

## How American Movies (Hollywood) Became Great

Although foreign films were very successful in the early days, it was the United States that eventually became the center of the film-making world. **How did Hollywood rise to the dominance it enjoys today?** 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 film—not only in the United States—but throughout the world.

### **World War I**

World War I was one factor that contributed to Hollywood's control over the market. In 1914, Archduke Ferdinand of Austria was assassinated, triggering the First World War. Before long, most of Europe was caught up in the 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. Also, many film crew members were drafted to fight in the war, emptying studios of their workers. 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 protected from the effects of WWI since it was not fought on U.S. soil and the U.S. stayed out of the war until 1917. Hollywood studio executives took advantage of a weakened foreign competition to fill the theatres with their films.

What impact did the war have on the film business in Europe?

How did the U.S. use the war to take control of the film business?

## **Stealing Talent**

Another 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 huge salaries if they would come to Hollywood and begin making films for them. When Hollywood producers stole acting talent from other countries, it not only weakened their competitors, but it also helped encourage foreigners to watch American films as they now starred their favorite stars.

It was not just actors who were recruited from foreign industries, but also technical workers of all kinds (including directors and cameramen.) Hollywood effectively stole the people and the techniques that were being used successfully in other countries and made it their own.

What did U.S. film companies do to draw foreign talent to the U.S.?

How did talent stealing help American film?

## **The Hollywood Studio System**

In the 1930s and '40s, 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 businessman 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.

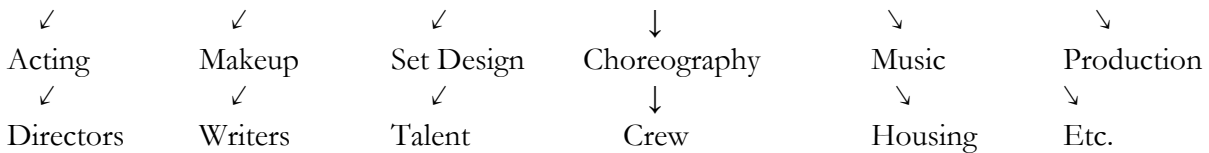
Underneath the executive head was the studio head or “boss” who oversaw the actual operations of the studio in California.

The typical studio was 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.

**Executive Studio Head** - (the “invisible” New York businessman)



**Studio Head** (boss at 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.

What is an assembly line?



These studios were factories that churned out an amazing 52 films per year (exactly one movie a week).<sup>1</sup> Studios 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. The studios 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 a lifetime contract, which meant that everyone was essentially owned in the same way that one would own property (or slaves).

How did using an assembly line to make movies help to make movies faster?

The most valuable studio asset was the film star. Actors and actresses were the most easily recognizable and popular element of films. Each Hollywood film had at least 2-3 stars. Big productions sometimes had as

<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.

many as 12-15 stars in them. Many young actors and actresses came to Hollywood to make it big. Actors who were fortunate enough to get a contract were put into special acting schools where they were taught how to speak properly, walk properly, dance properly, sing properly, etc.. From this group, the studio boss would select a few lucky individuals to become stars (people who were not picked were doomed to be chorus girls or extras for the rest of their careers). These stars would be heavily marketed and popularized until they became a success with the public.

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.

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 required date with each other once a week, say goodnight, 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 creativity or experimentation with films 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. With each studio making 52 movies a year, artists had a LOT of chances 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. Supposedly, these studios were also like cozy little communities where everybody knew everyone else and what was going on in each other’s lives.

Advantages of the Studio System	Disadvantages of the Studio System

The Hollywood Studio System quickly became the standard of film-making and soon began to be copied by other companies world-wide. This is one of the reasons for Hollywood’s dominance of the world film market and the main ingredient of its continued success today.