HOLLYWOOD'S AMERICA

United States History Through Its Films

SECOND EDITION

Edited by

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PREFACE

If you want to know about the United States in the twentieth century, go to the movies. Films represent much more than mass entertainment. Movies—even bad ones—are important sociological and cultural documents. Like any other popular commercial art form, movies both reflect and influence public attitudes. From the beginning of this century, films have recorded and even shaped American values, beliefs, and behavior.

The introduction to this book traces the history of American film against a backdrop of broader changes in late nineteenth and twentieth-century popular culture. A series of interpretive essays then examines how classic films treated American political, economic, and social life; primary sources that illuminate film history are also included as is an extensive bibliographic guide to the literature on American movies.

The history of the movies is caught up with broader themes and issues in American cultural history, such as the transition from a Victorian culture, with its emphasis on refinement, self-control, and moralism, to modern mass culture. Popular films offer a valuable way of examining public responses to the social disorder and dislocations of the Great Depression; the fears of domestic subversion of the late 1940s and early 1950s; the cultural and moral upheavals of the 1960s; and the meaning and significance of the Vietnam War.

The anthology will also help students develop the tools to read and interpret visual texts. In a society where visual images have become a dominant mode of entertainment and persuasion—used to promote presidential candidates as well as sell toothpaste and deodorant—visual literacy is an important craft of survival and intellectual growth. Film is a form of communication with its own rules and grammar that demands the same skills of critical thinking and analysis necessary for reading written texts. Analyzing a poem requires understanding patterns of rhyme and rhythm, sound and imagery. Interpreting a film involves a knowledge of the techniques that filmmakers use to construct their texts: camera work, editing devices, lighting, set design, narrative, and so on.

The films examined in this book are feature films—not documentaries or avant-garde or underground films. These are the classic films that engaged the emotions of their American viewers, and made them laugh, weep, cringe with terror, and tremble with excitement. They offered wit, suspense, romance, thrills, highlife and lowlife. Highbrow critics might dismiss most Hollywood films as schlock—but these films gave audiences more pleasure than any other art form and taught fundamental lessons in intimacy, tenderness, initiation, lust, conflict, guilt, and loyalty. As the nation's dream factory manufacturing fantasies and cultural myths, Hollywood has

given Americans their most intensive—if highly distorted—picture of their country's past, from the styles of the rich and famous to the underside of American life. It has been instrumental in shaping our deepest presuppositions about race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexual conduct. Movies have helped form the country's self-image and have provided unifying symbols in a society fragmented along lines of race, class, ethnicity, region, and gender. In certain respects subversive of traditional cultural values, movie culture has helped Americans adapt to an ever-changing society.

The Wizard of Oz

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INTRODUCTION

One night a year the country shuts down. All across the United States tens of millions of people press the buttons on their remote controls, sit back in their easy chairs or recline on their couches, and become the world's largest congregation, watching a major event in the country's civic religion—the Oscars. Even though movie attendance has fallen steeply—to just one-fifth of what it was at the time of the first Academy Awards ceremony in 1927—Americans still gawk at the limousines as they pull up to the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion in Los Angeles, gaze at the stars' tuxedoes and gowns, and wait impatiently for a memorable moment—a streaker racing across the stage or perhaps Jack Palance performing one-handed push-ups.

Americans watch the Academy Awards presentations for many reasons: To see briefly a more human side of their favorite movie stars; to pit their judgment against that of the five thousand members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences; to partake in the trashy pleasure of watching the glitziest extravaganza that Hollywood is capable of producing. But the Academy Awards ceremony also gives Americans a chance to recognize the movies that entertained them, engaged their emotions, expressed their deepest hopes and responded to their anxieties and fears. From *All Quiet on the Western Front,* a graphic portrait of the horrors and futility of war that came to embody the pacifism of the late 1920s and early 1930s, to the bleak revisionist western *Unforgiven* that deglamorizes the mythic western frontier and its violent traditions, Oscar winners and nominees have offered a vivid record of shifting American values.

Of all the products of popular culture, none is more sharply etched in our collective imagination than the movies. Many Americans instantly recognize images produced by the movies: Charlie Chaplin, the starving prospector in *The Gold Rush,* eating his shoe, treating the laces like spaghetti; James Cagney, the gun-toting gangster in *Public Enemy,* shoving a grapefruit into Mae Clarke's face; Paul Muni, the jobless World War I veteran in *I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang,* who, asked at the end of the bleak, determinist film how he lives, replies, "I steal"; Gloria Swanson, the fading movie goddess in *Sunset Boulevard,* belittling suggestions that she is no longer a big star: "It's the pictures that got small." Even those who have never seen *Citizen Kane* or *Casablanca* or the *Treasure of Sierra Madre* respond to advertisements, parodies, and TV skits that use these films' dialogue, images, and characters.

As cultural artifacts, movies open windows into American cultural and social history. A mixture of art, business, and popular entertainment, they provide a host of insights into Americans' shifting ideals, fantasies, and preoccupations. Like any

cultural artifact, the movies can be approached in a variety of ways. Cultural historians have treated movies as sociological documents that record the look and mood of particular historical settings; as ideological constructs that advance particular political or moral values or myths; as psychological texts that speak to individual and social anxieties and tensions; as cultural documents that present particular images of gender, ethnicity, class, romance, and violence; and as visual texts that offer complex levels of meaning and seeing.

This book offers examples of how to interpret classic American films as artifacts of a shifting American culture. Film history is at its clearest against a broader backdrop of American cultural and social history.

THE BIRTH OF MODERN CULTURE

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, a New York neurologist named George M. Beard coined the term "neurasthenia" to describe a psychological ailment that afflicted a growing number of Americans. Neurasthenia's symptoms included "nervous dyspepsia, insomnia, hysteria, hypochondria, asthma, sick-headache, skin rashes, hayfever, premature baldness, inebrity, hot and cold flashes, nervous exhaustion, brain-collapse, or forms of 'elementary insanity.'" Among those who suffered from neurasthenia-like ailments at some point in their lives were Theodore Roosevelt, settlement house founder Jane Addams, psychologist William James, painter Frederic Remington, and novelists Owen Wister and Theodore Dreiser.

According to expert medical opinion, neurasthenia's underlying cause was "over-civilization." The frantic pace of modern life, nervous overstimulation, stress, and emotional repression produced debilitating bouts of depression or attacks of anxiety and nervous prostration. Fears of "over-civilization" pervaded late nineteenth-century American culture. Social critics worried that urban life was producing a generation of pathetic, pampered, physically and morally enfeebled ninety-seven-pound weaklings—a poor successor to the stalwart Americans who had fought the Civil War, battled Indians, and tamed a continent. A sharply falling birth rate sparked fears that the native-born middle class was committing "race suicide." A host of therapies promised to relieve the symptoms of neurasthenia, including such precursors of modern tranquilizers as Dr. Hammond's Nerve and Brain Pills. Sears even sold an electrical contraption called the Heidelberg Electric Belt, designed to reduce anxiety by sending electric shocks to the genitals. Many physicians prescribed physical exercise for men and rest cures for women. But the main forms of release for late nineteenth-century Americans from the pressures, stresses, and restrictions of modern life was by turning to sports, outdoor activities, and popular culture.

Few Americans are unfamiliar with the wrenching economic transformations of the late nineteenth century, the consolidation of industry, the integration of the national economy, and the rise of the corporation. But few Americans realize that this period also brought the birth of our modern culture.

In the last years of the nineteenth century an ethos of self-fulfillment, leisure, and sensual satisfaction began to replace the Victorian spirit of self-denial, self-restraint, and domesticity. Visual images took their place beside words and reading,

which had been the essence of Victorian high learning. A new respect for energy, strength, and virility overtook a genteel endorsement of eternal truths and high moral ideals. Above all, a varied culture deeply divided by class, gender, religion, ethnicity, and locality gave way to a vibrant, commercialized mass culture that provided all Americans with standardized entertainment and information.

The Revolt Against Victorianism

The new mood could be seen in a rage for competitive athletics and team sports. It was in the 1890s that boxing began to rival baseball as the nation's most popular sport, basketball was invented, football swept the nation's college campuses, and golf, track, and wrestling became popular pastimes. The celebration of vigor could also be seen in a new enthusiasm for such outdoor activities as hiking, hunting, fishing, mountain climbing, camping, and bicycling.

A new bold, energetic spirit was also apparent in popular music, in a craze for ragtime, jazz, and patriotic military marches. The cult of toughness and virility appeared in the growth of aggressive nationalism (culminating in 1898 in America's "Splendid Little War" against Spain), the condemnation of sissies and stuffed shirts, and the growing popularity of such aggressively masculine western novels as Owen Wister's *The Virginian*. Toward the end of the century, the New Woman—personified by the tall, athletic Gibson Girl—supplanted the frail, submissive Victorian woman as a cultural ideal. The new woman began to work outside the home in rapidly increasing numbers, to attend high schools and college, and increasingly to press for the vote. During the '90s American popular culture was in full-scale revolt against the stifling Victorian code of propriety.

During the mid-nineteenth century, urban reformers responded to the rapid growth of cities by advocating the construction of parks to serve as rural retreats in the midst of urban jungles. Frederick Law Olmsted, the designer of New York City's Central Park, believed that the park's bucolic calm would instill the values of sobriety and self-control in the urban masses. But by the end of the century, it was clear that those masses had grown tired of sobriety and self-control. They craved excitement and self-expression. This was clearly seen at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago, where the most popular area was the boisterous, rowdy Midway. Here, visitors rode the Ferris Wheel and watched "Little Egypt" perform exotic dances. Entrepreneurs were quick to satisfy the public's desire for fast-paced entertainment. During the 1890s, a series of popular amusement parks opened in Coney Island. Unlike Central Park, Coney Island glorified adventure. It offered exotic, dreamland landscapes and a free, loose social environment. At Coney Island men could remove their coats and ties, and both sexes could enjoy rare personal freedom.

Central Park was supposed to reinforce self-control and delayed gratification; Coney Island was a consumer's world of extravagance, gaity, abandon, revelry, and instant gratification. It attracted working-class Americans who longed for at least a taste of the good life. If a person could never hope to own a mansion in Newport, he could for a few dimes experience the exotic pleasures of Luna Park or Dreamland Park. Even the rides in the amusement parks were designed to create illusions and break down reality. Mirrors distorted people's images and rides threw them off

balance. At Luna Park, the "Witching Waves" simulated the bobbing of a ship at high sea, and the "Tickler" featured spinning circular cars that threw riders together.

In part, the desire for intense physical experience would be met through sports, athletics, and out-of-doors activities. But its primary outlet was vicarious—through mass culture. Craving more intense physical and emotional experience, eager to break free of the confining boundaries of genteel culture, Americans turned to new kinds of newspapers and magazines, new forms of commercial entertainment, and, above all, the movies.

The Rise of Mass Communications

The last ten years of the nineteenth century were critical in the emergence of modern American mass culture. In those years emerged the modern instruments of mass communication—the mass-circulation metropolitan newspaper, the best-seller, the mass-market magazine, national advertising campaigns, and the movies. American culture also made a critical shift to commercialized forms of entertainment.

The urban tabloid was the first instrument of modern mass culture to appear. Pioneered by Joseph Pulitzer's New York *World* and William Randolph Hearst's New York *Journal,* these popular newspapers differed dramatically from the staid upper-class and the staunchly partisan political newspapers that had dominated late nineteenth-century journalism: They featured banner headlines; a multitude of photographs and cartoons; an emphasis on local news, crime and scandal, society news, and sports; and large ads, which made up half of a paper's content compared to just thirty percent in earlier newspapers. For easier reading on an omnibus or street railway, page size was cut, stories shortened, and the text heavily illustrated with drawings and photographs.

Entertainment was a stock-in-trade of yellow journalism (named for the "yellow kid" comic strip that appeared in Hearst's *Journal*). Among the innovations introduced by yellow journalists were the first color comic strips, advice columns, women's pages, fashion pages, and sports pages. Using simple words, a lively style, and many illustrations, yellow journalism could reach a mass audience that included many immigrants who understood little English. By 1905, Pulitzer's *World* boasted a circulation of 2 million.

Also during the 1890s, the rise of the country's first mass-circulation national magazines revolutionized the world of magazine publishing, and created a demand for fresh types of news. After the Civil War, the magazine field had been dominated by a small number of sedate magazines—such as *The Atlantic, Harper's,* and *Scribner's*—written for the "gentle" reader of highly intellectual tastes. The poetry, serious fiction, and wood engravings that filled these monthlies' pages rigidly conformed to upper-class Victorian standards of taste. These magazines embodied what the philosopher George Santayana called the "genteel tradition": the idea that art and literature should reinforce morality and refine sensibility, not portray reality. Art and literature, the custodians of culture believed, should transcend the real and uphold the ideal. The poet James Russell Lowell spoke for other genteel writers when he said that no man should describe any activity that would make his

wife or daughter blush. The founders of the nation's first mass-circulation magazines considered the older "quality" magazines stale and elitist. In contrast, their magazines featured practical advice, popularized science, gossip, human interest stories, celebrity profiles, interviews, muckraking investigations, pictures, articles on timely topics—and a profusion of ads. Instead of cultivating a select audience, the new magazines aimed to please the urban masses. By running popular articles, editors sought to maximize circulation, which, in turn, attracted advertising that kept the magazine's price low. By 1900 the nation's largest magazine, the *Ladies' Home Journal,* reached 850,000 subscribers—more than eight times the readership of *Scribner's* or *Harper's.*

The end of the nineteenth century also marked a critical turning point in the history of book publishing, as marketing wizards like Frank Doubleday organized the first national book promotional campaigns, created the modern best seller, and transformed popular writers like Jack London into celebrities. The world of the Victorian man of letters, the defender of "Culture" against "Anarchy," had ended.

In 1898, the National Biscuit Company (Nabisco) launched the first million dollar national advertising campaign. It succeeded in making Uneeda biscuits and their waterproof "In-er-Seal" box popular household items. During the 1880s and 1890s, patent medicine manufacturers, department stores, and producers of low-priced, packed consumer goods (such as Campbell Soups, H.J. Heinz, and Quaker Oats), developed modern advertising techniques. Earlier advertisers had made little use of brand names, illustrations, or trademarks; the new ads emblazed snappy slogans and colorful packages. As early as 1900, advertisements began to use psychology to arouse consumer demand by suggesting that a product would contribute to the consumer's social and psychic well-being. To induce purchases, observed a trade journal in 1890, a consumer "must be aroused, excited, terrified." Listerine mouthwash promised to cure "halitosis"; Scott tissue claimed to prevent infections caused by harsh toilet paper.

By stressing instant gratification and personal fulfillment in their ads, modern advertising helped undermine an earlier Victorian ethos of thrift, self-denial, delayed gratification, and hard work. In various ways, it transformed Americans from savers to spenders and told them to give in to their desire for luxury.

The creators of the modern instruments of mass culture arose from similar backgrounds. Most were outsiders—recent immigrants or Southerners, Midwesterners, or Westerners. Joseph Pulitzer was an Austrian Jew; the pioneering new magazine editors, Edward W. Bok and Samuel Sidney McClure, were also first-generation immigrants. Unlike the men and women from Boston's Brahmin culture or upper-class New York who had defined the genteel tradition, the men who created modern mass culture had their initial training in daily newspapers, commerce, and popular entertainment. As a result, they were more in touch with popular tastes. As outsiders, the creators of mass culture betrayed an almost voyeuristic interest in what they called the "romance of real life": high life, low life, power, and status.

The popular culture they created was simple, direct, realistic, and colloquial. A new realistic aesthetic overthrew the florid Victorian style. Writers and artists rebelled against the moralism and sentimentality of Victorian culture and sought to portray life objectively and truthfully, without idealization or avoiding the ugly.

The quest for realism took a variety of guises: in the naturalism of writers like Theodore Dreiser and Stephen Crane, with their nightmarish depictions of urban poverty and exploitation; in the paintings of what was called the "ashcan" school of art, with their vivid portraits of tenements and congested streets; and in the forceful, colorful prose of tabloid reporters and muckraking journalists, who cut through the Victorian veil of reticence surrounding such topics as sex, political corruption, and working conditions in industry. The task of the journalist, novelist, and artist, declared the writer Frank Norris, was to battle "false views of life, false characters, false sentiments, false morality, false history, false philosophy, false emotions, false heroism."

The most influential innovations in mass culture would take place after the turn of the century. Thomas Edison first successfully projected moving pictures on a screen in 1896, but it would not be until 1903 that Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery*—the first American movie to tell a story—demonstrated the commercial appeal of motion pictures. And although Guglielmo Marconi showed the possibility of wireless communication in 1895, commercial radio broadcasting did not begin until 1920 and commercial television broadcasts until 1939. These new instruments of mass communications would reach audiences of unprecedented size. As early as 1922, movies sold forty million tickets a week and radios could be found in three million homes.

The emergence of these modern forms of mass communications had far reaching effects upon American society. They broke down the isolation of local neighborhoods and communities and ensured that for the first time all Americans, regardless of their class, ethnicity, or locality, began to share standardized information and entertainment. They also created a truly democratic culture.

Commercialized Leisure

Among the most striking differences between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries was the rapid growth of commercialized entertainment. For much of the nineteenth century, Americans had regarded commercial amusements as suspect. Drawing on the Puritan criticisms of play and recreation and a republican ideology that was hostile to luxury, hedonism, and extravagance, American Victorians associated theaters, dance halls, circuses, and organized sports with such vices as gambling, swearing, drinking, and immoral sexual behavior. In the late nineteenth century, however, a new outlook challenged Victorian prejudices.

During the first twenty years of the new century, attendance at professional baseball games doubled. Vaudeville, already popular in the 1890s, increased in popularity, featuring singing, dancing, skits, comics, acrobats, and magicians. Amusement parks, penny arcades, dance halls, and other commercial amusements flourished. As early as 1910, when there were 10,000 movie theaters, the movies had become the nation's most popular form of commercial entertainment.

The rise of these commercialized amusements radically reshaped the nature of American leisure activities. Earlier in the nineteenth century, leisure activities had been sharply segregated on the basis of gender, class, and ethnicity. The wealthy attended their own exclusive theaters, concert halls, museums, restaurants, and sporting clubs. For the working class, leisure and amusement was rooted in partic-

ular ethnic communities and neighborhoods, each with its own saloons, churches, fraternal organizations, and organized sports. Men and women differed in their leisure activities. Many men (particularly bachelors and immigrants) relaxed in barber shops, billiard halls, and bowling alleys; joined volunteer fire companies or militias; and patronized saloons, gambling halls, and race tracks. Women took part in church activities and socialized with friends and relatives. After 1880, as incomes rose and leisure time expanded, new commercialized forms of cross-class, mixed-sex amusements proliferated. Entertainment became a major industry. Vaudeville theaters attracted women as well as men. The young, in particular, increasingly sought pleasure, escape, and the freedom to experiment in mixed sex relationships in relatively inexpensive amusement parks, dance halls, urban night clubs, and, above all, nickelodeons and movie theaters, free of parental control.

The transformation of Coney Island from a center of male vice—of brothels, saloons, and gambling dens—into the nation's first modern amusement park, complete with ferris wheels, hootchie kootchie girls, restaurants, and concert halls symbolized the emergence of a new leisure culture, emphasizing excitement, glamour, fashion, and romance. Its informality and sheer excitement attracted people of every class.

Coney Island offered an escape from an oppressive urban landscape to an exotic one. The new motion picture industry would offer an even less expensive, more convenient escape. During the early twentieth century, it quickly developed into the country's most popular and influential form of art and entertainment.

THE BIRTH OF THE MOVIES

Beside Macy's Department Store in Herald Square, New York City, a plaque commemorates the first public showing of a motion picture on a screen in the United States. It was here, on April 23, 1896, at Koster and Bial's Music Hall, that Thomas Alva Edison presented a show that included scenes of the surf breaking on a beach, a comic boxing exhibition, and two young women dancing. A review in *The New York Times* described the exhibition as "all wonderfully real and singularly exhilarating."

The Pre-History of Motion Pictures

For centuries, people had wrestled with the problem of realistically reproducing moving images. A discovery by Ptolemy in the second century provided the first step. He noticed that there is a slight imperfection in human perception: The retina retains an image for a fraction of a second after the image has changed or disappeared. Because of this phenomenon, known as the "persistence of vision," a person would merge a rapid succession of individual images into the illusion of continuous motion.

The first successful efforts to project lifelike images on a screen took place in the mid-seventeenth century. By 1659, a Dutch scientist named Christiaen Huygens had invented the magic lantern, the forerunner of the modern slide projector, which he used to project medical drawings before an audience. A magic lantern used sunlight (or another light source) to illuminate a hand-painted glass transparency

and project it through a simple lens. In the 1790s, the Belgian Etienne Gaspar Robert terrified audiences with fantasmagoric exhibitions, which used magic lanterns to project images of phantoms and apparitions of the dead. By the mid-nineteenth century, illustrated lectures and dramatic readings had become common. To create the illusion of motion, magic lantern operators used multiple lanterns and mirrors to move the image.

The first true moving images appeared in the 1820s, when the concept of the persistence of vision was used to create children's toys and other simple entertainments. The thaumatrope, which appeared in 1826, was a simple disk with separate images printed on each side (for example, a bird on one side and a cage on another). When rapidly spun, the images appeared to blend together (so that the bird seemed to be inside the cage). In 1834, an Austrian military officer, Baron Franz von Uchatius, developed a more sophisticated device called the "Phenakistoscope." It consisted of a disk, with a series of slots along its edge, which was printed with a series of slightly differing pictures. When the disk was spun in front of a mirror and the viewer looked through the slots, the pictures appeared to move. A simpler way to display movement was the flip book, which became popular by the late 1860s. Each page showed a subject in a subtly different position. When a reader flipped the book's pages, the pictures gave the illusion of movement.

These early devices were not very satisfactory. The slides used in early magic lanterns had to be painted by hand. The pictures displayed by the Phenakistoscope or flip books could not be viewed by more than one person at a time. The solution to these problems lay in photography. In 1826, the French inventor Joseph Nicephore Niepce made the first true photograph. He placed a camera obscura (a box with a tiny opening on one side that admitted light) at his window and for eight hours exposed a metal plate coated with light-sensitive chemicals. During the 1830s, another French inventor, Louis Daguerre, improved Niepce's technique and created the daguerreotype, the first popular form of photography.

The dauguerreotype was not very useful to the inventors who wanted to produce motion pictures. The process used expensive copper plates coated with silver and required a subject to remain motionless for fifteen to thirty seconds. During the mid-nineteenth century, however, two technical advances improved the photographic process. Copper plates were replaced with less expensive glass plates, light-sensitive paper, and, in 1880, flexible film. New film coatings significantly reduced exposure time and gave photographers greater mobility. By the late 1870s, the introduction of "dry-process plates" using gelatin emulsion reduced exposure time to just one twenty-fifth of a second and freed photographers from having to process their prints immediately.

The first successful photographs of motion grew out of a California railroad tycoon's $25,000 wager. In 1872, California Governor Leland Stanford hired a photographer named Eadweard Muybridge to help settle a bet. An avid horse breeder, Stanford had wagered that a galloping horse lifts all four hoofs off the ground simultaneously. In 1878, the English-born photographer lined up twenty-four cameras along the edge of a race track, with strings attached to the shutters. The horse ran by, tripping the shutters, and the twenty-four closely spaced pictures proved Stanford's contention.

Four years later, a French physiologist, Etienne-Jules Marey, became the first

person to take pictures of motion with a single camera. Marey built his camera in the shape of a rifle. At the end of the barrel, he placed a circular photographic plate. A small motor rotated the plate after Marey snapped the shutter. With his camera, Marey could take twelve pictures a second.

In 1887, Thomas Edison gave William K.L. Dickson, one of his leading inventors, the task of developing a motion picture apparatus. Edison envisioned a machine "that should do for the eye what the phonograph did for the ear." Dickson initially modelled his device on Edison's phonograph, placing tiny pictures on a revolving drum. A light inside the drum was supposed to illuminate the pictures. Then he decided to use the flexible celluloid film that George Eastman had invented in 1880 and had begun to use in his Kodak camera. Dickson added perforations to the edge of the film strip to help it feed evenly into his camera.

To display their films, Dickson and Edison devised a coin-operated peepshow device called a "kinetoscope." Because the kinetoscope could only hold fifty feet of film, its films lasted from just thirty-five to forty seconds. This was too brief to tell a story; the first kinetoscope films were simply scenes of everyday life, like the first film "Fred Ott's Sneeze," reenactments of historical events, photographed bits of vaudeville routines, and pictures of well-known celebrities. Nevertheless, the kinetoscope was an instant success. By 1894, coin-operated kinetoscopes had begun to appear in hotels, department stores, saloons, and amusement arcades called nickelodeons.

Eager to maximize his profits, Edison showed no interest in building a movie projector. "If we make this screen machine," he argued, ". . . it will spoil everything." As a result, Edison's competitors would take the lead in developing screen projection.

In devising a practical movie projector, inventors faced a serious technical problem: the projector had to be capable of stopping a frame momentarily, so that the image could be clearly fixed in the viewer's retina, and then advance the film quickly between frames. Two French brothers—Auguste and Louis Lumiere—solved this problem. They borrowed the design of their stop-action device from the sewing machine, which holds the material still during stitching before advancing it forward. In 1894, the Lumiere brothers introduced the portable motion picture camera and projector.

Finally recognizing the potential of the motion picture projector, Edison entered into an agreement with a Washington, D.C. realtor, Thomas Armat, who had designed a workable projector. In April, 1896, the two men unveiled the Vitascope and presented the first motion pictures on a public screen in the United States.

Competition in the early movie industry was fierce. Aiming to force their competitors out of the industry, moviemakers turned to the courts, launching over two hundred patent infringement suits. To protect their profits and bring order to the industry, Edison and a number of his competitors decided to cooperate by establishing the Motion Picture Patents Company in 1909, consisting of six American companies and two French firms. Members of the trust agreed that only they had the right to make, print, or distribute cameras, projectors, or films. The trust also negotiated an exclusive agreement with Eastman Kodak for film stock of commercial quality. Led by Carl Laemmle, later the founder of Universal Pictures, independent distributors and exhibitors filed a restraint of trade lawsuit under the