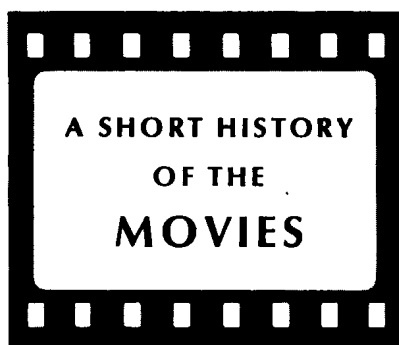


# A SHORT HISTORY OF THE MOVIES

Gerald Mast



\$4.95







# **A SHORT HISTORY OF THE MOVIES**

**GERALD MAST**



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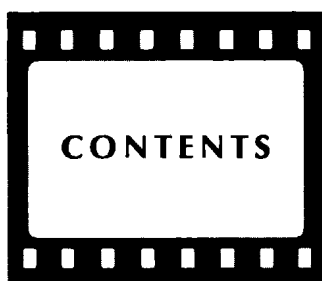
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AUTHOR'S NOTE: the author wishes to apologize for the obvious scarcity of stills from American motion pictures made between 1929 and the present. That scarcity must be blamed on the American film companies who either demanded exorbitant permission fees or withheld their permissions altogether.





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## INTRODUCTORY ASSUMPTIONS

**T**HE FIRST audience watched a motion picture flicker on a screen in 1895, only seventy-five years ago. In those seventy-five years the movies have developed from a simple recording device—the first films merely captured a scenic or not-so-scenic view—to a complex art and business. The first movie audiences were delighted to see that it was possible to record a moving scene on film; today we debate the desirability rather than the possibility of capturing an image. The important question for the first film audiences was, “Is the image discernible?” rather than, “Is the image meaningful?” From the simple beginning of turning a camera on to record a scene, the filmmaker has learned that his art depends on the way his camera shapes the scene he is recording. Analogous to the novel, the finished movie is not just a story, but a story told in a certain way, and it is impossible to separate what is told from how it is told. Just as novelists discovered that narrative technique can either be subtly invisible—as in Dickens or Hemingway—or intrusively self-conscious—as in Joyce or Faulkner—so too the filmmaker can construct a lucid, apparently artless story or a complex, almost chaotic maze for traveling to the story. The wonder is that while the evolution of narrative fiction can be traced back to Homer, the movies have evolved such complex techniques in only seventy-five years.

No one takes the movies more for granted than the present generation of moviegoers. For these “third-generation” audiences,

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who grew up with the polished, technically perfect sound films of the last twenty-five years, there is no consciousness of the way an entertainment novelty evolved into an art. Although the current "film generation" prefers seeing movies to reading novels, prefers making movies to writing poetry, and has even pushed movies into university curricula, it is surprisingly ignorant of the cumulative progress of the movie art—especially surprising since each student filmmaker lives through the identical historical evolution of film in learning his craft. He begins by trying to record technically correct pictures on film, perfecting his ability to obtain clearly focused, properly exposed images. He then realizes the power of different pictorial compositions, the strategies of long shots and close-ups, the effects of different lenses and filters. Then he discovers the power of editing in creating a film's meaning and tone. The student's first film is usually a black-and-white silent film with musical accompaniment—precisely the kind of film that evolved during the first thirty-five years of film history. Only after he gains some confidence with this kind of film does the new filmmaker experiment with color and synchronized sound.

The history of the movies is, first of all, the history of a new art. Though it has affinities with the novel, the drama, the dance, photography, and music, like each of these sister arts it has a "poetics" of its own. When the early films turned from scenic views to fictional stories, directors suspected that the "poetics" of the film was the same as for the stage. Stage acting, stage movement, stage stories, stage players, and stage perspectives dominated the first story films. The camera was assumed to be a spectator in a theatre audience, and just as the spectator has only one seat, the camera had only one position from which to shoot a scene.

Time and experimentation revealed that the camera was anchored by analogy alone—and that the analogy was false. The scene—the locale—is the basic unit of the stage because space in the theatre is so concrete. The audience sits here, the characters play there, the scenery is fixed in space behind the action. But space in the film is completely elastic; only the screen is fixed, not the action on it. Directors discovered that the unit of a film is the shot, not the scene. That shots can be joined together in any number of combinations to produce whole scenes. That scenes

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can be varied and juxtaposed and paralleled in any number of ways. Unity of place, a rather basic and practical principle of the stage, does not apply to the movie. More applicable is a principle of an appropriate succession of images which produces the desired narrative continuity, the intended meaning, and the appropriate emotional tension of the film as a whole. By the end of the silent era this principle had not only been discovered but demonstrated.

The discovery of sound raised doubts about the discoveries of the past thirty years. Once again the analogy with the stage was suspected; once again stage actors, stage writers, stage directors, and stage techniques flooded the movies. And once again, the analogy was refuted. Just as the stage is anchored visually in space, so too it is anchored by sound. Sounds come from the speaker's mouth; you see both the speaker and his mouth. But movies were free to show any kind of picture while the words came from the speaker's mouth. Synchronization of picture and sound also allowed for the disjunction of picture and sound. Further, the freedom of the movies from spatial confinement allowed a greater freedom in the kinds of sounds they could use—natural sound effects, musical underscoring, distortion effects, subjective thoughts, and so forth. Whereas the history of the silent film could be summarized as the discovery of the different means of producing an evocative *succession* of visual images, the history of the sound film is the discovery of the different means of producing an evocative *integration* of visual images and sound.

Just as the history of the novel is, to some extent, a catalogue of important novels and the history of drama a catalogue of important plays, the history of film as an art centers around important films. In film history, a discussion of the significant films is especially relevant, for not only are the individual films milestones on an historical path, but also significant artistic discoveries that immediately influenced other directors. Although Shakespeare drew from Seneca, and Brecht from Shakespeare, even more immediate was the influence of Griffith on Ford or Ford on Bergman. Without years of stage tradition to use as a well, film artists have drawn insights from the excitement generated by contemporary discoveries. The internationalism of film distribution has always guaranteed the rapid influence of any significant discovery.

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A study of seventy-five years of film history has led this author to make one basic assumption: no great film has ever been made without the vision and unifying intelligence of a single mind to create and control the whole film. Just as there is only one poet per pen, one painter per canvas, there can be only one creator of a movie. The "*auteur* theory" is as valid for films as for any other art. Whether the *auteur* improvises the whole film as he goes along—as Griffith did—or whether he works according to a preconceived and scripted plan, a single mind must shape and control the work of art. The difficulty with movies, however, is that their very massiveness and complexity work against their having such an *auteur*. The director is often no more than a mechanic, bolting together a machine (often infernal) that someone else has designed.

Those who view the film as an inferior artistic medium most frequently argue that the conditions of making a commercial film nullify its chances for artistic success. The great work of film art is the exception, the mediocre factory product the rule. To see the history of films as just a few dozen great movies is to simplify the history. All movies, great or small, have been made in the context of the entire film industry. Any film history that intends to reveal the genesis of today's film world must, in addition to discussing the film as art, discuss three related problems that have always influenced the artistic product—and continue to influence it today: the film as business, the film as entertainment, and the film as machinery.

Movies today are a billion-dollar business. The choice of directors, stars, and scripts is often in the hands of businessmen, not in the heads of artists. The company that invests \$5,000,000 in a picture ought to be able to insure the safety of its investment. Commercial values outweigh artistic ones. The name Hollywood is for some synonymous with glamor, for others synonymous with selling out. For decades Hollywood's commercial crassness has served American novelists—from F. Scott Fitzgerald and Nathaniel West to Gore Vidal—as a metaphor for the vulgar emptiness of the "American Dream." If the gifted young director today seems to face a distasteful dilemma—sell out or get out—it has been equally true that directors have faced the same dilemma for fifty years.

The awesome financial pressures of Hollywood are partly re-

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sponsible for the growing number of independent and underground films—just as Broadway production demands are responsible for the Off-Broadway and Off-Off-Broadway theatres. Young filmmakers often prefer to work alone with the life and life-styles around them; their sole expense is equipment and film. These filmmakers are, in a sense, regressing to the earliest period of film history. But every artistic innovation since then has ironically necessitated spending more money. If lighting was a step forward in film toning, it also required spending money on lighting equipment and on men who knew how to control it. If acting was to be improved, the proven actors would have to be retained. And as actors supplied greater and greater proofs, they demanded higher and higher salaries. Longer films required more film, more actors, more story material, and more publicity to insure a financial return on the greater investment. It took only twenty-five years for the movies to progress from cheap entertainment novelty to big business.

Making a film is such a massive and complex task it is a wonder that an artistically whole movie can be made at all. The huge sums of money required to make a movie merely reflect the hugeness of the task of taking a movie from story idea to final print. Shooting is painfully slow. It takes time to perfect each setup: lights must be carefully focused and toned, the shot's composition must be attractive and appropriate, the set must be dressed, background action (extras) must be coordinated with the action of the principals, actors must have mastered their interpretations of lines so that a single shot fits into the dramatic fabric of the whole film, make-up must be correct, costumes coordinated, the positions of the players must match those in the preceding shot. And so forth. Because it takes so much time to set up a shot, producers economize by shooting all scenes together that require the same location or setup, regardless of their position in the film's continuity. But even with such economies, to get five minutes of screen time "in the can" is a healthy day's work. Sometimes, on location with mammoth spectacle pictures, a whole day can be devoted to a fifteen-second piece of the finished film—until the sun, the caravans, the camels, the soldiers, and the gypsy maidens reach their proper places. The devastating effect of accomplishing so little each shooting day is that a film's budget is calculated

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on the number of days it will take to shoot, the average expense for a color film being in excess of \$75,000 per day. Whereas the novelist or poet or painter can sit alone and perfect his art with a minimum of expense (and waste), the film artist is the servant of an uneconomical master. Even the ten-minute student film can cost over \$1,000 for film stock and laboratory costs alone—exclusive of the original cost of the equipment.

Because movies cost so much to make, the men who spend that money are understandably concerned about getting it back again. The only way to retrieve expenses is with ticket receipts. Not only is the film artist at the mercy of expensive machines and services, but he is also dependent on the consent of the entertained. The history of the movies as a business is inextricably linked with the history of the movies as a mass entertainment medium. To get the public to spend its dollars at the box office, the producer must give the public what it wants, or make the public want what it gets. History indicates that the public has gotten some of both. The crassest movie maxim is the famous, "The box office is never wrong." The validity of the maxim is dependent on the kinds of questions you ask the box office to answer.

Just as film art has changed radically in the course of its seventy-five-year history, so too film audiences have changed. The first movie patrons in America were also patrons of vaudeville houses and variety shows. When those audiences tired of the same kinds of film programs, the movies found a home with lower- and working-class patrons. Small theatres sprang up in poor sections of cities; admission was a nickel or a dime. The rich and educated saw movies only on an evening of slumming. As film art and craft improved, larger, more expensive movie theatres opened in respectable and central areas of the cities. Films tried to appeal to a wide range of tastes and interests, much like television today. In this period there was little consciousness of movies as an art; they were mass entertainment. And as with today's television, the educated, the literati, and the serious shunned the movies. H. L. Mencken sardonically lauded the movies as the appropriate artistic attainment of the American "booboisie." Similes linking movies with tastelessness and movie patrons with morons continually pop up in fiction and articles of the 1920s and 1930s. Only recent American audiences, the third generation of movie-

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goers, expect the film to be art and not formulaic entertainment. Current audience surveys indicate that the overwhelming majority of steady movie patrons are between seventeen and twenty-nine, with B.A. degrees either in sight or in hand. The present movie audience takes its movies as seriously as it does the products of the novelist and poet. And, as usual, producers are giving the public what it wants. Although the existence of Radio City Music Hall, drive-in theatres, and neighborhood movie houses (steadily dwindling in number) proves that the mass entertainment film is not dead, it is really the "art" cinema that is alive and well in American cities.

A final influence on any discussion of the history of the movies is the fact that film art is dependent on machines. Appropriately enough, our technological century has produced an art that depends on technology. The first filmmakers were not artists but tinkerers. The same spirit that produced a light bulb and a telephone produced a movie camera and projector. Their goal in making a movie was not to create beauty but to display a scientific curiosity. The invention of the first cameras and projectors set a trend that was to repeat itself with the introduction of every new movie invention: the invention was first exploited as a novelty in itself and only later integrated as one tool in making the whole film. The first camera merely exploited the fact that it could capture images of moving things. The first synchronized-sound films exploited the fact that the audience could hear the words that the actors' lips were mouthing. Most of the first color films were merely colorful, many of the first wide-screen films merely wide.

Perhaps no invention so clearly demonstrated the ephemerality of pure gimmickry than the shortlived 3-D movie. There were obvious limits to the number of knives, spears, arrows, hatchets, and swords that could be thrown at an audience before it would begin to take itself elsewhere. The technical gimmickry of 3-D was so pervasive that the innovation could never be assimilated into a greater artistic whole. The same extinction seemed to threaten Cinerama, with its inevitable rides on roller coasters, hydrofoils, stagecoaches, dogsleds, and anything else that moved, until Stanley Kubrick made a lady of her with 2001. Novelty became an artistic tool; rather than exploiting movement for its



own sake, Kubrick used movement to echo the subjective impressions of his characters.

No other art is so tied to machines. Some of the most striking artistic effects are the products of expanding film technology. For example, the awesome compositions in depth and shadow of Welles' *Citizen Kane* are partially the result of the conversion from carbon-arc lamps to incandescent lighting in the studios and the development of high-speed panchromatic film, which allowed much greater depth-of-field. Research has converted the camera from an erratic, hand-cranked film grinder to a smooth, precise clockworks. Research has silenced the camera's noise without using clumsy, bulky devices to baffle the clatter. Research has developed faster and faster black-and-white stocks, enabling greater flexibility in lighting, composition, and shooting conditions. Research has developed color film stocks that are not only accurate in recording color but can also provide different effects for different artistic purposes. Research has improved sound recording and sound reproduction, has developed huge cranes and dollies, has perfected a wide assortment of laboratory processes and effects, has invented special lenses and special projectors and special filters. Film equipment is so sophisticated that no film artist can master all of it; he is dependent on mechanics as well as machines.

Because they are mechanical, because they are big business, because they pander to audience tastes, movies have never before been ushered into the temple of high art by those who guard the doors. Throughout their seventy-five-year history the movies have carried on a parasitic flirtation with the stage. Feeling the cultural superiority of the older art, movie producers and artists borrowed properties and people from Broadway. The typical route to Hollywood for a story idea was from fiction to Broadway to sound stage. But in 1970 a significant detour on this route is a sign of the changing times; Broadway now regularly adapts screenplays into stageplays. Despite the difficulties of money and machine, the movies have become the dominant and the liveliest living art.

This short history will follow the road the movies have traveled to get here. To keep a short history short has required several decisions. First, this history aims at revealing significant trends and turns along the road rather than exhaustive lists of titles, directors, and dates. For further reading in any particular period,