**Video Script**

**Lecture 12 – Pre-code Film**

**Fall 2020**

**Welcome**

Our topic for today is “Pre-Code Hollywood,” and the tough part about teaching the Pre-Code era of film history is that it’s named for something that happened *after* that era. So, I get stuck in this chicken vs. egg loop of how to explain pre-Code film.

Like, you need to know what the Production Code is to understand pre-Code film…but you need to know what happened in the pre-Code era to understand why the Production Code happened…and then my brain just cycles through that loop until I have a pedagogical malfunction and need to put my head down on the desk for a second.

**Timeline**

I thought the best way to explain things is through a timeline. **[ANIMATION]** In 1929, the stock market crashes, triggering the Great Depression. **[ANIMATION]** Then, a year later in 1930, a restrictive new set of rules is written about what can and can’t be shown in Hollywood films. This set of rules is known as the Production Code of 1930. **[ANIMATION]** But it isn’t until 1934, four years later, Hollywood actually begins *enforcing* the Production Code. The films produced in the years between the stock market crash and the enforcement of the code are unique enough that they stand out as their own era of film history. **[ANIMATION]** And we call it the pre-Code era.

In summary: the phrase pre-Code refers to the *five years* before the Production Code goes into effect, not *all years* before the Production Code goes into effect. And the Production Code of 1930 doesn’t actually matter until 1934. Easy, right? Not at all a weird historical riddle.

**Key Concepts**

Now that that’s settled, here are your key concepts for this lecture.

**Houston**

To understand the wacky world of pre-Code cinema, we need to imagine we’re living in 1929. **[ANIMATION]** Let’s say we’re residents of Houston! This is a picture of the city circa around 1927, so maybe this building with the scaffolding is finished, but otherwise, your hometown pretty much looks like this. **[ANIMATION]** Houston’s population *doubled* between 1900 and 1910. By 1930, it’s the most populous city in Texas. People are moving there in droves, and this is happening in cities across America. This process is known as urbanization.

For some, the 1920s are a time of relative wealth and freedom. There’s a post-WWI economic upswing, and there are lots of jobs to be had in the booming industrial sector. As I mentioned when I talked about Clara Bow last week, there’s a “New Woman” ideology buoyed by the adoption of the 19th Amendment in 1920 which, in practice, gave white women the right to vote. Young women in these booming cities have a little more freedom to go out, enjoy themselves, and work. We’ve come a long way from the earliest days of our class, when a lady had to have an escort to go to the circus, or whatever, lest everyone die from impropriety.

**Prohibition**

It’s also important to remember that from 1920, when the 18th amendment was went into effect, all the way until 1933 when it was repealed by the 21st amendment, the sale and manufacture of alcohol was prohibited in the United States. Here, you see a liquor store on the eve of Prohibition that with a sign in the window that reads:

*Good-by boys, we’re through. The people and the courts have handed us our ticket. We’re on our way. If you want liquors get them now!*

Incidentally, that’s also the text I’d like on my tombstone. Anyway, prohibition was divisive and increasingly unpopular as time passed, as you might be able to gauge from these fine fellows and their WE WANT BEER protest signs.

**Metropolitan Theater**

So, okay, back to the imaginary time travel. Pretend it’s October 23, 1929. It’s a fine Wednesday in bustling Houston. Maybe you have a new, industrial job. You can’t go out for a drink after work—at least for a legal one, anyway—so maybe you head to your local movie palace to see a film. This was the interior of the Metropolitan Theater, which opened in Houston in 1923. Since it’s such a big and expensive theater, it’s a good bet that by October of 1929 the Metropolitan has been wired for sound so you get to treat yourself to a talkie. And lots of Americans are spending their leisure time the way you do. Movie attendance goes up by 40-50% after *The Jazz Singer.*

Let’s pretend you had a good day on October 23, 1929.

**Selling Panic**

You wake up on October 24, 1929 and, in the span of a day, the world has changed. You pick up a newspaper and you see a story like this:

*SELLING PANIC WRECKS STOCK EXCHANGE; NEW YORK FRENZIED. Wildest day in history of market ruins scores; loses to be in billions. Leading financiers frantically call conference as sales break all known records; threaten to close exchange; almost every stock on list hard hit.*

October 24, 1929 marked the beginning of a stock market crash that lasts five days, from Black Thursday to Black Tuesday (October 29, 1929). Stocks declined 25% over those five days. The market lost the equivalent of $396 billion in today’s dollars. For reference, that’s more than the entire cost of World War I.

**Daily Texan**

What was life like if you were a UT student on Black Tuesday? Well, I was able to dig up the issue of *The Daily Texan* from October 29, 1929. **[ANIMATION]** The crash made it onto the front page, with some analysis from a current professor named Dr. Montgomery who soberly diagnosed the situation as “the people of the United States were too optimistic.”

The crash shares the front page with this story, **[ANIMATION]** “Thursday is the Last Day to Purchase Football Tickets.” Which is basically proof that being harangued about whether or not you’ve bought The Big Ticket is nearly a century old tradition.

**Pathe newsreel**

**[PLAY CLIP]** In the years before broadcast media, moving images of the stock market crash come out gradually via newsreel. Here’s one from Pathe. You can see that people working in the financial district in New York City simply swarmed out into the streets to try to get news of what was happening—this newsreel seems to try to capture the scale of the crash by demonstrating mass confusion, this sea of bodies just milling, milling, milling.

**The Great Depression**

What follows, as I’m sure you all know, is a decade of economic contraction, widespread unemployment, and poverty known as the Great Depression. Roughly 25% of the nation is unemployed and another 25% are employed only part time. (For reference, a little over 14% was the highest unemployment level we’ve seen so far during the pandemic.)

Without any social safety nets whatsoever in 1929, things got really bad, really quickly.

**Rothstein (Girl in Window)**

From a media history perspective, we have a lot of strangely beautiful images of the Depression because photography was federally funded as part of FDR’s New Deal—legislation intended to get the economy moving again.

**Berenice Abbott**

Federal Project No. 1 under the Works Progress Administration employed out-of-work artists and gave them jobs documenting the Depression, producing work for the public good, or disseminating their skills. Writers might work on literacy projects, for example. Theater directors produced dramas. And both Federal Project No. 1 and the Farm Security Administration dispatched photographers all over the country to produce images about the crisis. The photographs on these slides come out of that project.

**Hoovervilles**

Homelessness during the Depression sharply increased. Shantytowns called Hoovervilles (named sarcastically after President Herbert Hoover) popped up in cities around the country.

**Rothstein (Dust Bowl)**

The economic effects of the Great Depression are uniquely amplified in certain areas of the southern United States, including Oklahoma, Texas, and California. Overfarming, destructive farming techniques, and unfortunate weather patterns combined to destroy swaths of land across these areas, turning them into what was known as the “Dust Bowl.”

**Dorthea Lange**

Here, one of the most famous American photos of all time, taken by Dorthea Lange, of a migrant agricultural worker and her two children in the Dust Bowl.

**Rothstein (women in home)**

As with all historical events, the Depression impacted different social and economic groups differently. Black people, particularly in the rural south, were said to be “the last hired and first fired.” They were often the first to see their hours and jobs cut or eliminated. Black Americans also experienced the highest unemployment rate throughout the 1930s.

**Rothstein (woman and car)**

There *was* a so-called “Black cabinet” in the FDR administration who consulted on issues related to the Black community, but—and this is a big but—New Deal programs were administered *at the state level*, where racial segregation was still widely and systematically enforced. The promises of economic recovery spurred by federal investment were often erased for Black citizens by state and local Jim Crow laws.

**Flying Down to Rio**

Okay, now that we’ve had a little bit of an American history refresher, let’s put our course into the conversation. **[ANIMATION]** What impact do you think the Depression has on the movie business?

**Flying Down to Rio (continued)**

That answer has two parts. **[ANIMATION]** In the first year of the Depression, the movies do okay. Stuff like opera, theater, and baseball—all the live, more expensive amusements—see their attendance plummet. Movies are a comparatively cheap form of entertainment, so people keep going…at *first*.

**[ANIMATION]** From 1931 on, though, the movies tank too. Attendance drops by half. Thousands of small theaters close, especially the ones that weren’t wired for sound. The studios and remaining theater owners both all find themselves teetering near bankruptcy and are faced with the existential question of how to lure audiences back to the movies when most Americans had so little so spend on leisure.

**Think**

So, I put the question you. Stop for a moment and imagine you’re a theater owner in 1930. How do you get people to keep coming to the movies?

**Dish Night**

Theater owners came up with some creative strategies to encourage patrons to spend their precious nickels and dimes on the movies. **[ANIMATION]** One such promotion aimed at women was called “dish night.” Theaters would strike a deal with a china manufacturer to produce a complete set of dishware that included 52 pieces. Then, they would hold a “dish night” once every week for an entire year. Folks who bought a “dish night” movie ticket received one piece of china each week. So, you buy a ticket to *Flying Down to Rio* on dish night this week, you get a cup. You buy a ticket to *Gold Diggers of 1933* on dish night the following week, you get a saucer. And so on throughout the year. If women wanted the whole set of dishes—which was a luxury for the home that many couldn’t afford—they had to attend weekly.

**Bank Night**

Another promotion was called Bank Night, which was a franchised lottery game. Theater owners who bought into Bank Night were provided with a movie reel that explained the game to audiences (which I’ve never been able to find! I would love to see it) as well as some lottery drawing equipment. The way Bank Night worked was that anyone could enter the bank night lottery, because by not requiring a purchase, theater owners skirted lottery laws. The trick was, though, that if your number was drawn at the theater before a feature, you only had a few minutes to reach the stage to claim your prize. Obviously, you could only win if you’d bought a ticket to that show.

**[ANIMATION]** When in doubt, theater owners employed the oldest trick in the book: simply dropping prices. They’d slash admission on certain nights as low as they could go and call it Bargain Night. And who doesn’t love a bargain?

**Think for a moment**

Okay, now let’s imagine you’re the head of 308 Pictures, the premiere studio of 1930s Hollywood. How do you get people to come see your movies? What kinds of films do you make? Do you try to please kids, because they’re easy to dupe out of their money? Do you try to make films for the whole family in hopes that you could drive up attendance numbers?

**Sex & Violence**

No, of course not! In the venerable tradition of cheap thrills since time immemorial, **[ANIMATION]** you cram your pictures full of as much sex and violence as you possibly can. *What defines the pre-Code era is how risqué and how violent the films become.* And when the films aren’t sexy or violent, studios *advertise* them in such a way that makes audiences believe that they are. After all, it’s the Great Depression. No one wants to spend their last dime on a yearning epic about the plight of the Southern sharecropper.

They wanna see some boobies, and then they want to see one thousand machine guns pump lead into a wall.

**Sex**

On the sexy side of things, in the pre-Code era we tend to see stories about fallen women, sex workers, or “bad girls” who sleep their way to the top. These films are full of affairs, infidelity, ruthless pleasure-seeking, men being used and abused, and amoral female characters who don’t care who they hurt.

And I mean, I love all that, but the thing I find funniest about pre-Code films is how they have female characters continue their normal dialogue while pointlessly changing their clothes. You’ll see that in your screening for this week, and here’s another great example.

**Red Headed Woman (1932)**

This clip is from the 1932 film Red Headed Woman, the screenplay for which was written by Anita Loos and F. Scott Fitzgerald (yes, that F. Scott Fitzgerald), although he was uncredited. Take a look. **[PLAY CLIP]**

WHY ARE THESE WOMEN CHANGING CLOTHES? Because sex *sells*, baby, and it’s 1932 and we need butts in seats or the whole movie industry’s going down the toilet!

**Loose Ankles (1930)**

Here’s one more clip. This is from a 1930 film called *Loose Ankles*, in which Loretta Young plays a socialite who will inherit a fortune as long as 1) the newspaper doesn’t print anything scandalous about her, and 2) her aunt consents to her marriage. Angry at not being able to choose who she marries, she sets out to *intentionally* have a scandal. You can see where sexy hijinks might ensue.

But all of that’s besides the point for this clip, which I’m only including because so many of you said you’re Quentin Tarantino fans. **[PLAY CLIP.]**

We all know how much ol’ Quentin likes to feature women’s feet in his films, but I think this 90-year-old scene would make Tarantino blush.

**Violent Movies**

On the other side of the sensational coin, we’ve got movies that feature violence. In the 1930s, this mostly comes in the form of ganger films, which are filled with lots and lots of guns, car chases, and booze. Remember, it’s Prohibition, and I guess it gives people a vicarious buzz to see movie characters swigging liquor without a care.

The more interesting aspect of gangster films to me is how they model their protagonists on real life gangland figures like bank robber John Dillinger. Criminals are almost like folk heroes in some of these stories, and that makes sense when you remember the crash. In an era when so many people saw their savings disappear in an instant, bank robbers might seem like admirable, or at the very least *cathartic* figures.

**Scarface**

1932’s *Scarface* is one inspired by the story of Al Capone. Paul Muni plays Antonio “Tony” Camonte who violently rises through Chicago gangland. In an overt tie to the life of Capone, one scene depicts a version of the St. Valentine’s Day Massacre. Let’s watch a clip. **[PLAY CLIP]**

*Scarface* is a great film, but my one critique is that I’m not sure if there was enough gunfire. Kidding, of course—I don’t know if there were any bullets left in the western hemisphere after that scene.

To fully contextualize what we just saw, remember what we talked about in the last lecture on sound. Gangster films were popular after the advent of sound not only because their themes spoke to the moment, but because they were *spectacularly loud*. 1930s gangsters gleefully wield tommy guns, modern submachine guns that drummed out bullet after bullet, setting them apart in sight and in sound from older villains with their revolvers and rifles. Gangsters were made for this movie moment.

**Protest**

So, back at the top of the lecture, I mentioned that the pre-Code era was short—just five years. And that’s because while Jean Harlow is on screen stripping down to her skivvies every five minutes for no dang reason, there’s a growing concern among a faction of the public about the impact these movies are having children. Simultaneously, religious groups—particularly Catholics—are organizing against films they see as deeply immoral. And as these groups put more pressure on the government to regulate the content coming out of Hollywood, the industry must respond. And that’s where we’ll pick up in our next lecture.