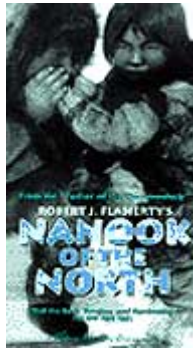


## Film History of the 1920s

### Foundations of the Prolific Film Industry:

Films really blossomed in the 1920s, expanding upon the foundations of film from earlier years. Most US film production at the start of the decade occurred in or near Hollywood on the West Coast, although some films were still being made in New Jersey and in Astoria on Long Island (Paramount). By the mid-20s, movies were big business (with a capital investment totaling over \$2 billion) with some theatres offering double features. By the end of the decade, there were 20 Hollywood studios, and the demand for films was greater than ever. Most people are unaware that the greatest output of feature films in the US occurred in the 1920s and 1930s (averaging about 800 film releases in a year) - nowadays, it is remarkable when production exceeds 500 films in a year.



Throughout most of the decade, silent films were the predominant product of the film industry, having evolved from vaudevillian roots. But the films were becoming bigger, costlier, and more polished. They were being manufactured, assembly-line style, in Hollywood's 'entertainment factories,' in which production was broken down and organized into its various components (writing, costuming, makeup, directing, etc.).

Even the earliest films were organized into *genres* or types, with instantly-recognizable storylines, settings, costumes, and characters. The major genre emphasis was on swashbucklers, historical extravaganzas, and melodramas, although all kinds of films were being produced throughout the decade. Films varied from sexy melodramas and biblical epics by Cecil B. DeMille, to westerns (such as Cruze's **The Covered Wagon (1923)**), horror films, gangster/crime films, war films, the *first* feature *documentary* (Robert Flaherty's **Nanook of the North (1922)**), romances, mysteries, and comedies (from the silent comic masters Chaplin, Keaton, and Lloyd).

1920-1930 was the ten year period between the end of the Great War and the Depression following the Stock Market Crash. Film theaters and studios were not initially affected in this decade by the crash. Some of the best artists, directors, and stars from European film-making circles were imported to Hollywood and assimilated there as emigrants (e.g., Ernst Lubitsch, Pola Negri, F. W. Murnau, Victor Seastrom, Greta Garbo, Michael Curtiz, etc.).

### The Major and Minor Film Studios:



The basic patterns of the film industry (and its economic organization) were established in the 1920s - the **studio system** was essentially born in the second decade of the century (with long-term contracts for stars, lavish production values, and increasingly rigid control of directors and stars by the studio's production chief and in-house publicity departments). After World War I and into the early 1920s, America was the leading producer of films in the world - using Thomas Ince's "factory system" of production, although the system did limit the creativity of many directors. Production was in the hands of the major studios (that really flourished after 1927), and the star system was burgeoning.



Originally, in the earliest years of the motion picture industry, production, distribution, and exhibition were separately controlled. When the industry rapidly grew, these functions

became integrated under one directorship to maximize profits, something called **vertical integration**. The major studios (see below) were those that had consolidated and controlled all aspects of a film's development. By 1929, the film-making firms that were to rule and monopolize Hollywood for the next half-century were the giants or the majors, sometimes dubbed **The Big Five**. They produced more than 90 percent of the fiction films in America.



The Big-Five studios had vast studios with elaborate sets for film production. They owned their own film-exhibiting theatres (about 50% of the seating capacity in the US in mostly *first-run* city houses), as well as production and distribution facilities. They also distributed their films to this network of studio-owned, first-run theaters (or movie palaces), mostly in urban areas, that charged high ticket prices and drew huge audiences. They required *blind* or *block bookings* of films, whereby theatre owners were required to rent a block of films (often cheaply-made *B-pictures*) in order for the studio to agree to distribute the one prestige *A-level picture* that the theatre owner wanted to exhibit. This technique set the terms for a film's release and patterns of exhibition and guaranteed success for the studio's productions.


[Monopolistic studio control lasted twenty years until the late 1940s, when a federal decree (in *U.S. vs. Paramount*) ordered the studios to divest their theatres.]

	<b>The Big Five Studios</b>	<b>Logo</b>
1.	<p><b>Warner Bros. Pictures</b>, incorporated in 1923 by Polish brothers (Jack, Harry, Albert, and Sam); the studio's first principal asset was Rin Tin Tin; became prominent by 1927 due to its introduction of talkies (<a href="#">The Jazz Singer (1927)</a>) and early 30s gangster films; it was known as the "Depression studio"; in the 40s, it specialized in <i>Bugs Bunny</i> animations and other cartoons</p>	
2.	<p>Adolph Zukor's <b>Famous Players</b> (1912) and Jesse Lasky's <b>Feature Play</b> - merged in 1916 to form <b>Famous Players-Lasky Corporation</b>; it spent \$1 million on United Studios' property (on Marathon Street) in 1926; the <b>Famous Players-Lasky Corporation</b> became <b>Paramount studios</b> in 1927, and was officially named <b>Paramount Pictures</b> in 1935; its Golden</p>	

<p>4. Marcus Loew of <b>Loew's, Inc.</b>, was the parent firm of what eventually became <b>Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer</b>. <b>MGM</b>, first named Metro-Goldwyn Pictures - in 1924 - was formed from the merger of <b>Metro Pictures</b> (1915), <b>Goldwyn Pictures Corporation</b> (1917), and the <b>Louis B. Mayer Pictures Company</b> (1918); the famous MGM lion roar in the studio's opening logo was first recorded and viewed in a film in 1928; its greatest early successes were <a href="#">Gone With the Wind (1939)</a>, <a href="#">The Wizard of Oz (1939)</a>, as well as <i>Tarzan</i> films, <i>Tom and Jerry</i> cartoons, and stars such as Clark Gable, Greta Garbo, and Spencer Tracy</p>	
<p>5. <b>Fox Film Corporation</b>, founded in 1912 by NY nickelodeon owner William Fox, was known for Fox Movietone newsreels; it later became <b>20th Century Fox</b>, formed through merger of <b>Twentieth Century Pictures Company</b> (founded in 1933 by Darryl Zanuck) and <b>Fox</b> in 1935; famous for Betty Grable musicals in the 40s</p>	

Three smaller, minor studios were dubbed "The Little Three", because each of them lacked *one* of the three elements required in *vertical integration* - owning their own theaters:

	<b>The Little Three Studios</b>	<b>Logo</b>
<p>1. <b>Universal Pictures</b>, (or Universal Film Manufacturing Co), founded by Carl Laemmle in 1912; formed from a merger of Laemmle's own Independent Motion Picture Company (founded in 1909) with Bison 101, the U. S. production facilities of French studio Éclair, Nestor Film Co., and several other film companies; its first successes were W.C. Fields and Abbott and Costello comedies, the <i>Flash Gordon</i> serial, and <i>Woody Woodpecker</i> cartoons;</p>		
<p>2. <b>United Artists</b>, formed in 1919 by movie industry icons Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, Sr., Charlie Chaplin, and director D.W. Griffith as an independent company to produce and distribute their films; United Artists utilized an 18-acre property owned by Pickford and Fairbanks, known as the Pickford-Fairbanks Studio, and later named <b>United Artists Studio</b> in the 1920s</p>		

<p>3. <b>Columbia Pictures</b>, originally the <b>C.B.C. Films Sales Company</b> in 1920 founded by brothers Jack and Harry Cohn, and Joseph Brandt, and officially named <b>Columbia</b> in 1924; established prominence with <a href="#">It Happened One Night (1934)</a>, Rita Hayworth films, <a href="#">Lost Horizon (1937)</a>, <b>The Jolson Story (1946)</b>, and <i>Batman</i> serials.</p>	
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Other studios or independents also existed in a shabby area in Hollywood dubbed "**Poverty Row**" (Sunset Blvd. and Gower Street) where cheap, independent pictures were made with low budgets, stock footage, and second-tier actors. It was the site of Harry and Jack Cohn's new business, the **C.B.C. Films Sales Company** (later becoming **Columbia Pictures**). Many of the films of the independents were either horror films, westerns, science-fiction, or thrillers:

- **Walt Disney** - specializing in animation; originally formed in 1923 in Los Angeles by Walt and Roy Disney
- **the Monogram Picture Corporation**, founded in 1930 by W. Ray Johnston to make mostly inexpensive Westerns and series (Charlie Chan, the Bowery Boys, etc.); Monogram merged with Consolidated Film Industries, Mascot, and Liberty to form a new company in 1935 called **Republic Pictures**, headed by Herbert Yates of Consolidated
- **Selznick International/David O. Selznick** - headed up by David O. Selznick, the son of independent film producer Lewis J. Selznick, the founder of Selznick Pictures; Selznick International Pictures was formed on October 15, 1935
- **Goldwyn** - headed up by Samuel L. Goldwyn
- **Republic Pictures**, founded in 1935 by the merger of Consolidated Film Industries, Mascot, Monogram and Liberty, and headed by Herbert Yates

#### **Extravagant Movie Palaces:**

The major film studios built luxurious 'picture palaces' that were designed for orchestras to play music to accompany projected films. The 3,300-seat Strand Theater opened in 1914 in New York City, marking the end of the nickelodeon era and the beginning of an age of the luxurious movie palaces. By 1920, there were more than 20,000 movie houses operating in the US. The largest theatre in the world (with over 6,000 seats), the Roxy Theater (dubbed "The Cathedral of the Motion Picture"), opened in New York City in 1927, with a 6,200 seat capacity. It was opened by impresario Samuel Lionel "Roxy" Rothafel at a cost of \$10 million. The first feature film shown at the Roxy Theater was UA's **The Love(s) of Sunya (1927)** starring Gloria Swanson (she claimed that it was her personal favorite film) and John Boles. [The Roxy was finally closed in 1960.] The Roxy was unchallenged as a showplace until Radio City Music Hall opened five years later.

#### **Grauman's Theatres:**

Impresario Sid Grauman built a number of movie palaces in the Los Angeles area in this time period:

- the *Million Dollar Theater* (on S. Broadway in downtown Los Angeles), the *first* movie palace in Los Angeles, opened in February, 1918 with 2,345 seats, and premiered the William S. Hart western film **The Silent Man (1917)**
- the *Egyptian Theatre* (on Hollywood Boulevard) opened in 1922 with 1,760 seats; it was the *first* major movie palace outside of downtown Los Angeles, and noted as having Hollywood's *first* movie premiere; its opening film was **Robin Hood (1922)** that starred Douglas Fairbanks: the theatre's creation was inspired by the

- discovery of King Tut's tomb that same year
- the now-famous *Chinese Theater*, with 2,258 seats, opened in Hollywood (on Hollywood Boulevard) in May, 1927 with the premiere of Cecil B. De Mille's **King of Kings (1927)**.

#### **Star Imprints at Grauman's:**

Grauman, dubbed as "Hollywood's Master Showman," established the tradition of having Hollywood stars place their prints in cement in front of the theater to create an instant tourist attraction ever since. (Legend has it that during the theatre's construction, silent screen actress Norma Talmadge accidentally stepped into wet cement and inspired the tradition. Grauman immortalized his own footprints, and invited Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks to do the same.) These are the first 10 stars, beginning in the spring of 1927, to imprint themselves (with handprints, footprints, or signatures) in the concrete of the Chinese Theatre's forecourt:

1. Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks, Apr. 30, 1927
2. Norma Talmadge, May 18, 1927
3. Norma Shearer, Aug. 1, 1927
4. Harold Lloyd, Nov. 21, 1927
5. William S. Hart, Nov. 28, 1927
6. Tom Mix and Tony (his horse), Dec. 12, 1927
7. Colleen Moore, Dec 19, 1927
8. Gloria Swanson, 1927 (specific date unknown)
9. Constance Talmadge, 1927 (specific date unknown)
10. Charlie Chaplin, Jan, 1928

#### **Pickford and Fairbanks:**

Two of the biggest silent movie stars of the era were Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford. America flocked to the movies to see the Queen of Hollywood, dubbed "America's Sweetheart" and the most popular star of the generation - "Our Mary" Mary Pickford. She had been a child star, and had worked at Biograph as a bit actress in 1909, and only ten years later was one of the most influential figures in Hollywood. She was married to another great star, Douglas Fairbanks, Sr. Their wedding in early March, 1920 was a major cultural event. She was presented with a wedding gift - "Pickfair" [the first syllables of their last names], a twenty-two room palatial mansion in the agricultural area of Beverly Hills - marking the start of the movement of stars to lavish homes in the suburbs of W. Hollywood and the making of Hollywood royalty. [The couple remained married from 1920-1935.] Strangely, Mary Pickford's downfall began after she bobbed her hair in 1928.

Douglas Fairbanks, Sr. also became an American legend after switching from light comedies and starring in a series of exciting, costumed swashbuckler and adventure/fantasy films, starting with **The Mark of Zorro (1920)**, soon followed with his expensively-financed adventure film, **Robin Hood (1922)**, and the first of four versions of the classic Arabian nights tale by director Raoul Walsh, **The Thief of Bagdad (1924)**, with magical "flying carpet" special effects. Another first occurred in 1926 - a Hollywood film premiere double-featured two films together: Fairbanks' **The Black Pirate (1926)** with early two-color Technicolor (and the superstar's most famous stunt of riding down a ship's sail on a knife) and Mary Pickford's melodramatic film **Sparrows (1926)**. Fairbanks scored again at the close of the decade with **The Iron Mask (1929)**. The *first* and only film that co-featured both stars was a talkie version of **The Taming of the Shrew (1929)**. Pickford's **Coquette (1929)**, her first all-talking film, won her an Academy Award, but she retired prematurely four years later.

#### **Other 1920s Box-Office Stars:**

The top box-office stars in the 1920s included Harold Lloyd, Gloria Swanson, Tom Mix, Norma Talmadge. Rudolph Valentino. Douglas Fairbanks Sr.. Colleen Moore. Norma

Shearer, John Barrymore, Greta Garbo, Lon Chaney, Clara Bow, and "Little Mary" Pickford.

Hauntingly mysterious and divine, Greta Garbo's *first* American film was **The Torrent (1926)**, followed quickly by **The Temptress (1926)**. Her *first* major starring vehicle was as a sultry temptress in torrid, prone love scenes with off-screen lover John Gilbert in **Flesh and the Devil (1926)**. MGM renamed Broadway actress Lucille Le Sueur and christened her "Joan Crawford" in 1925. And Louise Brooks made her debut film in mid-decade with **Street of Forgotten Men (1925)**. Glamorous MGM star Norma Shearer insured her future success as "The First Lady of the Screen" by marrying genius MGM production supervisor Irving Thalberg in 1927.

Clara Bow, a red-haired, lower-class Brooklyn girl was subjected to a major publicity campaign by B. P. Schulberg (of Preferred Pictures (1920-1926) and then Paramount's head of production in the late 20s and early 30s). He promoted his up-and-coming, vivacious future star as his own personal star, after grooming and molding her for her star-making hit film **The Plastic Age (1925)** as a flirtatious flapper - the "hottest Jazz Baby in Film." Bow was also exceptional in **Dancing Mothers (1926)** and in her smash hit **Mantrap (1926)**, and was further promoted with teaser campaigns for **It (1927)**. She soon became known as "The It (sex appeal) Girl" (in the high-living age of flappers) after its February 1927 release. She was boosted to Paramount Studios' super-stardom in the late 1920s by more publicity campaigns, fan magazine glamorization, and rumor-spreading. Bow also starred in the epic WWI film **Wings (1927)**, and in 1928 became the highest paid movie star (at \$35,000/week). But by 1933, after years of victimizing exploitation, she had gone into serious decline and retired due to hard-drinking, exhaustion, gambling, emotional problems, a poor choice of roles, the revelation of a heavy working-class Brooklyn accent in the talkies, and a burgeoning weight problem.

Young screen actress, platinum blonde starlet Jean Harlow was also 'discovered' and soon contracted with aviation millionaire/movie mogul Howard Hughes to replace the female lead in his soon-to-be-released, re-made sound version of **Hell's Angels (1930)**, another exciting WWI film about British flying aces.

#### **Janet Gaynor:**

Another famous screen couple, dubbed "America's Lovebirds" or "America's Sweethearts" were romantic film stars Janet Gaynor and Charles Farrell who were eventually paired together in twelve films. [The fact that Farrell was homosexual was kept from the public.] Their first film was **Seventh Heaven (1927)**, a classic romantic melodrama. For their work in *Seventh Heaven*, Janet Gaynor received the first "Best Actress" Academy Award and director Frank Borzage received the first "Best Director" Academy Award.

Janet Gaynor was also honored in the same year with an Academy Award for her exquisite acting in German director F. W. Murnau's *first* American film - the beautiful Fox-produced **Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans (1927)**, often considered the finest silent film ever made by a Hollywood studio. Murnau's succeeding films were **The Four Devils (1928)** and **Our Daily Bread (1930)**, with his last film the sensual semi-travelogue documentary **Tabu: A Story of the South Seas (1931)** shot with documentarist Robert Flaherty. (A week before **Tabu's** premiere in early March 1931, Murnau died in a car accident.)

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#### **Rudolph Valentino (1895-1926):**

The greatest male attraction in exotic, adventurous romantic pictures was handsome, hot-blooded Italian-born import Rudolph Valentino, after his breakthrough appearance in the famous tango scene in director

Rex Ingram's spectacle **The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (1921)**. Dubbed the "Latin Lover," the matinee idol symbolized the forbidden and mysterious eroticism denied to American women in the 1920s in such films as **The Sheik (1921)**, **Camille (1921)**, the successful **Blood and Sand (1922)**, **The Eagle (1925)**, and *The Sheik's* popular sequel **The Son of the Sheik (1926)**. *The Son of the Sheik* was a tremendous hit, released at the time of Valentino's funeral.

In 1926, his death came at the untimely age of 31, due to a perforated ulcer and peritonitis. Crowds in New York, mostly female mourners, verged on mass hysteria as they tried to view his body. [One of Valentino's legacies was that a brand of popular condoms was named after his role in one of his most famous films.] Native-born director Clarence Brown, who had directed Valentino in **The Eagle (1925)** also directed imported actress Greta Garbo in **Flesh and the Devil (1927)**, **Woman of Affairs (1928)**, and turn-of-the-decade **Anna Christie (1930)**.

### German Expressionism:

Due to fewer restrictions and less strict production schedules, the film art of European film-makers flourished in the mid-20s, with leading directors including G.W. Pabst (known later for directing American actress Louise Brooks in **Pandora's Box (1928)**), F.W. Murnau, and Fritz Lang. An artistic movement termed *Expressionism* was influential in European film-making following World War I. In the early 1920s, three German expressionistic films with dark shadows and dramatic lighting, visual story-telling, and distorted angular shots were to have a strong influence on the coming development of U.S. films:

- Robert Wiene's surrealistic fantasy/horror film **The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920)** with abstract sets
- F. W. Murnau's classic vampire film (the first of its kind) with actor Max Schreck - an adaptation of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* novel titled **Nosferatu, A Symphony of Horrors (1922)**
- Fritz Lang's **Dr. Mabuse: The Gambler (1922)** (aka **Doktor Mabuse der Spieler**) introduced the director's evil genius character

### Imports From Abroad:

A number of early movie stars and directors in Hollywood were hired artists from abroad - Bela Lugosi, successful German directors F. W. Murnau (invited to Hollywood by William Fox for his first Fox film - the critically-acclaimed **Sunrise (1927)**) and Ernst Lubitsch (he directed his first American film, **Rosita (1923)** starring Mary Pickford), producer Alexander Korda, director Michael Curtiz (recruited by Warners from Hungary), Greta Garbo, director Rouben Mamoulian, and more. Director Lubitsch's first American comedy **The Marriage Circle (1924)** about marital infidelity in Vienna, was later remade as the musical **One Hour With You (1932)**. With his classic, sophisticated "touch," Lubitsch boldly confronted the pre-Hays code of censorship with **So This Is Paris (1926)**.

Later in Germany, Fritz Lang's last major silent film was H. G. Wells' fantasy **Metropolis (1927)** - the expensive film enriched cinema in years to come with its innovative techniques, futuristic sets and production design, and allegorical study of the class system. Murnau's notable silent film weepie classic **The Last Laugh (1924)** told its entire story about a proud but demoted hotel doorman (Emil Jannings) through visualization, innovative camera movements (with only one inter-title), stylized *mis-en-scene*, a subjective point-of-view, and optical effects. Both Lang's **Metropolis** and Murnau's **The Last Laugh** were filmed by the pioneering German cameraman Karl Freund.

Murnau also filmed Moliere's 17th century satire **Tartuffe (1925)** as a movie within a movie, and Goethe's tragedy **Faust (1926)** with stunning chiaroscuro, images of medieval castles, huge mountains and Faust (Gosta Ekman) flying with Mephisto (Emil Jannings). *Faust* was the film that gave Murnau a contract with Hollywood's Fox Studios. The dark films of Josef von Sternberg in the late 1920s ushered in the gangster film: **Underworld (1927)**, **The Drag Net (1929)**, and **The Docks of New York (1929)**.

Lon Chaney, "man of a thousand faces," starred in the earliest version of **The Hunchback of Notre Dame (1923)**, and then poignantly portrayed the title character of the Paris Opera House in **The Phantom of the Opera (1925)** in his signature role. The unveiling of the phantom's face, when Christine (Mary Philbin) rips off his mask - was (and still is) a startling sequence.



Austrian-born director Erich von Stroheim's style was more harsh and European than the works of other imported directors. He had begun as an assistant director to D. W. Griffith. His specialty was the melodramatic portrayal of a decadent Europe with audacious scenes of sexuality. His brooding and expensive **Foolish Wives (1921)** was the *longest* commercially-made American film to be released uncut at 6 hours and 24 minutes in Latin America, but it was severely edited to a 10-reel version for general release. Von Stroheim's admired nine-hour, 42-reel silent masterpiece **Greed (1924)** (a detailed adaptation of Frank Norris' novel *McTeague*) was screened only once in its original form for newly-formed MGM executives including Irving Thalberg, and then severely cut down to its current length of 133 minutes (about 10 reels). Reportedly, the 32 reels of edited negatives were melted down by MGM to extract the valuable silver nitrate from the film stock. The same difficulties of extravagant over-spending and interminable length also plagued his film **The Wedding March (1928)**.

Legendary Russian *auteur* director Sergei Eisenstein's classic landmark and visionary film, **Battleship Potemkin (1925)** was released in the US in 1926, advancing the art of cinematic storytelling with the technique of *montage* (or film editing). Its most celebrated film scene, with superb editing combining wide, newsreel-like sequences inter-cut with close-ups of harrowing details, was the Odessa Steps episode in 1905 in which civilians and rioters were ruthlessly massacred. In the scene (with 155 separate shots in less than five minutes), the Czarist soldiers fired on the crowds thronging on the Odessa steps with the indelible, kinetic image of a baby carriage careening down the marble steps leading to the harbor. [The scene was parodied in a number of films, including Brian DePalma's **The Untouchables (1987)**.]

Another technological cinematic achievement was attained by experimental French filmmaker Abel Gance in his film **Napoleon (1927)**, a visually revolutionary picture originally six hours long and partially filmed with panoramic, "triptych" **Polyvision** (three-screens side-by-side to create a wide-screen effect, later known by future generations as Cinerama) at its climax. This meant that the film had to be shot with three synchronized cameras, and then projected on a gigantic, 3-part screens. [Within a few years, Fox's *Grandeur* wide-screen system was an early attempt at 70 mm. film gauge.]

And at the end of the decade, the influential and creative film **The Man with the Movie Camera (1929)** from experimental cameraman/director Dziga Vertov, employed some of the first uses of the split screen, montage editing, and rapidly-filmed scenes in its view of Moscow.

#### **Comedy Flourished:**

It was a great era for light-hearted silent comedy, with the triumvirate of humorists: Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and Harold Lloyd. The popularity of Charlie Chaplin as the Tramp soared in movies after his initial films with Keystone, Essanay, and Mutual. As already stated, he co-founded **United Artists** studios in 1919 with Mary Pickford, D. W. Griffith, and Douglas Fairbanks. His *first* silent feature film was First National's 6-reel **The Kid (1921)** (with child star Jackie Coogan), in which he portrayed the Tramp in an attempt to save an abandoned and orphaned child. (Chaplain married his underage, 16 year-old *The Kid* co-star Lita Grey in 1924).

Chaplin also appeared in **The Pilgrim (1923)** - in which he mimed the David and Goliath story, and in the classic **The Gold Rush (1925)**, a story with pathos and wild comedy about a Lone Prospector in Alaska. Chaplin was presented with a special Academy Award "for versatility and genius in writing, acting, directing, and producing" for **The Circus (1928)**. Chaplin's comedies were matched by the acrobatics and dare-devil antics of silent comic Harold Lloyd, who appeared as a gallant, 'never-say-die' All-American "Boy" (with glasses) in **Safety Last (1923)** - famous for his harrowing climb up the side of a tall building, **Girl Shy (1924)**, **The Freshman (1925)**, and **The Kid Brother (1927)**.



There was also the inspired comedic work of passively-unsmiling, sardonic Buster Keaton (The Great Stone Face) in **Sherlock, Jr. (1924)** (Keaton's *first* solo directorial work), **The Navigator (1924)**, the Civil War epic **The General (1927)** (Keaton co-directed with Clyde Bruckman) about a runaway train with spectacular sight gags, **Steamboat Bill, Jr. (1928)** - his last independent film, and **The Cameraman (1928)**, Keaton's *first* film for MGM that also marked the beginning of his decline.

Baby-faced Harry Langdon's best feature film in a short four-year film career, **The Strong Man (1926)**, was director Frank Capra's feature-film debut. He also starred in two other hits, **Tramp, Tramp, Tramp (1926)** and **Long Pants (1927)**. Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy appeared in their *first* film as a slapstick comedy team - a Hal Roach studio comedy **Duck**

**Soup (1927)**, and then performed in director Clyde Bruckman's **Putting Pants on Philip (1927)**. The Marx Brothers debuted in their *first* film together in 1929, **The Cocoanuts (1929)**.





And bulbous-nosed master comic W. C. Fields first juggled in the Ziegfeld Follies on Broadway in New York City from 1915-1921. In the mid-20s, he moved to Hollywood and wrote, directed, and starred in films. His *first* film was the one-reel **Pool Sharks (1915)**. After appearing in the Broadway musical *Poppy*, he starred in D.W. Griffith's screen version of the circus film, renamed **Sally of the Sawdust (1925)**. (It was later remade as **Poppy (1936)**, with Fields in the same role.)

### Griffith, Vidor, and Gish:

In 1919, the population of Hollywood was 35,000, but by 1925, had swelled to 130,000. To advertise how Hollywood was becoming the film capital of the world, the Hollywood sign (originally advertising and spelling out **HOLLYWOODLAND**) was built above town in 1923 for \$21,000 by a real estate developer. [After being declared an historic landmark in 1973, it was rebuilt in the late 70s by funds established by singer/cowboy Gene Autry, rocker Alice Cooper, and *Playboy* head Hugh Hefner.]

D. W. Griffith continued to be successful (his earlier **Birth of a Nation (1915)** remained the most popular film until another war saga **Gone with the Wind (1939)** was filmed at the end of the 30s). One of Griffith's last commercial blockbusters, his classic melodrama of a morally-ostracized young woman, **Way Down East (1920)**, was famous for its daring sequence of Lillian Gish in a blizzard and on a floating ice, rescued at the last minute by Richard Barthelmess. Griffith's next film, **Orphans of the Storm (1922)**, starred sisters Dorothy and Lillian Gish in a semi-factual drama of the French Revolution.

The largest grossing silent film up to its time was King Vidor's WWI tale - an epic, anti-war film and romance story from MGM **The Big Parade (1925)**, starring matinee idol John Gilbert. Vidor's enduring classic silent film of Everyman, **The Crowd (1928)**, a realistic "slice-of-life" tale of a faceless, underpaid, hard-working clerk who never seemed to get ahead in the big city of New York during the Jazz Age, was under-appreciated at the time of its release. Lillian Gish collaborated with director Victor Seastrom for two films: Nathaniel Hawthorne's classic **The Scarlet Letter (1926)** and **The Wind (1928)**, one of the last great silent films.

### Expensive Epics and Cecil B. DeMille:

Interestingly, some of the biggest successes of the 1920s were similar to the wide-screen epics of the 50s, such as:

- Rex Ingram's **The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (1921)** (that launched Valentino's career as a star)
- master showman Cecil B. DeMille's **Joan the Woman (1916)**, **The Ten Commandments (1923)** and **The King of Kings (1927)**
- the expensive spectacle of MGM's and Fred Niblo's colossal **Ben-Hur (1926)**

All of these lavish and grand films foreshadowed their epic remakes during the mid-fifties and early sixties and in later years. The silent era **Ben-Hur (1926)** was the greatest and most legendary spectacular of its kind, budgeted at a record \$3.9 million - the *most* expensive silent film ever (it made \$9 million at the box-office). Hollywood experimented with an early form of Technicolor for some color sequences in DeMille's big-budget, \$1 million epic **The Ten Commandments (1923)** and also in **Ben-Hur (1926)**.

Always noted as a showman, Cecil B. DeMille's name was forever associated with extravagant production values and biblical spectacles (with rich doses of orgies and bathing scenes) that he first filmed in the 1920s. He also adapted to the times with patriotic war-time films, such as **Till I Come Back to You (1918)**, sophisticated romantic comedies such as **Old Wives For New (1918)** and the racy romantic farce **Don't Change Your Husband (1919)** with Gloria Swanson, and sexy melodramas such as the risqué **The Affairs of Anatol (1921)**.

### Westerns and Prototypes of Other Genres:

The western film genre was uniquely American and became popular in the early days of the cinema. The *first* major Western, a landmark film, was director James Cruze's epic pioneer saga filmed on-location, **The Covered Wagon (1923)**, an authentic-looking 83 minute film advertised as "the biggest thing the screen has had since *The Birth of a Nation*." Legendary director John Ford directed his first major film, a seminal Western titled **The Iron Horse (1924)**, the sweeping tale of the construction of the first transcontinental railroad. The last film the old rugged Western hero, William S. Hart, appeared in was King Baggot's **Tumbleweeds (1925)**. Famed cowboy actors, in addition to William S. Hart, included Tom Mix and Harry Carey.

Other prototypical films were also released in the 1920s. The *first* science-fiction film (with early examples of stop-motion special effects) about prehistoric dinosaurs in a remote South American jungle **The Lost World (1925)**, adapted from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's tale, premiered during the silent era. Willis O'Brien, who would later be responsible for the success of **King Kong (1933)**, came of age as a stop-motion animator for this film. [In 1925, Imperial Airways presented it as the first in-flight movie on a flight from London to Europe.]

The prototype standard for later spooky, haunted "old dark house" mysteries was **The Cat and the Canary (1927)**, a film re-made numerous times in future years. And one of the first in the gangster film genre was Josef von Sternberg's Prohibition-era **Underworld (1927)**. Famous American movie dog, German shepherd Rin Tin Tin starred in over 20 films during the 20s silent era, including Warners' **Rinty of the Desert (1928)** and the transitional talkie-film **Frozen River (1929)**. Detective Charlie Chan's introduction (as portrayed by Japanese actor George Kuwa) was in the 10-part serial **House Without a Key (1926)**.

#### **The Birth of the Talkies:**

By the late 1920s, the art of silent film had become remarkably mature. Although called silents, they were never really silent but accompanied by sound organs, gramophone discs, musicians, sound effects specialists, live actors who delivered dialogue, and even full-scale orchestras. There would be two competing sound or recording systems developed during the early 'talkie' period: *sound-on-disc*, and *sound-on-film*.

In 1925-26, America technologically revolutionized the entire industry, with the formation of the **Vitaphone Company** (a subsidiary created by Warner Bros. and Western Electric). Warner Bros. launched sound and talking pictures, with Bell Telephone researchers, by developing a revolutionary synchronized sound system called **Vitaphone** (a short-lived *sound-on-disc* process developed in 1925 that quickly became obsolete by 1931). This process allowed sound to be recorded on a phonograph record that was electronically linked and synchronized with the film projector - but it was destined to be faulty due to inherent synchronization problems. Originally, Warner Bros. intended to use the system to record only music and sound effects - not dialogue.

The *first* feature-length film with synchronized Vitaphone sound effects and musical soundtrack (canned music and sound effects recorded on large wax discs), but without spoken dialogue, was Warner Bros.' romantic swashbuckler adventure **Don Juan (1926)**. The prestigious production was premiered in New York on August 6, 1926, and starred John Barrymore (nicknamed "The Great Profile") as the hand-kissing womanizer (the number of kisses in the film set a record). Director Alan Crosland's expensive film failed to create the sensation that Warners had hoped for. The second Vitaphone production was **The Better 'Ole (1926)**, featuring musical comedy and recording star Al Jolson, among others.

Most of the studios started to convert from silent to sound film production - a tremendous capital investment. Thousands of existing theaters had to be rewired for sound at great expense. In the mid 1920s, Warners invested over \$3 million in outfitting its 'picture palaces' to show Vitaphone films, and went into debt because of it.

In 1926, William Fox of the Fox Film Corporation responded to Warners' success with its own similar and competing, advanced **Movietone** system - the *first* commercially successful *sound-on-film* process developed in conjunction with General Electric. It added a 'soundtrack' directly onto the strip of film and would eventually become the predominant sound technology. [This system would soon replace the inflexible Vitaphone system because it was easier to synchronize the sound.] Fox's Movietone system was premiered in early 1927 with the showing of director Raoul Walsh's 12-reel comedy-drama war film **What Price Glory? (1926)** (originally released in November, 1926, and then re-released in January, 1927 with synchronized music and sound effects). They also released a Fox-Movietone News newsreel of the Lindbergh takeoff and flight across the Atlantic toward Paris. The *first* talking picture made in Hollywood was a Fox-Movietone short titled **They're Coming to Get Me (1926)**. In April, 1927, Warners built the *first* sound studio to produce a feature film with sound.

### **The Jazz Singer: The World's First Talkie**

The second sound feature released the following year on October 6, 1927, also directed by Alan Crosland for Warner Bros., revolutionized motion pictures forever. Producer Sam Warner died one day before the film's premiere at Warners' Theatre in New York City. It was the *first* feature-length talkie (and first musical), [The Jazz Singer \(1927\)](#), adapted from Samson Raphaelson's successful 1925-26 musical stage play (that starred George Jessel in the Broadway role). It was also the most expensive film in the studio's history, at a budget of about \$500,000. Here was a revolutionary film that was mostly silent - with only about 350 'spontaneously spoken' words, but with six songs (in the film's partly-synchronized musical soundtrack). The film was about an aspiring Jewish cantor's son who wanted to become a jazz singer rather than a cantor in the synagogue.

The sound era was officially inaugurated when audiences saw Russian-born American vaudeville star Al Jolson, and first heard him improvise a song's introduction: "Wait a minute! Wait a minute! You ain't heard nothin' yet," after the film's first musical interlude - a song called *Dirty Hands, Dirty Face*. Jolson proved his boast by continuing to sing *Toot, Toot, Tootsie*. They were further astonished by his talking to his mother (Eugenie Besserer) in an extemporaneous way after singing *Blue Skies*, and the film's final song *Mammy*. Jolson was chosen for the role (after it was turned down by Eddie Cantor) since he had already performed three songs in Warners' experimental short film **April Showers (1926)**, and because he was, in real-life, a cantor's son who had first sung in a synagogue as a child.

The other major film studios (Paramount, Loew's, First National and UA) realized the expensive and challenging ramifications of the sound revolution that was dawning, and that talkie films would be the wave of the future. In May 1928, to avoid an inevitable patent war, they signed an agreement with Western Electric to analyze the competing sound systems within the next year and jointly choose a single, standardized sound system.

### **End of the Silents - Upheavals in the Film Industry with the Early Talkies:**

As anticipated, the arrival of sound created great upheaval in the history of the motion picture industry, (as exemplified in the film [Singin' in the Rain \(1954\)](#)). Film studios were confronted with many problems related to the coming of sound, including restricted markets for English-language talkies. Many Hollywood actors/actresses lacked good voices and stage experience, and their marketability decreased. Technically, camera movements were restricted, and noisy, bulky movie cameras had to be housed in clumsy, huge sound-insulated booths with blimps (sound-proof covers). Artistically, acting suffered as studios attempted to record live dialogue, because stationary or hidden microphones (in either their costumes or other stage props) impeded the movement of actors. Some of the earliest talkies were primitive, self-conscious, crudely-made productions with an immobile microphone - designed to capitalize on the novelty of sound.

Silent film studios became obsolescent, and new investments had to be made for expensive new equipment, technological innovations, and sound-proofed stages. Cameras were mounted on moveable, squeak-proofed dollies, and microphones were hung from booms that could be held above the action (outside of the camera's view). Lubitsch's *first* sound film **The Love Parade (1929)** (with Jeanette MacDonald's debut appearance), exhibited the director's creative adaptation to the requirements of sound film, and was one of the first backstage musicals with musical numbers that were integral to the plot. Smoothly directed, Lubitsch avoided making it stage-bound and over-acted like many of the early talkies. And Rouben Mamoulian's first film **Applause (1929)** did creative and revolutionary things with recorded sound, such as overlapping soundtracks, and using sounds as cues or signals.

Films that began production as silents were quickly transformed into sound films. All of the studios were forced to follow suit. By 1930, the silent movie had practically disappeared, and by the mid 1930s, film industry studios had become sound-film factories. In 1927, only 400 US theatres were wired for sound, but by the end of the decade, over 40% of the country's movie theatres had sound systems installed.

Many stars of the silent era with heavy accents and disagreeable voices saw their careers shattered (e.g., Polish-accented Pola Negri, Emil Jannings, Ramon Novarro, Clara Bow, Vilma Banky, Colleen Moore, Rod La Rocque, Gilbert Roland, Nita Naldi, Renee Adoree, Blanche Sweet, Agnes Ayres, and John

Gilbert), while others like Joan Crawford, Paul Muni, Greta Garbo, Ronald Colman, Lon Chaney, Richard Barthelmess and Gloria Swanson survived the transition - but elocution lessons from diction coaches became a necessity for some. Other silent stars, such as Mary Pickford, failed to make the transition to talkies and retired in the 30s. Many new film stars and directors that had to be imported from Broadway, would become familiar Hollywood names in the 1930s.



### The Use of Color:

Another technological advance, in addition to sound, was the use of color. In the earliest years of the industry, hand-tinting/painting had been tried, but it was largely impractical, laborious, and unrealistic looking. Another process called *Kinemacolor* used a movie camera and projector that both exposed and projected black and white film through alternating red and green filters. In 1915, the **Technicolor Motion Picture Corporation** was founded by Herbert Kalmus, Daniel Comstock, and Burton Westcott to develop a more advanced system to colorize motion pictures. The company's *first* color process was a two color (red and green) additive system that used two color negatives pasted or printed together. The *first* two-color Technicolor production was **The Gulf Between (1917)**, and the *first* commercial, two-color Technicolor feature film made was the six-reel **The Toll of the Sea (1922)**, also noted as the first to use a subtractive two-color process. The *first* feature-length picture using this same innovative process was **The Black Pirate (1926)** with Douglas Fairbanks, Sr.

By 1932, what began as a two-color system in the mid- and late 1910s and 1920s evolved into a much richer and vibrant three-color process by Technicolor. Disney's *first* Technicolor cartoon, **Flowers and Trees**, won Disney his first Oscar for Best Short Film-Cartoon of 1931-32. The *first* three-strip, regular exposure Technicolor film was RKO's and Rouben Mamoulian's **Becky Sharp (1935)** - the *first* feature-length, three-strip Technicolor production.

### Many Other "Firsts":

The *first* original film musical and the first musical/sound film to win the "Best Picture" Academy Award was MGM's **The Broadway Melody (1929)** starring Charles King, Anita Page, and Bessie Love. it was also MGM's *first* full-length musical feature (in a long succession of distinguished musicals) and the *first* widely-distributed sound feature. MGM quickly followed up with the musical revue **Hollywood Revue of 1929 (1929)**, advertising it as having all of MGM's silent-film stars (Lionel Barrymore, Joan Crawford, Buster Keaton, John Gilbert, Marion Davies, Bessie Love, Norma Shearer, Marie Dressler, and more) now "talking and singing." The *first* all-color sound musical was Warners' and director Alan Crosland's backstage musical **On With the Show (1929)**.

The *first* major, feature-length Hollywood sound film with an all-black cast was King Vidor's first talkie - MGM's **Hallelujah (1929)**, but it was initially shot as a silent. It was the *first* film with a dubbed, asynchronous soundtrack added *later* in the studio - a technological, post-production advancement. In 1928, the *first* film-related hit record was Al Jolson's *Sonny Boy*, sung three times in Jolson's second feature film, the part-talkie, part-silent high-grossing tearjerker **The Singing Fool (1928)**.

The *first* all-talking (or all-dialogue) picture was a gangster film - Warners' experimental entry with sound and dialogue was director Brian Foy's **Lights of New York (1928)**. Nonetheless, it had 24 transitional titles. [All ten of 1928's 'all-talking' films were made at Warners.] The *first* all-talkie picture in Great Britain, **Blackmail (1929)**, was made by British director Alfred Hitchcock. The film was originally released as a silent film, but the studio pressured Hitchcock into adding dialogue sequences (with innovative post-synchronization techniques) for a talkie version. The suspenseful film was advertised by posters: "See & Hear It - Our mother tongue as it should be - SPOKEN! 100% Talkie. 100% Entertainment. Hold everything till you've heard this one!"

The *first* speaking cartoon with synchronized sound was Walt Disney's (and lead animator Ub Iwerks') **Steamboat Willie (1928)**, debuting the cute character of Mickey Mouse. In 1929, Disney started his *Silly*

*Symphony* animated cartoon series, *first* with the memorable **The Skeleton Dance (1929)**. In the same year, the *first* synchronized talking animated short/cartoon (as opposed to a cartoon with a soundtrack), **Bosco The TalkInk Kid (1929)**, was produced by animators Hugh Harman and Rudolf Ising (Harman also created the enduring *Merrie Melodies* and *Looney Tunes* cartoon series).

### **Influential Organization Formed: The MPPDA**

In 1922, the Hollywood studios formed the **Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA)** - a trade organization to lobby politicians, self-regulate the industry, and to counter negative publicity from a rash of scandals (e.g., the infamous Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle rape/murder case in 1921, and Mabel Normand's three criminal cases - one involving the murder of lover-millionaire William Desmond Taylor in 1922), and other mysterious events (the drug overdose of morphine-addicted silent film actor Wallace Reid in January, 1923, and the death of movie producer-director Thomas Ince onboard newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst's yacht *The Oneida* in November, 1924). Their main purpose was to shape the industry's public image, and to settle issues or common problems.

(Conservative Will H. Hays, the former Postmaster General of the US, became the head of the MPPDA and later set up the Hays Production Code in March, 1930 to monitor acceptable behavior and morals in films.)

### **The Beginning of the Academy Awards:**

The non-profit organization, the **Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS)** was founded in 1927 with Douglas Fairbanks as president, to recognize and reward excellence within the film industry. The AMPAS organization established the Academy Awards in the late 1920s and first announced them in February 1929, and then distributed them in mid-May of 1929 for films opening between August-1927 and late July-1928.

In the first year of the Academy Awards' presentations, separate awards (not known as Oscar quite yet) were given for Best Production (now termed Best Picture). There were two "Best Picture" winners: the financially successful anti-war film, William A. Wellman's **Wings (1927)** for Best Production and **[Sunrise \(1927\)](#)** for Best Unique and Artistic Picture (a category that was immediately dropped). **Wings (1927)**, coming at the end of a cycle of films about WWI, featured exciting aerial combat sequences and starred Clara Bow and a young actor named Gary Cooper. These films were the *only* silent films ever to win the Academy Award for 'Best Picture'. **[The Jazz Singer \(1927\)](#)**, declared ineligible for the Best Picture award, was given a special award for revolutionizing the industry.