

Title of the Course:

Film Studies

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History of Early Films

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Film or cinema is a composite art form which incorporates features of many fine art forms, performance art traditions, conventions of literature and technological devices, ranging from the camera to the computer. Cinema is the story telling form, or the narrative form of the 20th century.

A film is also often referred to as a movie, a picture, a feature, a talkie, a flick or a cinema. However, when the reference is to an individual motion picture, the words 'film' or 'movie' is generally used. On the other hand, normally, the word 'cinema' is preferred, when the reference is to movie as a form of art, or cinema as a cultural practice, or cinema as a social institution. In the present context of high globalization, with the increased mobility of people around the world, as a representational practice, cinema now speaks more or less in a universal idiom. And, cinema is identified as one of the very profitable global entertainment industries. Therefore, as an art form, or as an entertainment mode or as an industrial product, it is very important that we know the origin, development and the contemporary state of the cinematic culture.

In this module, we discuss some of the major turning points in the history of early films. Here, the phrase 'early films' means, films produced from 1895 to 1927. In 1895, we had the first public screening of films. In 1927, the first feature-length sound film, or the talkie, was released.

The following are the learning objectives of this module:

- i. To trace the early history of films;
- ii. To understand the major features of early films;
- iii. To figure out the pioneers of early films; and

- iv. To understand the early filmmaking practices;

The screening history of early cinema, was officially inaugurated, on 28th December 1895, in a small basement room of the Grand Cafe hotel, in Paris, the capital city of France. The basement room was called. Le Salon Indien. Le Salon Indien means ‘The Indian Parlour’. So, interestingly, India was very much an indirect participant in the first ever public screening of films! Altogether, 33 spectators, attended the first screening; paying one French franc for a ticket. In this first public screening, arranged for a ticketed audience, the French brothers, Auguste Lumiere and Louis Lumiere showcased their ten short actuality films. The Lumiere brothers were associated with the manufacturing of photographic plates and related tools. The duration of the Lumiere black-and-white films ranged from 30 to 50 seconds only. For screening these films, the Lumiere brothers used their newly invented wonder machine, the Cinematographe. The Cinematographe was a combination of a portable movie camera and a portable movie projector.

In this world premier exhibition event, the following 10 early Lumiere films were screened. They are arranged here, according to the order of their screenings and with their corresponding English titles.

- i. *La Sortie de l’Usine Lumiere a Lyon* (Workers Leaving the Lumiere Factory)
- ii. *Le Jardinier* (The Gardener)
- iii. *Le Débarquement du Congrès de Photographie à Lyon* (The Disembarkment of The Congress of Photographers in Lyon)
- iv. *La Voltige* (Horse Trick Riders)
- v. *La Pêche aux poissons rouges* (Fishing for Goldfish)
- vi. *Les Forgerons* (Blacksmiths)
- vii. *Repas de bébé* (Baby’s Breakfast)
- viii. *Le Saut à la couverture* (Jumping onto the Blanket)
- ix. *La Places des Cordeliers à Lyon* (Cordeliers Square in Lyon)
- x. *Baignade en mer* (Bathing in the Sea)

The early films are often called, “actuality films” or “actualities”. From 1896, the Lumiere brothers screened their films in most of the major cities of the world through their representatives. These cities include: New York, London, Bombay (now Mumbai), Montreal

etc. Cinema reached India on 7th July 1896 when Marius Sestier, a French exhibitor screened films in Watson's Hotel in Bombay using the Cinematographe machine. The screening schedule had the Lumiere film, *Arrival of a Train*. By 1905, about 1500 actualities were shot and shown across the world using the Lumiere Cinematographe.

The major features of the early Lumiere films are:

- a) They are silent;
- b) They are shot on location;
- c) They are shot with a single reel of film;
- d) They are shot with a hand-crank fixed movie camera;
- e) Their screenings are accompanied by a live orchestra and a running commentary;
- f) The length of each of these films were less than a minute; and
- g) Most of them are shots of real events, not of staged events.

However, it is historically incorrect to say that Cinema began with the Lumiere brothers, all of a sudden. The origin of cinema was actually a culmination of various artistic, performance and technological developments that happened over a long period of time. In film studies glossary, the period before the birth of motion picture is generally known as the pre-cinema period. According to film historian Richard Abel, 'pre-cinema period' not only refers to the apparatuses and inventions in which early cinema was predicated, but also refers to the cultural, philosophical and socio-economic contexts within which it emerged (2005: xxix). So, let's look into some of the major technological breakthroughs and artistic interventions which made the movies possible by the time of the Lumiere brothers and other pioneers like Thomas Ava Edison and Georges Melies.

The closest landmark, in the history of the origin of cinema, is the invention of still photography in 1827. Cultural historians give the credit of inventing still photography to the French inventor Joseph Niepce. "A View from the Window at Le Gras" was the title given to the first photograph taken by Joseph Niepce, using a device called the Camera Obscura. Camera Obscura is one of the first generation photo capturing devices. Camera Obscura literally means a 'darkened room' or a 'dark chamber'. By 1839, the photographic camera became a publicly accessible tool with the invention of Daguerreotype, by Louis Daguerre. The invention of still photography played a major role for the development of motion pictures, some seven decades later.

Cinema historians believe that, the history of moving pictures actually starts with the British photographer, Eadweard Muybridge. In 1872, he tried to capture moving men and animals using a series of still cameras, arranged sequentially, with wires attached to the shutters of these cameras. When the moving objects touched these wires, the cameras would capture their bodily movement at that particular moment. Muybridge captured 12 sequential still shots of a trotting horse in this way. When these individual, but continuous, still photographs were projected with Muybridge's image display machine, Zoopraxiscope, at a particular speed, the illusion of movement was created in the human eye. When these discrete sequential images are projected at a particular speed, that is, 24 frames per second, or 24fps, the optical illusion of movement is created in the human mind. This optical illusion is generally known as persistence of vision.

The biological phenomenon of the persistence of vision in human eye retains the projected individual image in the retina, a little longer, even after its actual disappearance. So, such series of retentions of individual images create the illusion of movement in human mind. According to film historian Erik Barnouw, "Muybridge had foreshadowed a crucial aspect of the documentary film; its ability to open our eyes to worlds available to us, but for one reason or another, not perceived" (3).

Let's look at some other important inventions which also contributed to the origin of motion picture. In 1874, Jules Janssen, a French astronomer, captured a series of still shots of Venus passing the sun, using his revolver photographique. Janssen's revolver photographique used individual film plates to catch each still shot. Jules Marey also contributed to the origin of cinema. Marey was a scientist-cum-photographer who was born in France. His contribution to the birth of cinema was his invention of the chronophotographic gun. This gun could capture twelve still images of a moving object in a second. Using these gun-shot pictures, in the 1890s, he studied the human and animal locomotion. For instance, using his gun photography he studied how cats always fall on their feet while landing on a surface from a height.

Another important name in the history of early film is that of Thomas Alva Edison, the American inventor. He invented the viewing machine, Kinetoscope, in the early 1890s. Edison also established the world's first permanent commercial movie studio, the Black Maria, in New Jersey, in the USA, in 1893. In this studio, he produced more than a dozen

films from 1893 to 1901. *Fred Ott's Sneez* (1893), *Rat Killing* (1894), *Annabelle Dancer* (1895), and *The Kiss* (1896) were some of the popular movies produced by Edison during this period. Film scholars like Wheeler W. Dixon and Gwendolyn Foster point out that, Edison tried to foreground female sexuality, bodily masculinity, white racism and anthropocentrism through his films. Despite such criticisms, Edison is acknowledged to be the first film practitioner who foresaw the immense entertainment possibility and commercial potential of cinema. While the Lumiere brothers dismissed cinema as “an invention without a future”, Edison foresaw the commercial possibilities and the cultural potential of the cinematic art.

What are the major differences between the Lumiere Cinematographe and the Edison Kinetoscope? The most important difference between Lumiere's Cinematographe and Edison's Kinetoscope is that the latter allowed only one viewer at a time during the projection, while the former allowed mass viewership, at a time, during the projection. To see a motion picture in Edison's Kinetoscope, the audience had to peep into a hole in the machine, one by one. At the same time, the Lumiere films could be projected on screen and enjoyed while sitting comfortably in chairs along with others in a darkened auditorium. This was the reason why Edison's films failed to appeal the mass audience in the beginning. Edison's Kinetoscope was heavier which made it less portable; whereas, the Lumiere Cinematographe was literally portable. Sensing the limitation of his projection machine, Edison, later depended on Thomas Armat's Vitascope projecting device for screening his films. Most of Edison's films were shot in his permanent studio, the Black Maria. It is also important to note that, most of the Lumiere films were shot on actual sites; whereas, most of Edison's films were shot within the studio.

Georges Melies, a French by birth, is another prominent figure in the history of early cinema. In the initial years of the 20th century itself, Melies tried to bring into cinema the elements of magic, fantasy, illusion, and even space travel. He also introduced many special effects like: reverse rolling of the reel, masking, dissolves, hand colouring of films, and double exposure. Melies's *Le Voyage dans le lune* (A Trip to the Moon, 1902) is generally referred to as one of the first Science-Fiction or Sci-Fi movies. Melies anticipated the space travel and interplanetary voyages through this film. Dixon and Foster say that George Melies' “trademark brand of phantasmagorical wizardry made him the godfather of special effects cinema” (Dixon and Foster, 11). Like Edison, Melies opted to shoot his films within the

studio. *La Chaudron Infernal* (The Infernal Boiling Pot, 1903) was another fantasy film directed by him. Film scholars praise Melies for extending the optical illusionary possibilities of the cinematic art. For Melies, film editing was more important than shooting because it is editing which gives film a style, a format and a meaning.

By the first decade of the 20th century, cinema got established as a popular entertainment industry around the world. Many permanent indoor theatres, dedicated for the purpose of film screenings were built in different part of the world during this time. Some of them were called Nickelodeons, because each ticket was sold for a nickel, or five cents in the US currency denomination. Odeon is the Greek word for a roofed-theatre. Some of these early movie theatres are: The L'ideal Cinema in France, built in 1902, The Nickelodeon in the USA, built in 1905, and The Korsor Biograph Teater in Denmark, built in 1908.

In the first two decades of the 20th century, Edwin S. Porter produced more than two hundred films. However, just two films, *The Life of an American Fireman* (1903) and *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) are enough to immortalize the name of the American filmmaker Edwin S. Porter in the history of film. In the first film, Porter combined actual documentary footages with staged shots in order to create the cinematic suspense. The second film is considered to be an archetypal film which inaugurated the Western as a sub-genre in Cinema. It had thieves, robbery, cops, vehicle rides, hot chases, gun shots, murders, and the final surrender. From first decade of the 20th century, till the 1920s, David W. Griffith was a sensation in American film industry. Working across genres like the melodrama, romance, and adventure, Griffith highlighted cinema as a narrative form. He experimented with film techniques in which the adjustments made in the mechanical eye, the camera, were given primary importance. His magnum opus is *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) which was based on the American Civil War. The huge box office success of this film could not rescue Griffith off the charges of racism and patriarchy which are explicit in this film. *Intolerance* (1916) was another major cinematic epic created by Griffith. His films are also known for their effective use of close-up shots, large scenarios, and the fade-outs and fade-ins to indicate time lapse. Griffith is believed to be the inventor of close-up shots. Most of his films were feature films. If the length of a film is 40 minutes or more, it is technically called a feature film.

As mentioned earlier, the history of Indian cinema began on 17th July 1896 when Marius Sestier exhibited films including Louis Lumiere's *Arrival of a Train* in Watson's Hotel in

Bombay. Harishchandra Sakharam Bhatvadekar, a professional portrait photographer, was also present amongst the audience at the Watson's Hotel. Erik Barnouw says that probably H. S. Bhatvadekar was the first Indian buyer of the Lumiere Cinematographe (55). With Cinematographe, Bhatvadekar captured the documentary shots of a wrestling match held in Bombay in 1899 at the Hanging Gardens. The title of his film was *The Wrestlers* and it is considered to be one of the first indigenous Indian attempts in filmmaking. The first full length motion picture produced by an Indian filmmaker is *Raja Harishchandra* which was released on 03rd May, 1913. Of course, it was a silent film with a Marathi linguistic milieu and it was directed by Dadasaheb Phalke. Dadasaheb Phalke is known as the father of Indian Cinema. *Alam Ara* (1931), directed by Ardeshir Irani, is considered to be the first Indian sound film.

At present, India is a major player in International film business. India has got more than 11000 screens as of now. It produces about 2000 films annually in different Indian languages. Indian cinema is unique in its visual idiom and for its general thrust on the melodramatic style centred around the joint-family and domestic issues.

In the history of early film, the 1920s witnessed a phenomenal presence of Documentary Film as a matured sub-genre of film. Filmmakers like Robert Flaherty, Dziga Vertov, and John Grierson contributed greatly to the growth of documentary film. We will learn about documentary film in detail in another module. Charlie Chaplin also made his feature cinema debut in the 1920s. As Francois Jost puts it, during the era of silent film, silence became an aesthetic stake, where silence was perceived less as an impediment than as an artistic choice (qtd. in Abel and Altman, 2001: 48). The history of silent films ends with the emergence of the first feature-length sound film or the talkie, *The Jazz Singer* (1927). It was a musical directed by the American filmmaker, Alan Crosland.

To sum up, as Simon Popple and Joe Kember opined, the history of academic study of cinema reveals a series of tensions between traditionally distinctive areas of studies such as, technology, aesthetics, audiences and business (5). Therefore, we have to follow a synthetic model while engaging with cinema as an object of academic scrutiny.

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Web Links:

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