

## **HOMEWORK: How American Cinema (Hollywood) Rose to Power**

The history of American cinema in its first 30 years is one of incredible expansion and growth. Beginning as a simple novelty in just a handful of big cities—New York, London, Paris, and Berlin—the new medium of film quickly found its way across the world, attracting larger and larger audiences wherever it was shown and replacing most other forms of entertainment as it did so.

Although French, German, British, and Russian film were all very successful in the early days of the medium, it was the United States that was to eventually become the dominant center of the film-making world. **But how did Hollywood rise to the dominance it enjoys today? What factors enabled American cinema to successfully squelch all other national film industries?** Well, a number of factors contributed to Hollywood's rise to power.

### **Control of the Market**

Around 1910, a number of film companies set up business in and around the small suburb of Hollywood to the west of Los Angeles. Within a decade, the system they created came to dominate the cinema—not only in the United States—but throughout the world. Heads of Hollywood studios quickly recognized that they could make more money if they expanded to reach foreign audiences too. Simple economics, right? Increase the demand for films and you'll have to increase the supply of films—thereby making more money. Often if a film didn't make up what it cost to make it in America, it could easily make up the money (and even make a profit!) by showing it to foreign audiences.

Having recognized this, studio heads put up a tough fight to make sure that foreign countries permitted Hollywood corporations to import their films into other countries without any constraints. Soon Hollywood films were shown in every country in Europe and in several countries in Asia and South America.

### **World War I**

World War I was another factor that contributed to Hollywood's eventual dominance over the foreign film-viewing market. In 1914, Archduke Ferdinand of Austria was assassinated, thus triggering the First World War. Before long, the face of the European continent was enveloped in war.

The war stopped virtually all film production in Europe. Suddenly the price of materials for film equipment became extremely expensive and film companies could no longer afford to make films. Additionally, many film crew members were drafted to fight in the war, emptying studios of their personnel. Several studios were converted into temporary barracks for soldiers and companies that made film stock and camera equipment were changed into factories for making war supplies.

The U.S., by contrast, was largely insulated from the effects of WWI since it was not fought on U.S. soil and the U.S. remained neutral in the war until 1917. Hollywood studio executives took advantage of a weakened foreign competition to fill the theatres with their films.

### **Talent Poaching**

The final contributor to U.S. success is the fact that Hollywood quite literally stole the talent from other countries. Whenever an actor or actress was successful in a foreign country, Hollywood executives would offer these actors glittering salaries if they would come to Hollywood and begin making films for them. When Hollywood producers "poached" acting talent from other national industries, it not only weakened their competitors, but it also recruited the affections and loyalties of foreign populations, which might account for the appeal of American films abroad.

It was not just actors who were recruited from foreign industries, but also technical workers of all kinds, most notably directors and cameramen. It was a logical business move for an industry that could afford to buy

the best staff in the world. Hollywood effectively stole the people and the techniques that were being used successfully in other national cinemas and made it their own.

### **Vertical Integration & the Hollywood Monopoly**

The “Golden Age of Hollywood,” roughly the period that spanned the 1930s and ‘40s, is so named because it was the era in which Hollywood reached the height of its power and glory. One of the main reasons that Hollywood enjoyed such success and popularity was because of what we now call “**vertical integration.**”

Vertical integration basically means that the Hollywood films studios owned a monopoly on the three areas of the film business: production, distribution, and exhibition. Production refers to the actual process of making the movies (this is the part where the actors, directors, editors, screenwriters, etc. are involved). Distribution refers to the process of transporting the films from the film studios and out to the movie theatres throughout the world. Exhibition refers to the actual theatres themselves where the movies are shown to the audiences.

Until 1946, the Hollywood studios controlled all three of these areas of film. At this time, theatres were mostly owned or controlled in some way by each of the studios. For example, when you went to a movie theatre back in the ‘30s and ‘40s, that theatre would only show films from one studio. So, you would go to the MGM theatre to see the latest MGM musical or you’d go to the Warner Bros. studio to see the latest Warner gangster movie. Essentially what that meant is that the film studios were making films to fill their own theatre seats.

With these conditions in place, movie-going was the #1 entertainment attraction during the 1930s and ‘40s. In 1946, when movie attendance had reached its all-time peak, 90 million Americans attended the movies on a weekly basis. Nearly every American went to the theatre on a weekly basis.

1. What factors enabled American cinema to rise to power and successfully squelch all other national film industries? (Include 2-3 specific examples from above to support your response.)

### **The Hollywood Studio System**

The “Golden Age of Hollywood,” roughly the period that spanned the 1930s and ‘40s, is so named because it was the era in which Hollywood was at the height of its power and glory. Movie attendance reached its all-time peak during this era, and Hollywood has never been quite as prolific since.

During this era, Hollywood was controlled by five major studios (Paramount, MGM, Fox, RKO, Warner) and three “major minor” studios (Columbia, Universal, United Artists) and operated under what was then called “the **studio system.**”

A typical studio was controlled by an “invisible” executive studio head. This would have been a Wall-Street business tycoon who controlled budgets, distribution, studio policies, publicity, marketing, and all government affairs that concerned the movie industry. The executive studio head was “invisible” because the general public didn’t really know that they existed, but in all truth it was these New York businessmen who controlled all studio affairs. Underneath the executive head was the studio head or “boss” who oversaw the actual operations of the studio in California.

**The genius of the studio system was that it took Henry Ford’s concepts of assembly line production and adapted it to the movie industry.** These studios were factories that churned out an amazing 52 films per year (exactly one movie a week).<sup>1</sup> They employed thousands of individuals, all with a specific area of expertise: acting, directing, writing, editing, costuming, music, dancing, cinematography, set construction, script supervision, etc. Every person was under an extremely long (i.e. lifetime) contract, which meant that everyone was essentially owned in the same manner that one would own property (or slaves). In order to speed up the process, there needed to be a sort of standardized product. Studios also began to specialize in making certain types of movies. For instance, Universal became famous for their horror pictures, Warner Bros. for their crime dramas and gangster pictures, MGM for their expensive musicals, and so forth.



2. What is an assembly line? AND How did using an assembly line to make movies help to make movies faster?

The typical studio ran almost like a little world unto itself. Each studio had its own hospital, mortuary, and apartments for all their employees. For instance, all the writers lived in one area of the studio, the musicians and orchestra members in another, the actors in another, and so forth. Supposedly, these studios were like cozy little communities where everybody knew everyone else and what was going on in each other’s lives.

The most valuable studio asset was, of course, the star. Actors and actresses were the most easily recognizable and popular element of the cinema. Each Hollywood film had at least 2-3 stars. Lavish productions sometimes had as many as 12-15 stars in them. Aspiring young actors and actresses came to Hollywood to make it big. Actors who were fortunate enough to be put under contract were put into special acting schools where they were taught how to speak properly, walk properly, dance properly, sing properly, etc. From this pool of talent, the studio boss would select a few lucky individuals to become stars (all others were doomed to be chorus girls or extras for the remainder of their careers). These stars would be heavily marketed and popularized until they became a success with the public (or proved to be an absolute flop).

Since the success of the studio hinged upon the star, stars were made to look as appealing as possible. They were never filmed with even a hair out of place and every effort was made to make them look their absolute best.

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<sup>1</sup> As a point of comparison, in 2015, Lionsgate released 28 films, Warner Bros. released 25 and Weinstein Co. put out 24. On the lower end, Paramount and Disney each released 11 films that year.

The studio executives would occasionally even make up fake lives for these actors to “act out” when they weren’t on the sets to spark more interest. Studio executives would arrange publicity stunts for them or sometimes even arrange off-screen “romances” between an actor and an actress for the tabloids to write about. These couples would go on a compulsory date with each other once a week, bid each other good night, and then go on with the rest of their lives.

The disadvantage of working under this system was that the studio employees had very little control over which movies they would work on or what type of movies they would do. Actors and actresses would often be loaned to other studios for a few pictures, sometimes as punishment for misbehavior or because the studio boss had lost them in a gambling bet. Also, there wasn’t really tons of room for bold experimentation or deviation from the pre-established Hollywood style because everything was under the supervision of the studio heads and producers.

However, there were also many advantages to this system, too. You were always guaranteed employment and there was never a fear of losing your job if you failed (unless you failed consistently over a long period of time). Hollywood offered artists a chance to practice and perfect their craft. Writers were given the chance to write a lot, musicians were given the chance to compose and perform all the time.

The Hollywood Studio System quickly became the standard of film-making and soon began to be copied by other production companies world-wide. No other national cinemas could compete with the enormous budgets and high production values of Hollywood, though. This is one of the primary factors that led to Hollywood’s eventual dominance of the world film market and is the main ingredient of its success today.

Advantages of the Studio System	Disadvantages of the Studio System