

FIL 1031 - History of Film I

UNIT ONE:

OPTICAL PRINCIPLES

1. Persistence of vision & Phenomenal Identity (Phi phenomenon).

Allow us to see a succession of static images as a single unbroken movement and permit the illusion of continuous motion upon which cinematography is based.

The frames of a strip of film are a series of individual still photographs which the motion-picture camera, as perfected by the Edison Laboratories in 1892 and as it exists today, imprints a single frame at a time - Projected at similar speed, creates the illusion of movement.

Silent 16-18fps

Sound film 24fps

2. Motion Pictures

Hannibal Goodwin - Celluloid film rolls. The introduction of a plastic recording medium (durable and flexible - put in to mass distribution by George Eastman) coupled with technical breakthroughs by Eadweard Muybridge and E. J. Marey enabled Edison to invent the Kinetograph, the first true motion-picture camera.

Edison had no interest in cinematography himself. Wished to provide visual accompaniment for his successful phonograph.

In 1889, he assigned William Kennedy Laurie Dickson to help him develop a motion-picture camera for that purpose. (Shows that motion pictures were never divorced from the idea of recording sound).

Dickson invented the *Kinetograph* (using already existing principles and techniques from others).

Edison not interested in projection of film for masses. Thought future of motion pictures lay in individual viewing (through a small viewing machine). Dickson invented the *Kinetoscope*.

Andrew Holland opened first Kinetoscope parlor in a converted shoe store in New York City (1894).

Dickson constructed the first motion picture studio in 1893. Called the Black Maria (refers to paddy wagon). Tar paper strips, single room allowing for sun light to be directed in.

First films - vaudeville turns, slapstick - Standard theatrical routines whose only requisite content is motion. Continuous, unedited film, the camera static (stationary - technical limitations).

Auguste and Louis Lumiere perfected a portable camera (actually projector as well) known as the *Cinematographe*.

In 1895 they projected their first film to a private audience in Paris (Mass viewing rather than individually like Edison's stuff).

Lumiere films often referred to as the beginning of Documentary film. (*actualities* - documentary views).

Just like Edison, films essentially photographed whatever was placed in front of the camera. Static with action continuous from beginning to end. Editing "reality" was unthinkable it seemed.

Two machines upon which the cinema is founded had been perfected at last (beginnings 1872 with "series photography" by Muybridge).

Early audiences saw individual scenes as self-contained and did not infer meaning from one scene to the next.

The shift in viewing films as "animated photographs" to films as continuous narratives (stories) began around the turn of the century.

There was no notion early in the development of the cinema that the camera might be used to tell a story - i.e. to create a narrative reality rather than simply record some real or staged event which occurred before its lens.

3. THE EVOLUTION OF NARRATIVE: GEORGE MELIES

George Melies a professional magician recognized the vast illusionist possibilities of the "living pictures".

Some film historians believe he discovered stop-motion photography, others argue that he had seen an example of stop-motion in an Edison film (The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, 1895). One thing is certain - Melies understood that film could manipulate time and space. Film could create its own reality.

He conceived his films in terms of dramatic scenes played out from beginning to end rather than in terms of shots.

His scenes are composed of single shots from a motion-less camera from a fixed point of view (that of a theater spectator) at eye level. The actors move across the frame from left to right and right to left as if they were on a stage.

Melies was nevertheless the cinema's first narrative artist (Some believe entertain films developed from Melies works)

He developed film narrative devices such as the fade in, fade-out, dissolve, and of course, stop-motion photography.

Trip to the Moon (1902) most influential film. Big success. Film very much resembles a photographed stage play (except for some optical effects).

He did however point the cinema on its way to becoming an essentially narrative rather than documentary medium.

4. EDWIN S. PORTER: DEVELOPING A CONCEPT OF CONTINUITY EDITING

Edwin S. Porter - Develop more sophisticated narrative style.

The Great Train Robbery (1903). Developed parallel action (a basic structural element of cinematic narrative) Telling a story in "continuity form". Emphasis on editing and effect on story telling. Cross-cutting between shots - parallel actions occurring simultaneously (NOTE: The video below is the final "shot" from the film, which actually, scared audiences of the time. A gunslinger shooting directly at them, point blank).

Motion added the dimension of time and the major problem for early filmmakers would soon become the establishment of linear continuity from one shot to the next.

Modern continuity editing, on which the classical Hollywood system is based, began when filmmakers discovered that action could be made to seem continuous from shot to shot, and, conversely, that two or more shots could be made to express a single unit of meaning.

Although The Great Train Robbery contains no intercutting within scenes, Porter cut between his scenes without dissolving or fading and most important without playing them out to the end.

Porter discovered that filmmakers could cut away from one scene before it was dramatically or logically complete and simultaneously cut into another after it had already begun.

Basic unit of cinematic meaning - not the scene as in Melies, not the continuous unedited film strip as early Edison and the Lumiere's, but the shot (of which Griffith would later

demonstrate, there were many virtually limitless number within any given scene).

Camera placement was fresh and dynamic. Panning shots.

Porter hit upon the absolutely essential fact that cinematic narrative depends not upon the arrangement of objects or actors within a scene (as does the theatre and still photography), but upon the arrangement of shots in relation to one another.

Audiences didn't understand any of this, but they loved Porter's dramatic excitement generated by Porter's editing.

Porter's film showed people with money that film was a money-making proposition. Directly instrumental in the spread of permanent movie theaters (Nickelodeons - "nickel theatre") across the country. Beginnings of realistic narrative (compared with Melies "fantasy").

5. INTERNATIONAL EXPANSION

Motion pictures rose from the status of a risky commercial venture to that of a permanent and full scale, if not yet major and respectable industry.

There was none of the intellectual excitement and creative ferment which might be expected with the birth of an art form - because no one was yet equipped to acknowledge that birth. Between 1903-1912 the industry's level of artistic and technical competence scarcely ever rose above the marginally adequate (until, perhaps, D.W. Griffith).

Movements against film - *Organized religion and political right.*

Movies were a corrupter of youth and a threat to public morality. (only the beginning as we'll see - 1920s Hays etc.) *Movies threatened revenues of church, saloons, vaudeville theaters - abolishment of films based on economics, not ideologies.*

MPPC (Motion Picture Patent Company) - "The Trust." Control over every segment of the motion picture industry through issuing licenses and assessing royalties therefrom. Monopolistic in practice and intent (Thomas A. Edison in conjunction with George Eastman, who produced celluloid film stock, in particular).

The Advent of the Feature Film

Slowly the *multiple-reel film* became to gain in popularity over the one or two reels. Quo Vadis (1913 - Italian film production, NOT an American/Western production) was a great success. First film shown exclusively in *first-class legitimate theaters* (the beginning of "Dream Palaces") rather than nickelodeons. Attracted a more prosperous and sophisticated audience. Features came into their own.

Exhibitors quickly learned that features could command higher admission prices and longer runs; single packages were also cheaper and easier to advertise than programs of multiple titles.

The feature film made motion pictures respectable for the middle class by providing a format similar to that of the *legitimate theatre*.

The feature opened up the possibilities of more complicated narratives and offered filmmakers a form that begged for serious artistic endeavor.

Longer films had to be made more slowly, with larger budgets and greater care than one and two reels, and once the feature was popularly accepted, high technical standards and elaborate production values became a new focus of competition within the industry.

Quality theaters (in which to show feature films) brought the nickelodeon era to an end and issued in the Hollywood studio system.

The Star System

Drawing power of star's characters (Most popular early performers were known to audiences only by their film names - "Little Mary" -Mary Pickford, etc.) Look at rise of system with Florence Lawrence the "Biograph Girl". Beginnings of the star system. How a "star" could influence popularity of a film.

Other commercial enterprises based on films began to come into being - e.g. film magazines, publicity gimmicks, photographs of the stars, posters, postcards, fan magazines. Stardom began to acquire godlike dimensions.

Hollywood

Weather, various scenery, and other qualities (such as access to acting talent). Los Angeles was a professional theatre center, had the existence of a low tax base, and the presence of cheap and plentiful labor and land. The rise of back lots.

Rise of Studios (e.g., Paramount, Fox, MGM, Warner Brothers, Columbia Pictures) and Studio Chiefs (Moguls).

Earlier companies that had continued to embrace the shorts were destroyed - Biograph and Edison's Company included.

Rise of Hollywood to International Dominance

Hollywood's rise to power was assured by the First World War, which temporarily eliminated the European competition (mainly French and Italian) and gave America dominion over the world film market for some time.

When war broke out on the Continent in 1914, the European industries were virtually shut down since the same chemicals used in the production of celluloid were needed for war materials. The American cinema prospered throughout the war - unchallenged. Over the period of the war, America exercised complete control over the international market and

set up a formidable worldwide distribution system. The world at large saw nothing but American films if it saw films at all.

World War I placed the American film industry in a position of undisputed economic and artistic leadership - a position it would maintain until the coming of sound and in some respects forever after.

D.W. GRIFFITH AND THE CONSUMMATION OF NARRATIVE FORM

Griffith (1875-1948) established the narrative language of the cinema as we know it today and turned an aesthetically inconsequential medium of entertainment into a fully articulated art form.

Paradox of the man - Genius, yet, racial bigot (naive southern romantic with pretensions to high literary culture - also, overly sentimental and melodramatic).

Working at Biograph - Company founded in 1895. W.K.L. Dickson, inventor of the Kinetograph etc. was one of founders. With G.W. "Billy" Bitzer, Griffith directed over 450 short films (one or two reels). Experimenting with narrative techniques that he would later utilize to their fullest on his greatest films (The Birth of a Nation, Intolerance, etc.).

Griffith was probably unaware that he was innovative. His various approaches to the cinematic narrative were essentially problem-solving concepts. His methods of proceeding was basically intuitive.

Essential Contributions of Griffith:

In the development of cinematic narrative - Interframe structure. Going from long shot, medium shot, close-up to enhance the emotional involvement of viewers. Editing shots of differing length together to intensify narrative.

The immense potential for the close-up to convey symbolic and psychological value to viewers.

As Griffith saw it, films were narratives, or stories, which were told through the arrangement not of words, but of moving photographic images.

Using parallel editing to heighten dramatic impact (psychology or inner thinkings of characters - not just for chases). Crosscutting or intercutting shots for a dramatic climax. The tale and the telling of the tale (i.e. cinematic narrative technique) became the vehicles for one another.

Griffith discovered that the length of time a shot remained on the screen could create significant psychological tension in the audience - that the shorter the length of time a shot was held on the screen, the greater the tension it was capable of inducing.

The visual tempo of the cutting for simultaneous action parallels, the dramatic tempo of the action photographed, so that content is perfectly embodied in form.

Alternating between shots of varying spatial length - alternation of shots of varying temporal (time) lengths, creating the basis of montage (discussed later)

Intra-frame Narrative - Griffith made the content of his films more serious. Griffith was attempting to dignify the medium of motion pictures. Griffith was the first great actor's director.

Showed that lighting could be a significant aesthetics factor for a motion picture. Balance of light and shadow (Rembrandt lighting).

Camera movement - importance of camera movement and placement to the dramatic expressiveness of film. (Intra-frame - cinematic structure - composition within a frame). Tracking shot - in which the camera and thus the audience actively participates in the action by moving with it.

Camera angle - could have a metaphorical (associative meaning). Low angle - strong character, high angle - weak character etc.

With these additions to film language, the whole notion of the frame acting as some sort of stage arch began to break down. By the time of Birth of a Nation (1915), it had nearly disappeared.

He perfected the fade, dissolve. Developed the flashback, the iris shot, the mask, the split screen, and soft focus.

Griffith's greatest attribute as a filmmaker was his compulsion to take everything about the cinema seriously. Many of his so called "discoveries" were not discoveries at all but simply the results of bestowing a degree of care on operations which earlier directors had performed in a slapdash manner.

Birth of a Nation (1915)

Controversy. Racial overtones, Ku Klux Klan etc.

Enormous financial success. Perhaps pushed taste of films to the emotional, sensational, melodramatic as opposed to the rational, philosophical.

First film to be acclaimed a work of art while simultaneously reviled as a pernicious distortion of the truth.

Intolerance (1916)

Big bomb. Too convoluted for audiences (in structure anyway).

Too much cross-cutting, parallel action. Too many separate spatial dimensions and time frames.

Last two commercial successes:

Broken Blossoms (1919)

Way Down East (1920) - which we'll view in class

The Struggle (1931) Last film. Bomb.

Died 1948.