Birth of the Motion Picture

3 Key Elements:
1. Mechanical-scientific theory
2. Evolution of an industry
3. Development of medium as an art and entertainment

Key Figures
1. Thomas Edison (& his assistant W. K. L. Dickson)
2. The Lumiere Brothers in France
3. George Melies (French magician)
4. Edwin S. Porter (U.S.)

Edison & Dickson
Edison had a working camera -- the Kinetograph and a peepshow viewer -- the Kinetoscope by 1889 (1st copyrighted film in 1891)
Edison trying to develop visuals to go with his phonograph -- didn’t see the potential, initially in movies -- didn’t bother to take out key patents
The Lumiere Brothers
Developed a smaller, lighter camera (tried to buy initially from Edison)
Began shooting "actualities" --- crews sent all over the world
Their films more popular than early Edison's films

Projection
Peepshow very limited --- projection needed for larger crowds & greater income --- but difficult technically
In order to develop a projector:
1. Needed bright light source
2. Projector that could run film smoothly without ripping it to shreds

Projection
Camera based on intermittent motion & persistence of vision - put light behind lens and camera becomes projector---
Many took this path to projection:
Lumiere brothers, William Freise-Greene (Eng.) R.W. Paul (Eng.), Thomas Armat (U.S.) the Lathams (U.S.)
Projection

The final technical barrier was finding a means to run film through the projector at high speed without breaking the film.

Solution—- the “Latham loop” to relieve strain at the film gate.

Projection

1. Lumiere’s showed first projected films to paying audience in Paris in December 1895.

2. Less certain date in U.S., but 1st paid showing probably at Koster & Bial’s Music Hall in New York in April, 1896.

Business Wars

Edison eventually developed his own projector -- the Vitascope (based on patents bought from Thomas Armat & Lathams, the “Latham loop”).

Two competitors challenged his dominance: The American Mutoscope & Biograph Company & the Vitagraph Company.
**Business Wars**

1. First permanent M.P. Theater in U.S. --- Tom Tally’s Elec. Theater in Los Angeles (1902)

2. “Nickelodeans” -- 5,000 by 1908

3. Three tier industry structure: production, distribution, exhibition

**Motion Picture Patents Company**

Composed of 9 leading companies:

1. Distributor could only distribute Patent Company films - 1 reel standard

2. Exclusive contract with Eastman Kodak -- hence control of raw material

3. Opposed by independents like Carl Laemmle, Adolph Zukor, William Fox, Sam Goldwyn

**The First Films**

- Edison films: stage-bound -- camera recording what was put in front of it --- the “formative tradition”

- Lumiere films -- “actualities” -- more realistic--the “documentary tradition”

- By end of 1890s Edison & Lumieres producing both types of films
George Melies

- Operated theater Robert-Houdin in Paris -- magic acts, stage plays
- Exploited trick photography, chorus girls and fantastic costumes
- Most famous film --- *A Trip to the Moon* (1902)

Unbelievably successful --- most popular films of the early period

Still stagebound -- shot equals scene - camera sitting in center of theater pointed at the proscenium arch

By 1914, lost studio - selling magazines & candy at Kiosk on streets of Paris

Edwin S. Porter -- Development of Continuity Editing

Worked for Vitagraph Co. -- then Edison

Influenced by films of Melies & so-called “Brighton School” in England

Began directing in 1902 -- Two really important films: *Life of An American Fireman* (1902) and *The Great Train Robber* (1903)
Summary of Evolving Style

1. Narrative films--the dominate form
2. Longer : 1 reel = 10 -12 minutes
3. Move from static one-shot views to increasingly fluid sequences of shots -- rudimentary editing
4. Stronger camerawork -- particularly Billy Bitzer at Biograph

D. W. Griffith

◆ Would-be playwright, actor
◆ Interested in “legitimate” theater -- not movies (considered “low-class”)
◆ Tried to sell script to Edison studios (Edwin S. Porter) in 1907
◆ Instead offered a job acting ($5 a day)
◆ 1st film-- Rescued from an Eagles’s Nest

Griffith Moves to Biograph

Within a year Griffith jumped to Biograph -- huge demand for films
Worked first as actor, then director
Adventures of Dolly (1908) first film as a director
Between 1908-1913 directed over 400 one reel films for Biograph
By 1913 Griffith making best pictures -- no one knew his name -- Trust didn't allow screen credits

Griffith frustrated by 1 reel limit (10 min. running time) -- want to make longer, more elaborate films

- The Film D'Art Company in France making 2 & 4 reel films -- but released one reel at a time in U.S.

After seeing Italian feature films Quo Vadis (1912) & Cabiria (1913) wanted to do features

In 1914 Biography moved him to management (too ambitious & too expensive to satisfy as a director)

He left for the Mutual Film Company, taking cameraman Billy Bitzer AND his entire stock company of actors

Griffith’s Most Important Feature Films

Birth of a Nation (1915)

Intolerance (1916)
Development of Film Business
(1914-1919)

Trust War all but over by 1914 (Trust finally lost battle in courts in 1917)
Innovations opposed by Trust had been used by the Independents to win the war against Edison's Patent Company.

Innovations Opposed By the Trust (1914-1919)

1. The Star System
2. Feature films
3. 1st run theaters --- first motion picture palace (The Strand) built in N.Y. in 1914
4. Move West to Hollywood

By End of World War I (1918)

System that we still recognize & understand today:

1. Studios founded by Fox, Laemmle, Goldwyn, etc... still exist
2. Vertical integration of industry -- combining prod./distrib./exhibition under single company
By End of World War I (1918)
3. Block-booking -- A. Zukor (Famous Players later Paramount)
   “A-pictures”, “B-pictures”, “C-pictures”
Theater owner must buy “B & C” to get “A”-level films
4. Factory system that cranked out lots of product -- recognizable genres, powerful publicity machine, incredible technical expertise

Classical Hollywood Style
1. Focus on single character (hero)
2. Time subordinated to plot
3. Camera angles psychologically correct
4. Continuity editing psychologically correct

Classical Hollywood Style
Every element in film subservient to story
Hidden (invisible) techniques to focus viewer’s attention always on the story
Rule #1 -- Never distract -- never call attention to technique
One of Early Studio System’s Greatest Successes -- Comedy

Screen comedy really began at Biograph (1909 to 1912) Griffith directed a few “Jones” comedies.

Important influence--Max Linder (French star much like Chaplin’s tramp)

Mack Sennett worked at Biograph for 2 years before starting his own Keystone Company

Mack Sennett

New style of comedy -- Slapstick

Comedy of the absurd -- breakneck chases, wild sight gags

Keystone Kops -- underdog vs. establishment

12 directors/ large gag crew --- Sennett more of an executive producer -- worked sometimes from a bathtub

Mack Sennett

Stock company of stars:
Buster Keaton, Ben Turpin, Fatty Arbuckle, Gloria Swanson, Chester Conklin, Carole Lombard, etc...

In 1913 Sennett had contract battle with Ford Sterling --- Sennett hired Charles Chaplin for $125 per week
Charlie Chaplin

Former vaudeville performer -- didn’t initially discover his “tramp” character.....

but when he did, Chaplin became the first world movie star
Recognized EVERYWHERE - the 1st International Star

Charlie Chaplin

Salary rising like a shooting STAR:
Sennett (1915): $125 per week
Essanay (1916): $1,250 per week + a $10,000 signing bonus
Mutual (1916): $10,000 per week + $150,000 signing bonus
1st National (1917): 1 million

Charlie Chaplin

Mixture of pathos and laughter
More sentimental than Buster Keaton (maybe Keaton is funnier for a modern audience)
Looks easy, but incredible trial & error to develop gags
Other Stars of Silent Comedy

Buster Keaton
Harold Lloyd
Harry Langdon

Like Chaplin, all of them eventually gravitated to feature-length films

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