THE LATE SILENT ERA IN HOLLYWOOD, 1920–1928

During World War I, the United States became the global economic leader. The center of finance shifted from London to New York, and American ships carried goods all over the world. Despite a brief, intense recession in 1921, resulting primarily from the shift back to a peacetime economy, the 1920s were a period of prosperity for many sectors of society. Republican administrations were in power, and a conservative, pro-business approach dominated the country. American consumer goods, including movies, continued to make inroads in many foreign countries. In contrast to this fiscal conservatism, society seemed to lose much of its restraint during the Roaring Twenties. The passage of the Volstead Act (1919), outlawing alcoholic beverages, led to the excesses of the age of Prohibition. Bootleg liquor was readily available, and visiting speak- easies or attending wild drinking parties became common among all classes. Before the war, women had grown their hair long, worn floor- length dresses, and danced sedately. Now they created scandals by bob- bing their hair, wearing short skirts, doing the Charleston, and smoking in public.

Many sectors of society, though, were shut off from the general pros- perity and sophistication of the 1920s. Racism was rampant, with the Ku Klux Klan growing after its revival in 1915 and the stiffening of immi- gration quotas to keep certain groups out of the United States. Workers in agriculture and mining fared poorly. The film industry, however, benefited from the high level of capital available during this period, and its films bore traces of the fast pace of life in the Jazz Age.

THEATER CHAINS AND THE EXPANSION OF THE INDUSTRY

The American film industry, expanding hugely during World War I, continued to grow in the postwar decade. Despite the recession of 1921, the era was one of prosperity and intensive business investment. For the first time, major Wall Street firms became interested in the young film industry. Between 1922 and 1930, total invest- ment in the industry leaped from $78 to $850 million. The average weekly attendance at American movie theaters doubled from 1922 (40 million) to 1928 (80 million). Hollywood's exports continued to grow nearly unchecked until the mid-1920s, leveling off only because virtually all foreign markets were sated.

Central to the industry's growth was a strategy of buying and building movie theaters. By owning theater chains, the big producers ensured an outlet for their films. Producers could then confidently raise budgets for individual films. Studios competed in offering eye-catching production values. A new generation of directors came to prominence, and Hollywood also attracted more foreign filmmakers, who brought stylistic innovations. If the 1910s had seen the formation

of the film industry, the next decade witnessed its expansion into a sophisticated set of institutions.

Vertical Integration

The most obvious sign of the growth of the film industry was its increasing vertical integration. The biggest firms jockeyed for power by combining production and distribu- tion with expanding chains of theaters.

At first, the main theater chains were regional. In 1917, seeking to challenge the power of the big Hollywood firms, a group of local theater chains formed its own pro- duction company, First National Exhibitors' Circuit. Its main member was the Stanley Company of America, a Philadelphia-based regional chain. Hollywood firms like Famous Players–Lasky, Universal, and Fox were suddenly faced with a competitor that combined production, distribution, and exhibition.

This three-tiered vertical integration guaranteed that a company's films would find distribution and exhibition. The bigger the theater chain owned by the firm, the wider its films' exposure would be.

Although First National's production wing never became really profitable, it goaded other firms to integrate vertically. Adolf Zukor, head of Famous Players–Lasky and its distribution wing, Paramount, began buying theaters in 1920. In 1925, during a second wave of theater-buying by the major firms, Famous Players–Lasky merged with Balaban & Katz, a Chicago-based theater chain controlling many of the biggest auditoriums in the Midwest. The result was the first production-distribution-exhibition firm with a truly national theater chain. Zukor marked the change by renaming the theater circuit Publix Theaters. The firm as a whole became Paramount-Publix. By the early 1930s, it owned 1,210 North American theaters, as well as some theaters abroad. Paramount-Publix's extensive holdings made it the subject of repeated g overnment antitrust investigation and litigation that would lead to major changes in the film industry after World War II.

Another important firm that achieved vertical inte- gration during this era was Loew's, Inc. Marcus Loew had begun as a nickelodeon owner, expanded into vaudeville, and built up a large chain of movie theaters by the late 1910s. In 1919, he moved into production by acquiring a medium-size firm, Metro, run by Louis B. Mayer. With the purchase of Goldwyn Pictures in 1924, Loew combined his production wing into M etro-Goldwyn- Mayer (MGM). After Paramount, MGM became the second largest of the Hollywood companies.

The chains owned by the vertically integrated firms encompassed a small portion of the nation's 15,000 theaters. In the mid-1920s, the Publix chain had roughly 500 houses, while MGM had only 200. Yet the three main chains included many of the big first-run theaters, with thousands of seats and higher admission prices. By late in the decade, about three-quarters of box-office receipts came from

these large theaters. Smaller urban and rural theaters had to wait to get a film on a subsequent run and often received worn prints.

As the big Hollywood companies expanded, they developed a system of distribution that would maximize their profits and keep other firms at the margins of the market. In dealing with the theaters they did not own, they employed block booking, meaning that any exhibi- tor who wanted films with high box-office potential had to rent other, less desirable films from the company. Exhibitors might be forced to book an entire year's p rogram in advance. Since most theaters changed programs at least twice a week and each big firm usu- ally made only around fifty films a year, a theater could deal with more than one firm. Similarly, the studios needed films from other firms to keep their own theater programs full. The biggest firms cooperated among themselves developing into a mature oligopoly during the 1920s.

Picture Palaces

Because the big theaters were so important, the major companies made them opulent to attract patrons, not simply through the films being shown but through the promise of an exciting moviegoing experience. The 1920s were the age of the picture palace, offering thousands of sets, fancy lobbies, uniformed ushers, and orchestral accompaniment to the films. Ordinarily attendance dropped during the summer, so in 1917 the Balaban & Katz chain pioneered the use of air--conditioning—a major draw in a period when home air-conditioning was unknown. Picture palaces gave working- and middle-class patrons an unaccustomed taste of luxury. Big theaters also offered a lengthy film program in addition to the feature, including newsreels and comic shorts. Silent films always had musical accompaniment. In the big pal- aces, this would usually entail a live orchestra; a smaller palace might have a chamber group or pipe o rgan; and small-town and second-run houses could offer only a piano player. Any of these might perform an overture and musical interludes. Some theaters even had live- action playlets and musical numbers interspersed with the film program.

There were two types of architecture: conventional and atmospheric. Conventional palaces were imitations of legitimate theaters, often incorporating elaborate ornamentation based on Italian baroque and rococo styles. Huge chandeliers, domes, and balconies were cov- ered with stucco and gilt. The atmospheric palace gave the spectator the impression of sitting in an auditorium that opened onto a night sky. The dark-blue dome would have light-bulb stars, and projectors cast moving clouds onto the ceiling by projectors. The decor might imitate exotic places, such as a Spanish villa or an Egyptian tem- ple. As the 1920s progressed, theaters got more flamboy- ant (7.1). The Depression would soon put an end to such extravagant theater building.

The Big Three and the Little Five

The vertically integrated firms that owned big theater chains—Paramount-Publix, Loew's (MGM), and First National—constituted the Big Three at the top of the industry. Trailing behind, but still important, were the Lit- tle Five, firms that owned few or no theaters: Universal, Fox, the Producers Distributing Corporation, the Film Booking Office, and Warner Bros.

Under founder Carl Laemmle, Universal continued into the 1920s to concentrate on relatively low-budget films aimed at smaller theaters. Despite a strong distribution wing, the firm had few theaters. Several major directors (John Ford, Erich von Stroheim) and stars (Lon Chaney) worked there early in the decade, but they were soon drawn away by higher salaries. For a time Universal employed the success- ful young producer Irving Thalberg, who helped the firm move into higher-quality, big-budget films; soon Thalberg also left, becoming a major force in shaping MGM's poli- cies. Later in the decade, German-born Laemmle was in the forefront in hiring émigré directors, who brought a brooding, distinctive style to the studio's output.

Fox also continued to concentrate on lower-budget popular fare, including its Westerns with William Farnum and Tom Mix. Fox launched a modest theater chain in 1925, making it one of the strongest of the Little Five. The company had a small stable of prestige directors: John Ford, Raoul Walsh, F. W. Murnau, and Frank Borzage.

Warner Bros. was smaller, possessing neither theaters nor a distribution wing. It scored a considerable success, however, with a series of films starring a German shep- herd, Rin-Tin-Tin. More surprisingly, Warners hired German director Ernst Lubitsch, and he made several important films there. In 1924, Warners drew on Wall Street investors' new willingness to put money into the film industry. It began a major expansion, acquiring theaters and other assets. The firm's investment in new sound technology would thrust it to the forefront of the industry within a few years.

The two other members of the Little Five were relatively small firms. The short-lived Producers Distributing Corpor ation (1924–1928) was notable mainly for producing a series of Cecil B. De Mille's films after he left Famous Players–Lasky in 1925. The Film Booking Office was formed in 1922 and turned out popular action films. In 1929, it became the basis for the production portion of a much more important new firm, RKO.

Standing apart from these eight firms was United Artists (UA), formed by Mary Pickford, Charles C haplin, Douglas Fairbanks, and D. W. Griffith in 1919. UA was a distribution firm, owning neither p roduction facilities nor theaters. It existed to distribute films produced inde- pendently by its four owners, who each had a small pro- duction company. Prior contractual commitments by the four founders delayed the firm's initial releases for a year, and Chaplin's first UA film, A Woman of Paris (1923), was not a hit. In 1924, producer Joseph Schenck took

over management of UA. By adding stars Rudolph Valentino, Norma Talmadge, Buster Keaton, and Gloria Swanson, as well as prestigious producer Samuel Goldwyn, Schenck stepped up the rate of release of UA films. However, UA still failed to make a profit in most years.

THE MOTION PICTURE PRODUCERS AND DISTRIBUTORS OF AMERICA

As the American film industry expanded, so too did efforts on the part of various social groups to increase c ensorship. By the late 1910s and early 1920s, there was call for a national censorship law, and more local boards were formed. Many postwar films exploited Roaring T wenties subject matter: bootleg liquor, jazz, flappers, and wild parties. Cecil B. De Mille's sex comedies presented adultery as frivolous, even glamorous. Erich von Stroheim's Blind Husbands (1919) similarly treated a married woman's flirtation as a fascinating violation of social norms.

Soon a series of scandals focused attention on the less palatable aspects of the lifestyles of famous filmmakers, including sex scandals and flagrant violations of the new Prohibition law. Mary Pickford's image as America's sweetheart received a blow in 1920 when she divorced her first husband to marry Douglas Fairbanks. In 1921, come- dian Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle was charged with manslaughter when a young actress died during a drunken party; although he was acquitted, the charges wrecked his career. The following year, director William Desmond Taylor was mysteriously murdered in circumstances that revealed his affairs with several well-known actresses. In 1923, the handsome, athletic star Wallace Reid died of morphine addiction. The public increasingly viewed Hollywood as promoting excess and decadence.

Partly in an effort to avoid government censorship and clean up Hollywood's image, the main studios formed a trade organization, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA). To head it, in 1922 they hired Will Hays, then postmaster general under Warren Harding. Hays had proved his flair for publicity by chairing the Republican National Committee. That flair, combined with his access to powerful figures in Washington and his Presbyterian background, made him useful to the film industry.

Hays's strategy was to push the producers to eliminate the offensive content of their films and to include morals clauses in studio contracts. Despite Arbuckle's acquittal, Hays banned his films. In 1924, the MPPDA issued the "Formula," a vague document urging studios to avoid the "kind of picture which should not be produced." Predict- ably, it had little effect, and in 1927 the Hays office (as the MPPDA came to be known) adopted the more explicit "Don'ts and Be Carefuls" list. "Don'ts" included "the ille- gal traffic in drugs," "licentious or suggestive nudity," and "ridicule of the clergy." "Be Carefuls" involved "the use of the flag," "brutality and possible gruesomeness," "meth- ods of smuggling," and "deliberate seduction of girls." The list dealt as much with the depiction of how crimes were committed as with sexual content. Producers continued to

circumvent the guidelines, however, and in the early 1930s the list would be replaced by the much more elaborate Production Code (see Chapter 10).

Although the Hays Office is usually thought of as a strategy to block domestic censorship, it also served the industry in other ways. The MPPDA gathered information on film markets at home and abroad, keeping up, for example, with censorship rules in various countries. Hays established a foreign department that battled several Euro- pean quotas aimed largely at American exports. In 1926, Hays's group convinced Congress to form the Motion Picture Division of the Department of Commerce. That division helped sell American films abroad by gathering information and bringing more pressure against harmful regulations. Indeed, the formation of the MPPDA pro- vided a clear signal that motion pictures had become a major American industry.

STUDIO FILMMAKING

Style and Technological Changes

The expansion and consolidation of the Hollywood film industry was paralleled by a polishing of the classical con- tinuity style that had developed in the 1910s. By the 1920s, the big production firms had dark stu- dios that kept out all sunlight and allowed entire scenes to be illuminated by artificial lights. Scenes' backgrounds were kept inconspicuous with a low fill light, while the main figures were outlined with a glow of backlight, usu- ally cast from the rear top of the set (7.2). The key, or brightest light, came from one side of the camera, while a dimmer secondary light from the other side created fill that softened shadows and kept backgrounds visible but inconspicuous. This three-point lighting system (fill, back- lighting, and key) became standard in Hollywood cinema- tography. It created glamorous, consistent compositions from shot to shot.

By the 1920s, the continuity editing system had become sophisticated indeed. Eyeline matches, cut-ins, and small variations of framing could successively reveal the most important portions of a scene's space. In John Ford's 1920 Western Just Pals, for example, a mother waits in anguish as her son supposedly drowns a litter of unwanted kittens. In fact, he only pretends that he has killed them. This complex action is gradually revealed without intertitles through a series of carefully framed details observed by the heroine (7.3–7.11).

By the late 1910s, most of the major technological innovations in American filmmaking had been made. One distinct change in the next decade was a new approach to cinematography. Before about 1919, most films were shot with a hard-edge, sharp-focus look. Then some filmmakers began to place gauzy fabrics or filters in front of their lenses to create soft, blurry images. Special lenses could keep the foreground action in focus while making the background less distinct. This technique enhanced the classical narrative style by concentrating the spectator's attention on the main action while deemphasizing less important elements. The result of such techniques was the soft style of cinematography, used most extensively during the 1920s and 1930s. This style derived from

still photog- raphy and especially the Pictorialist school, pioneered by such photographers as Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Steichen early in the century.

D. W. Griffith was one of the early proponents of this style. He worked with cinematographer Hendrik Sartov, who had begun as a still photographer, to film soft-focus shots of Lillian Gish and some landscapes in Broken Blossoms (1919). They further explored the approach in Way Down East (1920; 7.12, 7.13). The soft style was dominant by the early sound era and remained prominent until a new hard-edged style became fashionable in the 1940s.

Another major innovation of this era came with the gradual adoption of a new panchromatic type of film stock. The film stock used previously had been orthochromatic; that is, it was sensitive only to the purple, blue, and green portions of the visible spectrum. Yellow and red light barely registered on it, so objects of these colors appeared nearly black in the finished film. For example, the lips of actors wearing ordinary red lipstick appear very dark in many silent films. Purple and blue registered on the film stock as nearly white, so it was difficult to photograph cloudy skies: a blue sky with clouds simply washed out to a uniform white.

Panchromatic film stock, available by the early 1910s, registered the whole range of the visible spec- trum, from purple to red, with nearly equal sensitivity. Thus it could record a sky with the clouds visible against the blue background, or red lips as shades of gray. But panchromatic stock had problems as well: it was expen- sive, it deteriorated quickly if not used right away, and it demanded much greater illumination to expose a satis- factory image. During the 1910s and early 1920s, it was primarily used outdoors in bright sunlight for landscape shots (to capture cloud scenes) or indoors for studio close-ups that could be brightly lit. By 1925, Eastman Kodak had made its panchromatic motion-picture stock cheaper and stabler; soon the stock was also made more sensitive, requiring less light for proper exposure. By 1927, the Hollywood studios were quickly switching over to panchromatic stock. The result was not a radical change in the look of films, but panchromatic did permit filmmakers to make shots of actors who were not wear- ing makeup and to shoot a greater variety of subjects without having to worry about using special filters or adjusting costume colors. Panchromatic soon became the standard internationally.

In the years after World War I, the technical sophisti- cation of the Hollywood studios was the envy of the world. In addition, income from the huge American exhibition market and from expanded exports allowed higher budgets especially for the most prestigious films. These could cost in the neighborhood of ten times more than comparable films made in Europe.

Such resources, in combination with the fully formu- lated classical Hollywood style, gave filmmakers consider- able flexibility. They could apply the same stylistic methods to many types of movies.

During the 1920s, a new generation of filmmakers came to the fore, and they would dominate American film- making over three decades. Some, like John

Ford and King Vidor, had started directing on a modest scale in the 1910s, but they now rose to fame. Similarly, although a few stars of earlier years remained popular, new ones now came forward. Older genres developed, as when slapstick comedies and Westerns, typically relegated to short subjects, became more respected. New genres also appeared, such as the antiwar film.

Big-Budget Films of the 1920s

A film that reflected the growth of Hollywood and its newly ambitious productions was The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, directed by Rex Ingram and released in 1921. It was a big-budget project, running over two hours and based on a recent best-selling novel. Ingram, who had directed several minor films, was given considerable con- trol over the project and created an epic picture that was a huge success. The film deals with a South American fami- ly's changing fortunes during World War I, and it took a different attitude toward the conflict than earlier war films had. Although it still showed the Germans as evil "Huns," it presented the conflict as destructive rather than glori- ous (7.14). This anti-war stance would be common in other films of the decade.

The film's triumph was, however, probably mainly due to its stars, Rudolph Valentino and Alice Terry, who played the doomed central couple. They rose to immedi- ate stardom (7.15). Valentino was hired by Paramount and became a matinee idol, popularizing the "Latin lover" in such films as Blood and Sand (1922, Fred Niblo). His early death in 1926 provoked frenzied grief among his fans.

Cecil B. De Mille had been extraordinarily prolific from 1914 on. During the 1920s, he moved on to more sumptuous films at Paramount. One of his primary genres was the sex comedy, often starring Gloria Swanson, one of the era's top stars. De Mille's sophisticated comedies helped earn Hollywood a reputation for being risqué. He exploited expensive women's fashions, rich decors, and sexually provocative situations, as in Why Change Your Wife? (1920; 7.16, 7.17).

When his work came under fire from censorship groups, De Mille responded with films that mixed steamy melodrama with religious subject matter. The Ten Com- mandments (1923) had an introductory story depicting a young man who scoffs at morality and vows to break all the commandments; the main part of the film was an historical epic showing Moses leading the Jews out of Egypt (7.18). De Mille's biggest religious production of this era was The King of Kings (1927), controversial for its onscreen depic- tion of Christ. In the sound era, De Mille would become identified with historical and religious epics.

Similarly, after D. W. Griffith cofounded UA, he made several large-scale historical films. Just as he had been inspired by Italian epics like Cabiria to make The Birth of a Nation and Intolerance, now he was influenced by Ernst Lubitsch's postwar German films. Griffith's greatest success of the era was Orphans of the Storm (1922), set during the French Revolution. It starred the Gish sisters, Lillian and Dorothy, both affiliated with Griffith since the early 1910s (7.19). Lillian's career in particular flourished during this decade, as she worked with

such major directors as King Vidor (La Bohème, 1926) and Victor Sjöström. Griffith made another his- torical epic, America (1924), concerning the American Revolutionary War. His next film, however, was quite dif- ferent: a naturalistic tale of difficulties in postwar Germany called Isn't Life Wonderful (1924). Griffith's mid-1920s films were increasingly unprofitable, and he soon abandoned independent production to make a few films for Paramount. He completed two films in the early sound era, including the ambitious Abraham Lincoln (1930), but then was forced into retirement until his death in 1948.

As Griffith's case suggests, not all filmmakers who commanded large budgets in Hollywood during the 1920s fit comfortably into its efficient system. Erich von Stroheim had begun in the mid-1910s as an assistant to Griffith. He also acted, typically playing the "evil Hun" figure in World War I films. Universal elevated him to director in 1919 with Blind Husbands, the story of a cou- ple on a mountaineering holiday; the wife is nearly seduced away from her complacent husband by a scoun- drel, played by von Stroheim (7.20). The success of this film led Universal to give von Stroheim a larger budget for his second film, Foolish Wives (1922), in which he played another predatory role. Von Stroheim exceeded the budget considerably, partly by building a large set reproducing Monte Carlo on the studio backlot. Universal turned this to its advantage by advertising Foolish Wives as the first million-dollar movie. More problematically, von Stroheim's first version ran over six hours. The studio pared it down to roughly two and a half hours.

Von Stroheim's Hollywood career involved several such problems with excessive length and budgets. Pro- ducer Irving Thalberg replaced him when cost overruns threatened his next project, The Merry-Go-Round (1923). Von Stroheim then moved to the independent produc- tion firm Goldwyn to make Greed, an adaptation of Frank Norris's naturalistic novel McTeague ran nine hours. Von Stroheim cut it by about half. By now the Goldwyn company had become part of MGM, and T halberg took the film away from von Stroheim and reedited again. The final version, ran about two hours, shorn of one major plot line and many scenes. This story of an uneducated dentist and his miserly wife was filled with naturalistic touches and was perceived as grim, even sordid, by most critics and audiences (7.21). The excised footage was apparently destroyed, and Greed remains one of the great mutilated films. Von Stroheim achieved brief success at MGM by fill- ing The Merry Widow (1925) with sexual subject matter. He then moved to Paramount to make The Wedding March (1928), yet another film in which he starred as a seducer, this time nearly redeemed by love. Again von Stroheim contemplated a lengthy film that he hoped to release as two features; the studio reduced it to one, which did poor business. Von Stroheim's last major Hollywood project, an independent production for Gloria Swanson, was Queen Kelly (1928–1929), which was unfinished and only much later restored and shown. Von Stroheim ceased to direct in the sound era, but he acted in many important films, including Jean Renoir's Grand Illusion (1937).

New Investment and Blockbusters

During the mid-1920s, Wall Street investment allowed the Hollywood studios to produce even more big-budget films. Epic films followed the trend typified by The Ten Com- mandments, with colossal sets and lavish costume design. The newly formed MGM was particularly committed to prestige pictures. It undertook one of the decade's most ambitious projects, an adaptation of General Lew W allace's bestselling novel Ben-Hur. The production had originated in 1922 at the Goldwyn company, and the planners tried to give the film authenticity by filming on location in Italy— where, incidentally, labor costs were lower. Shooting in Italy, however, lacked the efficiency of studio work, and one accident during the filming of a naval battle may have caused the deaths of some extras. In 1924, MGM inherited the project when it absorbed Goldwyn. The process of completing the film was long and troubled. Ben-Hur finally appeared in 1926. Its chariot race was filmed in huge sets; a battery of cameras covered the action from many angles, permitting a breakneck pace in the editing (7.22).

MGM also made an important pacifist war film, The Big Parade (1925). Its director, King Vidor, had learned his craft by studying the emerging Hollywood style in his hometown theater in Texas. He began his career by acting in and directing minor films in the 1910s. Moving to MGM when it formed in 1924, he worked in several genres. His Wine of Youth (1924) was a subtle story of three generations of women: a wise grandmother looks on helplessly as her daughter nearly divorces, and her granddaughter takes this as a cue that she can settle for love outside marriage.

The Big Parade was a much more ambitious project. It starred John Gilbert, the main romantic idol of the period after Valentino's death, as a rich young man who volun- teers during World War I. The early portion of the story depicts his time behind the lines, as he falls in love with a French farm woman (7.23). An abrupt switch moves the film into epic scenes of the war (7.24). But, even more than The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, The Big Parade depicts the horrors of war. Now German soldiers are seen simply as other human victims of the combat. Alone in a foxhole with a dying German boy, the hero finds himself unable to kill the lad and instead lights him a cigarette. Other war films of the late 1920s and the 1930s followed this pattern, portraying war as grim and unglorious. The Big Parade became the first film to run more than a year on Broadway, and its success abroad was enormous. Vidor made a very different sort of film with The Crowd (1928). A working-class woman marries a clerk, but they nearly break up when one of their children dies in a traffic acci- dent. The Crowd stood apart from most Hollywood films in its nonglamorous depiction of everyday life.

Other studios carried on the trend toward big-budget films. In 1927, Paramount released Wings (William Wellman), another bittersweet tale of World War I, centering on two friends, Jack and David, who love the same girl and become pilots together. Jack fails to realize that his neighbor, Mary, is in love with him, and she follows him to France as a Red Cross driver. Mary was played by Clara Bow, who enjoyed a brief but intense period of stardom from the mid-

1920s to early 1930s. She epitomized the Jazz Age flapper, with an uninhibited natural sexuality; her most famous film, It (1927, Clarence Badger), earned her the name the "It girl" ("It" being a current euphemism for sex appeal).

Wings, like The Big Parade, combined its romantic elements with spectacular battle footage. Portable cam- eras were mounted on airplanes to capture aerial combats with an immediacy that trick photography could not equal (7.25). Its careful use of motifs and sophisticated use of continuity editing, three-point lighting, and camera move- ment made Wings the epitome of late silent filmmaking in Hollywood. When the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences was formed in 1927 and began giving out annual awards (later dubbed "Oscars"), Wings was the first winner as best picture.

Genres and Directors

After UA was started in 1919, Douglas Fairbanks was the first of its founders to release a film through the new com- pany. His Majesty, the American (1919, Joseph Henabery) was one of the unpretentious, clever comedies that made Fairbanks a star. Soon, however, he moved from comedy to a more ambitious costume picture, The Mark of Zorro (1920, Fred Niblo). It retained the star's comic flair but was longer and emphasized on historical atmosphere, a conventional romance, dueling, and other dangerous stunts (7.26). The Mark of Zorro was so successful that Fairbanks gave up comedy and concentrated on swashbucklers such as The Three Musketeers (1921, Fred Niblo), The Thief of Bagdad (1924, Raoul Walsh), and The Black Pirate (1926, A lbert Parker). Fairbanks was one of the most consistently popular stars of the 1920s, though his success dissipated in the early sound era. Fairbanks had been unusual as a silent comedian who worked exclusively in features from the beginning of his film career in 1915. In the 1920s, however, several of the great slapstick stars of the earlier period also aspired to work in longer films (see box).

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1920s COMEDY IN HOLLYWOOD

During the 1910s, most comedies that were based on physical action, or slapstick, were shorts that accompanied more prestigious features (though the popular comic stars often proved bigger draws). During the 1920s, feature-length slapstick comedies became more common. Stars like Charles Chaplin, Harold Lloyd, and Buster Keaton concentrated on creating stronger stories that would sup- port their elaborate physical gags. With their mastery of purely visual action, these comedians developed one of the most prominent and enduring genres of the decade.

Charles Chaplin continued to make hugely successful films in the early 1920s, when his contract with First National kept him from releasing through UA. In 1914, Chaplin had appeared in the first slapstick feature, Tillie's Punctured Romance, but subsequently he concentrated on shorts. In 1921, he returned

to features with extraordi- nary success in The Kid. Here Chaplin played the familiar Little Tramp but shared the spotlight with the expressive child actor Jackie Coogan, who appeared as a foundling whom the Tramp raises (7.27).

Chaplin soon became even more ambitious, making a drama, A Woman of Paris, in which he played only a walk-on role. This bitterly ironic romance satirized high society. Its droll, even risqué, humor (7.28) influenced other directors of sophisticated comedies. The public, however, stayed away from a Chaplin film without the Little Tramp. Chaplin brought back that beloved character in two very popular features, The Gold Rush (1925) and The Circus (1927).

Harold Lloyd quickly joined the vogue for slapstick features. Using the "glasses" character he had devel- oped in the late teens, he made A Sailor-Made Man (1921, Fred Newmeyer), the story of a brash young man who wins his love through a series of adventures. Although Lloyd starred in various types of comedies, he is best remembered for his "thrill" pictures. In Safety Last! (1923, Newmeyer and Sam Taylor), he played an ambitious young man who has to climb the side of a sky- scraper as a publicity stunt for the store where he works (7.29). Some of Lloyd's films of this era featured him as the bumbling small-town boy who becomes a hero when confronted with a great challenge, as in Girl Shy (1924, Newmeyer and Taylor), The Freshman (1925, Newmeyer and Taylor), and The Kid Brother (1927, Ted Wilde). Lloyd's career lasted into the early sound era, but even- tually the aging actor did not fit his youthful image, and he retired.

Buster Keaton's show-business career began when as a child he joined his parents' vaudeville act. In the late 1910s, he moved into films as an actor in Fatty Arbuckle's short films of the late 1910s. When Arbuckle shifted to features in the early 1920s, Keaton took over his film production unit and directed and starred in a series of popular two-reelers. His trademark was his refusal to smile, and he became known as "the Great Stone Face." Keaton's early films revealed a taste for bizarre humor that bordered at times on Surrealism (7.30).

Keaton soon moved into features, though his offbeat humor and complex plots made him less popular than his main rivals, Chaplin and Lloyd. His first feature-length hit was The Navigator (1924, codirected with Donald Crisp), a story of a couple cast adrift alone on a huge ocean liner. Keaton was fond of stories that exploited the cinematic medium, as in Sherlock Jr. (1924), which contained an elaborate film-within-a-film dream sequence (7.31). Keaton's finest film may be The General (1927, codirected directed by Clyde Bruckman), a story of a daring rescue during the Civil War. Keaton and Bruckman created an almost perfectly balanced plot structure, evoked period detail, and staged elaborate gags within single shots. Nonetheless, The General was not a success. In 1928, Keaton moved to MGM, where he made one film that was up to his old standard—The Cameraman (1928, Edward Sedgwick, Jr.). After the coming of sound, however, he was not allowed his customary freedom in improvising gags on the set. Keaton's career gradually declined in the early 1930s, when MGM began costarring him with more aggressive comics like Jimmy Durante. From the mid-1930s, Keaton played in many minor films and took small roles, but his

career never revived before his death in 1966.

Harry Langdon came to the cinema somewhat later than the other major comics of this era. From 1924 to 1927, he made short comedies for Mack Sennett. In these he developed his typical persona, one quite different from those of his rivals. Langdon cultivated a baby-faced image, playing naive characters who react slowly to whatever happens to them (7.32). By the mid-1920s, he also began making features: Tramp, Tramp, Tramp (1926, Harry Edwards), The Strong Man (1926, Frank Capra), and Long Pants (1927, Capra). Langdon continued to appear in small roles into the 1940s, but, as with many other comics of this era, his appeal came primarily through visual humor.

Although these major actors entered features, the comic short remained a popular part of theater programs. The most important producers of shorts remained Hal Roach, who had discovered Harold Lloyd, and Mack Sen- nett, formerly of Keystone. Under their guidance, a new generation of stars emerged. The most famous of these were Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, who had worked sepa- rately in minor comedies for years before being teamed by Roach in Putting Pants on Philip (1927). This short film about an American (Hardy) trying to deal with the turmoil caused by his aggressively flirtatious, kilt-wearing Scottish cousin (Laurel) remains one of their most hilarious (7.33). Unlike some other silent comedians, Laurel and Hardy made an effortless transition to sound, and Roach gradu- ated them to feature films in 1931.

Another star of this period was Charley Chase, who worked for Sennett. Chase was a thin, ordinary-looking man with a small moustache who depended not so much on his comic appearance as on his talent for staging elab- orate gags and chases (7.34). Comics from the teens who had played supporting roles in Chaplin's and other stars' films, such as Chester Conklin and Mack Swain, now acquired series of their own under Sennett.

END OF 1920s COMEDY IN HOLLYWOOD

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Another genre that gained in prestige during the 1920s was the Western. Previ- ously, Westerns had been cheap, short features shown primarily in small-town the- aters. Then, in 1923, Paramount released The Covered Wagon (James Cruze), an epic of the westward trip of a wagon train. With a large cast, including major stars, and a thrilling scene of the wagons crossing a river, the film was a hit. The low-budget Western continued to be a staple of Hollywood production, but for decades the large-scale Western would command respect.

John Ford had made his start directing stylish, mod- est Westerns (p. 64). Just Pals (1920) was an unconven- tional film, the story of a loafer in a small town who befriends a homeless boy and eventually becomes a hero by exposing a local embezzler (7.3–7.11). In 1921, he moved from Universal to the Fox Film Corporation. His first major success there was The Iron Horse (1924), a high-budget Western made in the wake of The Covered Wagon. This story of

the building of the first transconti- nental railroad exploited Ford's feeling for landscape (7.35). He soon became Fox's top director, working in a variety of genres. Ford's other Western at Fox was 3 Bad Men (1926), with an impressive land-rush sequence. Sur- prisingly, he did not return to the genre until Stagecoach (1939), but he was identified with Westerns throughout his long career.

Frank Borzage had also directed a number of low- budget Westerns during the 1910s. These include The Gun Woman (1918), the story of a rugged dance-hall owner who shoots the man she loves when he turns out to be a stagecoach bandit. Like Ford, Borzage moved into more prestigious filmmaking at the larger studios during the 1920s, though he quickly abandoned Westerns. Today he is often thought of in connection with melodramas, such as Humoresque (1920), a sentimental account of a Jewish violinist wounded in World War I. Some of Borzage's best films of the decade, however, were in other genres. The Circle (1925, MGM) was a sophisticated romantic com- edy. In 1924, Borzage moved to Fox, where he joined Ford as a leading director. His first film there, Lazybones (1925), was a rambling, low-key comedy about a lazy young man who—unlike most Hollywood protagonists— has no goals but sacrifices his already shaky reputation to raise a child for the sister of the woman he loves.

After The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari was shown in the United States in 1921, horror films gradually became a minor American genre. Universal pioneered this type of film, primarily because one of its main stars was Lon Chaney. Chaney was a master of makeup—"the Man of a Thousand Faces"—and had a flair for macabre roles. He played Quasimodo in the original adaptation of The Hunchback of Notre Dame (1923, Wallace Worsley), for which Universal built extravagant sets recreating medieval Paris, and the Phantom in the 1925 version of The Phantom of the Opera (Rupert Julian). Chaney's most consis- tently disturbing films, however, were made at MGM with director Tod Browning, whose taste for stories with per- verse twists matched his own. In The Unknown (1927), for example, Chaney played a circus knife thrower, Alonzo, who pretends to be armless as part of his act. His beautiful partner (played by the young Joan Crawford) has a patho- logical fear of being touched by men and trusts only Alonzo. To gain her lasting love, he a ctually has his arms amputated, only to discover that she has now fallen in love with another man (7.36). Chaney died prematurely in 1930, but Browning went on in the 1930s to make some notable horror films, such as Dracula (1931) and Freaks (1932). The horror film also received a boost in the late 1920s, when more German directors began moving to Hollywood.

The gangster genre had not been particularly import- ant in American filmmaking before the mid-1920s. There had been some films about petty gang crime, such as Griffith's The Musketeers of Pig Alley (1912) and Walsh's Regeneration (1915). The rise of organized crime associ- ated with Prohibition, however, helped make the flashily dressed, heavily armed gangster a prominent image in Hollywood films. One film did a great deal to establish the genre: Josef von Sternberg's Underworld (1927), made for Paramount.

Von Sternberg had started by independently produc- ing and directing a gloomy

naturalistic drama, The Salva- tion Hunters (1925), on a shoestring budget. It was championed by Charles Chaplin, but it failed at the box office. Von Sternberg codirected a few features without being credited. In 1927 he had his breakthrough film with Underworld. It was a big hit, in part due to its offbeat stars. Its odd hero is a homely, lumbering jewel thief, played by George Bancroft. He picks up a drunken Britisher (Clive Brook) and makes him into a refined assistant. The hero's world-weary mistress (Evelyn Brent) falls in love with the Britisher. Von Sternberg filmed this story with the dense, dazzling cinematography that was to become his hallmark (7.37). Von Sternberg went on to make another quirky gangster film starring Bancroft, an early talkie called Thunderbolt (1929). He also worked in other genres during the 1920s. The Docks of New York (1928) was a sordid story of a ship's stoker (Bancroft again) and a prostitute redeemed by each other's love; again the crowded scenery and textured, atmospheric lighting set von Sternberg's work apart. The Docks of New York prefigured the roman- tic melodramas that were to be the director's specialty in the 1930s.

Another unconventional director of this period was William C. de Mille, who has been overshadowed by his brother Cecil B. (the two spelled their family names differently). A former playwright, William made several distinctive films during the decade after World War I, mostly centering on gentle idiosyncratic characters. In Conrad in Quest of His Youth (1920), for example, a British soldier returns from India to find himself without any aim in life. In an amusing scene, he reunites his cousins in an attempt to recreate exactly their childhood existence. Miss Lulu Bett deals with a plain spinster forced into a subservi- ent position to earn her keep with her sister's family. Jolted out of her unquestioning acceptance by a false mar- riage to a bigamist, she rebels (7.38).

One isolated, but noteworthy, talent of the period was Karl Brown, a cinematographer who had worked with Griffith in the 1920s. For Paramount he directed Stark Love (1927), a film outstanding for its realism. Stark Love was a rural drama, filmed entirely on location in North Carolina with nonactors. It went against gender stereo- types of the period, telling the story of a backwoods culture in which women are utterly oppressed. A young man receives a scholarship but gives it up to send a neighbor girl to college in his place (7.39). After Stark Love, Brown returned to cinematography.

Unconventional films were not ruled out in Holly- wood, but they had to make money. The American pro- duction companies also proved their willingness to experiment by importing many successful foreign filmmakers.

Foreign Filmmakers in Hollywood

Before 1920, a few directors from abroad came to work in the American industry, mostly from France. Éclair's Maurice Tourneur made the move in 1914, Pathé's Albert Capellani in 1915, and Gaumont's Léonce Perret in 1917. The 1920s, however, were the first decade during which American firms systematically sought foreign talent and in which émigrés had a major influence on Hollywood

filmmaking.

As important filmmaking trends emerged in Sweden, France, Germany, and elsewhere in Europe, American stu- dio executives realized that these countries could be a source of fresh talent. Moreover, hiring the best European personnel was a way of ensuring that no country would grow powerful enough to challenge Hollywood in world film markets.

American firms also bought the rights to European plays and literary works and in some cases brought their authors to work as scriptwriters in the United States. A Paramount advertisement boasted

Every form of printed or spoken drama that might be suit- able for Paramount Pictures is examined. Everything useful published in Italian, Spanish, German or French is steadily translated. Synopses are made of every stage play produced in America, Paris, Berlin, Vienna, London and Rome.1

Studio representatives regularly visited Europe and viewed the latest films, looking for promising stars and filmmakers. In 1925, MGM executives who had seen The Story of Gösta Berling in Berlin signed its two stars, Greta Garbo and Lars Hansen, to contracts and also brought its director, Mauritz Stiller, to Hollywood. Similarly, Harry Warner saw two of Hungarian director Mihály Kertész's early films in London and wired him an offer that led to his lengthy career at Warner Bros. under the name Michael Curtiz. Since Germany had the most prominent foreign film industry, the largest number of émigré film- makers came from that country.

Lubitsch Comes to Hollywood The regular flow of European talent to Hollywood began after Ernst Lubitsch's Madame DuBarry was released in the United States (as Pas- sion, see p. 88) to great success. Star Pola Negri was soon acquired by Paramount. Lubitsch followed her to Holly- wood in 1923. Already the most successful director in Germany, Lubitsch quickly adapted his style to incorpo- rate the classical approach. He became one of the most highly respected filmmakers in Hollywood. Mary Pickford asked him to direct her in her 1923 production, Rosita. Although it allowed Pickford many amusing scenes, the film had the grandiose manner of Lubitsch's German pictures (7.40).

Despite Rosita's success, UA was in financial difficul- ties and could not fund further Lubitsch productions. Surprisingly, he moved to Warner Bros. and became the minor studio's most prestigious director. Inspired by Chaplin's A Woman of Paris, he made a series of sophisti- cated society comedies that hinted at sexual appetites and rivalries bubbling behind polite veneers. This suggestive- ness and Lubitsch's clever visual jokes became known as "the Lubitsch touch." He mastered continuity editing and could indicate characters' attitudes simply by how they shifted position in the frame or through the directions of their glances from shot to shot (7.41–7.44). Lubitsch's main films for Warner Bros. were The Marriage Circle (1924; see 7.2), Lady Windermere's Fan (1925), and So This Is Paris (1926). He also returned to his old genre, the historical film, with The Student Prince in Old Heidelberg (1927) at MGM and The Patriot at Paramount

(1928). He later proved to be one of the most imaginative directors of the early sound era.

Hollywood, and specifically MGM, also picked up on the important Scandinavian directors of the 1910s and early 1920s (pp. 52–56). The studio imported Benjamin Christensen, whose first American film, appropriately enough, was The Devil's Circus (1926); it harked back to the circus genre that had been so common in Scandinavian films of the 1910s (7.45). Chris- tensen went on to make several gothic thrillers, most nota- bly Seven Footprints to Satan (1929) before returning to Denmark.

Mauritz Stiller was hired by MGM after the success of The Story of Gösta Berling in Berlin. With him went Greta Garbo, whom Stiller had discovered. MGM set the pair to work on The Torrent, but Stiller's eccentricities and inability to conform to strict accounting methods soon led to his replacement. German producer Erich Pommer, then working in a brief stint at Paramount, hired him to make Hotel Imperial, starring Pola Negri. This was Stiller's most notable Hollywood production, including some "Germanic" camera movements that involved placing the camera on an elaborate elevator system. It did not recapture the wit or intensity of his Swedish films, however, and after a few more aborted projects, Stiller returned to Sweden, where he died in 1928.

In 1923, Victor Sjöström also accepted an offer from MGM, which renamed him Victor Seastrom. His first American film, Name the Man, was a bit stiff but contained several shots that displayed feeling for natural environ- ments. He Who Gets Slapped (1924) was a vehicle for Lon Chaney; another Scandinavian-influenced circus film, it proved highly popular. Seastrom then made two films star- ring Lillian Gish, who had recently come to MGM after her long association with Griffith. She wanted Seastrom to direct an adaptation of The Scarlet Letter. He seemed perfectly suited to Nathaniel Hawthorne's tale of love and retribution. His sense of landscape emerged even more strongly here (7.46). Similarly, the performances of Gish and Swedish actor Lars Hansen were strong, but MGM insisted on a comic subplot that vitiated the austere drama.

Gish and Hansen starred again in Seastrom's final American film, The Wind (1928). The story involves a woman who moves to the desolate, windswept Western frontier to marry a naive rancher. She kills and buries a would-be rapist but then is driven to the brink of madness by visions of the wind uncovering his body. Despite a hopeful ending imposed by the studio, The Wind was a powerful, bleak film. Its grimness and its release as a silent film when sound was coming in doomed it to failure, how- ever, and Seastrom returned to Sweden, to his original name, and to a long career acting in sound films.

Universal, one of the larger studios among the Little Five, lent prestige to its pro- duction output by hiring several European directors. Among these was Paul Fejos, a Hungarian who had made his mark in Hollywood by directing an experimental independent fea- ture, The Last Moment (1927). It consisted primarily of a drowning man's final vision, portrayed in a lengthy, rapidly edited

passage almost certainly influenced by the French Impressionist style. Lonesome (1928) was a simple story of a working-class couple's romance, portrayed with a naturalism that was unusual for Hollywood. His next film, the elaborate early musical Broadway (1929) used a huge Expression- ist-style nightclub set through which the camera swooped on a giant crane built for this production (7.47). After a few minor Hollywood projects, including the foreign-language versions of some early talkies, F ejos returned to work in various European countries in the 1930s.

Universal also hired Paul Leni, director of one of the main German Expressionist films, Waxworks. Leni's dark, vaguely expressionist adaptation of the hit Broadway gothic thriller The Cat and the Canary (1927) became an enormous success. The Man Who Laughs (1928) was a big-budget historical epic with overtones of the horror genre. It starred German actor Conrad Veidt in an Expressionist performance as a man whose mouth has been cut into a permanent grotesque grin. These two films reinforced Universal's orientation toward hor- ror films—a tendency that had begun with The Hunch- back of Notre Dame and The Phantom of the Opera and which was to intensify in the sound era with such films as Dracula and Frankenstein. Leni's death in 1929, how- ever, meant that others would take over the exploration of the genre.

Aside from Lubitsch, F. W. Murnau was the most prestigious European director to come to Hollywood in the 1920s. Fox hired him in 1925, in the wake of the critical acclaim for The Last Laugh. Murnau lingered at Ufa only long enough to make Faust (1926). Fox allowed him an enormous budget to make its biggest picture of 1927, Sunrise. Scripted by Carl Mayer, who had written so many German Expressionist and Kammerspiel films, and designed by Rochus Gliese, who had worked with Murnau in Germany, the film was virtually a German film made in America. It was a simple but intense psychological drama of a farmer who plans to murder his wife in order to run away with his lover from the city. The film was full of Germanic mise-en-scène with Expressionist touches (7.48). Even the American stars, Janet Gaynor and George O'Brien, were induced to give Expressionist-style performances.

Sunrise was perhaps too sophisticated to be really popular. Its huge city sets (7.49) made it so costly that it did only moderately well for Fox. As a result, Murnau's fortunes declined. He went on to increasingly modest proj- ects: Four Devils (1929), yet another circus film, now lost; and City Girl (1930), a part-talkie that was taken out of Murnau's control and altered. His last film began as a col- laboration with documentarist Robert Flaherty (pp. 164– 165). They worked on a fiction film about Tahiti, Tabu (1931). After Flaherty abandoned the project, Murnau completed a flawed but beautiful love story made on location in the South Seas. He died in a car accident shortly before the film's release.

Despite Murnau's lack of popular success during his Hollywood career, Sunrise had an enormous impact on American filmmakers, especially at Fox. Both John Ford and Frank Borzage were encouraged to imitate it. Ford's sentimental World War I drama Four Sons (1928) looks very much like a German film, and signs

of Ufa's stu- dio-bound style were to crop up in his sound films, such as The Informer (1935) and The Fugitive (1947).

Borzage's late-1920s films show even more directly the influence of Murnau's work. Borzage's 7th Heaven is an affecting melodrama about a forlorn Parisian prosti- tute, Diane, and a woman-hating sewer cleaner, Chico, who gradually gain each other's love only to be separated by World War I. None of the film crew was European, but the set designs by Harry Oliver incorporated the sorts of false-perspective backgrounds that Murnau had used in Sunrise and some of his German films (7.50). German-style virtuoso camera movements were imitated, most spectacularly in a vertical shot made from an eleva- tor (7.51).

Borzage followed up the tremendous success of 7th Heaven with a similar film, Street Angel (1928), starring the same actors, Janet Gaynor and Charles Farrell. They became the ideal romantic couple of the late 1920s. She won the first Best Actress award from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for these two films and Sunrise (at a time when an actor's entire year's out- put could be nominated). They starred together again in Borzage's film Lucky Star (1929), a dark, romantic love story that again displayed German inf luence and remained one of the rare Hollywood films with a wheelchair-bound hero.

European films, and especially those from Germany, also affected Hollywood filmmaking more generally. Flesh and the Devil (1926), directed by the well-established film- maker Clarence Brown, was full of fancy camera move- ment, subjective camera effects, and other techniques derived from European avant-garde cinema (7.52). It also starred the single most successful of the imported Euro- pean stars, Greta Garbo. Here she was teamed with matinee idol John Gilbert (7.53). Flesh and the Devil was only one production of the 1920s to borrow from Euro- pean cinema. Many other Hollywood films of the late 1920s and the 1930s also reflected influences from Euro- pean films, particularly those of the French Impressionist, German Expressionist, and Soviet Montage movements.

FILMS FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN AUDIENCES

In Chapters 4 through 6, we saw how alternatives to classi- cal Hollywood cinema arose in the form of stylistic move- ments. Other alternatives to mainstream Hollywood fare also appeared. In the United States, such alternatives have usually been specialty films aimed at specific audiences. During the silent era, a small circuit of theaters for African American audiences developed, along with a number of regional producers making films with all-black casts.

In 1915, the release of Griffith's The Birth of a Nation led to many protests and boycotts on the part of African Americans. Some envisioned the creation of black- controlled production firms that could provide an alterna- tive perspective on race relations. A few sporadic attempts at production were initiated during the latter half of the 1910s, but the results were usually short films that were relegated to a minor role on programs. They either showed positive images

of black heroism during World War I or perpetuated traditional black comic stereotypes.

During the 1920s, black roles in mainstream Holly- wood films were minor and still based on stereotypes. African Americans usually appeared as servants, wastrels, comic children, and the like. Black actors seldom found regular work and had to fill in with other jobs, usually menial, to survive.

As moviegoers, African Americans had little choice but to attend theaters that showed films designed for white audiences. Most theaters in the United States were segre- gated. In the South, laws required that exhibitors separate their white and black patrons. In the North, despite civil-rights statutes in many localities, the practice was for the races to sit in different parts of auditoriums. Some theaters, usually owned by whites, were in black neighbor- hoods and catered to local viewers. In such theaters, any films with black-oriented subject matter proved popular.

There were even a small number of films produced specifically for African American audiences. These used all-black casts, even though the directors and other film- makers were usually white. The most prominent company of this kind in the 1920s was the Colored Players, which made several films, including two particularly significant ones. The Scar of Shame (1927, Frank Perugini) dealt with the effects of environment and upbringing on black peo- ple's aspirations. The hero, a struggling composer, strives to live a respectable middle-class existence; he is "a credit to his race," despite the attempts of sordid characters to corrupt him (7.54).

The Colored Players also made a less preachy film that has survived, Ten Nights in a Barroom (1926, Charles S. Gilpin), an adaptation of a classic stage melodrama that had traditionally been played by white casts. Its com- plex flashback structure tells the story of a drunkard who reforms when he accidentally contributes to the death of his daughter in a barroom brawl (7.55). Despite its low budget, Ten Nights in a Barroom was skillfully lit and edited in the classical style.

In rare cases, black filmmakers were able to work behind the camera. Oscar Micheaux was for several decades the most successful African American producer-director. He began as a homesteader in South Dakota, where he wrote novels and sold them door to door to his white neighbors. He used the same method to sell stock to adapt his writings into films, creating the Micheaux Book and Film Company in 1918. Over the next decade, he made thirty films, concentrating on such topics as lynch- ing, the Ku Klux Klan, and interracial marriage.

The energetic and determined Micheaux worked quickly with low budgets, and his films have a rough, disjunctive style that boldly depicts black concerns on the screen. Body and Soul (1924) explores the issue of the religious exploitation of poor blacks. Paul Robeson, one of the most successful black actors and singers of the century, plays a false preacher who extorts money and seduces women (7.56). Micheaux went bankrupt in the late 1920s and had to resort to white financing

in the sound era. Nevertheless, he continued to average a film a year up to 1940 and made one more in 1948. Although much of his work is lost, Micheaux demon- strated that a black director could make films for black audiences.

The opportunities for African Americans would improve somewhat during the sound era. Talented black entertainers were in greater demand in musicals, and major studios experimented with all-black casts. As we shall see in Chapter 9, one of the most important early sound films, King Vidor's Hallelujah!, attempted to explore African American culture (pp. 177–178).

THE ANIMATED PART OF THE PROGRAM

The basic techniques of animated films had been invented during the 1910s (pp. 31–32), and the post–World War I period saw a boom in animation. New independent anima- tion studios appeared, creating greater output and apply- ing a division of labor that made the process of animation more efficient. Typically, head animators laid out the basic poses for the scene, the "in-betweeners" filled in the move- ments with additional drawings, other workers traced the drawings onto cels, still others filled in with paint, and a cinematographer photographed the images frame by frame. The result could be a series of cartoons released monthly or even biweekly.

Most animation companies produced series with continuing characters or themes. These films would be released through an independent distributor, but that dis- tributor might sign a contract with one of the big Holly- wood firms to put the cartoons on its own program. The most successful independent distributor of this era was Margaret J. Winkler Mintz. By the early 1920s, she was financing and releasing the decade's three most popular series: the Fleischer brothers' "Out of the Inkwell" films, the cartoons based on Bud Fisher's beloved "Mutt and Jeff" comics, and some of Walt Disney's earliest efforts. The Fleischer brothers, Max and Dave, had experi- mented with a new film technique called rotoscoping in the mid-1910s. The rotoscope allowed a filmmaker to take live-action films, project each frame onto a piece of paper, and trace the outlines of its figures. Although the roto- scope was patented in 1915, World War I delayed further development of it. After the war, the brothers returned to the device, using it to animate cartoon figures. They used a live-action prologue for each film in their series, featur- ing Max Fleischer as a cartoonist who creates Koko, a clown who pops "out of the inkwell." The first cartoon was released in late 1919, and several others followed spo- radically through 1920.

Rotoscoping was not intended to increase efficiency, as earlier inventions in cartooning were. Instead, by trac- ing the action one image at a time on cels, the cartoonist could easily produce characters that moved naturally as whole figures, rather than stiffly, moving only one or a few parts of their bodies, as in the slash and other simple cel systems (p. 66). The Fleischer's new character, Koko the Clown, swung his limbs through space freely, and his loose outfit swirled about him as he went (7.57).

The Fleischers also employed the standard techniques of cels, slashing, and retracing, but rotoscoping gave these devices new freedom. The "Out of the Inkwell" series prospered during the 1920s. In the early sound era however, the Fleischers replaced Koko with the equally popular Betty Boop and Popeye.

The "Mutt and Jeff" series had begun as a comic strip in 1911. Its hapless stars were two moustached fellows, one tall, one short. The strip's artist, Bud Fisher, agreed in 1916 to allow the celebrated strip to be animated. His name was invariably given as the creator of the cartoon series, even though over the years animation veterans actu- ally drew the cartoons. Distributor Mintz contracted the series for release through Fox, and it remained popular through the 1920s (7.58).

The young Walt Disney and his friend Ub Iwerks started their own commercial-arts firm in Kansas City in 1919. Failing to make money, they then worked for an ad agency, creating simple animated films. There they started "Newman's Laugh-O-Grams," a series of short animated films for local exhibition. After this venture also failed, Disney moved to Hollywood. In 1923, he received backing from Mintz to create a series of "Alice Comedies," which proved to be his first success. With his brother Roy, he formed the Disney Brothers Studios, which would eventu- ally grow into one of the world's biggest entertainment conglomerates.

During the 1920s, the staff of the firm included sev- eral of the major animators who would create series for Warner Bros. and MGM in the 1930s: Hugh Harman, Rudolf Ising, and Isadore "Friz" Freleng. They all worked on the Alice series, which combined live action and car- toon images (7.59). In 1927, the Disney studio switched to full animation with the "Oswald the Rabbit" series. In a legal battle, however, Charles Mintz, husband of Disney's distributor, seized control of the character. Walt's solution was to invent a new character called Mickey Mouse. The first two Mickey cartoons failed to find a distributor. A third, Steamboat Willie, incorporated the new sound technology and proved a huge hit. It helped catapult Dis- ney to the head of the animation business in the 1930s.

Other series of this period proved highly popular. Paul Terry, who had worked at various animation studios during the 1910s, started his own firm, Fables Pictures Inc., in 1921. He launched a series called "Aesop's F ables." For these modern retellings of the classic fables Terry used a virtual assembly-line division of labor to turn out one film per week; the results were amusing but usually conventional (7.60). Terry left the company in 1928 to create Terrytoons, a firm he ran until 1955, when he sold it to television producers.

The most popular series of the 1920s starred Felix the Cat. Its nominal creator, Pat Sullivan, had opened his own studio in 1915, making ads and animated films. He began making Felix cartoons for Paramount around 1918. Although Sullivan signed all the films, the head of animation was actually Otto Messmer, who originated the character of Felix and handled the animation pro- cess. Mintz

signed to distribute the series in 1922. The films were hugely successful, partly through the appeal of the feline hero and partly through the flexible animation style. In these films, Felix's tail could fly off his body and become a question mark or a cane for him to lean on (7.61). By the mid-1920s, the films had achieved a huge audience. Sullivan was also a pioneer in the use of tie-in products like dolls to further exploit the success of his cartoon character. Like most of the major animated series of the 1920s, Felix did not carry over well into the sound era.

The US film industry's push into foreign markets during World War I gave it an enormous economic base for its expansion and consolidation in the 1920s. Most national film industries were too small to offer significant resistance to American domination. Yet the cinema con- tinued to be an international phenomenon, and many countries managed to make at least a few films of their own. Some European countries were strong enough to support national industries and even to consider banding together to challenge American power. Moreover, for the first time, filmmakers in several countries were creating short experimental films that challenged the classical narrative approach of Hollywood cinema.