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Chapter One

Silent Film

History

The humble invention of the motion-picture camera took place during the 1890s. At that time there was no way to predict how important that invention would become for society. The first movies were no more than a minute in length and were developed using a large wooden contraption much like a camera obscura. The camera obscura which is Latin for "dark chamber" was a small darkened room with a light that was admitted through a small hole. This resulted in an inverted image of what was on the outside of the room being projected onto a wall which was painted white. In essence it was casting shadows upon the wall rather than a detailed picture of the subject.

The use of mirrors allowed the image to be turned right side up and viewed. These first motion-picture cameras were primitive according to today's digital standards, but provided a new tool for artists to create and share stories. A movie today plays in color on a large screen and uses cameras that pan left and right, up and down and zoom in and out. The first motion-picture cameras were not as sophisticated and basically stayed in one position.

The silent film era prepared a foundation for things that would follow within the movie industry. In fact, the invention of the motion-picture camera actually created a need for movie studios and the entire movie industry. In the beginning films were viewed in nickelodeons which featured box-like machines with a crank that allowed a person to look down into the box from above and turn the crank to see the film inside.

Title Cards

Since it was not possible to record sound with the motion picture a need to explain what was happening inspired the development of title cards or intertitles. These cards featured the written dialogue or title and were placed intermittently between

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various sequences of the film. These cards were used to explain important exp information to provide the audience with an understanding of what was happ within the film. The title cards were also used for narration and are still used to in film for the title and the actors and crew. The title cards first appeared in 1903. A trivial note about intertitles was that a single Oscar was given for title writing at the first Academy Awards ceremony in 1929.

Joseph W. Farnham (1884–1931)

An American playwright, film writer, and film editor during the silent film era. He was a founding member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences which is known for the annual Oscar Awards today. Farnham was born in Connecticut and developed relationships with theater empresarios Daniel and Gustave Frohman who owned and operated the Frohman Amusement Corporation. This corporation developed a network of theatrical road companies that toured the country with a show while it was still playing on Broadway in New York. It is unclear exactly how Farnham got started working with motion pictures, but at the first Academy Award presentation he won an Oscar for his work with title cards for the following pictures, *Fair Co-Ed; Laugh, Clown, Laugh,* and *Telling the World*. At that first award ceremony it was possible to be nominated for an entire body of work that year which included several movies rather than just one film like is done today. The Oscar for best writing for title cards was only given one year (1929) which was the first year that Academy Awards were given. This is most likely because the era of silent film was drawing to a close because the "talkies" with sound had been introduced a few years before.

Not only was Farnham the first and only Oscar winner for best writing of title cards, but he also was the first Academy Award winner to die. He died in 1931 of a heart attack in Los Angeles, California and is buried at Forest Lawn Memorial Park in Glendale, California.

Live Music and Sound Effects

Today the sound is integrated into the film track, but with original silent movies there was no sound track. This encouraged the development of musical scores that could be played either on a piano or an organ in the theater to accompany the movie. The theatrical organs had many sound effects such as car horns and other things that could be played at just the right moment during the film. The theaters in smaller communities had piano accompaniment which was not as involved as

the large theatrical organs located in a city. The pianists and organists would watch the film and develop special little musical intricacies to enhance the viewing of the film. Some films feature live voices behind the screen singing or even live narration.

During the heyday of silent motion pictures in the 1920s entertainment venues in the United States were primarily focused on live vaudeville acts, community sing-alongs and other live acts that would perform for an audience. Silent films were also a staple of community entertainment during this period and movie houses were built to accommodate the large crowds that would come to enjoy the films. These movie houses depended upon live music for the film presentations. Some employed the use of pianos in smaller theaters, but the largest movie palaces featured grand theatrical pipe organs that had been designed specifically for use with a silent movie. The Wurlitzer organ was the king of the theatrical organ companies and theater owners found it much more cost efficient to install a "mighty Wurlitzer" organ and hire several house organists rather than paying the salaries of a full orchestra for each performance.

Wurlitzer was the king of the organ manufacturers, but many other manufacturers joined the race to fill the new movie theaters with sound. The theatrical organs featured many different sounds including violins, flutes, oboes, trumpets, clarinets, and many other instruments found in an orchestra. A unique feature of the theatrical organs was that they featured special "tuned" percussive instruments such as chimes, pianos, glockenspiels, marimbas, xylophones, and vibraphones. Some of the more elaborate models even included the sound of sleigh bells. The organs were also able to produce many sound effects such as the sound of birds, auto horns, whistles, doorbells, thunder, drums, cymbals, gongs, and even the sound of a crash. These instruments were an incredible addition to the silent film and were the precursor to sound in motion pictures.

The introduction of "talkies" issued a death sentence for the huge theatrical organs. By the end of the 1920s there were over one thousand theatrical organs in the United States, but today there are about one hundred still in existence due to the efforts of the American Theatre Organ Society.

Acting in Silent Films

Without the ability to communicate using sound and dialogue actors had to resort to a much more physical performance. Body language and facial expressions were the key instruments at the actor's disposal when portraying a character. Contemporary audiences often find these performances to be overdone or sometimes even too

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simplistic for modern tastes. Many of the directors of the silent film era den that their actors deliver much larger than life body movements and express order to capture the emotion on film.

The use of slapstick comedy was very popular because it depended so much on visual cues. An actor could be funny by just using outrageous movements without having to even consider a very broad emotional range for acting. Society began to demand a much more realistic approach to acting after the development of the camera. Live performance theaters were moving to more realistic presentations and film audiences began to expect the same type of storytelling. About 1914 many movie studios began to aggressively pursue more realistic movie styles. It was during this time that camera improvements began allowing a much larger frame for shooting films. This allowed the audience to see much more detail in the film and allowed the actors to begin exploring the subtleties of expression that could be captured with the new filming techniques. This allowed them to exhibit emotional moments that were much more subtle than the broad over the top exaggerations that had been demanded in the past.

Speed of Projection

When the first silent films were being made the cameras that were used featured a variety of film speeds (frame rates) according to the preferences of the camera maker or film creator. The frame rates varied from twelve to twenty-six fps (frames per second). Once the motion picture industry became more established and organized a standard frame rate of twenty-four fps was standard. This happened around the time that sound began to be linked to the film in order to have a talking motion picture. Projectionists who operated the film projectors during the silent film era claimed that the industry standard during that period was sixteen fps. Historians have shown that the slower frame rates were actually intentional because of the slower cranking technique that was used in order to emphasize the comedy and action sequences within the silent film.

The original silent film projectors were hand cranked and the projectionist who operated the machine would receive cue sheets (instruction sheets) with specific cues within the film to adjust the cranking speed. The cranking speed was used to emphasize particular scenes within the film. Movie theaters would also adjust the cranking speed according to the time of day. For example, for the matinees during the day where the tickets did not generate as much money, the projectionist would be instructed to speed up the cranking speed in order to shorten the projection time. This also served as a way to create more show times by shortening the film projection time in order to get more showings in per day.

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The Emergence of Sound

The transition from silent film to talking pictures was based in research that started as early as the 1890s at the Edison lab. The problem at that point was that quality loudspeaker and amplifiers had not yet been invented so it was not practical to make movies with sound for commercial showing. Around 1920 vacuum tube amplifiers were developed along with high-quality loudspeakers which encouraged film makers to begin experimenting with adding sound to their films.

Adding sound to a motion picture could be accomplished in numerous ways, such as sound on a disc which could be played by a phonograph in sync with the frames of the film. Phonographs were very popular by this time and most homes in America had a phonograph for entertainment in their parlor for the family to enjoy. Film makers in the 1920s experimented and played with adding sound and by 1927 Warner Brothers studio had produced their first talking picture, "The Jazz Singer." It featured sound on a Vitaphone sound on disc system with six songs sung by the film's star Al Jolson. The film showcased lip synchronous singing and speaking within several isolated sequences of the film. Although this film is credited as the first talking picture there were actually several earlier instances where sound was introduced during a film.

The 1921 film, "Dream Street" directed by D.W. Griffith was shown to New York audiences featuring a single singing sequence and noises of a crowd. This film used the Phono-Kinema (sometimes called Photo-Kinema) which used a disc to produce sound. In April of 1923 the Phonofilm sound-on-film was introduced by Lee De Forest, but was soon replaced by the Vitaphone sound-on-disc system with the premier of "Don Juan" in August of 1926. This was the technology that was used for the Jazz Singer in 1927. Other important sound innovations soon followed with the Fox Movietone and RCA Photophone.

Although "The Jazz Singer" is considered the first talking picture it was not the first picture with sound. Warner Brothers had introduced "Don Juan" in August of 1926 four films soon followed in the next few months which featured musical instrumental soundtracks to accompany the film. The importance of "The Jazz Singer" and the making of cinema history rested in six words, "wait a minute, wait a minute. . ." which propelled Al Jolson into the history books marking the first words in a talking picture.

The Jazz Singer

The premier of the film was set for October 6, 1927, at the flagship theater in New York City of the Warner Brothers studio. The film was about a Jewish family and the studio felt it was appropriate to use the theme of the film as a guide for the premier.

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The film was set to premiere after sunset on the eve of the Jewish holiday Yom K
Warner Brothers worked feverishly to build up the premiere of the film with a
publicity campaign. Not only was the physical presentation of the film precari
because of the new technologies that were being premiered, but the Warner Brothers studios were suffering from financial difficulties at the time which created a complex mix of problems which demanded success.

The projectionists for the film were required to be almost superhuman in order for the film to work. The musical numbers featuring Al Jolson were on individual reels with separate sound discs which meant that the projectionist must thread the film and sync the sound disc to play without hesitation between reels. The film was only eighty-nine minutes long, but used fifteen reels with fifteen discs. Even a small hesitation or some other human error could have resulted in the public humiliation of failure for not only the film, but the Warner Brothers Studio who had bragged with great vigor about the new film.

Ironically, none of the four Warner Brothers would be able to attend the premiere. The strongest promoter of the Vitaphone system, Sam Warner died the day before "The Jazz Singer" was set to open. This caused the surviving Warner Brothers to return to California to mourn his passing. An audience member that evening at the premiere described the audience about halfway through the film. An excitement was building and suddenly Al Jolson's face appeared larger than life on the screen and spoke the words, "wait a minute" which prompted the audience to respond in such a loud fashion that the second half of the line was not heard. They were literally dumbfounded by seeing and hearing for the first time in a movie theater. The applause roared after each of the songs and led to a sense of hysteria as Al Jolson and Eugenie Besserer began speaking the dialogue scenes. One reporter described the crowd as a "milling, battling, mob" and chanted "Jolson, Jolson, Jolson." In the audience that evening was Life magazine reporter Robert E. Sherwood and he described the dialogue scene in the film as "fraught with significance" realizing that the end of the silent film was in sight. The headline in Variety called it "undoubtedly the best thing Vitaphone has ever put on the screen"

Noteworthy Silent Films

Today silent films tend to be overlooked by contemporary audiences. The stunning effects offered in the films made today cause an unfair comparison based on visual impact alone. The bright colors found in today's film often create a barrier to some people when considering viewing a black and white silent film. In order to prepare to view a silent film the audience should place the film within the historical perspective of when it was produced. Not only should the technology and equipment be

considered, but the vocal and acting styles of the period are vital to a clear understanding of the story.

There are many incredible silent films that are still popular today among film buffs. Charlie Chaplin used humor that was strongly based in the comedy found in the vaudeville shows that had been so popular on the stage. His movie, *The Kid* (1921) featured Chaplin dressed in what would become his iconic look of the little tramp. He wore a tattered jacket with a cane and a moustache. His acting style radiates with a silliness that almost forces audiences to endorse an affectionate feeling while watching his films.

Buster Keaton was another iconic actor performed with a different approach to comedy which featured physical aspects, but without the slapstick ridiculous comedy that Chaplin employed. Orson Welles commented on Buster Keaton's film *The General* (1926), saying it was "the greatest comedy ever made, the greatest Civil War film ever made, and perhaps the greatest film ever made." The film featured physical comedy using a style very similar to the comedy seen in films produced today.

The film *Gone With the Wind* (1939) featured vibrant color with the use of shadows and glorious music to tell the civil war tale of Scarlet O'Hara and her beloved plantation, Tara. In 1915 a silent film was produced that was equally important and also featured a story set during the American Civil War. The film used revolutionary techniques and starred Lillian Gish who was considered the sweetheart of the silent screen. D.W. Griffith's film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) featured stunning film sets, and intertitles that informed the audience of what was to come in the film. An example of this would be the chapter title in a book that provides the reader an idea of what to expect within the pages of that chapter. The film by today's standards is very controversial because it employed the use of black face which cast white actors wearing black makeup and acting like ignorant buffoons. The film was so powerful that it encouraged race riots across the United States and many have blamed it for encouraging the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan. This film demonstrates the power of storytelling with silent film and the absence of spoken words and music.

A German film director, Fritz Lang produced the film, *Metropolis* (1927) which was a mind-blowing demonstration of a dystopian allegorical tale. The film demonstrated the injustices of a capitalistic society and the problems faced by the industrialized working classes. Lang used a Schufftan process, which employed mirrors to make the actors appear to be small and in scale with the miniature sets used in the film. It is considered to be one of the finest examples of German expressionism in film.

Clara Bow was an iconic actress of the silent film era and the focus of the popular idea of the "it" girl in the 1920s. The "it" girl was considered to be an attractive young woman who demonstrated an appealing engaging personality and sex appeal.

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Paramount Studios released a film titled simply, *"it"* starring Clara Bow as a shop girl that successfully wins the heart of her employer through the indescr personality trait of the "it." This film was the first of many Cinderella sto featuring a young girl's journey from rags to riches which would be brought to the silver screen.

The film, *Flesh and the Devil* (1926) featured two Hollywood stars of the period, Greta Garbo and John Gilbert. The story of the film was a real-life romance between the two actors. It is interesting to note that Greta Garbo successfully made the transition from silent film to the new talking media. She even received four Oscar nominations all related to her speaking films. John Gilbert although very successful in silent films was not as fortunate and did not succeed in the new film media featuring sound.

One of the first films to take in over a million dollars at the box office was *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921). The film was an anti-war parable which propelled Rudolph Valentino into the national spotlight. Valentino was a swarthy young Italian man and danced the tango in the film which encouraged a tango craze to sweep the nation. Valentino was an iconic Latin lover and caused many women to swoon at the mere sight of him on the silver screen. He was an early sex symbol and "pop" icon made even more famous by his persona in silent film. He died at the age of 31 only five years after making *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* from complications due to a severe attack of appendicitis.

The Mark of Zorro (1920) was a swashbuckling film adaption of Zorro, which was a character from a magazine story, *The Curse of Capistrano*. It starred Douglas Fairbanks and introduced the black mask and hat that are so broadly known today as the defining features of Zorro. The film was produced by Fairbank's own production company, Douglas Fairbanks Pictures Corporation and was the first film released by the new United Artists company which had been organized by several film artists February 5, 1919.

United Artists

In 1918 Charlie Chaplin was producing a film for the National Pictures studio and was struggling with the studio executives to increase the budget for the film. Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks also had contracts with National Pictures as well as Famous-Players-Lasky, but the contracts were due to expire without any sign of renewal. Charlie Chaplin's brother Sydney served as his business manager and feeling that something was up decided to check with Pickford and Fairbanks. Chaplin, Pickford, and Fairbanks deduced that something was up and decided to hire a private detective to find out what was going on. The detective soon discovered

that National Pictures planned to merge all of the production companies into one after locking in the exhibition companies with a five-year contract. This would have greatly limited the creative control of the artists.

After the discovery of this plan Pickford, Fairbanks, Chaplin and Griffith incorporated the United Artists to function as a joint venture with each person holding a twenty-five percent stake in the preferred shares and a twenty percent stake in the common shares. This left an additional twenty percent of common shares which were held by their advisor and attorney, William Gibbs McAdoo. The original idea for the venture had been developed by Fairbanks, Pickford, Chaplin and movie star William S. Hart a year earlier. The four stars were already established stars in Hollywood and felt that forming their own company would allow them more control over their own work.

The climate of Hollywood during that period encouraged the formation of United Artists because producers and distributors were tightening their control over the salaries of actors as well as creative decisions. Film director D.W. Griffith was added to the group during the talks of forming United Artists. Shortly after Griffith joined the talks Hart pulled away before anything was actually formalized to establish the corporation. The head of Metro Pictures, Richard A. Rowland said that "the inmates are taking over the asylum." Hollywood executives did not look favorably upon the creation of United Artists. The lawyer/advisor William Gibbs McAdoo was the son-in-law of President Woodrow Wilson who was currently in office and had formerly been the secretary of the treasury for the Wilson administration. United Artists established offices at 729 Seventh Avenue in New York City and hired Hiram Abrams as the first managing director.

The original terms of the agreement when forming the organization obligated each star (Pickford, Fairbanks, Chaplin, and Griffith) to produce five motion pictures per year. In 1921 when the company became established this idea seemed unreasonable since most films were running round ninety minutes which translated to eight reels of film. This encouraged the original goal to be abandoned the financial backing for United Artists was extremely limited since they had chosen not to issue public stocks for the company. This meant that they were dependent upon the weekly prepayments of theater owners related to the upcoming movies to be shown in their theaters. This resulted in a slow production schedule for United Artists and the company was only able to distribute about five films per year during the first five years in business.

D.W. Griffith left United Artists in 1924 and veteran film producer Joseph Schenck was hired as the new president of the company. Schenck brought many assets to United Artists including his actress wife, Norma Talmadge, his sister-in-law, Constance Talmadge and his brother-in-law, Buster Keaton. During Schenck's reign over United Artists many contracts were signed with independent producers which

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included Howard Hughes and Samuel Goldwyn. In 1933 Schenck organized company with Darryl F. Zanuck. The name of the new venture was Twentieth Ce Pictures which soon was able to provide four pictures per year making up ha United Artists schedule.

Schenck formed a separate partnership with Pickford and Chaplin to acquire and build a theater under the United Artists name. They also began operating internationally in Canada and Mexico during the 1930s. In 1935 Schenck was denied a partnership in United Artists and resigned in order to setup a merger between his Twentieth Century Pictures and the Fox Film Corporation. This merger eventually materialized and the Twentieth Century Fox studios were established.

Many independent producers used United Artists to release their films during the 1930s including, Walt Disney Productions, David O. Selznick, and Walter Wanger. As of the late 1930s United Artists was showing a profit and Samuel Goldwyn was providing most of the pictures for distribution. He became upset with United Artists over compensation for his work which resulted in numerous lawsuits against the company. This encouraged him to ultimately leave United Artists. In 1939 the famed MGM hit *Gone with the Wind* had been planned to be a United Artists release, but when David O. Selznick wanted to use actor, Clark Gable in the picture he was under contract to MGM so he was forced to use MGM to release the film. Douglas Fairbanks died in 1939 which left a gaping hole among the founding members of United Artists. This brought on an uncertain time in the 1940s for United Artists.

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Charlie Chaplin

Charles Spencer Chaplin (1889–1913) an English actor who was the child of music hall entertainers. His mother had a brief stage career under the name Lily Harley and his father was a popular singer. Chaplin's childhood was filled with hardship and poverty which provided a true rags-to-riches story for him after he achieved such acclaim in Hollywood. As a child his father had abandoned the family and his mother had no means of income. He ended up in an orphanage where he was said to have dismissed his troubles with the graciousness of forgetfulness. Charlie Chaplin's childhood was anything but ideal, but he persevered and managed to survive.

By the time that Chaplin was nine years old he had developed an interest with the encouragement of his mother in performing. As an adult Chaplin recalled that his mother had assured him that he had some sort of talent. Using his father's connection as a singer Chaplin was able to become a member of the Eight Lancashire Lads which was a clog-dancing troupe. The troupe toured various English music halls during 1899 and 1900. He worked hard and the act was very popular with audiences. Even though Chaplin was successful as a dancer he longed to develop a

comedy act. At the age of fourteen he signed with a theatrical agency in London's West End. Sensing that Chaplin had great potential the manager quickly gave him his first opportunity in the role of a newsboy in a show. The role in the show proved to be fruitless for the show only managed to stay open for two weeks and was deemed a failure. Chaplin ultimately was cast as a pageboy in a production of *Sherlock Holmes* that toured throughout England and gave him enough recognition that he was called to London to play the role with actor William Gillette (1853–1937) who was the original Holmes in the production.

After working with the production of *Sherlock Holmes* Chaplin joined a new company of actors and went on tour with his brother who also had begun pursuing an acting career. He joined the juvenile act with *Casey's Circus* and developed very popular comedy pieces and soon rose to the ranks of being the star of the show. By the time he turned eighteen years old Charlie Chaplin was an accomplished performer on the stage. Chaplin was asked to join a theater troupe that was touring north America and six months into the second tour he was invited to work with the New York Motion Picture Company. The company operated Keystone Studios which happened to be losing their star, Fred Mace (1878–1917) and signed Chaplin as a replacement. Although Chaplin thought the Keystone comedies were very crude rough and rumble comedic action, he really liked the thought of working in films. Another driving factor for Chaplin was that it meant a new life. He met with the company and signed a contract for 150 dollars per week in 1913.

Charlie Chaplin moved to Los Angeles, California the home of the Keystone studio and due to the management thinking that he looked too young they ignored him for about a month. Chaplin used this time to learn about the process of making movies. He eventually was cast in a film, *Making a Living* (1914) and made his debut performance on film. Chaplin really did not like the movie but a film critic picked him out and called him "a comedian of the first water." The second film that Chaplin did would identify him for the rest of his career because of the costume that he wore. Charlie Chaplin chose this costume and at the time he felt like each piece of the costume should be a contradiction, baggy pants together with a tight coat and as small hat and very large shoes. He added a small moustache in hopes that it would add age to him without hiding his expressions which were key to a silent film actor. Once he dressed in the costume and had the makeup on he said it actually made him become the character and by the time the cameras were rolling the character was fully born.

The film was *Mabel's Strange Predicament* (1914) and Charlie Chaplin's character has become known to audiences as "the tramp" when the film that he shot next was released two days before *Mabel's Strange Predicament*. *Kid Auto Races at Venice* (1914) was the first film that audiences viewed that showed Charlie Chaplin as the tramp character even though it was technically his second film as the character.

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Charlie Chaplin's tramp character became very popular with audienc
eventually he was given the opportunity to direct a film, *Caught In the Rain* (
The film was highly successful and created the opportunity for Chaplin to direct
future films was secured. He appeared in short films that were being released weekly for Keystone. Chaplin's films introduced a slower form of comedy than the other Keystone films and in turn developed a very large fan base across the United States.

By November of 1914 Charlie Chaplin had a supporting role in the first feature length comedy film, *Tillie's Punctured Romance* (1914) which starred Marie Dressler (1868–1934). The film was a commercial success and increased the popularity of Charlie Chaplin and when his contract was up for renewal a month later, he asked for a 1,000 dollar a week raise. The head of the studio refused citing that it was too large a raise.

About the same time the Essanay Film Manufacturing Company offered Chaplin 1,250 dollars per week with a signing bonus of 10,000 dollars if he would join their studio. Charlie Chaplin signed the contract and moved to the new studio at the end of 1914. Chaplin began organizing a stock company of regular actors which included, Leo White (1882–1948), Bud Jamison (1894–1944), Paddy McGuire (1884–1923) and Billy Armstrong (1891–1924). One day he was enjoying lunch in a café and met Edna Purviance (1895–1958) and hired her because of her stunning beauty. She would appear in thirty-five films with Charlie Chaplin over the course of the next eight years. They also developed a romantic relationship which last for three years.

Charlie Chaplin was very aware of how his motion pictures appeared to audiences and took careful control over all of his film. He began to put more time into each film taking the care to make sure that it was exactly how he thought it should be for a theater audience. As time went on at the Essanay studios Chaplin's image was seen on merchandise and was featured in cartoons and comic strips and was the subject of several songs that had been written about him. As his fame began to grow worldwide, he was becoming the film industries' first international movie star. When his contract with Essanay ended in 1915 he sought a 150,000 dollar signing bonus from his next studio. He was receiving offers from Universal Studios, the Fox Studios, Vitagraph Studios and the Mutual Film Corporation. He ended up choosing the contract with the Mutual Film Corporation which had offered him 10,000 dollars per week. He ended up negotiating a contract with the Mutual Film Corporation that resulted in 670,000 dollars per year. This made Charlie Chaplin at twenty-six years of age one of the highest paid people in the entire world.

The high salary was widely reported by the press and the studio president happily explained that the studio could afford to pay the large sum simply because the public was demanding Charlie Chaplin and is willing to pay for him. The contract also gave Chaplin his own studio in Los Angeles to work in and opened in March of 1916.

At this point Chaplin added two more key members to his company of stock actors, Albert Austin (1881–1953) and Eric Campbell (1880–1917). Chaplin produced a series of two-reel films and his contract stated that he must release two-reel film every four weeks and he managed to meet the terms of the contract. The following year however he determined that he needed more time and he made only four more films for the company over the first ten months of 1917. Film critics and historians have cited the films he produced in this period as some of his finest work. These films, *Easy Street* (1917), *The Cure* (1917), *The Immigrant* (1917) and *The Adventurer* (1917) were cited by Chaplin later in life as representative of one of the happiest times in his career. The Mutual Film Company was patient with Chaplin's decreased rate of production and the contract came to a happy end.

At this point Chaplin was looking for a new distributor of his films that would allow him more independence. In June of 1917 Charlie Chaplin signed a contract with First National Exhibitors' to produce eight films in return for one million dollars. It was at this time that he chose to build his own studio on five acres of land off of Sunset Boulevard. His production facilities were first rate and were completed in January of 1918. This provided Charlie Chaplin the freedom he desired over making his motion pictures. The first film under the contract was *A Dog's Life* (1918) and it was described as a total work of art.

Chaplin approached First National for more money and they refused his request. He was very frustrated at this point with their lack of concern for the quality of his films and was worried about a rumor he had heard that the company was considering a possible merger with the Famous Players-Lasky studio. It was at this point that Charlie Chaplin joined forces with Douglas Fairbanks (1883–1939), Mary Pickford (1892–1979) and D.W. Griffith (1875–1948) to develop a new distribution company which they named, United Artists.

United Artists was officially established in January of 1919 as a revolutionary production company within the film industry because it enabled the four partners of the company who were all creative artists to personally seek funding for their films and also gave them absolute control over their films. Chaplin was so eager to start with this new company that he offered to buy out his remaining contract with First National, but they refused and insisted that he fulfill his commitment for the additional six films that contract stipulated must be delivered to the studio.

Charlie Chaplin's film *The Kid* (1921) which feature actor Jackie Coogan (1914–1984) was a combination of comedy and drama and was his first film to exceed an hour in length. The film dealt with the issues of poverty and parent–child separation and is thought to have been greatly influenced by Chapin's own childhood experiences. This was one of the earliest films to combine comedy and drama. The film was released with instant success and three years later it had been screened in

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over fifty countries. Having fulfilled the contract at First National in Nover 1922 Charlie Chaplin was finally able to enjoy the freedom to make his first p as an independent producer. The film *A Woman of Paris* (1923) was a romantic dra that told the story of ill-fated lovers. He had chosen to feature the actress in the film rather than himself in order to show the nuances of the relationship. Audiences did not support a Charlie Chaplin film without him appearing in it. The film was a box office disappointment and Chaplin was deeply hurt by his failure for he longed to produce a serious dramatic film and was very proud of his work. The lack of enthusiasm caused Chaplin to pull the film from theaters as soon as the contracts had been fulfilled. His film *The Gold Rush* (1925) was the best film he had made to that point and also became the highest-grossing film he had made up to that point. The film opened in August of 1925 and became one of the highest-grossing films of the entire silent film era with profits of over five million dollars.

May 16, 1929 the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences held the first ceremony to honor the best film of 1927 and 1928 with awards. The ceremony was a private dinner at the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel in Los Angeles, California. Douglass Fairbanks, the Academy president hosted the ceremony and tickets cost five dollars with almost three hundred guests attending. The presentation ceremony lasted for fifteen minutes. The awards were created by Louis B. Mayer who was the founder of Louis B. Mayer Pictures Corporation which would eventually merge with M-G-M. It is the only Academy Awards ceremony not to be broadcast either on radio or television. The Awards were presented for twelve categories and the winners had been announced three months before the ceremony. Two Honorary Awards were presented that evening. Charlie Chaplin received an Honorary Award for acting, writing, directing and producing *The Circus* (1928). Warner Brothers received an Honorary Award for producing *The Jazz Singer* (1927) which had revolutionized the entire industry with a talking picture.

By the time that Charlie Chaplin's film *The Circus* (1928) was released the entire film industry and American Audiences had witnessed or been made aware of sound films. Chaplin was very defiant against sound films and completely disregarded the new medium of film insisting that he would continue to make silent films. He continued work on his film, *City Lights* (1931) and released the film in December of 1930 for preview audiences. Unfortunately, by that time silent films were a thing of the past and considered irrelevant. A preview before a public audience was not a success, but a similar showing for film critics and the press garnered a different appraisal. One journalist commented that no one else in the world could have created a film such as this. He is the only one who has that odd phenomenon known as audience appeal. The film was released in 1931 and proved to be popular and a financial success and eventually grossed over three million dollars.

Even though the film had been a success Chaplin was not sure he could make another film without dialogue. He remained convinced that sound would not work in his films.

Topics for Discussion

1. What significance did the Wurlitzer Corporation play in the presentation of silent movies?

2. What significance did the words, "wait a minute, wait a minute" have on Hollywood and the film industry?

3. Discuss the importance of the United Artists in Hollywood.

4. What was the purpose of changing the film speed at different times during the day?

5. Explain why the Warner Brother missed the premiere of the film *The Jazz Singer* and the first time a studio audience viewed a film with actors speaking.

6. Discuss the development of the United Artists and who was instrumental in forming the organization and why it was necessary.

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