

The History of the Motion Picture

Who Invented Cinema, the Camera, or Film?



The first machine patented in the United States that showed animated pictures or movies was a device called the "wheel of life" or "zoopraxiscope". Patented in 1867 by William Lincoln, moving drawings or photographs were watched through a slit in the zoopraxiscope. However, this was a far cry from motion pictures as we know them today. Modern motion picture making began with the invention of the motion picture camera.

The Frenchman Louis Lumiere is often credited as inventing the first motion picture camera in 1895. But in truth, several others had made similar inventions around the same time as Lumiere. What Lumiere invented was a portable motion-picture camera, film processing unit and projector called the Cinématographe, three functions covered in one invention.

The Cinématographe made motion pictures very popular, and it could be better be said that Lumiere's invention began the motion picture era. In 1895, Lumiere and his brother were the first to present projected, moving, photographic, pictures to a paying audience of more that one person.

The Lumiere brothers were not the first to project film. In 1891, the Edison company successfully demonstrated the Kinetoscope, which enabled one person at a time to view moving pictures. Later in 1896, Edison showed his improved [Vitascope](#) projector and it was the first commercially, successful, projector in the U.S..

"The cinema is an invention without a future" - Louis Lumière

Films and Filmmaking

Showing a moving film to an audience was the culmination of several inventions. The magic lantern was invented in the 17th century and quite sophisticated shows of projected glass slides were available by the mid-19th century. The illusion of movement created by viewing rapid sequences of still pictures was also known and exploited in children's toys like the zoetrope. Celluloid, from which films were made, was invented in 1856 and a camera to take sequences of pictures invented in 1890.

In 1892 in the USA William Dickson, Thomas Edison's assistant, invented the Kinetoscope, which projected perforated film, (Edison's invention), inside a big wooden box, viewed by one person at a time. Then in 1895, in France, Auguste and Louis Lumière invented the Cinématographe, which could project Kinetoscope film to an audience. There were almost simultaneous developments in Britain. Birt Acres filmed the Boat Race in March 1895, and showed it on a projector made by his associate, Robert Paul, in January 1896, a month before the Lumière brothers first showed their films in this country.

With rapidly growing public interest, filmmaking improved quickly. Specially made dramas and adventures appeared. The Great Train Robbery (1903) was the first full-length action film. All these films were silent, of course, although the audience wasn't.

The First Cinemas

After a series of disastrous fires, the Cinematograph Act of 1909 (effective from 1910) was passed. There now had to be a separate projection room, adequate exits and fire precautions. The Bioscope tents and some of the scruffier Penny Gaffs had to close. A few purpose-built cinemas had been erected before 1910, but the Act stimulated the building of many new cinemas. Architects of new cinemas turned to music halls for ideas. Interiors were opulent, with plenty of gilded mirrors, dark wood and deep-red plush seating. There was a deliberate effort to make them look respectable and to get away from the Penny Gaff image that had put off many people. In May 1912 the Electric Palace, Harwich, built in 1911, advertised:

'Always a good, up-to-date programme. Superb ventilation. Strictly sedate and orderly.'

By the beginning of the First World War there were probably about 3,500 cinemas in Britain. With so many men away in the forces, audiences declined, and about a quarter of them closed. However, this decline was not to last long. The cinema was to have its heyday in the boom years after the war.

The Great Train Robbery

Edwin S. Porter is known as the first director to use modern film techniques to tell a story. He was famous for taking unrelated scenes and making a dramatic film from them. He demonstrated that films could be shot "out of sequence" and then pieced together for dramatic effect.

The "The Great Train Robbery", Porter tells the story of a train robbery and the capture of the bandits. Porter created suspense by switching from scenes of the fleeing robbers to scenes of the mob trying to catch them.

Audiences loved "The Great Train Robbery". Music halls and vaudeville theaters were packed with eager patrons night after night. This success led to the first motion picture theaters called "nickelodeons" because the price of admission was only a nickel.

In 1907 at least 5000 nickelodeons were operating around the world. In the United States, a new theater opened everyday! Often, theaters were just a screen and chairs piled into an old store or other large building.

Early movies were "silent". Actors told the whole story with their movements alone. Often, a piano player would be hired to accompany the movies.

Movie Studios

The sudden success of nickelodeons caused a shortage of new films. There simply were not enough to go around. Pooling their talents, filmmakers soon created the first motion picture "studios". These studios were quickly making hundreds of films each year in the New York area.

In 1911 the Nestor Company built the first movie studio outside of New York. The location

chosen was a small town in the Southern California named Hollywood. Within a few years, Hollywood was to become the movie capital of the world--a position it still holds today.

D.W. Griffith

Of the early filmmakers, one man stands out as the "father of motion pictures." D.W. Griffith directed hundreds of short films during his career. He spent these years making better and better movies and developing his unique style. Griffith breathed new life into an industry that was starting to go flat. His greatest contribution to filmmaking was the close-up. He could move his cameras closer and closer to the actors to focus the attention of the audience.

Until Griffith's time, all action in a scene had been filmed with one camera. The camera usually stayed in the same spot. Instead of moving the camera from scene to scene, the actors and scenery moved.

Griffith used several cameras and many different angles to let the audience see more than one side of the action. To the audience, it was like being in the center of things.

Griffith is famous for his two masterpieces, "The Birth of a Nation" and "Intolerance". The former was made in 1915 at a cost of more than \$110,000. That was an unheard-of budget for a film in those days. The sheer cost of the production drew plenty of attention to the picture even before it reached theaterse. Today, it is still considered by some critics to be the greatest motion picture of all time.

Mack Sennett's Keystone Kops

Mack Sennett was one of the many actors employed by D.W. Griffith. Born in Canada, Sennett came to America in 1909 and soon joined up with Griffith. Sennett learned much of his directing technique from Griffith. When he was still an actor, Sennett would study Griffith's style. At night, he would stand near the studio doors, waiting for Griffith to leave work. He would often join the great director on his walks home. On those walks, Sennett learned a great deal about movie making.

By 1912 Sennett had his own motion picture studio, called Keystone. Sennett's Keystone studio was famous for its wild comedies--many of which featured the Keystone Kops. These were a bumbling bunch of policemen who always found themselves in a wild chase after somebody or something.

Sennett's movies were circus-like, but they were rooted in reality. The films were set in familiar settings--small towns and villages that people across the world could relate to. As a director, Sennett became famous for his sense of timing. To produce special effects, he often used slow motion and creative camera angles. Sometimes he even ran the film backwards--which audiences found hilarious.

The comoviens in Sennett's films each had an unusual personality or "lool" which Sennett played up to grab extra laughs. These comoviens included Fatty Arbuckle, Ben Turpin, Charley Chase, and Charlie Chaplin.

End of Nickelodeons

As movies became more successful, they moved out of nickelodeons and into real theaters. Vaudeville singers, dancers, and comoviens were replaced by the "silver screen." Audiences poured into theaters by the millions. In exchange for their ticket money, viewers demanded longer and better productions.

Studios scrambled to keep up with the demand. Filmmakers began to adapt popular plays

and books into motion pictures. And dozens of famous stage actors headed to Hollywood to seek their fortunes as movie stars.

Studio System

From the early 1920s to the 1950s, the Hollywood studio system became the center of the world's filmmaking. The studios of this period were involved in every aspect of the film industry, owning studio lots, developing films from the script phase, and distributing films in their own movie theaters. Five studios, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, the Fox Film Corporation, Warner Brothers, RKO Radio Pictures, and Paramount Pictures, dominated the industry. Studios promoted stars, like Humphrey Bogart and Mae West, who were under contract and had little say in which movies they would star in. From the late 1920s, sound became a key component of the film industry.

Artist-Driven Films

The power of studios declined with a number of them being taken over by multi-national companies. From the 1950s, artist-owned film production groups like United Artists began to dominate film production. Directors like Francis Ford Coppola and David Lean were allowed to make ambitious, big-budget and dark films. This period culminated in the 1960s and 1970s, when directors had unprecedented authority over how films were conceived, shot and edited. This period ended in the late 1970s. Some film historians acknowledge that Michael Cimino's financial and critical disaster "Heaven's Gate," as one reason that filmmaking artists have gotten less authority from studios over their own work.

Independent Film Movement

Between the 1970s to the early 1990s, independent film became a major aspect of the industry. Since film technology has become much less expensive in the last thirty years, it has become easier to write, direct and star in your own movies. Also, film schools have given a greater number of artists access and training in filmmaking. Though some of these films are produced by small film companies, "indie films" usually feature character-driven, small movies. Indie filmmakers like Paul Thomas Anderson, Steven Soderbergh and Kevin Smith have parlayed success in independent film world into mainstream success. Film star Robert Redford started the Sundance Film Festival in 1978, hosted in Salt Lake City, Utah. The festival has become a major venue of independent films in the United States and a cable network has been developed around the Sundance festival.

Blockbusters and Contemporary Film

In the 1990s and 2000s, blockbusters and franchise films have become a significant part of the film industry. Cross-promotions with fast food chains and toy manufacturers, as well as international distribution, have made movies like "Titanic" and "Jurassic Park" the ambition of most major studios, signaling a move away from small, character-driven movies. The technological advances in special effects and 3-D cameras have also allowed for more opportunities for this kind of work.