

Lecture 7 - Hollywood in the Thirties

- I. An industry emerges
 - The Studio Era
 - "The golden age of Hollywood"
 - Stars and genres
- II. Strains of comedy
 - Anarchic
 - Worldly
- III. Screwball comedy

Disclaimer: *The following notes were taken by a student during the Fall 2006 term; they are not Prof. Thorburn's own notes.*

- An Industry Emerges: Now we are leaving the silent era, with synchronous sound.
 - This is the great cut-off – the moment of seismic change.
 - Things had to be radically reorganized
 - I don't think, however, that this is such a large change as the change that occurs when television enters the scene.
 - But it definitely felt like a revolution to Hollywood at the time.
 - The systems created in the silent era were fortified and expanded during the era of sound.
 - The infrastructure, control,
 - Large amounts of money were spent by the movie industry as they geared up for sound.
 - Remember, the return to silent film with Modern times had a profound nostalgic effect.
 - The complexity generated by the movies had already been internalized by the audiences of the time.
- "The Studio Era"
 - Remember, people watched the movies all the time, habitually
 - For example, in 1938, 67% of the American population went to the movies each week
 - In 1968, it's only 10% each week
 - This represents a profound transformation in how audiences interacted with films
 - Specific genres had developed, and audiences expected particular things from those genres.
 - It was a gigantic industry, employing tens of thousands of individuals
 - There were many studios, and they were well known, with their own reputations for certain kinds of movies and certain specialties. (There were

five major studios, with 75% of the revenue between them (MGM, Paramount, Warner Brothers, 20th Century Fox, and RKO)

- It appealed across age, gender, race, class divisions... the movies were the national entertainment system.
- The stars became even more important, with even bigger, more famous names, during this era.
 - The philosophy of acting that developed was one where stars played variations on a theme, so that their own personality came through, with recognizable characters.
- Strains of Comedy in the 1930s
 - Westerns were in some sense trivialized in the 1930s, because they started using sound and music in strange, gimmicky ways
 - In other genres, however, the new premium on top was very beneficial
 - Signature strains:
 - Anarchic
 - The Marx brothers fall into this category
 - The plot and character isn't so important
 - There is a lot of destructiveness, subversive playfulness
 - A reduced, less well-developed version of this sort of comedy survived in the Three Stooges.
 - W.C. Fields was a writer of this sort of comedy. He often played a drunk in his roles, unfriendly to children and dogs.
 - European comedy
 - This is artistically more interesting
 - There was a European attitude towards sexual discretion
 - Many of the Hollywood directors who created this sort of film were themselves transplanted Europeans, often Germans
 - Screwball comedy
 - This is the form that was dominant.
- Screwball comedy
 - This was a distinctive American creation
 - It derives from Broadway farces of the 1920s, and from the slapstick comedies of the
 - Some characteristic features: Profound irreverent humor, very fast-paced dialogue, slapstick comedy intermixed with a new emphasis on well-developed character
 - It was very often about the differences in the social classes, and it was often very mocking and satiric of the high-born characters (remember, it developed during the depression)
 - The films reflect the social disorientation that was characteristic of the depression

- This genre created extremely powerful women, and they were the first films to create dominant female characters, who were more important than their corresponding male characters in the same films.
- Clip: from “Bringing Up Baby,” 1938
- These movies had a lot to do with the carnal, physical relations between men and women.
- Clip: from “Ball of Fire,” 1942