

Development of the Cinema

FROM SCIENTIFIC NOVELTY TO A NEW ART AND ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY

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BEGINNINGS

The American silent cinema really came into its own during and immediately after the First World War, although it flourished from the mid-1890s, and may be traced back as early as the work of Muybridge in the 1870s and 1880s -- this before even the invention of film as a medium for recording photographic images.

The "prehistory of cinema" has been treated in other works, recounting the concept of "persistence of vision" and how early experimenters applied it to various toys that produced an illusion of motion from still images. These generally had pictures drawn on cylinders or disks lined with slits, which when spun acted as shutters and created the apparent motion of the pictures. The 1826 invention of photography brought the potential for using actual objects rather than simply artists' impressions. For a number of decades the low sensitivity of emulsions required exposure times of several seconds to many minutes, but some enterprising photographers would shoot subjects in a series of poses that imitated the actual motion when viewed in these devices. After the American Civil War, photographic sensitivity gradually increased to the point where an exposure could be made in a fraction of a second. Nature photographer Eadweard Muybridge developed a passion for recording the individual elements of various animal and human motions photographically, reputedly after being hired to settle a bet on whether a galloping horse had all four feet off the ground at one time. He positioned a row of cameras, each of which was capable of a single exposure on a glass photographic plate, alongside a track with strings stretching across it connected to each shutter. The horse running past tripped each shutter in succession, recording a series of progressive images of its movement. Then he decided to control the interval between exposures with a clockwork mechanism instead of trip cords for a more even spacing of 12 to 24 images. The experiment proved that horses did have all feet off the ground at some point, but more important, Muybridge realized that he could view these frozen slices of life in motion by means of one of the popular toys. He rigged up a large disk containing glass

plate copies of his pictures with another disk of slits that could spin in front of a lantern slide projector, and was projecting the animated photographs to scientific gatherings throughout the 1880s.

Then came George Eastman's introduction around 1888 or 1889 of a flexible plastic base for the emulsion, making possible long strips of what was now called "film" that could hold a row of thousands of separate images. Developments in the laboratories of Thomas Edison and others in both America and Europe soon resulted in practical systems for recording and reproducing motion using only one camera by the early 1890s. William Kennedy Laurie Dickson was the Edison researcher who was apparently responsible for the first major breakthrough.

Edison first exploited the seemingly miraculous achievement of moving pictures with individual coin-operated arcade machines throughout 1894 and 1895. In December 1895 the French brothers August and Louis Lumière projected their films on a screen before a paying audience, creating an immediate sensation. Edison quickly followed by buying the patents of Americans Thomas Armat and C. Francis Jenkins, who had developed their own projection machine to run Edison's films. Many experimenters around this time created their own cameras and projectors using a variety of film formats and mechanical methods, but the Edison format of vertically running 35mm film that had a row of rectangular perforations along each edge for the sprocket drive and an image that stretched between them exactly four sprocket holes high rapidly became the most prevalent. With minor variations it is still in use today and a film from the 1890s, if in good physical condition, could be shown on any modern theatrical projector.

For several years audiences flocked to exhibitions of moving pictures, many of which toured the country, a few setting up business in permanent storefront locations. People were fascinated at first by the mere fact that pictures could move. The earliest films ran from several seconds to a minute or two in length, and ranged from mundane subjects documenting everyday life, to views of exotic foreign locales, to newsworthy events of the day, all of which could now be seen in motion. Short comic scenes performed before the cameras also proved quite popular, as did risqué dancing acts and professional boxing. Special visual effects like slow motion, fast motion, and backwards motion had a novelty appeal, and filmmakers like the French magician George Méliès made great use of the medium's potential for trick effects such as double exposures, subjects appearing and disappearing, and perspective illusions. By the turn of the century mere novelty was beginning to wear thin and Méliès, Edwin S. Porter, and other filmmakers turned to short narratives as the main basis for their pictures.

The popularity of Porter's 1903 *The Great Train Robbery* showed the cinema's potential as a major form of narrative entertainment, using such sophisticated techniques as matte shots, a moving camera, outdoor filming with greater depth of staging, and editing back and forth from one scene to another. Its length of almost a full 1000-foot reel established a new standard that would last about a decade until the emergence of multi-reel feature length productions. A full reel for one story allowed more complex stories to be told in a running time of 10 to 20 minutes (depending upon the cranking speed), rather than the

few minutes that had previously dominated film releases usually shown with several subjects spliced together on a reel.

Nevertheless, many of these early story films, such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1903), still emphasized the new medium's documentary beginnings, proudly advertising that they were "reproductions" of popular stage plays or famous scenes from them, now recorded for posterity on film for viewing anywhere a projector could be set up. These look primitive from a modern point of view because their purpose was to record a performance, usually in one long take for each scene, rather than to express the story in a new cinematic form. Many filmed dramas also used simple painted backdrops like those of stage shows and were careful to keep the entire set in a long shot of the scene with actors moving from side to side in the frame as they would on stage. Very early on, however, filmmakers used cinema's photographic potential to recreate visual devices from another popular narrative form, the lantern slide show. Since the mid-nineteenth century, performances of dual "magic lantern" illustrated lectures had been a common medium for both education and entertainment. Very often short dramatic stories would be posed by actors as a series of stage tableaux. These would be photographed for lantern slide showings and presented with a narrator or live actors reciting the lines. Elaborate "trick effect" slides were developed, allowing parts of a scene to change while it was on the screen. The use of two projectors also permitted one image to dissolve into the next or on top of another to indicate a flashback or a character's thoughts. Filmmakers quickly appropriated the dissolve for the same use, as well as the ordering of scenes according to a preplanned structure. As filmmakers gained experience doing dissolves and double exposures, a fad developed for a time of having the same actor play two or more roles and appear on the screen at the same time. During the late 1910s, stars Mary Pickford and William Farnum, among others, took advantage of the technique to act scenes opposite themselves.

COLOR

Lantern slides were usually hand colored to various degrees, and until the perfection of natural color photography motion pictures utilized a number of different methods to add color to the black and white image. Especially in the early years, the 1890s through the 1900s, a surprisingly large number were painstakingly hand painted one frame at a time -- the manual precursor to computer colorization. The Pathé studio developed an elaborate method of stenciling to mass produce color copies once stencils had been cut by hand for each color. The most common methods of introducing color in silent films was by tinting and toning. Tinting a film involved running the desired footage through a bath of color dye, resulting in an overall color for the image. Toning was a chemical process that replaced the black silver image with a different colored metallic compound. When used in combination, tinting a toned image, a two-color appearance could be obtained. The most commonly used color tints were blue for night scenes, red for fire scenes, yellow for sunlit scenes, green for forest scenes, and so forth. The most common tone was probably the brown or sepia appearance, especially effective with Westerns, but often used throughout an entire movie. Films that used more than one color had to

be cut into separate rolls, run through the dye or toner, and spliced together in the proper sequence. This had to be done for every tinted or toned print, so the films were generally printed in tinting order and then reassembled once the colors had been added.

There were a number of experimenters searching for a practical method of natural color cinematography from the very beginning. The properties of light and primary colors were understood, and full color images could be taken by photographing the same thing three times through different color filters, but it was not until the 1930s that Technicolor developed its cumbersome but effective "three-strip" subtractive process. Nevertheless there were processes that obtained limited but sometimes spectacular results using additive color. As early as 1912 the Gaumont company was making demonstration films that had three successive frames photographed and later projected through separate color filters using normal black and white film. The color was vividly realistic but the film had to run through a special projector at a very high speed to project three frames at once, and there was difficulty in overlapping the images on the screen without color fringes. An easier method that had a brief vogue used two complementary colors rather than the three primary colors. With the Kinemacolor process, persistence of vision was used not only to blend the still images into motion but to blend alternate orange-red and blue-green frames, again using black and white film, but projected through alternating filters connected to the projector's shutter. This technique worked well for static scenes, but even though the film ran twice as fast as standard black and white movies, fast-moving subjects were in different positions for each color record, again creating fringes of color. Moreover, the alternate color frames still did change fast enough on the screen to avoid a flicker effect, and prolonged viewing of the process could cause eyestrain and a headache. The Prizma Color process achieved more popularity, for while it was similar, it actually dyed the alternate frames on the print rather than using a special projector with colored filters. Later they were printed on opposite sides of the film, using a subtractive process that permitted both a standard projector and a normal projection speed. In 1917 the Technicolor company produced an entire feature with an additive process, but abandoned it for a more practical two-color subtractive process. This photographed the reddish and greenish images simultaneously on adjacent frames, but they were printed onto separate strips of black and white film that were then dyed the appropriate color and glued together back to back. *The Toll of the Sea* (1922) was the first feature film using this process throughout, and films like *The Ten Commandments* (1923), *Ben-Hur* (1925), and *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925) used it for certain scenes. Only a few full-length silent features were produced in Technicolor, notably *The Black Pirate* (1926) and *Wanderer of the Wasteland* (1925). By the end of the 1920s, Technicolor improved on its system by introducing a dye-transfer process (also used by a later stage of Prizma Color), printing the colors one at a time onto a strip of clear film instead of having to glue two rolls together. Many early sound features used this process, as well as a few late silents issued with synchronized music and sound effects like *The Viking* (1928) and part-talkies like *The Mysterious Island* (1929), a trouble-plagued adaptation of the Jules Verne novel that had actually been started as a silent production in 1926.

CINEMATIC TECHNIQUE

Over the first decade of the twentieth century a “grammar” of film gradually evolved. Through improvisation, trial, and error, certain techniques and practices became accepted as conventions for expressing certain ideas, indicating sequence of action, and developing characters. D. W. Griffith was one of the first directors to recognize how effective these techniques could be and was instrumental in refining them to manipulate audience response to the stories he told. Closeups had been used sparingly from the earliest days of movies to let the audience see details that might not be noticed in long shots. The very first Edison movie copyrighted, *A Kinetoscopic Record of a Sneeze* (1893), was a closeup of a man sneezing, although in general Edison’s cinematographers and other early filmmakers tried to compose the frame so people could be seen head to foot. Once theatrical presentation superseded peep-show devices, the larger-than-life projected image even caused some to view closeups as unnatural distortions of life. However, not long after making his first film in 1908 Griffith intuitively used them much more frequently than before to emphasize the facial expressions of his actors, thus permitting more subtle performances.

Many directors not only used long shots to present a theatre-like composition in most of their scenes but they moved the actors from side to side as on the stage. Griffith gradually had more and more scenes in which actors moved toward or away from the camera and staged action on several different planes of depth within the scene rather than in one straight line. He also regularly broke scenes down into several shots, with the camera in different positions or focused on different characters, giving them a greater intimacy. More important, he pioneered the use of cross-cutting between actions happening in different places at the same time. He learned and his work taught others how to build tremendous suspense and excitement by controlling the pacing of the editing, rather than simply splicing scenes together in chronological order. In addition he pushed for longer and more complex films, often undercranking the camera to squeeze more action into the arbitrary one and then two reels of film his employers would permit. In five years at the Biograph company (1908-13) he moved from *The Adventures of Dollie*, a crude one-reel melodrama running about ten minutes and filmed mainly in long shots and long takes, to fast-paced two-reel featurettes like *The Battle of Elderbush Gulch*, running a half hour to 45 minutes, and finally an hour-long, four-reel biblical epic, *Judith of Bethulia*. Once free of the restrictive Biograph hierarchy, he was able to create a series of three-hour masterpieces of cinematic style, beginning with *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Intolerance* (1916).

If Griffith was a major force in helping advance film drama, Mack Sennett, who worked at Biograph for and with Griffith from 1908 to 1912, helped create a frenetic new style of film comedy. Leaving Biograph in 1912 for the Keystone company, he adapted his experience in burlesque theatre to the new opportunities offered by film. His editing was even faster paced than Griffith’s and gave his chase scenes a manic, even chaotic sense that distinguished his comedies from others (and quickly gave rise to imitators). Some of the shots in his films lasted mere fractions of a second while many other filmmakers were still staging scenes in single long takes of several minutes each.

THE RISE OF FEATURES

American directors before the First World War faced formidable competition from foreign filmmakers. Artistic uses of lighting, dramatic photographic compositions, daring themes, elaborate and realistic sets, and, most important, longer films imported from Europe caught the attention of audiences and critics. It did not take long for American filmmakers to pick and choose and incorporate what impressed them most into their own productions. The French *Queen Elizabeth* (1912) starring Sarah Bernhardt did not break new ground stylistically, but its use of a world-famous stage actress and its hour-plus running time helped give a new prestige to motion pictures in America. Until 1913 most American films were one or two reels in length, with a few three-reel productions being made after 1911 or so. Motion picture exhibition was based on the concept of variety. Even after dramatic and comic narratives superseded the multitude of documentary and trickfilm subjects that had dominated the cinemas first decade, distributors did not think audiences would sit through an hour or more of a single story. As a result they would release multi-reel films like *The Life of Moses* (1909) and *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) one reel at a time to be shown on consecutive nights or even consecutive weeks. At that time movies in the United States were largely attended by immigrants and the working class who could afford their five-cent admission and easily follow the short, simple, visual stories. The middle and wealthy classes were more likely to spend their entertainment money on vaudeville, live theatre, and the opera. The imported feature-length films were often exhibited in legitimate theatres, rather than the small "nickelodeon" movie houses, in a conscious attempt to win over a new audience. Italian film spectacles like *Cabiria* (1914), with its fluidly moving camera rolling through gigantic sets, were especially influential. Movie theatre managers began to feature multi-reel productions as the main attraction for the evening, with a few shorts to round out the program instead of having an hour or more featuring a variety of short films only. As this became more and more prevalent, studio production patterns changed to accommodate the practice and longer films began to be referred to as "features."

Trade journals from 1912-14 reveal mixed reaction from both producers and exhibitors about some of the new directions in filmmaking. For some time, many directors steadfastly believed that films should be well photographed but should concentrate on recording the actors' performances. They found breaking up scenes into medium shots and separate closeups of the different characters to be too distracting unless done for some special purpose (e.g., an extreme closeup of a letter, locket, ring, etc.). Many also resisted the trend towards feature-length films of an hour or longer, but by 1914 public support at the box office made feature attractions the rule rather than the exception.

Although it was by no means the first feature or even the first popular epic film, the release of Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* in March of 1915 was a major milestone due to its overwhelming commercial success. From then on, short films were simply an added attraction in nearly every theatre and might be dispensed with altogether in the case of such a long feature. From then on, people from all walks of life and levels of income

developed the habit of moviegoing. *The Birth of a Nation*, controversial as it was, was the “must-see” film that everybody went to, and substantial numbers went back to see it again and then went to see other films. Producers like Cecil B. DeMille responded with stories that would appeal to a more educated and urbane audience.

SOUND FOR “SILENTS”

Crowds got even bigger, and by the late 1910s new movie palaces were springing up as large or larger than traditional legitimate theatres. The “silent” cinema was presented with a musical background, just as earlier forms of entertainment had been, from slide shows to stage melodramas to grand opera. Big city theatres that could sell thousands of tickets a day had their own full-sized house orchestras to play the musical accompaniment to their films. Smaller theatres had smaller orchestras or perhaps a two- or three-piece combo. Still smaller theatres invested in one of the newly developed musical instruments especially for movies: a “unit-orchestra,” as a theatre pipe organ was termed, or a “photoplayer,” a hybrid piano/pipe organ with built-in percussion and sound effects. Only the very smallest movie houses and traveling shows would use a solo piano, or possibly a small reed organ.

A few major studio releases had new musical scores composed especially for them, and a large number had scores compiled from existing mood music plus a few newly composed themes for the particular film. Virtually all had “cue sheets” prepared, breaking the film down into notable scenes with suggestions for the musical mood or an actual piece that a theatre might use. An individual pianist or organist would often improvise the score while watching the film, using no printed music. By the mid-1910s there were already large sheet music collections published of themes labeled as suitable for certain types of motion picture scenes. These were available in a variety of arrangements, usually for solo piano, organ or piano-conductor (with indications of instrumentation), small orchestra, and large orchestra.

Besides a musical accompaniment, a number of theatres in the early years employed “lecturers” who would narrate the stories, read the intertitles (if any), and improvise additional dialogue. Some films during the “nickelodeon” period of one-reelers had printed story outlines or scripts that clarified character relationships and motivations that might be otherwise difficult to ascertain. In ethnic neighborhoods of larger cities this practice of lecturing lingered on well after the arrival of feature-length productions. Its practitioners pointed out that new immigrants learned how to speak and read English at these movie houses without the need for formal education. Instead of undergoing the pressure of a classroom situation, they could learn simply by listening to the language while following the words and story on the screen. Not only were they being entertained at the same time they were learning English, but they could absorb the American culture and customs depicted, hastening their assimilation into society.

ACTORS AND ACTING

By the early 1910s, around the same time as the move toward feature-length films, came a new emphasis on the performers in films, who had previously been anonymous. As their faces became familiar and names promoted, a “star system” quickly arose, with popular actors guaranteeing an audience no matter what the story or title.

As feature-length dramatic films became firmly established, directors and actors (some to a greater degree than others, it must be admitted) understood the medium of silent cinema was a distinctive art form requiring a different approach from other types of performance. It could not use the spoken word like the theatre, and its nature of editing and differing perspectives required new techniques in staging the actors in front of the camera. It needed a new style of acting that recognized and exploited the absence of sound. In addition it now had to be able to adapt a performance to be effective in extreme long shots, medium shots, and close-ups. Actors had to be skillful enough at pantomime to convey thoughts and emotions but had to avoid exaggerating when the camera was close to them. Many developed a habit of acting with their eyes and subtle facial twitches even more than with their bodies, William S. Hart being especially notable in this regard. It was a new convention for audiences to become accustomed to, and when stage actor Frank Keenan used deliberately slow and underplayed facial expressions in *The Coward* (1915), one critic accused him of “mugging” for the camera. As late as 1929 some critics were put off by the more naturalistic acting style that motion pictures permitted, as evidenced in accusations of Louise Brooks’ subtle portrayal of Lulu in *Pandora’s Box* being wooden and expressionless. A large number of films, especially those of the 1915-1920 period, contain a mixture of acting styles, some actors being relatively restrained, while others in the same scene might be flamboyantly overstated. Examples of this include such notable titles as the first starring film of Theda Bara, *A Fool There Was* (1915), and the large-scale studio epic *Ben-Hur* (1925). Nevertheless, the silent cinema rapidly developed a recognizable acting style that transcended the need for extensive dialogue or descriptive titles. This helped cinema become truly an international medium of expression for three decades until the dominance of talking pictures in the 1930s.

A technical factor in film production and exhibition, but one that continues to have an impact on both the actors’ performances and the overall artistic impression of silent films, is the speed at which the movies were photographed and projected. Both cameras and projectors originally had variable speeds. Early experiments proved that 12 to 14 images per second were required for smooth motion, and the faster the speed, the smoother the action would appear. Some early films from the 1890s were photographed at about 48 images per second, but in order to save film most camera operators standardized a theoretical ideal speed of 16 images per second, whether cranked by hand or using an electric motor. When projected at the same speed at which the images were filmed, the action appears normal. Scenes cranked slower in the camera would appear faster on the screen, an effect often used for fights and comic situations. However, theatre operators would sometimes run all films at a slightly faster speed in order to fit in an extra show each day, with more potential income from admissions. As filmmakers realized this, they began to crank the camera faster, to 18, 20, or 22 frames

per second. Theatres, of course, sped up projection speeds even more. When the Vitaphone sound system was introduced in 1926, a single set speed had to be established for maintaining synchronization with the separate disk that contained the soundtrack. Sound that was recorded on film, as with the Movietone system, had to maintain a single constant speed for proper reproduction. The average speed prevalent in theatres at the time of 24 frames per second was chosen as the new standard and has remained in effect ever since. As a result, when silent films made before 1926 are shown on modern projectors, the motion often appears unnaturally fast. On the other hand, when a silent film from the late 1920s is mistakenly shown at 16 or 18 frames per second because it is supposed to be the "silent" speed, the action and pacing becomes unnaturally slow. Ideally a variable speed projector must be used, and adjusted to match the most natural action on the screen, just as was done in the most reputable theatres of the silent era.

POSTWAR DEVELOPMENTS

The outbreak of war in Europe in 1914 severely hampered the European film industry, both in resources available for productions and in export markets. Over the next few years this paved the way for the American cinema to dominate the world market. By the war's end in 1918, American film techniques, once lagging behind, had equaled or surpassed those of foreign competitors and American stars had won large followings throughout the world.

After the war, films became more refined not only in cinematic technique but in story material. Motion picture production had become one of the nation's leading industries and began to adjust to mass tastes on a large scale. Previously there had been a wider range of subjects treated and a larger likelihood of daring elements or tragic endings. Tastes also changed to prefer more sophistication and contemporary themes, and intertitles developed their own recognizable style of writing. Instead of straightforward descriptions they began to pack both exposition and character information into carefully worded prose poems. In feature comedies but even in some light dramas they often relied heavily on puns related to topical events and trends, and self-consciously clever and abstruse sexual innuendoes.

The "jazz age" of the 1920s may have ushered in a more flippant approach to tradition and morality, but the moviegoing public still wanted its heroes to have at least the appearance of propriety. Scandals involving sex and murder destroyed the careers of more than one superstar, even when nothing could be proved to implicate any wrongdoing on the part of the star involved. The heavy sensationalism by the press of the most lurid aspects, even when information was distorted, out of context, or completely false, created public outrage and calls for film censorship. The most notorious case involved popular rotund comedian Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle, whose main indiscretion turned out to be that he hosted and was present at the drinking party at which a promiscuous young starlet became ill and ultimately died. He was finally acquitted of murder after three trials but was shunned by producers. At the same time the Arbuckle trials were going on another prominent case exposed the private lives of

popular actresses Mary Miles Minter and Mabel Normand. Both were linked to the unsolved murder of director William Desmond Taylor, with whom one or both had been having an affair. Normand's career was damaged, but that of 19-year-old Minter, who had been an audience favorite since a child, was devastated.

A vocal segment of the population decried both the private lives of Hollywood celebrities and the increasing suggestiveness and promiscuity portrayed on the screen. To avoid official government censorship, the major studios appointed former postmaster Will Hays to oversee the newly formed Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), a self-policing board that would approve scripts and finished films before they were released to the public. Studios started inserting "morality clauses" into contracts of major stars. Hays even banned Arbuckle from appearing on screen. The "Hays Office," as it came to be known, was widely followed by filmmakers and seemed to satisfy critics. Films of 1921 and before would occasionally include tasteful nudity and judicious use of profanity in the title cards, although sometimes excised by various state or local censorship boards around the country. After the Hays Office this became extremely rare. Towards the end of the 1920s, however, especially after the coming of sound, films ventured further and further into previously taboo areas and a new 1930 production code was widely ignored until strict enforcement began in 1934.

Another development in American cinema during the 1920s was an influx of major foreign filmmakers to Hollywood, many of them from Germany. Directors like Ernst Lubitsch, F. W. Murnau, and Paul Leni had a profound influence on the "look" of American films that would last well beyond the silent period. The European directors popularized a new fluidity to cinematography and editing. Although they had been used before, moving cameras -- dolly and crane shots -- became much more commonplace, as did subjective shots that showed the audience the same point of view as one of the characters. Lubitsch and Murnau became a part of the Hollywood establishment, changing the fashions in filmmaking as much as they adapted to those already prevailing.

Lubitsch is best remembered for his witty use of double entendres and themes of playful sexuality, but his productions like *The Student Prince in Old Heidelberg* (1927) also were highly polished exercises in cinematic technique. Murnau's *Sunrise* (1927) was essentially a stylized studio-bound artfilm along the lines of his German productions such as *Nosferatu* and *Faust*. His *City Girl* (1929) looks more American, while incorporating a European pastoral sensibility, but in *Tabu* (1931) he downplayed plot and character to accentuate the visual as he had done in the German *The Last Laugh*. Americans like King Vidor and Frank Borzage exploited the new freedom of movement in such late silent masterpieces as *The Crowd* and *Street Angel* (1928). Lighting and set design took on aspects of German expressionism, as in Rex Ingram's *The Magician* (1926), Leni's *The Cat and the Canary* (1927) and *The Last Warning* (1929), and again, Borzage's *Street Angel*.

A number of American films in the late 1920s even tried to return to the tragic endings that were more common in foreign imports and in American pictures before 1920. Directors and/or studio executives would often make alternate happy endings, as

in the case of *The Crowd*, *The Torrent* (1926), *Love* (1927), and others, and give theatres the choice of which version to show. Other times, as in the case of *The Wind* (1928), a 1927 preview with the original tragic ending impressed critics but proved so unpopular with exhibitors that only the happy ending was used for its general release, which did not come until a full year later (and included a synchronized soundtrack of music and sound effects).

A VARIED AND ENDURING ART

The last few years of the American silent cinema coincided with the last few years of the 1920s. This period is sometimes called the highest point of cinematic artistry. Certainly motion pictures produced at this time were technically polished, with a confident and effortless use of editing, an artistically accomplished visual imagery, and an expressive, stylized mode of acting. They were also a lucrative industry, and just like the film industry of future generations, catered as much as possible to as wide an audience as possible. As in any era, individual films stand out as superior works of art while a large majority can be described better as competent works of craftsmanship. By the mid to late 1920s, Hollywood films often had a slick, refined style that adhered to conventional and successful formula. Ten to 15 years earlier, at the beginning of the feature film period, the styles were somewhat different, but again certain formulas and conventions predominated. In this earlier period, however, there seemed to be a greater experimentation with subject material, character types, and cinematic techniques as filmmakers struggled to determine the surest formulas for financial success. The result today is that many of the earlier films can appear quaint and primitive when their conventions did not become the prevailing style of later years. However, the same films can often have a fresher approach to their content and tell surprisingly sophisticated stories that were simplified and homogenized in later silent and sound productions. Another interesting characteristic of films made before 1920 is that many more adaptations of classic literature and theatre were made than in any other period of filmmaking, except perhaps the first years of talking pictures. Part of this was due to the struggle to prove cinema was a respectable form of entertainment. By 1920 there were more stories written expressly for the screen, but there was also a greater tendency to adapt popular literature -- short stories and best-selling novels -- rather than famous works of the past. The cinema by then was fully established and did not need to borrow its respectability from another medium to attract viewers.

In short, the silent years of American cinema produced an incredibly large number of films that exhibit a gamut of styles, subjects, and techniques. Over a period of only three decades a new art form emerged from a simple toy designed to demonstrate a scientific principle and from inventions that were intended simply to provide a permanent record of real life. As filmmaking developed into an art it preserved not only a record of how actors and settings appeared, but of how writers, directors and audiences looked at their everyday world, how they felt about society and about life in general. Never before could someone from a remote culture and/or time have such a vivid picture of how another group of people lived and thought. The American silent cinema reflected life as

it was at the time it was created, but because of its wide reach it also became a part of life, and as such, was a molding force in setting trends, fashions, and new ways of thinking.

With certain exceptions, cinema always emphasized its entertainment aspects over its artistic pretensions. It was a popular art form that people went out of their way to see. Its influence as the first form of mass media and mass art was profound, as it did not rely on literacy or the necessity for extensive travel to be experienced. By the mid-1910s, less than a generation after its invention, the cinema had matured to an extent that very little of its basic properties would ever change. Such future developments as color, sound, and wide image ratios were merely refinements of earlier experiments. Changes in styles of acting and story subjects merely indicated changing public tastes. The most effective of films produced after the silent era still rely heavily on the silent cinema's ability to convey information visually. Over a century after the first films were exhibited, the standards of photographic composition, editing, and story length that became established in the 1910s are still applied, whether a story be presented by means of a film, video, or computer format.