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## Hollywood Cinema and American Modernity in the Jazz Age

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The decade that followed the First World War witnessed considerable social upheavals one of which was the newly established social phenomenon of the cinema. From family recreation to dating rituals the cinema contributed to their 'modernization' often reflecting those changes in the films they produced. Harold Lloyd's *The Freshman* (1925) built on the myths that had sprung up about college life that had been initiated by an expansion in higher education and called up a world of sexual liberation outlined in the jazz age stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald. Ernst Lubitch's comedy/drama *Forbidden Paradise* (1924) depicted a vision of Old World royalty that was both spectacle and satire, confirming its passing. Where Lloyd's comedy was restless and fast Laurel and Hardy's was driven by sense of confusion at the rapid pace of modern life. Destroying machinery, upending the workplace and enraging those who they encountered, the two met the accelerating age with a lethargic resistance. In the 1920s for American audiences and for those outside of its borders from Europe to Latin America, from cinema was the harbinger of the American Century.

At the end of the First World war Europe's economies had been exhausted, the war had destroyed much of the confidence in the old order and throughout the 1920s each country sought to rebuild under clouds of political and social upheaval. The United States' experience was fundamentally different. While the war effort had a high profile in terms of media visibility the effect was in many ways the converse of that of Germany for example. Rather than defeat the country emerged from the war an enormous economic powerhouse. Wages rose steadily from 1917 and continued throughout the 1920s until the Crash of 1929. The social impact of new technologies such as the telephone and the automobile added to a sense of the increasing rhythm of modernization. Cinema culture through the films, the fan magazines, the press and the social space of the cinema theatres developed alongside these phenomena and became a primary, and very public, visual manifestation of modernity.

From 1900 and throughout the war years the American film industry had developed along the lines of the rest of the nation's industrial transformation by incorporating Taylorist 'scientific management' techniques and a variation of Fordist principles of serial manufacturing, which

standardized production practices but still allowed a flexibility among craftsmen and creatives such as scriptwriters, directors and stars/actors. The system allowed for the smooth production of films on a mass production scale. This system, which really began in the mid teens became a mature industry in the 1920s. By the end of the decade there were four major studios, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Paramount, Warner Brothers, Fox, and Radio Keith Orpheum (RKO). All five studios produced a full range of films in studios based in Hollywood. They owned the networks that distributed them throughout the United States and globally. And they held major ownership in the cinema theatre chains that showed them. In addition to these five were the 'little three' Universal, United Artists and Columbia Pictures. These three produced films and had relationships with the five majors to distribute them.

The studio system worked slightly differently with each studio but generally the process was that the studio would decide on the stories they would make and then put them into the 'assembly line' production. This was usually the decision of the producer. The most well known of these was the 'Boy Wonder' producer Irving Thalberg who at age 24 headed up production at MGM. The process at MGM under Thalberg illustrates the general way the studios worked. Thalberg over saw six productions at any one time. He had under him three unit managers who were in charge of two or three films each. Thalberg worked with the scriptwriters and production designers to make creative decisions, appoint directors and then allow his unit managers to produce the film. He would test the films on audiences in the outlying areas of Los Angeles and then recut films based on audience reaction.

The strategy at MGM was to develop stars and put them into films that fit their persona. (Greta Garbo's 'mysterious vamp' persona, for example, was developed by turning her reluctance to give interviews because her inability to speak fluent English into an asset.) This was an innovation in that it gave the studios control over their stars, who they would have under contract usually for seven years. These contracts allowed the studios to control the demands for more money that invariably accompanied the star's rise to fame.

The studios produced films that made up the whole of cinema programmes. A typical cinema programme included the 'A' feature, the less expensive 'B' feature, the serial and the comedy short. The feature films were the jewels in the production crown and these would be the most expensive production the studio made. These 'A' features such as *Beggars of Life* (Dir. Wellman, Paramount, 1927) or *Flesh and the Devil*, (dir. Clarence Brown, MGM, 1926) were the mainstay of the productions slate, with 8 to 12 produced each year. There were two or three large expensive productions such as *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (Dir. Fred Niblo, MGM, 1925) or *Wings* (William Wellman, Paramount, 1927), which were usually taken on exclusive 'road show' tours before being put into the regular cinema theatres. However much of the studios regular production was devoted to filling the programme of regular features and shorts. Hal Roach, who had his own studio and developed comedy duo of Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, had produced comedy shorts independently until he joined MGM in 1927. Roach produced Laurel and Hardy shorts, along with the Our Gang comedies and Charley Chase among others, for MGM throughout the 1920s and 30s. These shorts were as popular a part of the programme as the features.

The studios control of production, distribution and exhibition allowed them to monopolise the film industry and keep foreign competition out. As with other forms of American industry these practices, along with protectionist policies toward imports and extensive distribution networks worldwide, resulted in the dominance of the domestic market, which in turn aided the

predominance of Hollywood product internationally.<sup>i</sup> Outside of the boundaries of the United States this phenomenon offered a different version of modernity than that of post-war Europe. In Europe this American modernity of mass production and consumption offered a competitive contrast to European versions and had the effect of equating modernization with a discourse of “Americanization”.

However while the monopolistic business practices ensured the Hollywood studios exposure to large audiences this could not have been sustained as long as it was without the films having a popular appeal. Producers such as Thalberg, Daryl Zanuck at Warner Brothers, or B.P. Schulberg at Paramount were keenly aware of their audience’s preferences and made their story selection decisions based on this. Hence the reputation Hollywood had among literary and intellectual elites as for a ‘mass produced’ low and middlebrow product. However with the rise of the studio system the basis of most Hollywood narratives were in response to the challenges of modernization for traditional social mores. Throughout the narratives of the films, the stories in the magazines and the ‘real life’ stories of the stars, the primary conflict were primarily the traditional versus the modern, whether it lay in sensational melodramas set in urban environments, the encroaching of civilization (modernity) on the wilderness in Westerns, the comedies of Laurel and Hardy or Harold Lloyd or in the prevalence of dramas concerned with the behavior of the ‘new woman’.

The audiences both in America and in Europe displayed a particular preference for ‘modern’ stories. This is not to say that costume and period dramas were not popular, but often the primary conflict in film stories lay in the confrontation between ‘traditional’ attitudes, most often in terms of morality, particularly in terms of romances, and ‘modern’ sensibilities which were referencing the social shifts and upheavals that were on-going throughout the 1920s. Factors such as the increase in automobile ownership had a material effect on dating rituals for example. Prior to the automobile courting couples had recourse to parks and the bicycle fad of the late 1890s in finding ways of getting out from under the scrutiny of parents and chaperones. Cars, and of course the darkness of the cinema, prompted anxieties about dating practices and the behaviour of teenagers and young adults prior to marriage.

This was the basis for most Hollywood scripts. By the 1920s cinema-going had become a ‘habit’, and the youth market made up a large part of the cinema audience. Going to the movies, as going for joy rides in cars, was a particularly ‘modern’ experience and the social anxieties and conflict that both created were often spelled out on the screen. Scriptwriters, often women who at this time made up over 50 percent of the scenario writers for the studios, placed these conflicts at the centre of their stories. This was true particularly of scenarist Anita Loos who was establishing her career in contrasting staid pious (often older) men with the modern wise-cracking woman. She wrote in her 1920 book *How To Write a Photoplay*:

There are some things which cannot be expressed in pantomime. For this reason we advise you to use explanatory sub-titles with as clever and forceful wording as possible whenever the action necessitates explanation<sup>ii</sup>.”

Loos emphasised the importance of the kind of rhythmic use of language that she excelled in to bring over a story. Her work with Constance Talmadge throughout the early 20s in films with provocative titles such as *The Virtuous Vamp* (1919), *The Love Expert* (1920) established Talmadge as a light comedienne where the titles were foregrounded as part of the films’ attractions. The Hollywood press journal *Wid’s Daily* noted that *The Virtuous Vamp’s* titles were ‘unusually good’. They also liked the titles of another Loos-penned effort *In Search of a*

*Sinner* enough to highlight an excerpt on the front page of the February 24, 1920 edition: “Said the modern St Anthony: ‘I’m above temptation!’ Replied the up-to-date enchantress: ‘Well, stoop a little stupid!’”<sup>iii</sup> The ‘up-to-date enchantress’ is central to the comic conflict between modern and traditional, as is the underlying arch treatment of masculine desire. *Wid’s Daily’s* endorsement was aimed directly at exhibitors as a quality that would result in profitable box office. Loos’s snappy and sharply aimed dialogue exemplifies the developing and changing idea of what constituted realism in the following decade. These were recognisably ‘real’ characters who spoke a language of the present, the up-to-date.

The example of Loos’s use of the wise-cracking ingénue offered a way of putting across the changes in sexual mores in a palatable humourous form. This had the effect of making the stories seem modern, not just simply by the costumes but more importantly by putting actual social conflicts and changes on the screen. Seen by audiences, whether they were in the rural or suburban areas of the United States or in cinemas throughout Europe and the rest of the world, made Hollywood a primary source for showing audiences what the modern world looked like. In that sense for American audiences Hollywood cinema was a ‘modern’ form, and for audiences outside of the United States Hollywood was the main visual and narrative example of Americanism.

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<sup>i</sup> Kristin Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment* (London: BFI Publishing, 1985), Ruth Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood*, (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1997).

<sup>ii</sup> Anita Loos and John Emerson, *How to Write Photoplays*, (New York: The James A McCann Company, 1920) p.35.

<sup>iii</sup> *Wid’s Daily*, 24 February, 1920, p.1.

