

## Lecture 7 - Hollywood in the Thirties

- I. An industry emerges
  - The Studio Era
  - "The golden age of Hollywood"
  - Stars and genres
- II. Strains of comedy
  - Anarchic
  - Worldly
- III. Screwball comedy

*Disclaimer: The following notes were taken by a student during the Fall 2006 term; they are not Prof. Thorburn's own notes.*

- An Industry Emerges: Now we are leaving the silent era, with synchronous sound.
  - This is the great cut-off – the moment of seismic change.
  - Things had to be radically reorganized
  - I don't think, however, that this is such a large change as the change that occurs when television enters the scene.
  - But it definitely felt like a revolution to Hollywood at the time.
  - The systems created in the silent era were fortified and expanded during the era of sound.
    - The infrastructure, control,
  - Large amounts of money were spent by the movie industry as they geared up for sound.
  - Remember, the return to silent film with Modern times had a profound nostalgic effect.
  - The complexity generated by the movies had already been internalized by the audiences of the time.
- "The Studio Era"
  - Remember, people watched the movies all the time, habitually
    - For example, in 1938, 67% of the American population went to the movies each week
    - In 1968, it's only 10% each week
    - This represents a profound transformation in how audiences interacted with films
  - Specific genres had developed, and audiences expected particular things from those genres.
  - It was a gigantic industry, employing tens of thousands of individuals
  - There were many studios, and they were well known, with their own reputations for certain kinds of movies and certain specialties. (There were

- five major studios, with 75% of the revenue between them (MGM, Paramount, Warner Brothers, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, and RKO)
- It appealed across age, gender, race, class divisions... the movies were the national entertainment system.
  - The stars became even more important, with even bigger, more famous names, during this era.
    - The philosophy of acting that developed was one where stars played variations on a theme, so that their own personality came through, with recognizable characters.
  - Strains of Comedy in the 1930s
    - Westerns were in some sense trivialized in the 1930s, because they started using sound and music in strange, gimmicky ways
    - In other genres, however, the new premium on top was very beneficial
    - Signature strains:
      - Anarchic
        - The Marx brothers fall into this category
        - The plot and character isn't so important
        - There is a lot of destructiveness, subversive playfulness
        - A reduced, less well-developed version of this sort of comedy survived in the Three Stooges.
        - W.C. Fields was a writer of this sort of comedy. He often played a drunk in his roles, unfriendly to children and dogs.
      - European comedy
        - This is artistically more interesting
        - There was a European attitude towards sexual discretion
        - Many of the Hollywood directors who created this sort of film were themselves transplanted Europeans, often Germans
      - Screwball comedy
        - This is the form that was dominant.
  - Screwball comedy
    - This was a distinctive American creation
    - It derives from Broadway farces of the 1920s, and from the slapstick comedies of the
    - Some characteristic features: Profound irreverent humor, very fast-paced dialogue, slapstick comedy intermixed with a new emphasis on well-developed character
    - It was very often about the differences in the social classes, and it was often very mocking and satiric of the high-born characters (remember, it developed during the depression)
    - The films reflect the social disorientation that was characteristic of the depression

- This genre created extremely powerful women, and they were the first films to create dominant female characters, who were more important than their corresponding male characters in the same films.
- Clip: from “Bringing Up Baby,” 1938
- These movies had a lot to do with the carnal, physical relations between men and women.
- Clip: from “Ball of Fire,” 1942

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