

Hollywood and the great depression essay sample



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Often referred to as the 'Golden Age' of American cinema, the Depression years (1929 -1940), were in actuality, characterized by gripping financial and moral constraints. Though the industry and its spiritual home of Hollywood were largely seen as 'depression-proof'[1] leading into the 30's, evidence suggests this type of thinking was more fantasy than fact. In this essay, I will explore the impact of The Depression on Hollywood and its movie makers, whilst critically examining its output over the decade.

Conventional wisdom puts the beginning of The Great Depression at the 29th October, 1929. This day, known as Black Tuesday, is remembered in history as the largest ever stock market crash. In truth however, a worldwide economic downturn beginning some 12 months before signified the end of the booming '20s, and heralded a new era in American economics, politics and culture. At the heart of this metamorphosis was the burgeoning industry of American cinema.

Of course, cinema, at this time, was not new to American audiences. In fact, movies had become a part of the Nation's psyche since just after the turn of the century when Edwin S. Porter, working from Edison Studio's produced the first major American film in *The Great Train Robbery*[2]. Porter has since been lauded as the father of story film, and his work led to the popularization of cinema and the opening of hundreds of the infamous Nickelodeon cinemas across the nation in the early part of the century. In the proceeding years the industry saw massive growth as a proliferation of studios and filmmakers cashed in on the rising popularity of film. By 1915, many of the major studios, previously spread throughout America, began to centralize their operations, moving west to Hollywood. There were a number of advantages

for the studios to centralize; not least among them was the opportunity to pool resources so as to be able to produce several films at once. This, the studio's did with aplomb, and as a result, by 1920, cinema had entered a new era of prosperity. This time saw the rise of silent movie stars such as Charlie Chaplin and Fatty Arbuckle, while producers such as Cecile B. Demille and Mark Sennett were also making a name for themselves among a growing list of modern movie celebrity.

By the mid-1920's, movies the American movie industry was reaching epic proportions. Capital investment was surpassing the \$2 billion mark and the total output in the US was averaging around 800 releases a year (to put that figure in perspective; today, the average output of American filmmakers is less than 500 films a year)[3]. At that time there were an estimated 20, 000 movie houses operating in the US, with the largest being the massive Roxy Theatre in New York City with a 6, 200 seat capacity[4].

In the 1920's, as today, the filmmaking landscape was dominated by a few large studios. Known as ' The Big Five', the largest and most prolific of these studios, controlled over 50 per cent of seating capacity in the US and produced around 90 per cent of films. ' The Big Five' are still largely dominant to this day – they are: Warner Bros., Paramount, RKO, MGM and 20th Century Fox.

A second tier of film studios, though not with the same output as ' The Big Five' were also shaping film throughout the 20's. Comprising Universal, United Artists and Columbia Pictures, ' The Little Three' as they were sometimes called, boasted some hugely successful films of the era, including

the Abbott and Costello comedies (Universal Pictures), and films by the legendary Charlie Chaplin (United Artists). Also producing films were a number of small independent studios, referred to as the 'Poverty Row' studios in reference to the shabby area in Hollywood in which they operated. Characterized by low budgets and B-list actors, these studios held none of the clout of the eight major studios, however in influential terms, they did help shape the industry. Among these 'Poverty Row' studios in the 1920's was the Disney Studio. Specializing in the budding animation genre, Disney Studios quickly became one of the best loved studios in the US.

Films made in the twenties were the usual mish-mash of genres associated with boom financial times. Until 1927 films were silent, and a familiar mix of comedies, westerns and fantasy films were keeping audiences entertained across the country. Titles such as *The Mark of Zorro*[5], *Robin Hood*[6] and the *Hunchback of Notre Dam*[7]e, were widely successful, as audiences identified with the audacious story-lines and high production values. 1927 saw a shift in thinking from the larger studios as sound (apart from the live performers already prevalent in American theatres) was introduced to movies.

The first 'talkie', *The Jazz Singer*[8], starring Al Jolson, signaled the start of a new era in filmmaking. The late 1920's were very much an experimental age, and as more and more studios scrapped the Silent movie for the modern alternative, film values changed. Many were critical of the quality of the early 'talkies'. "Some of the earliest talkies were primitive, self-conscious, crudely-made productions with an immobile microphone - designed to capitalize on the novelty of sound"[9]. Nevertheless, the 1920's

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were an exciting time to be both filmmaker and film enthusiast. The US economy was booming, advances in technology and filmmaking techniques meant that cinema was developing and improving at a rate as never before and the population was responding to cinema in such a way that it was getting harder and harder to tell whether film was echoing American society or vice versa. In fact, when the economy took a down-turn in 1929, many predicted the movie industry would continue to thrive, declaring Hollywood to be 'depression-proof'[10].

In October 1929, the world economy effectively collapsed. World trade decreased by 60 percent and the US was hit hard. Unemployment ran at over 25 percent and prices of almost everything fell spectacularly (farm prices for example, dropped by 51 percent from 1929 to 1933)[11]. The causes of this astonishing downturn were varied and widespread, but as Chairman of the Federal Reserve from 1934 to 1948, Marriner S. Eccles, observed in his memoirs: "As mass production has to be accompanied by mass consumption, mass consumption, in turn, implies a distribution of wealth - not of existing wealth as it is currently produced - to provide men with buying power equal to the amount of goods and services offered by the nation's economic machinery"[12]. Put simply, before the crash, US economy was floating on a wave of consumer sentiment rather than any tangible economic grounding. Of course, the US film industry was a part of this wave and had thrived under these unrealistic market conditions. Now, under the weight of a spiraling US economy, something had to give. And it did.

Initially the film industry showed little change. Indeed, there was even a sense of persisting optimism throughout the industry that the tough times were a mere blip on the radar. John D. Rockefeller articulated what many in the film industry were thinking when he said: “ These are days when many are discouraged. In the 93 years of my life, depressions have come and gone. Prosperity has always returned and will again”[13]. The novelty of sound in movies was enough to keep the film industry ticking over and attendances at movie theatres in 1930 actually increased from the pre-crash figures. Ironically however, it was the new sound technology that would ultimately put the first financial pressure on the studios.

By 1931, attendances at movie theatres had dropped markedly, and the studio’s, still financing the expensive transition from Silent film to ‘ talkies’ struggled to turn a profit. Hollywood was losing money. Up to one third of the nations theatres closed over the ensuing years, and the industry drastically cut industry salaries and production costs, and as drought gripped the nation from the early 30’s, further cutting public spending, Hollywood was finding itself in real trouble. In an attempt to improve their bottom line, double bills were becoming standard in theatres and the major studios began offering random prizes and promotions for their depleting flock of moviegoers.

Variety labeled 1931: “ The worst year ever financially in the history of the pictures [and] also, virtually, the worst annum in the existence of almost every other industry”[14].

All was not lost however. The film industry’s growth throughout the previous decade and its firm entrenchment in the hearts and minds of the American people did help in keeping the major players afloat, and The MGM studio

even managed to maintain a small profit throughout the 1930's. The films during this time also took on a new tone. As the prosperous 20's was reflected in the fantasy and adventure genres that prevailed at the time, the early 30's was the era of dark and escapist films.

Before this time, Hollywood productions were generally fairly tame affairs, though now, social and economic hardship had brought about a new feeling in Hollywood. The Gangster movie became the unofficial flagship of the Hollywood of the early 30's. Titles such as Mervyn Leroy's *Little Caesar*[15], *The Public Enemy*[16] and *Scarface*[17], did not necessarily reflect American society at the time, so much as pass comment on the darkness felt by the millions caught up in the depths of the depression. Each of these movies was highly controversial, particularly *The Public Enemy*, in which Jimmy Cagney's gangster character shoved a grapefruit into Mae Clarke's face, and all of them were unprecedentedly violent.

Violence, however, was not the only worry for the morally conservative. Sex, or at least suggestiveness, was increasingly playing a more significant role in the Hollywood movies of the early 30's. Mae West was undoubtedly the queen of suggestive theatre. Her roles in *Night After Night*[18], in which she played a brothel owner and the 1933 film *She Done Him Wrong*[19], in which she starred alongside actor Carey Grant and uttered the famous line "When I'm good, I'm very good. But when I'm bad I'm better", were her most famous and controversial films. *She Done Him Wrong* resulted in protests to Congress in the US and was actually banned in Australia.

The depression era also saw the birth of another film genre – the exploitation film. Cult favorite, *Freaks*[20], documented the world of actual deformed sideshow performers, whilst the titillating *Reefer Madness*[21] exposed the world of the marijuana subculture. The Horror film also reared its heads at this time as a major force with titles such as *Dracula*[22], *Frankenstein*[23] and *The Mummy*[24], all showing in the early 30's, thus providing an alternative escapist route for those so inclined.

These were extreme examples, but in the world of Hollywood filmmakers, social boundaries existed to be pushed, molded and re-shaped, especially at a time in history when the population needed so badly to be disorientated from their difficult lives. Not so, according Hollywood's Producers Association. Its Production Code was drafted by a Priest named Father Daniel Lord and specifically prohibited the depiction of “ nudity, profanity, white slavery, miscegenation, excessive and lustful kissing, and scenes of passion” that “ stimulate the lower and baser element”[25]. The code was actually created in 1930, however at the time was considered more of a Public Relations exercise, and, as already explained, the code was not strictly adhered to. Change came in the form of Joseph Breen.

Leader of the Catholic Church, Reverend Amleto Giovanni Cicognani, called on Catholics around the world to undertake “ a united and vigorous campaign for the purification of the cinema, which has become a deadly menace to morals”[26]. The Catholic community responded with some 9 million people forming The Legion of Decency which threatened to boycott all those films that did not comply with the code. Under the threat of boycotts that had the potential to devastate the industry, the Hollywood

Producers association began to enforce the code, placing Joseph Breen in charge in 1934. The Breen office, as it became known, had the power to hold a film from public view. The moviemakers now had no choice but to comply with the code, and this would have a dramatic effect on the character of film in the 1930's.

Extreme, boundary-pushing cinema was now off of the movie-makers agenda, though the public, still squeezed and hurting from the depression, continued to demand films that would help them escape from the bleak realities of everyday life. Slapstick comedies became popular. The Marx Brothers made a name for themselves in this genre with their unique style of slapstick improvisation - *A Night at the Opera*[27] and *Duck Soup*[28] being two of their most popular efforts, while W. C. Fields, also a star of the era, was satirizing everyday life in his 1935 film *The flying Trapeze*[29]. Fulfilling the prophecy that 'laughter is the best medicine', the crowds began to flock back to the theatre, and by 1935, the light was certainly at the end of the tunnel for the ailing film industry.

If the film industry was kept afloat by escapism in the form of sex, horror and comedy, then it was the musical that really returned it to its former glory.

Since the birth of sound in cinema in the late 20's, studios had worked hard at bringing the musical to the screen. The first musicals, mostly adaptations from the stage, were rushed affairs, brought about as studios tried to outdo each other in the transitional stages from silent to sound. However, it was not until 1933, when the musical realized its full potential, and the audience responded. *42nd Street*[30] by Warner Bros was the breakthrough title and it

was hailed a masterpiece. Carle Gillettee, a film critic of the time observed of the film: “ The success of 42nd Street will probably bring a new avalanche of musicals”[31]. Gillettee was ultimately proven correct as there was indeed an ‘ avalanche of musicals’, and with them a new type of optimism.

Observers noted that the power of the musical was not just in the singing and the dancing, but rather, ironically, in the realism of the films. Where before, movies dealt in pure escapism, the new wave of musical acknowledged the times, yet still managed a degree of optimism. *The Gold Diggers of 1933*[32] went on the gross more than the breakthrough *42nd Street*, and it did so largely on the back of a setting that recognized the nation’s economic fortunes.

By 1935, Hollywood was thriving again, and though it would be challenged many times over the next 80 years, at no other time in its history has the ideals and existence of Hollywood been as threatened as it was in the early years of the depression.

Those that declared Hollywood to be depression proof, did so under the flawed assumption that to survive under the circumstances of the depression was to thrive. Survival for the Hollywood studios, however, was not an easy task and it was done largely on the back of gains made in the previous decade. By integrating itself with the nations ideals in the 1920’s in times when prosperity reigned, Hollywood was able to adapt to the needs of an audience that was crying out for a method to escape the debilitating economic crisis. Although Hollywood survived the depression, the face of the industry changed dramatically. Today, Hollywood and its movies are

entrenched in our daily lives. They both reflect social change and cause it; it was The Great Depression, and Hollywood's reaction to it, that set cinema up as a significant cultural element.

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