

The Studio System

Sources: Cinematography Outlines By Jim Soto
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THE FIVE MAJORS

Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM)

- o established in 1924 from parent company Loew's Inc
- o leader in stars and glamour
- o Movies: *Gone with the Wind* and *The Wizard of Oz* (both 1939)
- o Actors: Judy Garland, Spencer Tracey

Metro Goldwyn Mayer was the biggest and most prolific of the Hollywood studios in the 30s. At one point it was releasing an unbelievable average of 1 feature per week. Its parent company, Loew's, provided the largest exhibition and distribution network in the world. There was no film or star too big for MGM.

The studio was run by Louis B. Mayer, who was known to be a ruthless businessman with little concern for art. Despite this, MGM produced some of the most dazzling films of the era, including *Grand Hotel* (1932), *Gone with the Wind* (1939), and *The Wizard of Oz*.

The force behind *Gone with the Wind* was the famous Hollywood producer, David O. Selznick, who built his own production company. Based on his past successes, including *A Tale of Two Cities* (1935) and *A Star Is Born* (1937), he was contracted by the major studios, who guaranteed the finances of his films.

Selznick was determined to film the greatest epic ever seen and he started generating a sensation by paying Margaret Mitchell \$50,000 for the film rights for her first novel, *Gone With the Wind*. This was unheard of amount at this time, but it paid off as a good advertising investment, as the book had sold over 1.5 million copies at the time the film's release.

Selznick also spent \$100,000 doing screen tests to find the perfect Scarlett O'Hara

Recipe for an Epic:

All-star cast

Over 50 speaking roles and 2400 extras

Film in three-strip Technicolor

Shoot and edit a final cut that runs close to four hours in length. To do this half a million feet of film was actually shot (approximately 85 hours of raw footage).

Elaborate costumes: Over 5000 items designed for wardrobe

Enormous sets: 90 sets built (the 'City of Atlanta' set alone having over 50 buildings).

For the famous "Burning of Atlanta" scene, the crew actually burned down a bunch of old sets on the studio backlot. The fire was so intense that the local fire department got calls reporting that MGM was burning down. This single scene cost \$25,000 to film.

The Wizard of Oz: Trouble in Paradise

There was a great deal of fighting between the studio heads and the people involved in the making of *The Wizard of Oz*. A total of four directors were involved. The first was Richard Thorpe (lasted two weeks) and then George Zukor (lasted two or three days). Victor Fleming (the credited director) was involved for four months, but was hired away by David O. Selznick to direct *Gone with the Wind*. King Vidor was brought in to finish the production, which took him ten days. This consisted mostly of completing the film's opening and closing sepia scenes that take place on the farm in Kansas.

Even with the different directors, the film is a stunning piece of art, with wonderful scenes that include flying monkeys, hundreds of dancing munchkins, the Emerald City and the famous Yellow Brick Road.

- established in 1924, by merger of Loew's, Inc. theater chain with three production companies (Metro Pictures/Goldwyn Pictures/Louis B. Mayer Productions)
- leader in stars, glamour, spectacle: consider *Gone with the Wind* and *Wizard of Oz*, both 1939
- high pre-production investment (i.e., numerous writers and editors), and Irving Thalberg's tight rein on production through 1936
- a "galaxy of stars": Joan Crawford, Greta Garbo, Judy Garland, Greer Garson, Jean Harlow, Norma Shearer; Mickey Rooney, Spencer Tracey, Clark Gable
- effects of Depression: \$15m profit in 1930, \$4.3m in 1933. Never lost money.
- purchased by Kirk Kerkorian, 1969; later MGM-UA; then briefly belonged to Turner, who kept the pre-1986 film library when he sold it back (hence Turner Classic Movies, which also owns UA and pre-1950 Warners films); owned by French bank Credit Lyonnais 1991-92; back to Kerkorian; Sony in 2004; bankruptcy in 2010; now part of MGM Holdings Inc.

Paramount

Established as Distribution company in 1914; acquired by Zukor in 1917, who merges it with his production company

First “vertically integrated” company

Actors: Marlene Dietrich, Mary Pickford, Bing Crosby

Paramount - Bible Epics and European Glamour

Many of the directors and technicians in the early days of Paramount were Austrian and German exiles.

Because of this the studio’s films had a “European look,” being full of dramatic lighting and elaborate set designs.

One of Paramount’s main directors was Cecil B. DeMille, who, along with D. W. Griffith, invented the Biblical Epic. If you close your eyes and try to imagine different stories from the Bible or from ancient mythology, you will probably picture the films of DeMille.

Ernst Lubitsch and the Comedy of Manners

In contrast to the epics of DeMille, Paramount also had the German director Ernst Lubitsch under contract, who directed films that featured the glamorous lives of the “jet set.” A recurring theme in classical Hollywood film is the lifestyles of the idle rich. Endless films featured New York playboys and dancing girls sipping champagne and dancing the night away in elaborate nightclubs and dark speakeasies. The fact that these films continued to be successful at the box-office during prohibition and at the very height of the worst depression in the United States speaks volumes to idea that for most of its audience Hollywood functioned as a great fantasy factory.

- established as a distribution company in 1914, it was acquired by Adolph Zukor in 1917, who merged it with his production company, Famous Players-Lasky Corp., and then started buying theatres, making it the first fully vertically-integrated company
- silent era stars: Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, Gloria Swanson, William S. Hart, Fatty Arbuckle
- directors: Cecil B. DeMille, Erich von Stroheim, Mack Sennet, D.W. Griffith, Dorothy Arzner (from 1927--one of few women directors in era)
- comedy, light entertainment, occasional epics (like DeMille's Ten Commandments)
- later stars: Mae West, Marlene Dietrich, Hedy Lamarr, Barbara Stanwyck, Marx Bros., Bing Crosby, Bob Hope
- produced 40-50 films annually in studio heyday
- effects of Depression: \$18.4m profit in 1930, \$6.3m in 1931, -\$21m in 1932: receivership in 1933, bankruptcy in 1935
- heavily involved in television in 1960s
- sold off 1929-49 films to MCA in 1958; acquired by Gulf and Western, 1966; acquired by Viacom in 1990s; now part of Viacom/CBS

Fox (later 20th Century Fox)

Established in 1913 by William Fox

Known for musicals and westerns

Actors: Shirley Temple, Marlon Brando, and Marilyn Monroe

William Fox founded Fox Studios in 1914 and began building his empire by buying up chains of movie theatres. This coincided with a production strategy that emphasized big spectacle. Fox had early success with this strategy with such films as *Seventh Heaven* (1926) and *What Price Glory* (1926). Both films were box-office hits, but Fox soon found himself locked into this format, as he needed to continue to gamble with big budgets films to offset production cost and the company's real estate holdings.

William Fox continued in this manner until the stock market crash of 1929 brought about the Great Depression. In 1930 with a national decline in box-office revenue and the studio close to bankruptcy Fox was ousted from the board of directors. Five years later the studio merged with a small independent, 20th Century Pictures, to become 20th Century Fox. Darryl Zanuck, a former producer at Warner Bros, was put in charge of studio production. One of the first things Zanuck did was to secure the contract of one of the most popular stars in Hollywood, the seven-year-old Shirley Temple.

It is not surprising that with the Chase National Bank as a major investor and with Shirley Temple being the studio's primary asset, Zanuck favored "safe" films that often carried strong pro-republican sentiment. A glaring exception to this policy is John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940). It is a stunning indictment of the financial institutions that profited at the expense of poor farmers by foreclosing on mortgages and loans and forcing hundreds of dispossessed families off their land.

- established for exhibition in 1913 by William Fox; producing films by 1915.
- "20th C" after 1935 merger with production company headed in part by Darryl F. Zanuck, former Warners production head who had just left United Artists
- known for musicals; westerns and crime films after 1948; *The Robe* (1953), 1st Cinemascope feature film
- directors: John Ford, Elia Kazan, Joseph Mankiewicz
- stars: Shirley Temple, Will Rodgers, Tyrone Power, Betty Grable, Carmen Miranda, Sonja Henie; in 1940s/50s Henry Fonda, Marlon Brando, Marilyn Monroe, Jane Russell, Gregory Peck
- effects of Depression: \$10m profit in 1930, -\$4m in 1931, -\$7m in 1932; founder Fox forced out in 1931.
- owned by Rupert Murdoch/News Corp since 1985

Warner Brothers

Established in 1924 by Harry, Jack and Albert Warner

1st Sound film – *The Jazz Singer* (1927)

Assembly line production

Warner Bros is best known for its innovations in sound technology. In 1925 Warner partnered with Western Electric to develop a sound system. This involved a massive investment as the company had to reconvert all its theatres.

Two years later, with much fanfare, the studio released *The Jazz Singer*. It was heralded as the first “talking picture” and was a huge international success, eventually grossing 3 million dollars.

The sound was recorded on discs that each had a total playing time equal to one reel of film. Because this form of synchronized sound was rather unreliable, it was soon replaced by sound recorded directly onto film.

The genre that Warner Bros is most associated with is the gangster film. In 1939 the head of production at Warner, Darryl F. Zanuck, announced a series of films whose stories would be drawn from newspaper headlines. This was the inspiration behind both *Little Caesar* (1931) and *The Public Enemy* (1931), and the commercial success of these two films determined studio policy the rest of the decade. Gangster movies made a lot of dough.

Warner Bros is of course also known as the home of Bugs Bunny and the rest of the Looney Tunes characters.

- 1st sound film: *The Jazz Singer* (1927)
- fully integrated only by 1928-30, with acquisition of First National Pictures theatre chain (which had come into being in 1917 to resist Adolph Zukor)
- effects of Depression: \$14.5m profit in 1929, \$7m in 1930, -\$8m in 1931; thanks to “bloodletting” and assembly-line, rationalized, low-budget productions WB did not go bankrupt or become beholden to Wall Street
- 60 films per year in depression, 1930s: gangster films, backstage musicals, social realism
- no “stable” but contact directors and stars: Raoul Walsh, Howard Hawks; Paul Muni, Humphrey Bogart, James Cagney, Edward G. Robinson, Errol Flynn, James Dean, Bette Davis, Ingrid Bergman, Joan Crawford, Barbara Stanwyck, Lauren Bacall
- also heavily into TV in 1960s; later Warner-Seven Arts, then Warner Communications, now part of Time Warner

RKO (Radio-Keith-Orpheum)

Born from a merger of smaller companies in 1928

Unit production – contracting to directors

Films: *Citizen Kane*, *King Kong*, *Bringing Up Baby*

RKO was formed at the beginning of the sound era. Its parent company was RCA (the Radio Corporation of America), which was headed by the tycoon John D. Rockefeller.

RKO was partly responsible for streamlining Hollywood film, by instituting “unit production.” This involved RKO contracting independent producers responsible for making a specific number of films that had a specific style or storyline (e.g. all of RKO’s musicals were made by a single crew on a single sound stage). In this way, different producers were put in charge of different genres.

Citizen Kong

Even with this factory approach, RKO is not really associated with a particular genre. This is partly because the studio kept changing its production policies and did not commit to any one type of film (although it did make a number of Fred Astaire musicals).

The studio is mostly remembered for producing two classic films: *King Kong* (1933) and *Citizen Kane* (1941). It was television that killed RKO. First RCA sold off its interests in the studio to concentrate on development of film’s strongest rival, television (NBC would soon become the company’s new flagship). And then in 1953, after another tycoon, Howard Hughes, took control of RKO, it could no longer compete and sold off all its assets. The studio facilities were brought by Desilu Television Productions.

- n immediate major, born of the 1928 merger of Radio Corporation of America with Keith and Orpheum theatres to exploit its "Photophone" movie sound system
- "unit production" introduced by David O. Selznick (contracting with individual directors for a certain number of films, free of studio interference)
- hence *Citizen Kane* (Welles), *King Kong*, *Bringing Up Baby* (Hawks), *Notorious* (Hitchcock)
- associated with horror films and film noir in its B-movies; after 1940-42, B-movies became the chief product
- effects of Depression: \$3.4m profit in 1930, -\$5.7m in 1931; forced into receivership
- bought by Howard Hughes (1948), then General Tyre and Rubber Company (1955) then Desilu Productions (1957), which was later acquired by Gulf & Western, which merged it with Paramount, now owned by Viacom

THE THREE MINORS

Universal Pictures

- formed 1912 by Carl Laemmle Sr.
- production facility in Universal City in San Fernando Valley, not Hollywood, 1915
- Irving Thalberg among first chiefs of production (before joining MGM)
- stars: Rudolph Valentino, Lon Chaney; later, after mid-40s reorganization, attracted James Stewart, Charlton Heston, Orson Welles, Marlene Deitrich, Janet Leigh by offering percentages of profits in contracts
- Frankenstein, Dracula (both 1931), All Quiet on the Western Front (1930, 1st sound movie on WWI)
- after 1948, thrillers, melodramas, westerns
- effects of Depression: lost its theatres; Laemmle forced out in 1936 after the studio went into receivership
- taken over by Decca Records, 1952; part of MCA after 1962; bought by Matsushita in 1990 for \$6.6 billion; sold to Seagram (1995); sold to Vivendi (France, 2000); sold to GE/NBC, 2004; now part of NBC Universal

United Artists

- breakaway company founded by Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, Charlie Chaplin, D.W. Griffith, distributing their films (most successful with Chaplin's)
- only Chaplin still producing in 1930s; UA turned to distributing features of independent producers like Samuel Goldwyn and David O. Selznick
- only a major after 1948 Paramount case: High Noon (1951), Marty (1955), 1960s James Bond films; three Oscars in a row in 1975-77 (One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest; Rocky; Annie Hall)
- effects of Depression: lost money in 1932, but largely OK after that
- overextended in late 1970s; part of Transamerica since 1967, sold to MGM in 1981(along with pre-1950 Warner film library)

Columbia

- 1930, produced and sold B-movies to "big five"
- 1932, Harry Cohn, one of the original founders, becomes president, with a tight rein
- 1934, It Happened One Night's great success led it to experiment with "A" pictures too; often these were adaptations of novels and stage plays
- no stable, but associations with Frank Capra, Rita Hayworth; after 1948 William Holden, Broderick Crawford, Judy Holliday
- effects of Depression: survived OK in part because it owned no theatres
- first to get into television (Screen Gems, 1950--Dragnet); also backed foreign productions, e.g., Lawrence of Arabia, 1962)
- sold studios, 1972; bought by Coca-Cola, 1982; bought by Sony, 1989