. While the industry's expansion onto foreign screens did not get underway until after the domestic market was consolidated by the MPPC in 1908, it took less than a decade for American movie companies to gain a major foothold in that market. As Kristin Thompson has detailed, World War I threw the Western world into turmoil, ultimately permitting the American film industry to take over international markets previously controlled by European suppliers such as Italy and France (Thompson 1985, 71). While foreign buyers were lured by the quality of American films, especially once US production turned to more costly feature films, the domination of the world market really depended on the construction of an exporting

infrastructure. As with the domestic business, power over the global market depended on controlling distribution. During the war, London ceased to function as the center of foreign distribution, and American film companies moved aggressively to deal directly with overseas markets. This meant establishing offices throughout the world and, in some cases, sending representatives to negotiate deals for specific pictures. The opening of subsidiary offices in non-European countries would be particularly important to the postwar domination exerted by American companies. In turn, major South American exchanges set up offices in New York. As World War I boosted the economies of North America, Japan, and various South American countries, these countries could better afford the importation of American goods, films included. During the 1920s, American filmmakers continued to enjoy a dominant role in the exhibition

of movies throughout the world. Several countries, most notably Germany, would secure its domestic market from American domination, as well as build a healthy exportation business. And cooperation between European countries would prevent their national cinemas from being totally overwhelmed. But the changes brought about by sound and, then, the rise of fascism in Europe, would present new obstacles, as well as opportunities, for the American industry in its efforts to exploit overseas markets.

While American films were being sent overseas for exhibition on international screens, the talent of international cinemas slowly made its way to Hollywood and its impact would be felt throughout the studio era. Even before the consolidation of production in southern California, French film artists, such as directors Maurice Tourneur and George Archainbaud, went to work for the World Film Corporation, an American production and distribution company (Koszarski 1994, 66). From Germany came F. W. Murnau and Ernst Lubitsch, the latter surviving and succeeding well into the sound era. Joseph von Sternberg got his start in American movies. In the late 1920s, he briefly returned to his native Germany to make films for UFA, before returning to Hollywood, with Marlene Dietrich in tow. Victor Sjöström had been a prolific director in Sweden before directing films in Hollywood beginning in 1924. Several European actors also became immensely popular during the 1920s. As Diane Negra details in the hardcover/online edition of this series, Pola Negri had worked in the Polish and German film industries before becoming a star in Hollywood. Greta Garbo, who, unlike Negri, survived the talkie revolution to continue as one of MGM's biggest stars, arrived from Sweden to make her first American film in 1926. The exoticism of foreign stars was matched by the exoticism of films built around foreign subjects. Rex Ingram would direct a number of these films, including *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921), *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1922), *The Arab* (1924), and *The Garden of Allah* (1927) – the first of which featured Rudolph Valentino, a star whose immense popularity grew into something of a national cult. Whether placed in Argentina, Spain, or the Sahara desert, Valentino's characters projected a sexual magnetism inseparable from their foreign identity. In *The Sheik* (1921), Valentino plays Ahmed Ben Hassan, a European-born Arabian prince who woos and seduces Lady Diana Mayo (Agnes Ayres). As in

many of his films, the allure of Valentino's Sheik is wrapped, quite literally, in the garments of exoticism – in this case flowing robes and headdresses. In this film, in particular, he seems inseparable from the mise-en-scène of costume and layered curtains.

## The Jazz Age On-Screen – Inside and Outside of Hollywood

While the silent cinema looked overseas for exotic locales, to America's West for stories of cowboys on the range, and to the sentiments of nineteenth-century melodrama, it registered, as well, the contours of its age – the Jazz Age. Indeed, in its formal rhythms and inherent voyeuristic appeal, in its fabrication of star personas, and its urban settings (whether on location or in the studio), the movies contributed to the transformation undergone by the nation, from genteel agrarianism to cosmopolitan renaissance. No doubt American film remained wedded, at points, to an earlier era. Griffith's cinema, for example, while modern in its editing, often remained tied to his Victorian roots. But the rise of mass culture, with the movies in the lead, now appears inseparable from the era of scandal sheets and speakeasies, the Scopes Trial that debated teaching Darwin's theory of evolution in public schools, and the victory for women's voting rights in 1920. Indeed, the New Morality of the period – leisure, consumption, and sexual independence – found expression in many films of the era.

The migration from country to city that characterized the 1920s, and the harsh realities of that movement, were represented in King Vidor's *The Crowd* (1928), which tells the story of John Sims who comes to New York to achieve success but finds struggle, heartbreak, and tragedy instead. Vidor's montage of bustling streets captures the dynamic rhythms of urban dwellers at work and at play, as David A. Gerstner details in the hardcover/online edition. Vidor's mobile camera, influenced perhaps by the stylistic breakthroughs of Murnau in Germany, appears to climb the side of a skyscraper and then glide over a giant office filled with two hundred workers at their desks. Combining melodrama with realism to present the individual buffeted by mass culture, Vidor's film illustrates how, within the Hollywood mode, the mobility of cinema could trace the dimensions of city life, its pace and scope.

So, too, in *The Big Parade* (1925), *What Price Glory?* (1926), and *Wings* (1927), did Hollywood present a sober encounter with World War I. The movies also found a partner in another burgeoning Jazz-Age pastime – sports. An enthusiasm for boxing, fueled by the stardom of Jack Dempsey (who would himself appear in several films and marry screen star Estelle Taylor), found its way into such films as Famous Players-Lasky's *The World's Champion* (1925), Buster Keaton's *Battling Butler* (1926), and Tay Garnett's *Celebrity* (1928). Baseball, too, provided material for films from this period, most notably in *The Busher* (1919) and *Headin' Home* (1920), the latter starring Babe Ruth.

The period crystallizes most clearly perhaps in Frank Urson's *Chicago* (1927) – a narrative continually remade for screen and restaged for Broadway over the decades to follow, extending into the new millennium. Originally adapted to screen at the end of the silent era from a Broadway play based on actual events, *Chicago* is both a product and a satire of its age. The film is rife with scandal-hungry journalists, crimes of passion, a greedy criminal mouthpiece, a career-driven District Attorney, policemen happy to be in on the action, and, at the center, a sexually independent married woman. Released at the end of 1927, the film's story of Roxie Hart (Phyllis Haver), a less than moral flapper who murders her lover and is then acquitted by a leering and gullible all-male jury, is played mostly for laughs. But it carries a sophisticated sting in satirizing a gossip-crazed public manipulated by truth-bending tabloid reporters. Registering the power of mass culture and its place within a novelty-seeking era, in love with both profits and self-promotion, *Chicago* represented the kinship that then existed and would remain between the movies and the newspaper world. The thorough reciprocity between Hollywood and publishing, in the form of fan magazines, film reviews, and gossip columns, would only be strengthened with the coming of sound and the migration of writers from Eastern and Midwestern cities to the movie colony.

While the fictional narrative dominated production throughout this period, three other categories of filmmaking also got their start during the silent era. Two of these came from within the industry – newsreels and animation. The third, a less well-defined category that, at times, worked in the animation and documentary modes, emerged from outside the

studios – experimental film. But before turning to these, at least one significant figure working in an independent mode needs to be acknowledged – Oscar Micheaux. The child of parents who had been slaves, Micheaux was drawn to the cinema while struggling to be a writer. He made his first film in 1919 from a position totally outside the white-dominated commercial industry and would, over the next 30 years, become the most prolific producer/director of feature films aimed at a black audience, as Paula J. Massood observes in the volume, most notably perhaps his *Body and Soul* (1925) that marked the film debut of Paul Robeson, as a bit of a shyster, but nonetheless charismatic, preacher.

## Newsreels

The ancestry of the weekly newsreel dates back to the Kinetoscope when the Edison Company staged prizefights at its Black Maria studio. Edison-era actualities and films of the Spanish-American War, many of them staged for the camera, established in the minds of moviegoers the sense that the cinema could provide more than theatrical entertainment. In 1900, camera operators arrived in Galveston, Texas within days of a hurricane that leveled the city and killed 5,000 people. Six years later, in the aftermath of the San Francisco earthquake, cameramen from Edison and Vitagraph were on the scene to photograph the devastation. In addition to events such as these, and the more modest tragedies of daily life, silent news films also covered the affairs of state, with Teddy Roosevelt a particularly frequent figure before the cameras.

American moviemakers were relatively slow in turning to weekly news films, and the first newsreels exhibited in the United States were the product of French producer Charles Pathé, who introduced an American edition of his newsreel in 1911 (Fielding 1972, 70). During the teens a variety of production companies tried their hand at the genre, some in association with major news organizations such as the Hearst press and the *Chicago Tribune*. By the middle of the decade, Universal, Selig, and Vitagraph had established themselves as fixtures. Then, in 1919, Fox entered newsreel production and, with its cameramen stationed around the globe and a state-of-the-art laboratory in New York, quickly emerged as a leader in the field.

Newsreel production in the 1920s was characterized by aggressive competition. Exclusive rights to photographing sporting events were often undermined by undercover competitors, and the race was always on to bring events to screen as quickly as possible. To meet the demand for regular programs, newsreel producers frequently turned to the reenactment of news, and at times, the staging of events exclusively for filming. Still, the newsreel cameraman, glorified in the popular press, was often on scene recording spectacular events, frequently risking life and limb in the process. In 1927, both Paramount and MGM entered the newsreel business just in time for the conversion to sound, and in a short time *Paramount News* took a leading role. But it was Fox's *Movietone News* that recorded the first important sound-on-film events – the takeoff of Charles Lindbergh's pioneering transatlantic flight from Long Island on May 20, 1927 and the ceremonies welcoming his safe return on June 27. Fox premiered the first regular all-sound newsreel at the Roxy in New York in October 1927.

## Animation

Animation for the screen would not approach anything close to maturity until after sound came to cinema. But certain essential technical advances were achieved during this time, establishing the means by which the medium would enter into its golden age. Winsor McCay pioneered animation with *Little Nemo* (1911) and *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1914). Billed in *Little Nemo* – a film about the artist and his process – as “The Famous Cartoonist of the *N.Y. Herald Tribune*,” McCay relied upon hand drawing thousands of cartoons set before the Vitagraph camera. The impracticality of this method for mass production is clear, but it would not be long before Earl Hurd and J. R. Bray, working separately, would develop the means by which to animate specific sections of the frame against a background that did not require movement. Hurd's cels, which could be layered, allowed the artist to animate only those parts of a drawing that needed motion, thus drastically reducing labor time and making the animated film amenable to the industry's mode of production (Koszarski 1994, 170).

While several popular newspaper cartoon characters found their way into animated shorts – and the later “star,” Felix the Cat, debuted during this time –

perhaps the most significant films reflexively featured the animation process itself. The plot of *Little Nemo* revolves directly around McCay's efforts to impress his colleagues by bringing his drawings to life. McCay is also on-screen at the beginning of *Gertie* and his voice is heard throughout, via intertitles, instructing his dinosaur to do tricks for the audience. A similar reflexivity characterizes the early work of Max Fleischer, who would go on to be among the most important of sound-era animators and the creator of Betty Boop. Fleischer's “Out of the Inkwell” series typically began with a shot of the artist's hands opening his ink bottle, and in *Cartoon Factory* (1925), he appears in the frame in live-action next to his animated Koko the Clown.

In its infancy then, American animation frequently broke the frame of illusion and foregrounded itself as the main attraction. In *Cartoon Factory* and *Gertie the Dinosaur*, animated figures break free from or disregard the orders of their creators. As such, they point toward an irreverence that would characterize many of the most accomplished animated shorts of the sound era, in particular those created by Warner Bros. In exposing their means of production and in their direct address to the spectator, early animators signaled how their genre, more than any other within the Hollywood mode, would joyfully challenge the conventions of illusion. The arrival of sound on film provided a boost to animation because it eventually brought to an end the live stage presentation that often preceded the projection of a feature. As a theater's film program became standardized, a permanent place was created for the animated sound short.

Walt and Roy Disney founded their animation studio in Hollywood in October of 1923. Like the Fleischers, Disney's early work combined animation with live-action, as Kirsten Moana Thompson points out in this volume, and in the first of his silent *Alice* cartoons from 1923, Disney and his collaborators are featured in the frame alongside their drawings that come to life. Disney's first star, Mickey Mouse, was introduced in *Plane Crazy* (1928), but it would not be released as a sound cartoon until after the success of the better-known *Steamboat Willie* (1928). Like so many Disney cartoons to follow, character and music seem inseparable. We meet Mickey at the wheel of the steamboat, whistling and tapping his foot, and for the next eight minutes virtually everything within Mickey's reach becomes a musical instrument – bull's teeth become a

xylophone, pots and a washboard a percussion section. The bodies of objects and creatures undergo amazing transformations in a space where nothing seems permanent. As Robert Sklar has written of Disney's 1920s and early 1930s animation, it created a world in which "there is no fixed order of things: the world is plastic to imagination and will" (1994, 200).

## The First Avant-Garde

While the canon of early avant-garde filmmaking has been located firmly within European borders, the 1920s witnessed the emergence of a widespread experimental movement in the United States as well. As Jan-Christopher Horak has demonstrated in this volume and elsewhere, the professionalized avant-garde of post-World War II America supported by university teaching positions and foundation grants had been preceded by a self-identified "amateur" movement two decades earlier. During the 1920s, a far-ranging network of filmmakers, art house theaters, and publications was established. By 1927, according to Horak, there were roughly 30,000 amateur filmmakers in the United States and a year later, more than 100 film clubs (1995, 19).

This is a cinema of remarkable variation, much of it lost to history. Unlike Hollywood, experimental filmmakers often chose not to privilege the human figure within the frame. Rather, their films frequently pivoted around lyrical editing, abstract compositions, and psychological expressionism. They often functioned as personal records. Some of what survives from this period, and certainly that which is most often screened today, reveals a fascination with modern urban life and the rich visual patterns of the cityscape. Like their European counterparts – Walter Ruttmann (*Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, 1927), Dziga Vertov (*Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929), and Joris Ivens (*Rain*, 1929) – filmmakers such as Charles Sheeler, Paul Strand, Herman Weinberg, and Robert Flaherty pursued a nonnarrative cinema that combined documentary and poetic impulses.

In *Manhatta* (1921), Sheeler and Strand's cinematic transposition of Walt Whitman, the skyscraper "iron beauties" of the city are offered as monumental sculptures, combining art and industry. In Flaherty's *The 24 Dollar Island* (1927), the camera is liberated from framing the human form so that the "mountains of steel

and stone" are captured in all their patchwork density through extreme long shots. Flaherty orchestrates an interframe montage that combines the fixity of stone structures like the Brooklyn Bridge with the mobility of cars, tugs, and ships in the harbor. In short, the poetic potential of nonnarrative filmmaking was no less significant for American filmmakers as for their European counterparts.

But the early American avant-garde did far more than document cities. Like its European influence, it frequently used the frame not for verisimilitude but for abstraction, preferring the symbolic rather than the indexical potential of the medium. In *The Life and Death of 9413—A Hollywood Extra* (1928), Robert Florey and Slavko Vorkapich satirize the movie business, depicting a man whose dreams of stardom turn nightmarish when he is transformed into a numbered, mechanized Hollywood extra. Shot by Gregg Toland, the film intercuts expressionist iconography, miniatures, and images of the real Hollywood. A sequence, in which editing prevents the man from successfully ascending a set of stairs, echoes a similar pattern in *Ballet Mécanique* (Fernand Léger and Dudley Murphy, 1924), also an experimental film that hinges on abstracting everyday objects and body parts – bowls, whisks, necklaces, numbers, eyes, and lips. Montages of close-ups and interiors with pitch-black backgrounds create a hallucinatory space in *The Life and Death of 9413*. This antirealist impulse, eager to explore the subjective, perceptual realm, would remain an important component of alternative cinema. In fact, while the economics of film production in the United States permitted the commercial industry to define the medium for most moviegoers, experimental filmmakers of the 1920s initiated an avant-garde that would consistently challenge that definition throughout the twentieth century.

## The Coming of Sound to the Cinema

The period covered by this section is punctuated by the rise of the talkies. The silent cinema had, of course, rarely been silent and live musical accompaniment had almost always been part of the moviegoing experience. But because sound synchronized with the image – either on disk or on the film itself – would

arrive in the late 1920s to forever change the industry as well as the art form, it continues to make sense to periodize the history of cinema at this juncture. Over the past 30 years, considerable scholarship has been focused on the coming of sound. That work has successfully overturned the myths of an earlier era – that *The Jazz Singer* (1927) revolutionized the industry virtually overnight, throwing studios into a panic, and that Warner Bros., on the brink of collapse, single-handedly pioneered a new film form. But that does not mean a singular interpretation of this period has emerged, as Paul Young points out in this volume. Douglas Gomery has consistently argued that the transition to sound was thoroughly planned, the result of cooperation and consolidation within and between filmmaking companies and the giants of the recording, electric, and telephone industries (Gomery 2005). Donald Crafton has argued that the changeover to sound was “partly rational, partly confused,” that the studios’ master plan, enacted to maximize profits, was accompanied by regular improvisation to deal with the unanticipated problems posed by the application of new technologies (Crafton 1997, 4). For David Bordwell and Janet Staiger, the introduction of synchronized sound can hardly be understood as a revolution. Rather, it exemplifies the flexibility of the system, “a typical case of how the Hollywood mode of production could accommodate technological change” (Bordwell & Staiger 1985, 247).

What is clear is that sound came to cinema over a protracted period of experimentation, first outside the movie industry and then also within it, and it did so over the course of expanding applications before and after the October 1927 premiere of *The Jazz Singer*. In 1926, the Vitaphone (sound-on-disk) presentations of *Don Juan* (1926) and *The Better 'Ole* (1926) offered musical scores to accompany each feature. During 1927, the sound-on-film system that Fox labeled Movietone was used for newsreels and the filming of shorts capturing vaudeville performers. During the 1929–1930 season, the studios released silent and sound versions of all their films, with sound-on-film technology rapidly becoming the standard. Finally, all-sound production became standard practice starting with the 1930–1931 season (Gomery 2005, 2). What is also clear is that sound film was enormously profitable, handsomely returning studio investments in new theaters and sound equipment. As Gomery has suggested, it was not so much *The*

*Jazz Singer* as it was Jolson’s next film, *The Singing Fool* (1928), with its record-breaking revenues, that convinced the industry of the box office potential of synchronized sound.

The transition to sound may have been smoothly accommodated by the Hollywood mode of production and it certainly secured rather than destabilized the major studios’ domination of the domestic and world markets, but it changed forever what audiences expected and got every time they went to the movies. Synchronized sound gave filmmakers a new and powerful tool to advance realism – the ricochet of bullets, the screeching of tires, the tapping of dancing feet – and restored to acting the volume and inflections of voice. It also provided a new source of anxiety for those who worried about the influence of the movies – the sounds of passion, the potential crudities of language – as the medium moved toward a more faithful representation of the world beyond the screen.

As quickly as the audience took to the movies, it took to their new incarnation with sound, bringing to a close a remarkable period in the history of American culture. The golden age of silent film was giving way to what would become another golden age, the years during which the movies came into full kinship with the American stage, in its Broadway and vaudeville traditions, and the increasingly popular form of radio. Few could know, in 1927, how truly prophetic were Al Jolson’s words in *The Jazz Singer*: “You ain’t heard nothin’ yet.”

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