COM 320, History of Film

The U.S. Hollywood Studio System (1920's-1950's)

Key sources:

What distinguished the Hollywood Studio System?

1. Oligopoly: A relatively limited list of active studios--only 11 total, including five Majors, three Minors (the “Little Three”), and the Independents (e.g., Disney, Goldwyn, & Selznick)

2. The 5 Majors all were distinguished by Vertical Integration, that is, ownership of Production-Distribution-Exhibition (dissolved after the Paramount Case ruling of 1948)

3. Moguls: The importance of a handful of quite similar men in formulating the studio system (i.e., With one exception (Darryl Zanuck of 20th Century-Fox), the moguls were Jewish, of recent Eastern European or Russian extraction, from families who had suffered great prejudice and hardship, most having already amassed small fortunes in other businesses back east. For more info, see the book and/or PBS documentary “An Empire of Their Own”.)

4. Large physical plants
   * soundstages
   * backlots
   * other facilities that ensured the independence of the studio (e.g., fire station, medical center, bungalows, school, restaurants)

5. A “stable” of contract players and crew (e.g., Wallace Ford)

6. The star system
   * the "grooming" of stars under contract
   * star vehicles

7. Studios as family or "protectorates"
   * studio head as patriarch (e.g., Louis B. ("Born on the 4th of July") Mayer)

8. Properties developed from within the studios

9. The importance to most studios of the development of one or more genres

10. From the 1950's on, this system fell apart with competition from TV, buyouts by large conglomerates, a weakening of the system due to the Paramount Decision in 1948, etc. (more on this later in the term).
11. During the Studio Era, each studio had its own distinct "personality" profile

1. **MGM** ("The Supreme")

   Roots: A merger of Metro, Goldwyn & Mayer Pictures in 1924  
   Moguls: Louis B. Mayer, Irving Thalberg, Dore Schary late  
   Genre Development:  
   - Musicals  
   - Comedies  
   - Dramas  
   In the Stable:  
     Joan Crawford, Greta Garbo, Norma Shearer (the 3 Queens), the Barrymores, Clark Gable,  
     Myrna Loy, Marion Davies (the Hearst connection), Gene Kelly, Judy Garland, Mickey  
     Rooney, Spencer Tracy, James Stewart, Elizabeth Taylor, Vincente Minnelli, King Vidor  
     early (e.g., *The Crowd* ’28), Marx Brothers late (5 pictures, steadily deteriorating), Ernst  
     Lubitsch late, Arthur Freed, Elvis Presley

2. **PARAMOUNT** ("The Sophisticate")

   Roots: Evolved out of Famous Players-Lasky (founded by Jesse Lasky in 1912; Paramount was  
   the leading film studio by 1917), based on successful stage work, a tradition that would  
   continue, on and off, all the way through *Come Back Little Sheba* ’52.  
   Moguls: Adolph Zukor (the "Maximum Mogul")  
   Genre Development:  
   - Sophisticated Romantic Comedies  
   - Marx Brothers Comedies  
   - Film Noir  
   - Spectacles  
   - Von Sternberg/Dietrich films  
   - Preston Sturges films  
   - The Road Series--Hope/Crosby films of the 1940's  
   In the Stable:  
     Cecil B. DeMille, D.W. Griffith, Ernst Lubitsch early, Joseph Von Sternberg, Mitchell  
     Leisen, Preston Sturges, Billy Wilder, Mae West, Gloria Swanson, Bob Hope, Bing  
     Crosby, Marlene Dietrich, Claudette Colbert, Clark Gable early, Gary Cooper, Marx Bros.  
     early

3. **RKO** ("The New Yorker")

   Roots: Merger of RCA, Keith-Albee-Orpheum, & Pathe Pictures (RKO stands for Radio-Keith-  
   Orpheum) in 1928 (later than all other majors)  
   Moguls: NO SINGLE PERSON--Pandro Berman (early), Howard Hughes  
   Genre Development:  
   - Musicals (early  
   - Film Noir
Screwball Comedy (2nd to Columbia)
Other Impt. Films--King Kong '33, Gunga Din '39, Cat People '42, I Remember Mama '48
In the Stable:
Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, Katharine Hepburn early, Irene Dunne early, Jane Russell

4. **20TH CENTURY FOX** ("The Rube")

Roots: Merger of Fox and 20th Century--a big change from Fox alone
Mogul: Darryl Zanuck
Genre Development:
"Problem" or Social Films
Action/Adventure
Backstage Musicals--some Shirley Temples
Soaps
Disaster
In the Stable:
Shirley Temple, Alice Faye, Betty Grable, Tyrone Power, Will Rogers, Henry Fonda,
Carmen Miranda, Sonja Henie (ice skater), John Ford

5. **WARNER BROS.** ("The Slicker")

Roots: The merging of several small nickelodeon studios
Mogul: Jack L. Warner
Genre Development:
Weepies/"Women's" Films
Gangster/Film Noir
Swashbucklers
Backstage Musicals
War
In the Stable:
Al Jolson, James Cagney, Bette Davis, Humphrey Bogart, Edward G. Robinson, Claude Rains, Olivia DeHavilland, Errol Flynn, John Garfield, Paul Muni, Ida Lupino, Joan Crawford late, Busby Berkeley early

6. **COLUMBIA** (One of the "Little Three")

Roots: Established by the Cohn Bros. in 1924
Moguls: Harry Cohn
Genre Development:
Screwball Comedies
Capra Social Comedies (the "Little Guy")
"Blockbusters"
In the Stable:
Frank Capra, The 3 Stooges, Rosalind Russell, Jean Arthur; often borrowed stars on loan-out (e.g., Cary Grant and Irene Dunne for The Awful Truth)
7. **UNITED ARTISTS** *(a "Little Three")*

**Roots:** Four powerhouses of the 1920's formed their own company in order to achieve artistic freedom--Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks Sr., Charles Chaplin, D.W. Griffith

**Moguls:** Mary Pickford, Joseph Schenck

**Genre Development:**

"Quality" Films

**In the Stable:**

See above

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8. **UNIVERSAL** *(A "Little Three"; "The Old Monster")*

**Roots:** The combination of several nickelodeon companies in 1912

**Moguls:** Carl Laemmle (Sr.)--the rebel who defied Edison

**Genre Development:**

- Horror
- Spectacles
- Weepies
- Musicals
- Westerns
- Sex Comedies

**In the Stable:**

Erich von Stroheim early, Lon Chaney early, Boris Karloff, Bela Lugosi, Deanna Durbin, W.C. Fields, Abbott & Costello later, Rock Hudson, Tony Curtis

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9. **DISNEY**

**Roots:** Walt and a mouse. . .

**Moguls:** Walt, Ub Iwerks

**Genre Development:**

- Animated Features
- Family (Live action)

**In the Stable:**

A mouse, Fred MacMurray

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10. **SAMUEL GOLDWYN**

**Roots:** An independent producer, releasing primarily through RKO

**Mogul:** Samuel Goldwyn

**Genre Development:**

- Serious Drama
- Classics

**In the Stable:**

William Wyler, Miriam Hopkins, Ronald Colman, Gary Cooper, Lucille Ball, Merle Oberon, Gregg Toland (unusual for a cinematographer)

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11. **SELZNICK INTERNATIONAL**
Roots: An independent producer
Mogul: David O. Selznick
Genre Development:
Classics
Mysteries
In the Stable:
Under personal contract to Selznick--Ingrid Bergman, Gregory Peck, Joseph Cotton, Joan Fontaine, Jennifer Jones (Selznick married her), Hitchcock through 1940's

MORE "POVERTY ROW"

-Quickie moviemaking; Often led the pack with cheapies later imitated by the majors (e.g., Westerns, backstagers)

-Examples:
  -Monogram (Jane Eyre '34)
  -Majestic (The Scarlet Letter '34)
  -Hal Roach (Topper '37)
  -Republic (Gene Autry, Roy Rogers)
    -Eventually absorbed most of the smaller studios, becoming a mini-major
    -Finally snagged Ford/Wayne for The Quiet Man '52, and Nicholas Ray for Johnny Guitar '54

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