
THE MESSAGE AND THE MOVIES

CINEMA AS IDEOLOGY

Week 1: The Great War and The Great Depression

Wings (1927) *It Happened One Night* (1934) and *Modern Times* (1936)

Hollywood and The Military

The US Department of Defense (DOD) and Military have worked hand in hand with Hollywood since its inception

*“Government and corporate bureaucracies such as the Pentagon (Department of Defense, or DOD) have public relations divisions, which ensures special access to the media. Film-makers have made use of military advice and material to save costs and create authentic looking films since the early twentieth century – including the Ku Klux Klan-recruitment classic *Birth of a Nation* (1915)”*

Alford, M. (2010) p.9

And while this relationship which allows filmmakers the use of expensive military hardware, thus offering magnificent screen spectacles, is good for business, it of course comes at a price. The use of planes, helicopters and even warships is proffered on the strict understanding that the film will –

*“...uphold the integrity of the men and women in uniform and the ability to do their job.” As stated by Matthew Alford in his excellent book *Reel Power* “...the film industry routinely promotes the dubious notion that the United States is a benevolent force in world affairs and that unleashing its military strength overseas has positive results for humanity.”*

Though these fairly terrifying implications should chill the blood of most right-minded people, the general populace has managed not to think about it, seeing what's on-screen as simply the acceptable face of Hollywood.

Apocalypse Now (1979)

Shot in the Philippines. Not only did it afford the production crew with many Vietnam-like locations, it crucially allowed Coppola access to US military equipment via Philippine dictator Marcos.

And it is hard, when watching the completed feature, not to concede that the US army is being sold as a belligerent 'other'. In one famous scene set to the uproarious score of Wagener's *Ride of the Valkyries*, low-flying choppers appear on the horizon as green steel dragons. Loaded to the gills with guns and ammo, they napalm a small peasant village of civilians into extinction with deadly fiery breath.

The first Oscar winner *Wings* (1927) was produced hand-in-hand with the US War Department

Wings (1927)

With a story by John Monk Saunders, director William A. Wellman was the only director in Hollywood at the time who had World War I combat pilot experience. Actor Richard Arlen and writer John Monk Saunders had also served in World War I as military aviators. Arlen was able to do his own flying in the film and Rogers, a non-pilot, underwent flight training during the course of the production, so that, like Arlen, Rogers could also be filmed in close-up in the air. Stunt pilot Dick Grace broke his neck falling out of the cockpit after a controlled crash.

The fatal crash of an Army Air Service pilot. Wellman soon realized that Kelly Field did not have the adequate numbers of planes or skilled pilots to perform the needed aerial maneuvers, and he had to request technical assistance and a supply of planes and pilots from Washington. The Air Corps sent six planes and pilots from the 1st Pursuit Group stationed at Selfridge Field near Detroit. 2d Lt. Clarence S. "Bill" Irvine became Wellman's adviser. Irvine was responsible for engineering an airborne camera system to provide close-ups and for the planning of the dogfights

It became the first Best Picture Oscar winner. It also included Hollywood's first male on male kiss.

'...Richard Arlen and Charles "Buddy" Rogers have a more meaningful relationship with each other than either of them has with Jobyna Ralston or Clara Bow, both token love interests whom male adolescents all over America correctly identified as "the boring parts" of the movie. In fact, Arlen and Rogers have the only real love scene in Wings and Rogers learns the true meaning of love through his relationship with his buddy...'

Russo, V. (1981) p.71-72

"Wings is...a man's picture and I'm just the whipped cream on top of the pie"

Clara Bow

Charlie Chaplin

- Came from a background of extreme hardship and poverty
- Was forced into a workhouse when he was nine
- Separated from his mother
- His father was a chronic alcoholic and died at 38
- Chaplin struggled with extreme poverty for much of his childhood

"His was one of the most genuine 'rags to riches' stories that ever was."

The Tramp

'...I thought I would dress in baggy pants, big shoes, a cane and a derby hat. I wanted everything a contradiction: the pants baggy, the coat tight, the hat small, the shoes large...I added a small moustache, which, I reasoned would add age without hiding my expression...I had no idea of the character...I began to know him and by the time I walked onto the stage he was fully born.'

Charlie Chaplin

Between 1913-17 Chaplin/The Tramp became the most famous 'star' on the planet. In this period, the age of automatic deference was coming to an end. The ideology was being challenged. America had a massive wave of strikes. A major symbol of opposition to the factory system was the image of the tramp. In February 1914, a mob of 700 tramps took over a church in Manhattan – demanding food and shelter. This was followed by a mass rally of the industrial workers of the world. Chaplin was an intelligent man – he would have been keenly aware of the significance. The Character of The Tramp became so popular that he was allowed to make his own films for the company

United Artists

In 1919, Chaplin, alongside partners Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford, and D. W. Griffith formed United Artists, a brand-new distribution company. This effectively freed Chaplin from the constraints of what would later become the so called 'star system'. The move also led to him being treated to further scrutiny by establishment figures, who perhaps realized what they feared most of all was a subversive film maker, who now owned the means to his own production.

- Chaplin became one of the first 'auteurs'
- Would take much longer to make films – often filming take after take
- Perfection was key
- This, in an age when even second takes were extremely rare
- He would not only direct, produce and star, he also learned to play various instruments, so he could produce music for films too.
- He went on to become one of the most successful 'rebels' the world had ever seen
- '...films were always for the underdog'

City Lights (1931)

The Great Depression and its devastating social effects, the widening gap between the super wealthy and forgotten working class is sharply observed in this ‘comedy romance in pantomime’.

Modern Times (1936)

But it's with *Modern Times*, where Chaplin, already monitored closely by the FBI, for his perceived communist allegiances, would succeed in creating one of the most subversive and anti-establishment Hollywood films of the early 20th century.

...I remembered an interview I had with a bright young reporter on the New York World. Hearing that I was visiting Detroit, he had told me of the factory-belt system there – a harrowing story of big industry luring healthy young men off the farms who, after four of five years at the belt system became nervous wrecks’

Charlie Chaplin

The first thing we see in *Modern Times* (1936) is a clock, the second hand moves quickly and menacingly about the art deco time piece as the credits appear and a nosily constructed orchestral stab, a musical version of the factory siren, wakes us from our day dreams. It's time for work. We cut to a shot of herded sheep which quickly dissolves into scene of city workers, rammed against each other, in the Bedlam like morning rush to ride the subway to the nightmarish conveyor belts which await.

We are quickly introduced to the Kafkaesque environment of the factory floor, where slave driving bosses appear Big Brother like on huge monitor screens to castigate lack of productivity and rage at the criminality of over long toilet breaks. We see a young worker being unwillingly served food by a time saving device, which prefigures, albeit comically, the disturbing Ludovico scene from Kubrick's later *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), and in one cinematically iconic moment, the Little Tramp is quite literally fed into the machine, in a beautifully rendered yet scarily symbolic attack on a psychotic form of ever hungry capitalism.

Also in the film, we are introduced to the skin and bones beauty of the urchin like Paulette Goddard. When we first meet her, billed only as ‘The Gamine’ we gate crash into her pathetic and motherless family set up, one ravaged by the mass unemployment which envelops their grim industrial environment.

Later, after escaping from a paddy wagon, the pair set up home together, no more than a chaotic, half-collapsing shack on the edge of town, a harsh metaphorical reminder of where ‘decent society’ places them – i.e. a problem best forgotten about.

Although the shack set up supplies us with some of the most touching scenes of the film, they also, on closer examination, offer us something much more tragic. That two people should have been challenged so cruelly by a morally bankrupt system, that they have grown to accept their ramshackle existence, with its scraps of food and little else, is in some respects deeply disturbing and arguably Chaplin at his subversive best.

...the theme is about two nondescripts trying to get along in modern times. They are involved in the Depression, strikes, riots and unemployment.’

Charlie Chaplin

- Hailed as one of his greatest achievements
- Extreme poverty – convincingly portrayed
- Exploitation
- The ‘madness’ of the capitalist system
- The hypocrisy of the expectation for ordinary people to be happy with their poverty
- Rebellion
- The last appearance of ‘The Tramp’

'Modern Times is perhaps more meaningful now than at any time since its first release. The twentieth-century theme of the film, farsighted for its time—the struggle to eschew alienation and preserve humanity in a modern, mechanized world—profoundly reflects issues facing the twenty-first century...'

Jeffery Vance

The Pre-Code Era - 1930-1934

"That four-year interval marks a fascinating and anomalous passage in American motion picture history: the so-called pre-Code era, when censorship was lax and Hollywood made the most of it. Unlike all studio system feature films released after July 1934, pre-Code Hollywood did not adhere to the strict regulations on matters of sex, vice, violence and moral meaning...the Code commandments were violated with impunity and inventiveness in a series of wildly eccentric films..."

Doherty, T (1999) *Pre-Code Hollywood*

Pre-Code Contexts

- The Great Depression
- The nation was plunged into a crippling economic crisis
- Commercial radio came to prominence – threatening to erode the market further
- Sound technology costs were skyrocketing
- Revenues were going down

"Nobody is genuinely starving," - President Herbert Hoover

The Great Depression (1929-1939)

- There were 20 recorded cases of famine in New York City in 1931, and 110 fatalities from hunger in 1934.
- Between 1929 and 1945 there were at least 20,000 deaths due to starvation – The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)
- "Work or starve"

Work or starve. Fulsome evidence of one common experience in the Great Depression, the palpable pangs of hunger afflict screen characters across the genres, men and women alike living hand to mouth, propelled by the basic biological urge to eat, to earn not even a decent day's wages but just a square meal. Food and eating are more than leitmotifs in pre-code Hollywood; people literally faint from hunger"

Doherty, T. *Pre-Code Hollywood*

- Hordes of individuals were compelled to leave their homes during the Great Depression (1929–1939)
- Sleeping/living in box cars or under bridges
- Some found work of farms in exchange for food etc.
- Others joined criminal gangs out of desperation

American Screwball Comedy

These films acted as a forerunner to later 'Rom Coms'. They were also born out of the 'Marital Farces' of the 1920s. A natural progression from the bawdiness of Mae West and the fast-paced dialogue of The Marx Brothers

- Became popular around the same time as The Great Depression and thrived up till 1940
- Dominant female characters
- Often male lead characters have their masculinity challenged
- Battle of the sexes
- Like farce, screwball is often centred around misunderstandings or mistaken identities
- Sophistication and slapstick
- Beautiful, sexy leads
- The central couple are initially hostile to each other
- The final romantic union is often planned by the woman from the outset, while the man does not know about her intention at all.
- *'He's the man I'm going to marry. He doesn't know it, but I am'*
- Adult themes were presented more covertly
- Physical sexual tension was replaced by verbal sparring
- *'Sex comedy without the sex'* – Andrew Sarris
- Very fast paced
- Witty, overlapping dialogue
- The films were made as a response to the Hays Code

Often acted as a 'cultural release valve' – a safe background on which to explore more serious issues such as class. No coincidence that these films rose to prominence during the Great Depression. There was a demand for films with a strong social class critique. Members of the upper classes are often presented as pampered, lazy and unable to cope with reality.

'Feminist calls for equality appear to have fed into screwball comedy to some extent, although shorn of more radical demands at the political and economic levels. Screwball heroines are physically active, vital, often participating in the paid labour force and enjoying a more equal relationship with men than that found in earlier generations of film comedy...'

Geoff King

It was as fast-paced and physically raucous as the slapstick that had come before it, but made sophisticated by the shimmering promise of sex, and an unstoppable flow of densely witty dialogue. Individually, the stars of these films were gorgeous – and when paired off, many of them had the kind of chemistry that could set a cinema on fire. But they weren't afraid to tumble over a sofa, or drop face-first into the mud, if laughs could be come by in the tumbling.'

Robbie Collin

Putting the 'screw' in screwball

- 'Why are we not having sex?' – *It Happened One Night*
- 'When are we going to start having sex again?' – *His Girl Friday*

The Romantic Comedy or Screwball Comedy lives on the problem of 'not having sex'. The film is over, only when, the problem is resolved - when sex starts or resumes

'This is explicit in The Awful Truth when the boy and girl figures on the clock finally go through the same door just before "The End"; and in It Happened One Night when the Walls of Jericho come down at the same moment.'

Brian Henderson

It Happened One Night (1934)

Frank Capra

- Based on the short story *Night Bus*, by Samuel Hopkins Adams
- Bought by Columbia at Capra's request
- Riskin set about turning it into a screenplay
- Interest in the project though, was not great

- Robert Montgomery turned down the lead
- The female lead was turned down by Miriam Hopkins, Myrna Loy and Margaret Sullivan
- Clarke Gable was leant by MGM (possibly as punishment)
- Gable turned up drunk for the first meeting with Capra
- Claudette Colbert only accepted the role at the last minute, after a pay rise and the promise it would be a quick shoot
- It was filmed on a shoestring and filming only took four weeks

“I just finished the worst picture in the world.” - Claudette Colbert

Colbert and Gable did not get on, there were flare ups on set. Despite this their on-screen chemistry really sizzles. Like many of Capra’s films it deals with outsiders pretending to be something they aren’t

Characterization

Ellie Andrews

- Attempts to fit in with ‘ordinary people’
- Unware of her sense of entitlement
- She is running away from her own failures, just like Peter

Peter Warne

- Oozes swagger
- Has lost his job
- Is down to his last ten dollars
- Has to make the long journey back to New York to find work

Much of the film is set in a world of people with very little money travelling long distances. Food and money (or lack of it) play a big part in the film. We are presented with an America, which is all too real – despite its escapist overtones. Visually it shares much in common with *The Grapes of Wrath*. It begins and ends with glimpses of wealth and glamour.