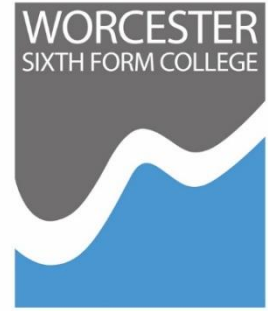


A-Level Film Studies

Summer Study Task



Task:

Please watch of the below source and ready the document that follows about the Studio system and the Golden Age of Hollywood.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6KfBNrHU_SY

FACTFILE: GCE AS LEVEL MOVING IMAGE ARTS

THE HOLLYWOOD STUDIO SYSTEM



The Hollywood Studio System

Learning Outcomes

Students should be able to:

- demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the industrial model of Hollywood film-making, its origins, early history and contemporary relevance;
- explain the link between the studio system and the development of the Classical Hollywood Style;
- discuss the following features of the studio system:
 - vertical integration of production, distribution and exhibition;
 - the assembly line production model of different craft departments working within the conventions of the continuity style;
 - the role of genre-based filmmaking in the assembly line production model;
 - the differentiation of genres through separate codes and conventions;
 - the role of the director, producer and writer on a studio picture and the constraints on individual expression;
 - the individual house style and personality of each major studio.



Course Content

Early History of the Studio System and Vertical Integration

The Lumiere brothers are credited with the birth of cinema but Hollywood turned it into an industry through **vertical integration** and the **production line model**.

Vertical integration, within the film industry, relates to a type of industrial model where one company owns all the means of production, distribution and exhibition and therefore controls all stages of the film process.

This system of vertical integration began in 1917 when Adolph Zukor acquired Paramount, then a distribution company, and allied it with his own production company. Zukor recognised the need to combine production and distribution. During the early years of cinema, demand for films was increasing rapidly. There were a large number of film theatres, which forced film production and distribution to become much more streamlined in order to meet this demand. By 1922 Zukor was also buying up film theatres, which meant Paramount's films were further guaranteed an audience.

During this period between 1913 and 1929, four other companies became vertically integrated and established themselves as rivals to Paramount. Collectively, all five studio companies became known as the '**Big Five**':

- Paramount;
- Warner Brothers;
- RKO;
- MGM; and
- Fox.

These companies were joined by three smaller companies, who were not yet fully integrated and became known as '**The Little Three**':

- Columbia;
- United Artists; and
- Universal.

These eight companies had full financial control, also known as 'monopoly', over the film industry during the 1920's. There were huge profits to be made but also huge costs, particularly with the arrival of sound in 1927. This meant that creative and financial decisions went hand in hand.

This became known as the **studio system** and was based in Hollywood, California, where land was cheap and the weather was good, presenting ideal conditions for filming.

The Wall Street Crash of 1929 affected many of the studios. The 1930's was to become a period of economic depression. Audiences wanted value for money so the **double bill** became the norm, which meant two films would be shown back-to-back. This practice led to the rise of '**B**' **movies** – which were the low-budget films shown before the main feature.

Despite financial difficulties, the major studios survived and still controlled 95% of all films produced during the years 1930-1948, which became known as **Hollywood's Golden Age**.

More than six hundred films a year were produced during this period.

In 1946, 90 million people went to the movies every week in the USA and the industry made \$121 million profit. However in 1948 this had fallen to \$48 million when the Supreme Court put an end to the major studios' monopoly. They no longer had control over exhibition which made up two thirds of their business. This opened the industry up to **independent production companies** and signaled

the end of vertical integration and the beginning of the end of the studio system, which was soon under threat from television.

Assembly Line Production Model

Film studios were very like industry **assembly lines** with strict divisions of labour and hierarchies of power. Directors, actors and technicians were all contracted to a studio for seven years. Actors could be loaned out to other studios. Stars were pivotal to the success of a studio and were important to the development of a studio's brand or marketing.

This assembly line approach meant that the films were often formulaic and belonged to distinctive **genres**, with their own stylistic conventions, developed during this time. The major studios also developed their own individual **house style** and specialisms.

The film industry replicated the craft production techniques of the theatre, which worked in small teams such as costume, hair, make-up, set design. But the demand for film was so great that it soon developed on an industrial scale.

Thomas H. Ince, producer, director and actor, is credited with creating the first **assembly line model** and developing systems to streamline production by ensuring the entire range of filmmaking activities could be integrated within one large space including sound stages, production offices, prop houses and sets. It also meant departments could work on more than one film at any one time.

The production process began with the script and locations, followed by sets and filming and finally processing, editing and sound. The product would move from department to department, just as if it were on an assembly line, with a clear division of labour.

The script would often be divided into blocks which could be filmed out of order so scenes set in a particular location or with a particular character could all be filmed at once and then edited together later. The same sets and props could also be used by different productions, streamlining production and increasing the number of films produced.

Genre

Genre is a way of organizing and creating films according to a type or category and is designed

to shape and respond to audiences' expectations. During 1929 and the onset of the Great Depression, audiences began to demand more for their money and cinemas began screening the **double bill**, i.e. showing two films back to back. This caused an increased demand for films and the second feature (actually shown first) was usually low budget and became known as the **B movie**. These films were made quickly to a formula with clearly defined codes and conventions as part of their production and distribution processes. B movies were often produced by smaller companies who specialised in genre-based filmmaking - these were often referred to as **Poverty Row** studios because of their low-budget filmmaking. The use of the same sets, costumes and actors again helped streamline this low budget production line model. Westerns were one of the most popular film genres of the time. Genre-based filmmaking was not just confined to B movies, however. The major studios also specialised in particular genres in their main features. Warner Brothers were known for producing gangster films which were cheaper to make than the musicals produced by MGM, for example.

Genre Codes and Conventions

Genre films, through repetition and variation, tell familiar stories and are useful for both producers and audiences. They enable producers to reduce the risks involved in filmmaking and reproduce formulas that work. Films can be produced quickly and audiences can understand them just as quickly; popular examples include Horror, Comedy and Romance. There are also genre hybrids or sub-genres which combine genres such as action/adventure or science fiction/fantasy films.

All genres have codes and conventions or rules by which they are governed:

- A genre film's narrative will most likely follow in an ordered sequence of events with repetitions and variations on a few basic plots;
- A genre film may deal with particular themes;
- A genre film may feature specific technical conventions;
- A genre film may include certain character types;
- A genre film may feature particular locations and more particularly use specific elements of mise-en-scène such as props, costumes; hair, make-up and body language;
- Directors and actors may be associated with a particular genre, which reinforces its appeal;
- The historical and social context may also be significant in understanding a particular genre.

Some genres may also share certain codes and conventions. Western and war films can share similar narrative structures and similar character types but the iconography is very different.

The Western was one of the most popular genres during Hollywood's Golden Age. It dealt with the conquest of the West and expansionism. The main protagonist is usually a cowboy, gunslinger or bounty hunter and conflicts arise through encountering outlaws or Native Americans. Desert landscapes; Stetsons and guns are clear characteristics of the genre. Duels or shootouts frequently occur at key turning points in the narrative.

Directors and Producers

In the studio era directors, writers and producers were employees who were under contract to a particular studio for up to seven years at a time. They had to work under the strict parameters of a studio's style and within the codes and conventions of the dominant film genres of the time. Scripts could be written collaboratively and therefore writers were sometimes not credited for work they had done. The volume of films produced meant that these three key creative roles were as much part of the assembly line model as any other crew member. Many films made during this time can therefore be seen to lack any sense of unique or individual style. Some directors, producers and writers struggled under this system and found it repressive while others, such as John Ford, flourished and helped to creatively define the emerging genres and their conventions. Others again, found strength from the creative relationships they established within the system, such as director Billy Wilder and writer I.A.L. Diamond, who collaborated on a number of films together.

Studio House Styles

Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer or **MGM** was set up in 1924 after the merger of three smaller companies, Metro, Goldwyn and Mayer. It was the largest of the five major studios and was known for big budget spectacles with expensive sets, bold colours and high key lighting with successes such as *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939) serving as a good example of MGM's house style. They invested a great deal in pre-production, which meant scripts were often collaborative. Star directors were less important at MGM but stars were. MGM had a strong stable of female stars including Judy Garland and Joan Crawford. They also had one of

the major box office draws in Clark Gable.

Warner Brothers was set up in 1923 by the four Warner Brothers. It was the first studio to produce a talking picture with *The Jazz Singer* in 1927. This investment was intended to improve its status amongst the Big Five. It was the company least affected by the Wall Street Crash due to careful planning by its Head of Production Darryl Zanuck, later owner of Twentieth Century Fox. The studio's signature was low-budget gangster films with cheap sets and a low-key lighting style which proved popular with working class audiences. Stars included Edward G. Robinson and James Cagney in films such as *Little Caesar* (1931) and *White Heat* (1949). With strict adherence to budgets and shooting schedules, it became an incredibly efficient production model.

Paramount is the oldest of the Hollywood majors and the first to be integrated in 1917 when Adolph Zukor brought production and distribution together. Zukor recognised the value of stars early on and consequently Paramount had a strong stable during the silent era, which included Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks and Gloria Swanson. It also had one of the strongest stable of directors during this time with D.W. Griffith, Cecil B de Mille and Eric Von Stroheim.

It was known for producing comedies, with stars such as Fatty Arbuckle and directors such as Mack Sennett and later the Road Movies with Bob Hope and Bing Crosby; as well as biblical epics such as *The Ten Commandments* (Cecil B. de Mille, 1923) later remade in 1956.

Paramount was the second largest of the Big Five but owned the largest number of film theatres and used to produce more films than any of the other major studios. Unlike the others it was not rigidly controlled by a mogul.

Fox was established in 1913 by William Fox and integrated by 1915. Fox was ambitious but by 1931 the company was in financial difficulties and William Fox was forced out. In 1935 it merged with a smaller production company, Twentieth Century, led by Schenk and Darryl Zanuck (formerly Head of Production at Warner Brothers) and became known as **Twentieth Century Fox**, the third largest of the five majors during the Golden Age.

Fox was known for its musicals and a growing stable of stars, which included Shirley Temple followed by Tyrone Power, Carmen Miranda and Betty Grable in the thirties to Marlon Brando and Henry Fonda in the fifties. Its directors included John Ford and Elia Kazan.

After World War II it expanded its repertoire to include westerns and crime films as well as musicals. It also continued to invest in new technologies being the first production company to use cinemascope with *The Robe* (Henry Koster, 1953).

RKO was established in 1928 during the advent of sound. It was a readymade vertically integrated company and was known for Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers musicals. It also made more B movies than the other major studios; however it also enjoyed some notable successes including *King Kong* (1933) and *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1944).

References

Books

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Hayward, S. (1996). *Key Concepts in Cinema Studies*. London: Routledge, pp. 45–49 & 354–367.

