

The Film Industry in the 1960s: The Change Begins!

The Film industry in the United States in the 1960s, reflected the decade of fun, fashion, and rock 'n' roll, as well as the tremendous social changes which were occurring. Still fighting the new television medium, however, 1963 was the worst year the film industry had seen in fifty years, with only 121 feature film releases. The following year was not much better and saw the largest number of foreign films released in the US in any one year with 361, vs. 141 American. This was a trend that would define and monumentally change the industry throughout the 1960s.

With movie audiences declining due to the dominance of television, major American film companies began to diversify with other forms of entertainment products, including records, publishing, TV movies and the production of TV series. Increasingly throughout the 60s, the major studios financed and distributed independently-produced domestic pictures and made-for-TV movies became a regular feature of network programming by mid-decade.

To save money, many film productions were being made abroad to save money; especially in Canada and the U.K., where foreign filmmakers from Italy, Germany and Japan were beginning to congregate. By mid-decade, the average movie ticket price had dropped to less than a dollar, and the average film budget was slightly over one and a half million dollars. By the end of the decade, the film industry was very troubled and depressed and experiencing an all-time low that had been developing for almost 25 years.

Many of the studios during this time, had to sell off their backlots for condominiums and shopping centers as California real estate prices soared. Some even sold old props to attempt to stave off bankruptcy, like MGM which was rapidly selling of various old film artifacts, including Dorothy's ruby slippers

from ***“The Wizard of Oz”*** (1939). Others offered tours of their back lots, including Universal which began its famed studio tours in 1964. Still others created theme parks, with Disney opening a new attraction in Orlando, Florida.

In an attempt to draw audiences back to the movie theatres, Stanley H. Durwood became the father of the 'multiplex' movie theater in 1963 when he opened the *first*-ever mall multiplex theatre in Kansas City. Three years later, he introduced the world's first four-plex, and then in 1969, he built a six-plex with automated projection booths.

Due to various insecurities and financial difficulties, many studios were quickly taken over by multi-national companies, especially following the deaths of the movie-studio moguls such as Louis B. Mayer of MGM and Harry Cohn of Columbia. The traditional, Hollywood studio era was history, as more and more studios were acquired by other unrelated business conglomerates. The age of "packaged" films and the rise of the independent company and producer was beginning.

Actors and Directors were no longer trapped in illegal studio contracts and many embraced their new freedom and rushed to create their own independent film companies, allowing them to take advantage of income tax and other corporate advantages.

Just as the studios were changing, so to was the demand for newer, more intellectually challenging content. Young college students and others were attracted to independent art-house style films and the new style of directing that was coming from Italy, Germany, Japan and other foreign markets. Many of these directors were now based out of the U.K., making the distribution of their films to the United States simple.

The most distinguished "British" art-house films of the decade came from one of the most original, visionary and controversial of directors of his time, Stanley Kubrick, whose remarkable films, were considered anti-Hollywoodish, as they are filled with dark visions of social and political institutions during the Cold War era.

One of his most famous is the Cold War black comedy "***Dr. Strangelove: Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb***" (1964). The film is about a possible nuclear Armageddon at the hands of inept politicians, arrogant scientists, and military figures with lunatic concerns about fail-safe points, hotlines, and Communist plots such as fluoridation.

Hollywood could not always predict which films would do well, as what worked in the past no longer was a sure thing in the present. However, it was clear that more emphasis had to be placed into the hands of the director, who was now regarded as a creative and powerful ***auteur***, and who was now functioning very independently of the weakened studio system.

As film censorship was slowly being abolished in the US, a new freedom of language, subject matter and permissiveness was expressed in film, with more explicit treatments of sex and violence. In November of 1968, a major revision in the ratings systems helped to encourage artistic freedom rather than censorship, and avoided the threat of government-sponsored censorship. It let Hollywood film-makers compete against adult-oriented foreign film productions, and lessened restraint toward themes of sex, nudity, violence and obscenity. A new *voluntary* ratings code was announced to replace the decades-old Hays Production Code.