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Old Hollywood: Tough Guys and Mad Dames

Rich Johnson

Week 1

INTRODUCTION: BEGINNING OF THE END

After the leading moviemakers capped off the 1930s with *Gone with the Wind*, *The Wizard of Oz* and *Wuthering Heights* in 1939, Hollywood (seemingly) had a *bright* future. However, shortly after, with the US entering WWII in 1941, studio output was defined by ‘hardboiled’ narratives that gave birth to the tough guy persona who would either be in the battlefields of Europe or wrestling with an internal battlefield often explored back home in the urban sprawl that had defined the first quarter of the 20th century. The ‘dream factory’ was, aside from the musicals holding onto any sense of optimism, becoming something far more psychological. The studios* and their notorious moguls – Louis B. Mayer (MGM), the Warner brothers (Warner Bros.), Joseph M. Schenck, Darryl F. Zanuck, Spyros Skouras and William Fox (20th Century Fox), to name a few – still lead the charge and was an interesting decade that gave birth to a forerunner of stars whose sensibilities truly set the groundwork for what was to come. We talk about how the 1940s not only shaped the tough guys but also how it portrayed women on screen. We have the gaslighting and psychological roles but, amongst early challenging performance, female talent that dared to challenge convention.

*The ‘Big 5’ studios of the Golden Age were: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, RKO, 20th Century Fox, Warner Bros., and Paramount Pictures.

Please refer to the reading list for a full reference of films.

Precursors:

Nosferatu (1922)

Director(s): F. W. Murnau

Studio(s): Decla-Film

The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920)

Director(s): Robert Wiene

Studio(s): Decla-Film

The Jazz Singer (1927)

Director(s): Alan Crosland

Studio(s): Warner Bros.



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M (1931)

Director(s): Fritz Lang

Studio(s): Nero-Film A.G.

Gone with the Wind (1939)

Director(s): Victor Fleming, George Cukor, Sam Wood

Studio(s): Selznick International Pictures / Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

The Wizard of Oz (1939)

Director(s): Victor Fleming, King Vidor

Studio(s): Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

Wuthering Heights (1939)

Director(s): William Wyler

Studio(s): The Samuel Goldwyn Company

Main:

Double Indemnity (1944)

Director(s): Billy Wilder

Studio(s): Paramount Pictures

Story of G.I. Joe (1945)

Director(s): William A. Wellman

Studio(s): Lester Cowan Productions (Uncredited. Distributed by United Artists)

Gilda (1946)

Director(s): Charles Vidor

Studio(s): Columbia Pictures

The Killers (1946)

Director(s): Robert Siodmak

Studio(s): Mark Hellinger Productions (distributed by Universal Pictures)

Out of the Past (1947)

Director(s): Jacques Tourneur

Studio(s): RKO Pictures

In a Lonely Place (1950)

Director(s): Nicholas Ray

Studio(s): Santana Pictures Corporation (distributed by Columbia Pictures)

The Dark Mirror (1946)

Director(s): Robert Siodmak

Studio(s): Nunnally Johnson Productions (distributed by Universal Pictures)



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The Snake Pit (1948)

Director(s): Anatole Litvak

Studio(s): Twentieth Century Fox

The Hitch-Hiker (1953)

Director(s): Ida Lupino

Studio(s): The Filmmakers Inc. / RKO Radio Pictures

Reference to:

The Grapes of Wrath (1940)

Director(s): John Ford

Studio(s): 20th Century Fox

The Great Dictator (1940)

Director(s): Charlie Chaplin

Studio(s): United Artists

Pinocchio (1940)

Director(s): Ben Sharpsteen, Hamilton Luske, Bill Roberts, Norman Ferguson, Jack Kinney, Wilfred Jackson, T. Hee

Studio(s): Walt Disney Productions

Sergeant York (1941)

Director(s): Howard Hawks

Studio(s): Warner Bros.

Bambi (1942)

Director(s): David Hand, James Algar, Samuel Armstrong, Graham Heid, Bill Roberts, Paul Satterfield

Norman Wright **Studio(s):** Walt Disney Productions

The Wolf Man (1941)

Director(s): George Waggner

Studio(s): Universal Pictures

Casablanca (1942)

Director(s): Michael Curtiz

Studio(s): Warner Bros.

This Is the Army (1943)

Director(s): Michael Curtiz, Edward A. Blatt

Studio(s): Warner Bros.



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Going My Way (1944)

Director(s): Leo McCarey

Studio(s): Paramount Pictures

Mom and Dad (1945)

Director(s): William Beaudine

Studio(s): Hygienic Productions / Hallmark Productions

Song of the South (1946)

Director(s): Wilfred Jackson, Harve Foster

Studio(s): Paramount Pictures

Forever Amber (1947)

Director(s): Otto Preminger, John M. Stahl (uncredited)

Studio(s): Twentieth Century Fox

Samson and Delilah (1949)

Director(s): Cecil B. DeMille

Studio(s): Paramount Pictures

Where the Sidewalk Ends (1950)

Director(s): Otto Preminger

Studio(s): Twentieth Century Fox

Raw Deal (1948)

Director(s): Anthony Mann

Studio(s): Edward Small Productions (distributed by Eagle-Lion Films)

The Big Combo (1955)

Director(s): Joseph H. Lewis

Studio(s): Security Pictures / Theodora Productions (distributed by Allied Artists Pictures)

Notes:

'This is the story, then, of a great empire built of dreams of glamour, dreams of beauty, wealth and success, and of that empire's sudden decline and fall.'

Otto Friedrich's *City of Nets: A Portrait of Hollywood in the 1940's* (2014) is a recommended read on this era.

The Golden Rage:

- A Hollywood reminder
- A sound idea
- The Great Depression



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- The wizard and the wind
- WWII
- Conquering heroes?
- Fall of the studio system
- Grit and the glamour
- Trauma town
- Fragmented parallels
- Strength and madness

Main period: 1939-1959

- From *The Wizard of Oz* to *Imitation of Life*
- This second volume of 'Old Hollywood' will focus, through selected movie stars and their movies, throughout the 1940s and 1950s
- Looking at the choice of roles, specific stories centred around tough and traumatised characters will highlight traits often attached to a specific gender and socio-political issues of the period

Legacy and Impact

- The tough guy persona and prelude to the 'action hero'
- The rise of the 'Femme Fatale' and parallels to the '90s thrillers
- A reminder of how the fall of the 'studio system' impacted on American cinema and rise of New - Hollywood and beyond

A Hollywood reminder...

After around twenty years of pioneering and working on prototypes in film and early film technology, to avoid Thomas Edison's monopoly, most of the businessmen (the future Moguls) migrated West to California. The hills, the natural set pieces (and monuments)... and, most importantly, something the East coast had less of: the sun.

Hollywood was once dubbed 'Hollywoodland' beginning as a hamlet before growing rapidly during the first quarter of the century. It was originally known for being set up as real estate. But even before then, it was an orange grove. Hence 'Orange County'. The orange – if *ever* there was a symbol of the sun... and sunny life of the region. Eventually the famous sign dropped its last four letters, cementing its place in history.

Studios were set up including the 'Big 5': Paramount, RKO, MGM, Warner Bros. and 20th Century Fox... and eventually the 'Little 3': Universal, United Artists and Columbia.

Of course, the pioneering and innovation continued most notably with the birth of sound from Warner Bros.' Those of you who attended the previous Old Hollywood course may recall that *The Jazz Singer* was the first 'talkie', released in 1927. This changed *everything*.



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Although after WWI, the 'Roaring Twenties' became a the decade of wealth and excess that had built on post-war optimism, it all imploded. The period in which Hollywood blossomed was fraught with a global economic crisis and impending threat from Europe with the rise of the Nazi party. It began with the Wall Street Crash of October 1929 that marked the beginning of the Great Depression. A huge migration from the Midwest towns only exasperated the poverty in the cities already caused by the crash. All of this – the Crash *and* Dust Bowl – led to huge poverty; a complete contrast to the bright lights of Broadway and Hollywood.

Glitz, glamour... comedy, music and dance a major escape from the 'Depression', hence the rise in popularity of the movies and their stars.

As a true precursor to the next couple of decades explored during this Old Hollywood course, 1939 is considered one of the greatest years in the history of cinema and as good a place as any to begin... with the wizard and the wind.

The Wizard of Oz and *Gone With the Wind* – both MGM movies – revolutionising the filmmaking, pushing technology, size, scope and the theatrical experience. There was also *Wuthering Heights*, another sweeping romantic tale that launched Laurence Olivier's screen career.

A reminder of the reality...

The 1930s come to an end with the release of two powerful examples of cinema that illustrate the times: John Ford's adaptation of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) – starring a young Henry Fonda – and Charlie Chaplin using satire to poke fun at Hitler in his masterpiece *The Great Dictator* (1940). [His major speech](#) one of the most powerful monologues committed to celluloid.

WWII

The bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese on December 7th, 1941, changed everything. Up to this point there was little intention for the US to enter WWII and became one of the most significant events of the 20th century.

In terms of other horror – at least on the big screen – *The Wolf Man* was released five days after the attack on Pearl Harbor and redefined werewolf lore, setting the blueprint for years to come. The film shows this huge contrast between the make believe worlds of cinema and real horrors at play in the world during this period. [Read more about the film via my Fangoria piece.](#)

The iconic romantic war drama *Casablanca* (1942) starring Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman was also a significant film of the decade. Despite not being a box office success at the time, it has, like a lot of films, found its audience over the years.

This was followed by the majority of films shot during WWII that were considered moral boosters and particularly patriotic. Nominated for four Academy Awards – including Robert Mitchum's only Oscar nomination for Best Supporting Actor – the film could be seen as jingoistic but, for its time is a great example of war movies of the period that doesn't quite fall into the romanticised aspects of war that would follow during the 1950s, due to its semi-documentarian approach.



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Conquering heroes...

Obviously we think of the might of the US helping to end WWII. The 'flag' may have been representative of this but nothing was won with further wars continuing in the fallout as the world became more and more divided between capitalism and communism.

... and conquering moguls

But, the conquering heroes of Hollywood continued to hold on to their output of movies, despite drastic changes that were beginning to be made in terms of the types of stories that were told. Prominent (and infamous) Moguls include: Louis B Mayer (MGM), The Warner brothers - Harry, Albert, Sam, and Jack. (Jack Warner eventually taking full control of their studio), Daryl F Zanuck (Fox), Carl Laemmle (Universal) and David Sarnoff (RKO).

Hits of the '40s included: *Pinocchio* (1940), *Sergeant York* (1941), animated classic *Bambi* (1942), musical *This Is the Army* (1943), musical comedy drama *Going My Way* (1944), *Mom and Dad* (1945) – a rare independent sexploitation film outside of the studio system – condemned by the National Legion of Decency. Another film that has become more and more controversial over the years is Walt Disney's *Song of the South* (1946), which despite its racist undertones was the highest grossing film of the year. Other films include: romantic adventure movie *Forever Amber* (1947), the seminal psychological drama *The Snake Pit* (1948) – a major film explored during the Olivia de Havilland session – and biblical drama *Samson and Delilah* (1949) that ushered in the studios' historical epics of the '50s.

But all was about to change with the fall of the studio system...

The studio system of owning the studio, distribution and theatre chains was put to an end in 1948. Loews Incorporated was the owner of America's largest theater chain and parent company of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Other studios included: Universal Pictures, Columbia Pictures and United Artists.

When the studio system ended with the U.S. Supreme Court decision ("United States v. Paramount") block booking of film releases was banned and studios ordered to relieve themselves of all theatre holdings.

In a nutshell: studios controlled all aspects of their film productions, including production, distribution, and exhibition... and was ultimately their downfall. This resulted in RKO pictures dissolving in 1959.

Grit and the glamour...

As mentioned, throughout the 1940s, the majority of movies released were designed to boost moral such as musicals and romantic dramas to lift the spirits of people home and away.

So, we have the stark contrast of what is left over from the pre-war years, such as Charles Vidor's 1944 song and dance number *Cover Girl* with Gene Kelly and the Rita Hayworth.



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The gangster movies had now morphed into something much darker, brooding and psychological, giving birth to film noir – such as Billy Wilder’s definitive entry into the genre *Double Indemnity* also from 1944.

Let’s take a look at this ‘trauma town’.

Photo sources from a stash of L.A. crime photographs (from the 1920 to the 1970s) located in 2014, restored and given a new lease of life. <https://flashbak.com/bloody-brutal-vintage-crime-scene-photos-from-the-los-angeles-police-department-archives-430592/>

First photograph: Detail of two bullet holes in car window, 1942.

Left: Female assault victim exposes bruising and bandaged fingers. Date: 2/6/1950 Right: “What me worry?” circa 1952. Next: Crenshaw, 7 August 1953.

But, the most infamous was the death of 22-year old aspiring actress Elizabeth Short – otherwise known as ‘The Black Dahlia’ – whose remains were found on January 15, 1947.

Such horrific crimes and circumstances become a major part of Hollywood’s DNA... Seeping more and more into the celluloid. Detectives examining dead bodies becomes heavily stylised and heightened. Such as *Where the Sidewalk Ends* - Dana Andrews’s detective Mark Dixon in 1948 – Anthony Mann’s *Raw Deal* (1948) and Joseph H. Lewis’ *The Big Combo* (1955) – possibly my favourite film noir of all time.

Lewis – otherwise known as ‘Wagon Wheel Joe’ – was a B movie filmmaker who could make low budget movie look as good as any studio’s output making use of incredible staging, lighting (iconic of the subgenre) and the important direction of characters. He was a seriously overlooked director whose shots were perfection. He understood the language of film, threading together tight narratives to make outstanding American movies.

Fragmented parallels...

Let’s take a step back and explore some of the links to film noir that came out of Europe. The mind as metaphor – those WWI parallels to crucial artists and art movements.

German Expressionist cinema continued to reflect artist's inner emotions rather than attempting to replicate reality. The movement, as with the general expressionist movement across Europe dominated the first quarter of the 20th century. Max Beckmann (1884–1950). Left: *Children at a Window* (*Kinder am Fenster*, 1922). Right: *Self-Portrait* (*Selbstbildnis*, 1922). This output of art was intensified in the outcome of WWI leaving a fragmented state... and state of mind.

Most notably with the Dada art movement was a specific influence on the arts in general and can still be felt today when studying the rich history of techniques that came out of this period. Formed during WWI in Zurich, it is often seen as a proto-punk movement but mainly a crucial moment in human history that illustrated the negative reaction to the horrors and folly of the war. Individuals



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literally destroyed all rules in art, poetry and performance and was often satirical and nonsensical in its output. It was the beginnings of 'anyone as artist'. Works of art from Raoul Hausmann (1886-1971) include: *The Mechanical Head (The Spirit of Our Time, 1920)* and *Right: The Art Critic (1919-20)*.

Nosferatu producer, art director, and costumer designer Albin Grau's original drawings show an obvious influence of German Expressionism, translated directly to the screen by F.W. Murnau.

Other seminal films include Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920)* with its remarkable sense of design; those fierce angles dissecting the screen and reflecting the broken minds of Germany.

Both German Expressionism and examples of Hollywood's film noir output utilise oblique camera angles that help to distort the subject, deliberately leaning into imbalanced compositions. Much like the stories themselves, space becomes maze-like, reflecting the minds of the characters therefore becoming hugely symbolic.

Then there is Fritz Lang's *M* from 1931. Again, symbolism may include light through blinds cutting a character's face, a ticking clock, reflections – all of which reflects those fractured psyches. There is a strict sensitivity at play that works more with concept rather than all singing and dancing narratives. *M*, in particular, became a perfect bridge between the films of Europe and their growing influence on Hollywood.

both visually and also in terms of the stars who migrated – the iconic Peter Lorre playing alongside Humphrey Bogart in *The Maltese Falcon (1941)*, directed by John Huston. It all seems to come back to film noir... in this case Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity*, which will be discussed during the Barbara Stanwyck session.

Other featured film noir on the course will include the 1946 movies *Gilda and The Killers, Out of the Past (1947), In a Lonely Place (1950)* and *The Hitch-Hiker*, a significant film as it was directed by one of the few female directors of Old Hollywood, film star Ida Lupino who will have a week dedicated to her.

Strength and madness...

It becomes clear that there is a heavy contradiction in how women are portrayed during the 1940s. "*We Can Do It!*" is an American World War II wartime poster produced by J. Howard Miller in 1943 for Westinghouse Electric as an inspirational image to boost female worker morale. Looking at the poster we see that women were only depicted as strong, almost as a last resort and seems rare for media to depict them in such a way in America.

You only have to begin looking at the films in which many women are either in peril, gaslit or deemed 'mad'. Robert Siodmak's *The Dark Mirror (1946)*, also starring Olivia de Havilland is an incredible thriller from Universal Pictures, de Havilland playing twins, seamlessly. More on this film in the coming weeks. The film is one of a few in which she challenged herself an actress and is quite remarkable for the time period leading the way to *The Snake Pit (1948)*. An overlooked film



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that takes a deep dive into a a mental institution a schizophrenia patient attempts to recover her memory.

This is one of many films to be explored over the next 9 weeks. As well as the aforementioned actors Olivia de Havilland, Humphrey Bogart, Barbara Stanwyck and Robert Mitchum we will also take a look at the works of Lana Turner, Gregory Peck, Ida Lupino, Glenn Ford and Burt Lancaster.