MOTION PICTURES

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Summary

This paper outlines the development of motion pictures from a cultural perspective that includes some technical detail and thoughts on the future of motion pictures. In just over one century, motion pictures have changed the way humans live. At this moment, millions of people are watching movies in practically every corner of the world. Motion pictures join the personal, artistic, political, and cultural in unique ways that have made them both pervasive and influential.

Throughout the twentieth century, motion pictures proved invaluable to humans on the level of the individual and in social, cultural, and political realms. There is no doubt that their significance will continue. It is commonplace for individuals to describe films that entertain them, or touch them personally, and that change their lives. Likewise, countries, cultures, societies, nations, and ethnic groups have long affirmed the importance of motion pictures to their group identities and social movements (see *Identity Formation and Difference*).

Yet, motion pictures have a darker side, as they have been used by governments and other powerful groups as a persuasive form of propaganda designed to further policies that restrict freedoms, and support racist, sexist, and, often, violent ideologies. Furthermore, the commercial production, distribution, and exhibition of movies have traditionally been controlled by a relatively small group of large companies in various parts of the world. The result is that international media conglomerates control billions of dollars in media revenues each year (see *International Communications and Media Networks*). Therefore, their films often represent a limited view steeped in a cultural hegemony that furthers cultural imperialism and restrictive ideologies.

Regardless of these problems, the future of motion pictures seems vibrant and hopeful. New Internet-based technologies suggest that, if important issues such as the international digital divide can be successfully resolved, the production, distribution, and exhibition of motion pictures may be decentralized and democratized (see chapter *Internet Access, Cost and the Information Gap*).

1. Introduction

Motion pictures are an important part of human life. Millions of people routinely view them in small and large theaters, classrooms, places of worship, workplaces, small outdoor community squares, and large auditoriums. Motion pictures are internationally distributed where they can be projected onto screens, broadcast to television sets, or circulated by videocassette or digital disk technology, and in some parts of the world, motion pictures can be viewed on computers with Internet connections. The movies, in only one hundred years, have become a pervasive and influential mass medium.

Understanding motion pictures requires a historical and cultural perspective. Although the technology of the cinema plays an important role in its development, it is more often the sociopolitical and cultural environment in which films are made that most significantly affect them as a mode of communication and entertainment. In most places, motion pictures are both art and commerce, and maintaining the balance between these two, often competing, forces is difficult. Likewise, movies are both entertainment and cultural communication, another duality that causes problems in terms of representation and ideological perspective.

This paper offers a brief history of motion pictures that lays out the major developments, trends, and influences on international cinema. This essay also highlights several important sociocultural concepts that help to explain many of the issues surrounding motion picture production. Finally, this paper offers some ideas about the future of motion pictures.

2. History

Modern motion picture technology, or the movies, has existed for a little over a century. Yet, as early optical devices such as the phenakistoscope, the zoetrope, and picture "flip-books" attest, human beings have been fascinated with pictures that move for much longer. These devices used their optical "tricks" to make still pictures printed on paper appear to move. However, the modern mass medium known as motion pictures

had to wait for technical advances in the related areas of photography and projection. The development of the requisite technology for moving pictures was not achieved by any one individual or group, although many people is different countries did claim to invent the movies. Motion picture technology was developed, improved, and, often, transformed through the combined efforts and inventions of many people working in Western Europe and North America in the late 1880s and 1890s.

In the United States, Thomas Edison had taken an interest in having moving pictures to accompany his already popular phonograph. One of his assistants, W. K. L. Dickson, was primarily responsible for the development of Edison's early motion picture camera, the kinetograph, and the device they used to view their short moving images captured on a clear strip of photographic film, the kinetoscope. The kinetoscope was not a projector but, rather, a free standing viewer that allowed a single user to peer inside its cabinet and view the brief moving image, often called a "film" because Dickson utilized the relatively new flexible film (known as celluloid) developed by the Eastman Kodak Company. The bulky kinetoscope soon proved to be inferior to film projection, and Edison began producing a projector invented by Thomas Armat, the vitascope. On April 23, 1896 at Koster and Bail's Music Hall in New York City, the new system premiered.

Meanwhile, in Paris, France, Louis and Auguste Lumière were working on their cinématographe, a combination camera and projector. One of their earliest moving pictures was a short view of workers leaving their factory and was probably filmed in early 1895. It survives today as one of the earliest important landmarks in film history. In Paris's Grand Café on December 28, 1895 they presented their first program of short films. Simultaneously, motion picture producers like the Edison Company and the Lumière Brothers set about making short films and distributing them around the globe and, in so doing, spread interest in motion pictures.

2.1 The Silent Era

The earliest filmmaking was, for the most part, documentary and docudrama in style and content. These brief movies (usually less than a minute or so in length) were often representations of real life occurrences, such as vaudeville and stage performers, or everyday events such as a train rapidly entering a station or a comical recreation of a common event such as young couple trying to feed their child.

Yet, these little views of life and short performances did not consist of much more than a static camera set up to record the image on film. The narrative art of filmmaking developed as a natural outgrowth in this new entertainment medium. Its similarities to theater were obvious, and its potential for presenting vignettes was realized by several different filmmakers early on. Although it is a matter of some dispute as to who made the very first narrative motion picture, many important clues suggest that it was the French filmmaker Alice Guy. Regardless, narrative filmmaking developed quickly, and motion pictures became longer and more sophisticated as the technology developed and the public demand grew.

This public clamor for motion pictures, combined with the desire of early filmmakers to capitalize on what they feared might be a passing fancy, encouraged many different

people to become involved in the burgeoning industry. They created a highly competitive character for the early film industry that encouraged filmmakers to be innovative in both the art and technology of motion pictures. France, Italy, and the United States led the early development of the motion picture industry; however, the early 1900s also saw filmmaking develop in England, Germany, Denmark, and Japan. Unfortunately, this early period of competitiveness by a large group of independent filmmakers was relatively short lived. Soon it became apparent that a few large companies would dominate the filmmaking business by a variety of means, including forcing out their competition, merging, and the formation of oligopolies that protected their investments in filmmaking by controlling the industry through vertical integration. In essence, the large companies, called studios, produced the films, distributed the films, and either directly or indirectly controlled the exhibition of the films.

In the United States, several large companies who owned various patents on motion picture equipment came together, primarily under the leadership of the Edison Company, and made legal agreements that effectively forced many of the smaller movie producers to merge or close down production. The United States government eventually dissolved the Motion Pictures Patent Pool (MPPC), also known as "the trust." Unfortunately, the damage to their competitors was already done. The MPPC was responsible for several important changes in motion pictures including lengthening them, a trend that had already begun in France, the beginning of the star system, legitimizing movies for the middle classes, furthering reliance upon genre films, and moving film production to Hollywood, California, USA. The MPPC reached its goal of driving out the competition. It further ensured that large companies would continue to dominate the filmmaking industry by raising the production values of films and, therefore, making movies much more expensive to produce. This increased cost helped to keep the financial investments required to make movies out of the reach of most independents. Further, the MPPC had a significant influence and control over the content of motion pictures by focusing production on themes and issues that would appeal to a mainstream, middle-class, and ethnically "white" audience. The silent film master D. W. Griffith in his epic 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation* exemplified this condition. The silent era in the United States produced many important directors including Griffith, Cecil B. De Mille, Erich von Stroheim, and Charlie Chaplin, and the standardization that took place during this period helped to form the classical Hollywood cinema style which would eventually dominate cinema internationally.

Yet, the French industry was the dominant international film industry in the early decades of filmmaking. It was not until World War I severely curtailed the production and distribution of films in Europe that the United States motion picture industry was able to dominate filmmaking in the West (see *World War I*). The motion picture producers in the United States took advantage of the war by continuing to develop their own industry and by using the European market, after the war, to expand their influence and audience. Similar conditions arose during and after World War II, as the United States' "Hollywood" film industry furthered its international dominance.

Filmmaking in Europe after World War I was an exciting time as alternative film styles were explored, partly as a reaction to the new international dominance of the Hollywood style and partly due to an interest in further developing the art of film. In France, French

Impressionism (1918–1929) and the related but less popular French Surrealism movements focused on subjective states of mind, particularly those associated with love and sex, and drew from the rich tradition of Impressionist painting. Impressionist and Surrealist filmmakers such as Abel Gance, Marcel L'Herbier, Jean Epstein, Germaine Dulac, and Luis BuZuel were pioneers in form and style and were essential to the development of Art Cinema. In Germany, German Expressionism (1920–1927) dominated cinematic style. Like Impressionism, Expressionism was concerned with psychological states, but Expressionism focused more on abnormal psychology such as insanity. It also dealt greatly with legends and myths. Stylistically, these films drew from the visually exciting Expressionist theatre and, therefore, set design and expressionistic acting were emphasized. The dark worlds that Expressionist filmmakers created had a powerful and long-lasting effect on filmmaking internationally, as almost all horror and science fiction films owe a debt to German Expressionism. Furthermore, the important post World War II Hollywood film style known as film noir was also greatly influenced by the style of Expressionism (see *Modern Art*). Expressionist directors such as Robert Wiene, Fritz Lang, F. W. Murnau, and G. W. Pabst changed filmmaking forever with their contributions to cinematic style and mise-en-scene. Meanwhile the Soviet Montage movement (1925–1933) flourished in the Soviet Union. Soviet Montage films were heavily influenced by the work of great film theorists who were also filmmakers such as Lev Kuleshov, Sergei Eisenstein, and Dziga Vertov. Eisenstein, in particular, was influential in furthering the theoretical aspects of moviemaking. Eisenstein is particularly associated with dynamic editing that emphasizes conflict, movement, and rhythm that furthered the narrative point of his films. Likewise, because of their Marxist beliefs, Soviet Montage filmmakers often focused on revolutionary themes and social topics (see *Russian Revolution*).

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Biographical Sketch

J. Emmett Winn Ph.D. is an assistant professor of communication at Auburn University in Auburn, Alabama, USA. He teaches courses dealing with the history, theory, and criticism of the mass media. His specialty is film studies, and he conducts his research from a cultural approach designed as a discursive confrontation of social and political issues concerning the media. He is particularly interested in issues of class, race, gender, ethnic, and religious identity. Dr. Winn is a member of the American Association of University Professors and the Phi Kappa Phi honorary.