

The Movies

Preston William Slossen



OVERVIEW

The movies became a national form of entertainment in the 1920s. Grand movie palaces were built, stars were born, and the silents were replaced by the talkies. Preston William Slossen writes about the growth of the industry in these excerpts from his 1930 book, *The Great Crusade and After, 1914–1928*.

GUIDED READING As you read, consider the following questions:

- How did the motion picture industry affect Americans' lives?
 - What types of movies were created in the 1920s?
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The motion picture as a factor in American life had an influence difficult to overestimate. It became during this period one of the most popular pastimes in all parts of the country, and one of the weekly habits of a large portion of the population. By the middle 1920's it had become the fourth largest industry in the country, representing a capital investment of more than one and a half billion dollars. By 1927 there were twenty thousand five hundred motion-picture theaters with a seating capacity of some eighteen million. In these were shown daily about twenty-five thousand miles of celluloid film, and to these resorted weekly about a hundred million of the American people, counting the many who habitually went more than once a week. About half of these theaters were in towns of less than five thousand inhabitants, and they extended about as far out into the suburban fringe of the cities as groceries and drug stores. Only the most remote localities were beyond easy reach of the movies and only the most exclusive individuals failed to patronize them occasionally.

The small, unattractive and often unsafe halls which served well enough in the earlier years of the century now developed into gorgeous and gigantic theaters designed especially for the purpose, equipped with pipe-organ and symphony-size orchestra, and providing elaborate divertissements involving soloists, ballet and chorus. . . . The turning point in this development of building and program may be dated as 1914 when Samuel L. Rothafel, known to millions as "Roxy," who not many years before in a little Pennsylvania mining town had had to give his show behind a barroom on such days as he could borrow chairs from an undertaker, opened the Strand Theater in New York and developed a form of entertainment more akin to the opera than to the old "nickelodeon."

Meantime the art of the silent drama was showing steady improvement. Those actors who possessed the peculiar power to impress their personality on the public through pantomime rose speedily to prominence and attained, what previously had been an exaggeration, worldwide celebrity. Among the first to become such popular favorites were three young girls: the Gish sisters, Lillian and Dorothy, and Gladys Smith (better known as Mary Pickford) in pathetic and sentimental rôles; and, among the men, Charlie Chaplin in comedy and Douglas Fairbanks in romantic drama.

In 1913 . . . Michael Simm Sinnot (Mack Sennett) offered [Charlie Chaplin] \$150 a week to play in his Keystone Comedies. Two years later another company was glad to take him over at \$1250 a week, and the next year he was getting more than ten times that salary. Before he had been in the movies ten years Charlie Chaplin was known by name and sight to more of his contemporaries in all lands than any man who had ever lived. . . . Charlie Chaplin's customary make-up, his tiny mustache, his ill-fitting shoes, suit and hat, his air of injured innocence under unmerited misfortunes, and his quick "comeback" aroused amusement and subconscious sympathy in all lands and classes.

The first photoplay to develop the dramatic capabilities of the film was "The Birth of a Nation," produced in 1915 by David Wark Griffith from *The Clansman* by the Reverend Thomas Dixon, a novel of Reconstruction days in which the Ku Klux Klan was presented as the defender of white supremacy and feminine virtue. Though the play aroused the bitter resentment of the Negroes and their Northern sympathizers, and though it was the first motion-picture show for which the full theater price of two dollars was charged, it was an immediate and long-continued popular success. It was perhaps no mere coincidence that a few years later the K. K. K. was revived and became an active factor in American politics. "The Birth of a Nation" was an epoch-making work in the history of the motion picture, because Griffith had the courage to cut loose from the conventions and limitations of the stage and to employ the technic peculiar to the screen, such as flight and pursuit, mobs and battles, distant views and close-ups, the fade-out and the switchback, and by the alternation of views of simultaneous events in distant places to keep the attention of the spectator on their interaction, as, in this case, the extremity of the besieged and the approach of the rescuers.

Griffith's production also demonstrated the value of the photoplay in the depiction of historical events, and established the supremacy of the feature film. The feature film ordinarily ran from one to two hours and cost to prepare from ten thousand dollars to several millions. Between seven and eight hundred feature films were produced in America annually. Among the most successful were: several of pioneer days, "The Covered Wagon," "The Iron Horse" and "The Pony Express"; war plays, "The Big Parade," "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" from the story of Blasco Ibañez, and "What Price Glory"; religious dramas, "The Ten Commandments," "The King of

Kings, "Quo Vadis" and "Ben Hur"; Griffith productions, "America" and "The Orphans of the Storm"; North African plays, such as "The Sheik" and "Beau Geste"; romantic dramas in which Douglas Fairbanks starred, such as "The Three Musketeers," "Robin Hood" and "The Thief of Bagdad." . . .

By the end of the [twenties] methods of synchronizing voice, music and other incidental sounds with the film were perfected so that dramas and operas were heard as a whole. The achievement was first demonstrated by the sudden success of "The Jazz Singer" in which Al Jolson . . . sang his characteristic "Mammy" songs. This was in October, 1927, and within two years the leading theaters of the country had remodeled their mechanism so as to use sound.

Source: Slossen, Preston William. *The Great Crusade and After, 1914-1928*. The Macmillan Company, 1930.