
BACKGROUND BOOKS

THE MOVIES IN AMERICA

"The coming of the motion picture," newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst once said, "was as important as that of the printing press."

Hearst, as was his wont, exaggerated a bit. But during its humble beginnings in a Menlo Park, N.J., laboratory, nobody could have guessed what an enormous impact on Americans' fantasies, mores, and morals the motion picture would have—least of all its inventor, the redoubtable Thomas Alva Edison.

Edison and his assistant, William Dickson, at first saw the moving picture as something to accompany music from Edison's phonograph, notes Emory University's David A. Cook in **A History of Narrative Film** (Norton, 1981). So they experimented with ways of putting pictures on rotating cylinders like Edison's early audio records. In the process, they created the world's first motion picture "star," a burly Menlo Park mechanic named Frederick Ott, who shamelessly hammed it up in front of the camera dressed in a white sheet belted around his middle.

In 1889, Dickson came up with the idea of putting pictures on a single film strip with sprocket holes on each side, and the Kinetograph was born. (Edison and Dickson stuck with their star: Their first picture was called *Fred Ott's Sneeze*.) In most of its essentials, it was the predecessor of the modern movie. With one crucial exception.

The Kinetograph did not project pictures on a screen; it was a peepshow. And Edison did not think enough of the machine's potential to pay the \$150 needed for an international copyright. Seizing the opportunity, Auguste and Louis Lumière, of Lyon, France, adapted Edison's technology and invented a projection system, the Cinématographe. Other projectors followed, including Edison's Kinetoscope.

So quickly did American film-makers churn out new movies that by 1926, Terry Ramsaye, a journalist turned newsreel producer, could offer up a serious 868-page study of the American cinema, **A Million and One Nights: A History of the Motion Picture** (Simon & Schuster, 1926). "For the first time in the history of the world," Ramsaye observed, "an art has sprouted, grown up, and blossomed in so brief a time that one person might stand by and see it happen."

Arthur Knight's **The Liveliest Art: A Panoramic History of the Movies** (Macmillan, 1957; rev. ed., 1978), living up to its title, is the best popular survey of film history through the late 1970s.

After attracting curious throngs during their first years, Knight recalls, movies were relegated to the clean-up spot in vaudeville revues. Most were novelty items, running no longer than a minute. Then, in 1903, Edwin S. Porter filmed one of the first coherent cinematic narratives, *The Great Train Robbery*, and before long, movies were everywhere.

American film-makers soon began to head West, to the sunshine of Burbank and Hollywood, where year-round outdoor filming was possible. In the beginning, the locals were not happy to see them. Los Angeles boarding houses hung signs that read, "Rooms to Rent—No Dogs or Actors."

The rest, as they say, is history.

Most of the insider chronicles of Hollywood's Golden Age have been lost among the countless exposés and kiss-and-tell memoirs that bring in profits for booksellers. For a distillation, consult **Hollywood on Hollywood: Tinsel Town Talks** (Faber & Faber, 1985, paper), an entertaining compendium of words wise and otherwise by Hollywood's notables, collected by freelance writer Doug McClelland.

"I am paid not to think," said a straight-faced Clark Gable, commenting on the studio system's control over his acting career. The first words Fay Wray heard about her role in *King Kong*: "You will have the tallest, darkest leading man in Hollywood." On the semi-serious side, studio boss Louis B. Mayer suggested in 1937 that Hollywood's celluloid creations were "important to world peace."

In recent years, film scholars have moved away from the "great man" view of Hollywood, the notion that a handful of top studio executives and directors dictated the way movies would be made.

By 1920, for example, Hollywood had unconsciously defined a "proper" style of film-making and ruled out most alternatives. The results are still with us: The emphasis is on telling stories with seamless narratives, usually set in more or less realistic surroundings, with at least a few characters sure to engage the sympathies of the average moviegoer. Avant-garde directors may make statements by shooting entire films composed of one-second scenes or populated by pathetic characters; in Hollywood, such things simply are not done.

Such is the thesis of *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (Columbia, 1985) by David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, all at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

A more obvious influence on movies—at least until the 1960s—was Hollywood's self-censorship at the hands of the Production Code Board (1930-68), better known as the Hays Office. Jack Vizzard's account of his years on the

board, *See No Evil: Life inside a Hollywood Censor* (Simon & Schuster, 1970) is an engaging, sympathetic look at the censors' work.

The Hays Office worried not only about nudity, blasphemy, and profanity (among the taboo words were "cripes" and "fanny") but about plots that seemed to let sinners and malefactors off too lightly. The war between the censors and the studios was unrelenting. One story has it that a screenwriter once tweaked the censors by penning the stage direction: "From offstage, we hear the scream of a naked woman."

Vizzard admits the excesses and absurdities of the old censorship, but he laments that under the industry's current rating system (G, PG, PG-13, R, X), just about anything goes, if it sells tickets.

Of all the many writers who have journeyed to Hollywood in search of fat scriptwriting fees, only F. Scott Fitzgerald, in his unfinished portrait of *The Last Tycoon* (Scribner's, 1941, cloth; 1983, paper), has written a lasting novel about movieland.

The problem for novelists may be that it is very difficult to wrap an illusion around an illusion. As David Lees and Stan Berkowitz note in *The Movie Business* (Random, 1981, cloth & paper), even Hollywood's palm trees, its brick and concrete, are deceptive. "The uninformed," they write, "show up at Hollywood and Vine and see nothing but tacky tourist traps and hookers of both sexes breathing in a lot of brown smog. Visitors find it hard to imagine that at that very corner, and nearby as well, movies are happening."



EDITOR'S NOTE: *Many of the titles in this essay were suggested by Douglas Gomery.*