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. (Some famous names of studio heads you may recognize: Louis B. Mayer, Samuel Goldwyn, Darryl Zanuck, Joe Schenck, etc.)

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.

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 a week). 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).

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. 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. Only talent and popularity brought these individuals a little bit of artistic freedom.

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. Supposedly, these studios were like cozy little communities where everybody knew everyone else and what was going on in each other’s lives.

As mentioned before, each studio during this era churned out an unprecedented 52 films per year (one a week). In order to speed up the process, there needed to be a sort of standardized product. 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.

A slight distinction should be made here between the “A-Picture” and the “B-Picture.” A-Pictures had a higher production value, meaning that the studios spent a lot more money on these pictures, had bigger stars, more talented writers, etc. These were usually the studio’s “prestige pictures,” the ones which were intended to make a lot of money or win awards. Each studio put out a certain number of A-Pictures a year. B-Pictures, by contrast, had a lower production value. These pictures were much cheaper to make by comparison. They frequently featured less well-known actors and beginning directors and writers. It was in the B-Pictures where most experimentation occurred and where new talent was found.

The Hollywood Studio System quickly became the standard of film-making and soon began to be copied (with varying degrees of success) 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.