Film Art and Film History

Not everything is possible at all times.” This aphorism of art historian Heinrich Wölfflin might serve as a slogan for our final chapter. So far, our survey of film art has examined various formal and stylistic possibilities, and we've drawn our examples from the entire range of film history. But film forms and techniques don't exist in a timeless realm; equally accessible to all filmmakers in particular historical circumstances, certain possibilities are present while others are not. Griffith could not make films as Godard does, nor could Godard make films as Griffith did. This chapter asks: What are some ways in which film art has been treated in particular historical contexts?

These contexts will be defined, first by period and then by nation. Although there are other equally good methods for tracing change, period and nation remain traditional ways of organizing historical problems. Second, in some of our cases, we'll look for what are typically called film movements. A film movement consists of two elements:

1. Films that are produced within a particular period and nation and that share significant traits of style and form.

2. Filmmakers who operate within a common production structure and who share certain assumptions about filmmaking.

There are other ways of defining a historical context (for example, biographical studies, genre studies), but the category of movement comes closest to the emphasis of this book. The concepts of formal and stylistic systems permit us to compare films within a movement and to contrast them with films of other movements.

Our range of choice will be narrowed still further. We're concerned with Hollywood and selected alternatives. We'll trace the development of the commercial narrative cinema while contrasting it to other approaches in style and form.

Since a film movement consists of not only films but also the activities of specific filmmakers, we must go beyond noting stylistic and formal qualities. For each period and nation, we'll also sketch relevant factors that affect the cinema. These factors include the state of the film industry, artistic currents held by the filmmakers themselves, prominent technological features, and cultural and economic
elements. These factors necessarily help explain how a particular movement began, why some shaped its development, and why it declined. This material will also provide a context for particular films we’ve already discussed; for example, the following section on early cinema situates Lumière and Méliès in their period.

Needless to say, what follows is chronologically incomplete. As the writing of serious film history is in its early stages, and we must often rely on secondary sources that will eventually be superseded. This chapter reflects only current states of knowledge: there are, as always, important films, filmmakers, and movements that remain undiscovered. Moreover, there are many unfortunate omissions: important filmmakers who don’t relate to the movement that, for example, Toni, Bresson, and Kurosawa are absent, as are certain important film movements, such as French postwar cinema of the 1950s and Brazil’s Cinema Novo movement of the early 1960s. What follows simply seeks to show how certain possibilities in film form and style were explored within a few typical and well-known historical periods.

Early Cinema (1893–1903)

In order to create the illusion of movement, still pictures must appear in rapid succession. To prepare their and display them to the right rate, certain technologies are necessary. Most basically, there must be a way of recording a long series of images on some sort of support. In principle, one could simply draw a string of images on a strip of paper or a disc. But photography offered the cheapest and most efficient way to generate the thousands of images needed for a reasonably lengthy display. Thus the invention of photography in 1839 launched a series of disc events that made cinema possible.

Early photographs required lengthy exposures (tens of hours, later minutes) for a single image; this made photographs motion pictures, which need 12 or more frames per second, impossible. Faster exposures, of about 1/25 second, became possible by the 1870s, but only on glass plates. Glass plates weren’t suitable for motion pictures because there was no effective way to move them through a camera or projector. In 1878, Eadweard Muybridge, an American photographer, did make a series of photographs of a running horse by using a series of cameras with glass plate film and fast exposures. But he was primarily interested in freezing phases of an action, not in creating the movement by projecting the images in succession.

In 1882, another scientist interested in analyzing animal movement, the Frenchman Etienne-Jules Marey, invented a camera that recorded 12 separate images on the edge of a revolving disc or film or glass. This constituted a step toward the motion picture camera. In 1888, Marey built the first camera to use a strip of flexible film, rather than paper. Again, the purpose was not to break down movement into separate stills but the movement photographed lasted a second or less.

In 1890, George Eastman introduced a cheap, flexible film base, celluloid. Once the base was improved, and camera mechanisms had been developed to show the film, the 1882 and exposure to 1/25 of a second on long strips of frames became possible.

Projection had existed for many years and had been used to show slides and other shadow entertainments. Those early lanterns were modified by the addition of shutters, cranks, and other devices to become early motion picture projectors.

One that device was created in 1889 and was made of the projector. Since the film strip is wound on the spool, it is possible to feed it through a slot at the side of the frame. The light shines through the film, and as the frame advances, a print is made on it. The film then passes through a series of rollers and is cut by a knife or razor. The film is then wound onto the reel and the process is repeated.

The combination of a flexible, transparent film base, a fast exposure time, a mechanism to pull the film, and a camera, an intermittent device to stop the film, and a series to capture the film was achieved by the early 1890s. After several
years, inventors working independently in many countries had developed flat-bed cameras and projector devices. The two most important firms were the Edison Manufacturing Company in America, owned by inventor Thomas A. Edison, and Lumiére brothers in France, the brothers Louis and Auguste Lumiére.

By 1893, Thomas A. Edison's assistant, W.K.L. Dickson, had developed a camera that made short 35mm films. Interested in exploiting these films as a novelty, Edison hoped to combine them with his phonograph to show motion pictures. He had Dickson devise a special projection machine, the Kinetograph (12.2), to display these films to individual viewers.

Since Edison believed that images were a passing fad, he did not develop a system to project films onto a screen. This was left to the Lumiére brothers. They invented their own camera independently, at exposed a film roll of 35mm film and also patented it as a projector (12.2). On December 28, 1895, the Lumiére brothers held one of the first public showings of motion pictures projected onto a screen, at the Grande Café in Paris.

There had been several earlier public screenings, including one on November 1 of the same year, by the German inventor Max Skladanowsky. But Skladanowsky's bulky machine required two strips of wide-gauge film running simultaneously and hence had little influence on the subsequent technological development of the cinema. Although the Lumière brothers didn't totally invent cinema, they largely determined the format for the new medium and established Kinematograph and formed their own movie company to make films for theaters.

The first films were extremely simple in form and style. They consisted of a single shot framing an action, usually at a short distance. In the first film studio, Edison's Black Maria (12.3), vaudeville entertainers, farm sports figures, and celebrities, for example, Annie Oakley, performed for the camera. A machine produced the film on a roll and rarefied air with the camera, and the entire building turned on a central axis to follow the camera's motion. The Lumière brothers, however, took their cameras to paris, gardens, scenes, and other public places to film everyday activities or news events as in their Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat (15.5).

Until about 1913, most films showed scenic places or noteworthy events, and narrative form also entered the cinema. From the beginning, Edison staged comic
scenes, such as one enragé, 1895 in which a drunken man struggles with a policeman. The Lumière made a popular short A Journey around the World (1895), also a comic scene in which a boy tricks a gardener into squinting himself with a lens (14.3).

After the initial success of the new medium, filmmakers had to find more complex or interesting cinematic properties to keep the public's interest. The Lumière's camera operated all over the world to show films and to photograph important events and exotic locales. But after making a large number of films in their first few years, the Lumière reduced their output and they ceased filmmaking altogether in 1898.

In 1896, Georges Méliès purchased a projector from the British inventor Robert William Paul and soon built a camera based on the same mechanism. Méliès's first films resembled the Lumière's shots of everyday activities, but as we have seen (pp. 113-115), Méliès was a magician and he discovered the possibilities of simple special effects. In 1897, Méliès built his own studio. Unlike Paul's Black Maria, Méliès's studio was glass instead of like a green screen, so the studio did not have to move with the sun (124).

Méliès also began to build elaborate sets and create fantasy worlds within which his magic transformations could occur. We have already seen how Méliès thereby became the first member of the cinema's special effects section (13.3-4). From the simple effect of a magician performing tricks in a magic lantern, Méliès progressed to longer narratives with a series of tableaux. Each consisted of one shot, except when the transformations occurred. These were created by Méliès, designed to be imperceptible on the screen. He also adapted old stories, such as The Flying Dutchman (1897), to make them his own. All these features made Méliès's films extremely popular and widely imitated.

During this early period, films circulated freely from country to country. The Pathé Frères imported increasingly from filmmaking from 1911 on, establishing production and distribution branches in many countries. Soon it was the largest film concern in the world, a position it retained until 1914 when the beginning of World War I forced it to cut back production. In England, several entrepreneurs managed to invent or obtain their own filmmaking equipment and made scenes, narratives, and trick films from 1895 into the early years of the 20th century.
The Development of the Classical Hollywood Cinema (1908–1927)

Edison was determined to exploit the money-making potential of his company's invention. He took to force competing filmmakers out of business by bringing patent violation suits against them. One other company, American Mutoscope & Biograph, managed to survive by inventing cameras that differed from Edison's patents. Other firms kept operating while Edison sought them in court. In 1908, Edison bought Biograph to bring three other companies under control by forming the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC), a group of 13 firms based primarily in Chicago, New York, and New Jersey. Edison and Biograph were the only stockholders and patent owners. They hired other members to make, distribute, and exhibit films.

The MPPC never succeeded in eliminating its competition. Numerous independent companies were established throughout this period. Biograph's most important director from 1908 on, D. W. Griffith, formed his own company in 1913, as did other filmmakers. The United States government brought suit against the MPPC in 1912; in 1915, it was declared a monopoly.

Around 1910, film companies began to move permanently to California. Some historians claim that the independent companies fled west to avoid the harassment of the MPPC; but some MPPC companies also moved there. Among the advantages of Hollywood were the climate, which permitted shooting year-round, and the great variety of terrain—mountains, seas, desert, city, available for location shooting. Soon Hyperion and other recent arrivals on the outskirts of Los Angeles began to film production.

The demand for films was so great that no single studio could meet it. This was one of the factors that led Edison to agree to the existence of a group of other companies, although he tried to control them through his licensing procedure. Before 1920, the American industry assumed the structure that would continue for decades—a few large studios with individual artists under contract, and a peripatetic group of small independent producers. In Hollywood, the studio developed a highly organized system with each production under the control of the producer, who usually did not work on the actual making of the films. Even an independent director such as Buster Keaton, with his own studio, had a business manager and distribution firm to distribute his films through larger companies, like Metro and other United Artists.

Gradually, through the 1910s and 1920s, the smaller studios merged to form the large firms that still exist today. Famous Players, joined with Jesse L. Lasky and then formed a distribution wing, Paramount. By the late 1920s, most of the major companies—MCM (a merger of Metro, Goldwyn, and Mayer), Fox Film Corporation (merged with 20th Century in 1935), Warner Bros., Universal, and Paramount—had been formed. Though in competition with one another, these studios tended to cooperate to a degree, realizing that no one firm could satisfy the market.
Within this system of mass production studios, the American cinema became a definitively Americanized mass entertainment form. Early films had consisted primarily of tableaux or vaudeville sketches. One of Edison's directors, Edwin S. Porter, made some of the first films to use principles of narrative economy and development. Among these were The Life of an American Family (1903) and One of the Firemen (1903), which featured a scene of a single fireman fighting a fire with a hose. The film was a form of cinema verité, a genre that emphasizes the immediacy and spontaneity of the event. Porter's work was noted for its dramatic tension and its ability to convey the hero's struggle against the forces of nature.

In 1903, Porter made The Great Train Robbery, in some ways a precursor to the classic American film. The film follows the story of a man, woman, and child who are taken hostage by a gang. The narrative is divided into several episodes, each of which is marked by a change of scene or a new character. The film is notable for its use of montage and its ability to convey the hero's struggle against the forces of nature. Porter's work was noted for its dramatic tension and its ability to convey the hero's struggle against the forces of nature.

In 1906, D.W. Griffith began his directing career. The next five years, he would make hundreds of one- and two-reelers, running about 15 and 30 minutes, respectively. These films were relatively complex narratives in their own right, and none of these techniques were used in the early films. Griffith's early work was notable for its use of montage and its ability to convey the hero's struggle against the forces of nature. His work was noted for its dramatic tension and its ability to convey the hero's struggle against the forces of nature.

The development of narrative techniques in the early cinema was a result of the efforts of a number of prominent filmmakers of the period. One of these was Thomas H. Ince, a producer and director responsible for many films between 1910 and the end of World War I. He devised a film system, whereby a single producer could oversee the making of several films at once. He also worked on narrative techniques, with his direction of The Birth of a Nation (1915) and The Birth of a Nation (1915) being good examples of his use of montage. Ince's films were widely influential. In addition, his use of montage was a result of the need to train his actors in the method of motion pictures. His films were widely influential. In addition, his use of montage was a result of the need to train his actors in the method of motion pictures. His films were widely influential. In addition, his use of montage was a result of the need to train his actors in the method of motion pictures. His films were widely influential. In addition, his use of montage was a result of the need to train his actors in the method of motion pictures. His films were widely influential. In addition, his use of montage was a result of the need to train his actors in the method of motion pictures. His films were widely influential. In addition, his use of montage was a result of the need to train his actors in the method of motion pictures. His films were widely influential. In addition, his use of montage was a result of the need to train his actors in the method of motion pictures. His films were widely influential. In addition, his use of montage was a result of the need to train his actors in the method of motion pictures. His films were widely influential. In addition, his use of montage was a result of the need to train his actors in the method of motion pictures. His films were widely influential. In addition, his use of montage was a result of the need to train his actors in the method of motion pictures. His films were widely influential. In addition, his use of montage was a result of the need to train his actors in the method of motion pictures. His films were widely influential. In addition, his use of montage was a result of the need to train his actors in the method of motion pictures. His films were widely influential. In addition, his use of montage was a result of the need to train his actors in the method of motion pictures. His films were widely influential. In addition, his use of montage was a result of the need to train his actors in the method of motion pictures. His films were widely influential. In addition, his use of montage was a result of the need to train his actors in the method of motion pictures. His films were widely influential. In addition,
ence, the glass roofed studios of the earlier period began to give way to studios dependent on artificial lighting, rather than direct daylight and electric lighting. The change was speeded up by the advent of “interior” with only one or two bright sources of light and no fill light. According to legend, DeMille instructed his stagehands to mount his lighting equipment and light his sets as if he were shooting under “interior” lighting. This so-called “interior” or “single light” lighting was to become par for the classical period of lighting techniques. The Chey also greatly impressed the long-fingered Shakespearian illuminators, who occasionally used similar stark lighting effects.

Like many American films of the teens, The Cheat also uses a linear pattern of narrative. The first scene (12.9) introduces the lead character by not establishing the Japanese businessman's identity; he seems to be a sort of omniscient observer. This scene is a bit long, and it is not clear what the purpose of the scene is, as it seems to be a transition scene. The next scene is a bit more engaging, as the Japanese businessman is shown making a speech in front of a large audience.

*King Vidor, director recutting the night before he began directing his first film in 1912*

12.9 The opening scene of The Cheat introduces the lead character.

12.10 That scene later when the man speaks the moment.

12.11 In the New York Times, the lead character is long-shoted, but the group ends to ...
with a similar division of labor at each. Independent production was less important. Some independent firms made low-budget films, often Westerns, for small and rural theaters. Even powerful Hollywood stars and producers had trouble remaining independent. Keaton gave up his small studio in 1926 to go to MGM under contract; there his career declined, partly because of the incompatibility of his old working methods with the rapid production patterns of the huge studio. Griffith, Mary Pickford, Fairbanks, and Charlie Chaplin were better off. Forming a distributing corporation of their own, United Artists, in 1919, they were able to continue independent production at small companies under their umbrella corporation, though Griffith's company, United Artists, failed, and the careers of Fairbanks and Pickford declined soon after the introduction of sound.

There were alternative kinds of films being made during the silent era—in most of them in other countries. After examining these alternative movements, we'll return to consider the classic Hollywood cinema after the coming of sound.

German Expressionism (1919–1926)

At the start of World War I, the output of the German film industry was relatively small, though some impressive pictures had been made there. Germany's 2000 movie theaters were playing mostly French, American, Italian, and Danish films. Although America and France banned German films from their screens immediately, Germany was not even in a subtle enough position to ban French and American films. For then the theaters would have had little to show.

To combat imports and cooperation, as well as to create its own propaganda films, the German government began to support the film industry. In 1916, film imports were banned except from neutral Denmark. Production increased rapidly. From 200 small companies in 1910, the number grew to 131 by 1918. But government policy encouraged these companies to band together into cartels.

The war was unpopular with many in Germany, and labor shortages increased after the success of the Russian Revolution in 1917. Widespread strikes and Inspontaneous protests were organized during the winter of 1916–1917. To promote pro-war films, the government, the Deutsche Bank, and large industrial concerns combined several small film firms to create the large company UFA in late 1917. Backed by these essentially conservative interests, UFA was able to gain control of not only the German market but the postwar international market as well.

With this huge financial backing, UFA was able to gather top talent and build the best-equipped studios in Europe. These studios later attracted foreign filmmakers, including the young Alfred Hitchcock. During the 1920s, Germany coproduced many films with companies in other countries, thus helping to spread German-styled influence abroad.