

The Hollywood Film Industry in the 1940s

During the United States' involvement in World War 2, the Hollywood film industry cooperated closely with the government to support its war-time information campaign. Following the declaration of war on Japan after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, the U.S. government created a **Bureau of Motion Picture Affairs** to coordinate the production of entertainment features with patriotic, morale-boosting themes and messages about the "American way of life," the nature of the enemy and the Allies, civilian responsibility on the home front, and the fighting forces themselves.

When World War II ended, the American film industry seemed to be in an ideal position. The Depression had ended and the Allied victory had opened up the vast, unchallenged markets in the war-torn economies of Western Europe and Japan. Furthermore, from 1942 through 1945, Hollywood had experienced the most stable and lucrative three years in its history, and in 1946, when two-thirds of the American population once again went to the movies at least once a week, the studios earned record-breaking profits. The euphoria ended quickly, however, as inflation and labor unrest boosted production costs at home, while overseas, important foreign markets, including Britain and Italy, implemented protectionist quotas, which meant that these countries refused to allow American films to be shown. As a result, American film revenue sunk quickly.

The industry was even more severely weakened in 1948, when a Federal Antitrust suit against the five major and three minor studios (**Majors:** Paramount, MGM, 20th Century Fox, RKO & Warner Brothers **Minors:** Universal, Columbia, and United Artists) ended in the "Paramount decrees," which forced the studios to

divest themselves of (sell off) their movie theatre chains and allowed competition in the Exhibition sector (movie theatre chains) for the first time in 30 years.

Finally, the advent of network television broadcasting in the 1940s provided Hollywood Film with its first real competition for American leisure time by offering consumers movies and other programming, in the home.

Film content during the 1940s was strongly influenced by the fear of Communism that pervaded the United States. On November 24, 1947, a group of eight screenwriters and two directors, later known as the *Hollywood Ten*, were blacklisted and sentenced to serve up to a year in prison for refusing to testify in front of the House on Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), which wanted them to accuse fellow actors, writers and directors of being Communists or having Communist sympathies.

Throughout the blacklisting era, filmmakers refrained from making any but the most conservative motion pictures; controversial topics or new ideas were carefully avoided. The resulting creative stagnation, combined with financial difficulties, contributed significantly to the end of the studio system.

Women's Films in the 1940s:

The **woman's film** is a film genre which includes women-centered narratives, female protagonists and is specifically designed to appeal to a female audience. Woman's films usually portray "**women's concerns**" such as problems revolving around domestic life, the family, motherhood, self-sacrifice, and romance. These films were produced from silent era until the 1950s and early 1960s, but were most popular in the 1930s and 1940s, reaching their zenith during World War 2.

The woman's films that were produced in the 1930s during the Great Depression have a strong thematic focus on class issues and questions of economic survival. The 1940s woman's film, however, places its protagonists in a middle- or upper-middle-class world and is more concerned with the characters' emotional, sexual, and psychological experiences. The female protagonist is portrayed as either good or bad.

The film industry in the 1940s had an economic interest in producing these films, as women were believed to comprise a majority of movie-goers; especially since the men were at war. In line with this perception, many woman's films were big productions, which attracted some of Hollywood's best stars and directors. Production of women's films dropped off in the 1950s as melodrama became more male-centered and as soap operas began to appear on television.

Director Michael Curtiz and “Mildred Pierce”:

Michael Curtiz began acting in and then directing films in his native Hungary in 1912. After WWI, he continued his filmmaking career in Austria and Germany and on into the early 1920s, when he directed films in other countries in Europe. Moving to the US in 1926, he started making films in Hollywood for Warner Brothers and became thoroughly entrenched in the studio system making many, many popular films. His films during the 1930s and '40s encompassed nearly every genre imaginable and some, including “*Casablanca*” (1942) and “*Mildred Pierce*” (1945), are considered film classics. His brilliance waned in the 1950s when he made a number of mediocre films for studios other than Warner Brothers. He directed his last film in 1961, a year before his death at 74.

