

The Department of English

RAJA NARENDRALAL KHAN WOMEN'S COLLEGE (AUTONOMOUS)

GOPE PALACE, MIDNAPORE, WEST BENGAL

Offers

BRIECOURSE MODULE ON:

Evolution of the Cinema

(Section 1)

For

Semester- IV

Paper- SEC 2: Film Studies

Provided by:

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Faculty

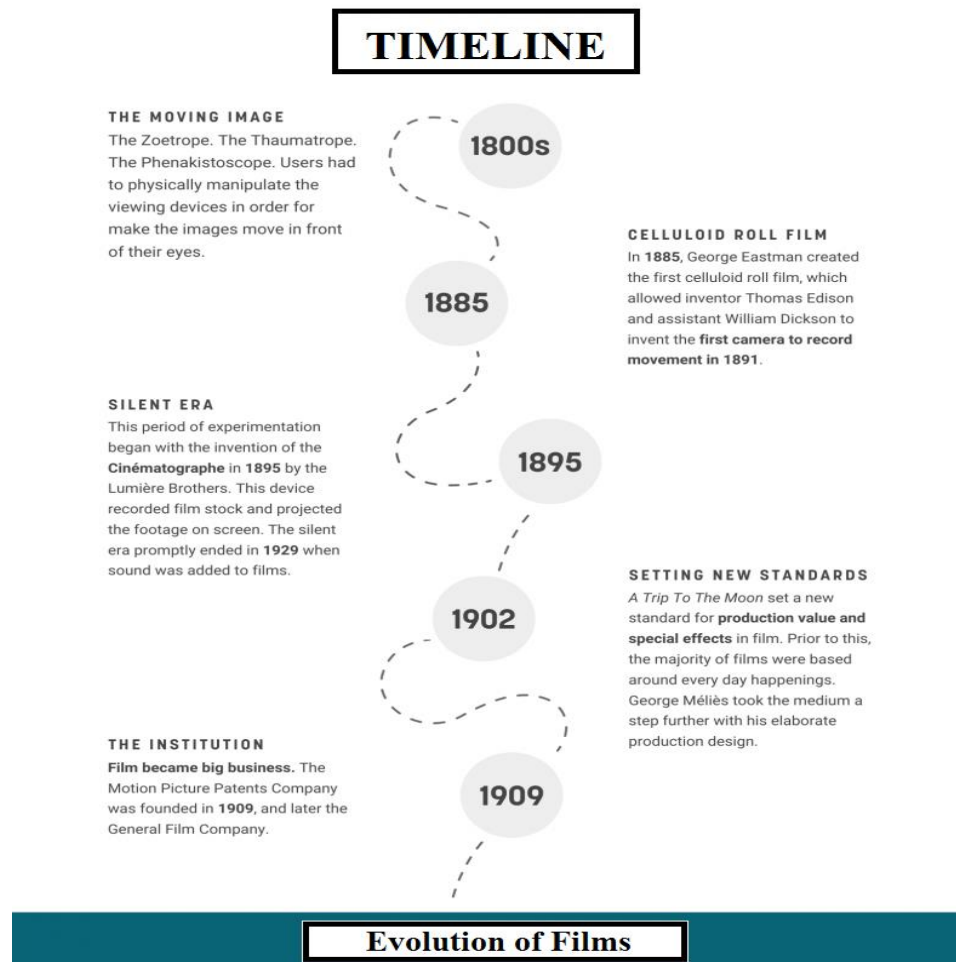
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1. Evolution of the Cinema:

In 1891 the Edison Company in the USA effectively demonstrated a prototype of the Kinetoscope, the early motion picture exhibition device, which enabled one person at a time to view moving, animated pictures. The first to present projected moving pictures to a paying audience (what we call ‘cinema’) were the Lumière brothers in December 1895 in Paris.

At first, films were short at length, sometimes only a few minutes or less long. They were shown at fairgrounds, theatres, opera houses and music halls or anywhere a screen could be set up and a room darkened. Subjects included local scenes and activities, views of foreign lands, short comedies and events considered newsworthy. The films were accompanied by talks, music and a lot of audience participation—although they did not have synchronised dialogue, they were not ‘silent’ as they are sometimes described.



2. Films and Phases:

2.1 Silent Films:

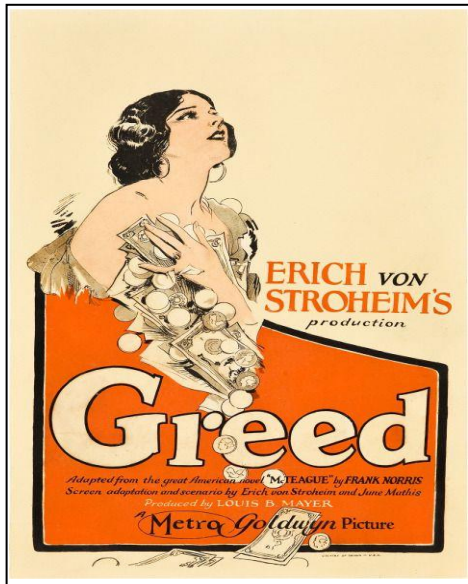
'Silents' or silent film are the films of the early era that were without synchronized sound, from the earliest film (around 1891), until 1927, when the first 'talkie', *The Jazz Singer* (1927) - the first commercially successful sound film, was produced. Its follow-up was *The Lights of New York* (1928), the first all-synchronized-sound feature. The silent era basically lasted until the end of the decade when most films started to appear as 'talkies', although there were hold-outs like Chaplin's *City Lights* (1931). Many of the early silent films were either motion-presentations of plays, epics, romances, or crude comedies.

Calling films silent is an injustice to the creative faculty involved in making a film a medium of articulation. In the early days, movies were often accompanied by a phonograph recording. Then, movie theatres and other dream places provided live music from pianists, organists, wurlitzers, and other sound machines. In the larger cities with bigger theaters, silents were usually accompanied with a full-fledged orchestra to provide musical background and to underscore the narrative on the screen. Unfortunately, many of the early silent classics have been lost owing to decomposing effect of nitrate film-bases that resulted in outright destruction. About 80% of silents have been lost forever, as film historians believe.

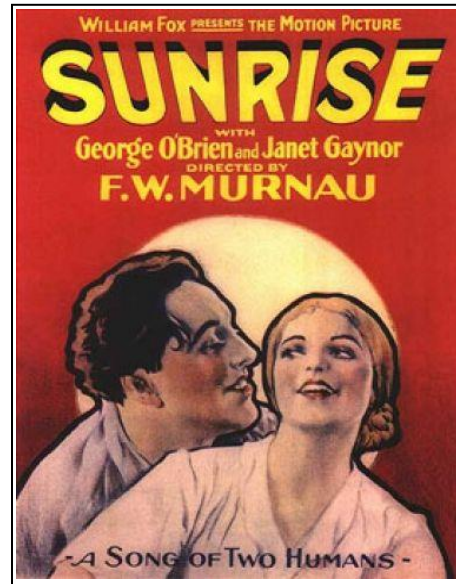
Silent films, usually made with low budgets and few resources, were an important evolutionary stage in the development of films, since they forced film-makers to tell engaging narrative stories with actors who could articulate feelings and emotions with body language and facial expressions flawlessly. Major foundational elements and visual vocabulary of cinema, including lighting, cinematography, film-set designing, costuming, camera shots, composition, movement, special effects (jump cuts, dissolves, superimpositions, miniatures, matte paintings), and more start to creep into the scene with this. After the film was shot, editors were compelled to use fundamental techniques (montage, cross-cutting, parallel scenes, tableaux, etc.) to convey the proper rhythm and continuity.

Early masterpieces of silent films include Cecil B. De Mille's *The Ten Commandments* (1923), Erich Von Stroheim's *Greed* (1924) and King Vidor's *The Big Parade* (1925), *The*

Crowd (1928). In addition to this, we must name F. W. Murnau's *Sunrise* (1927), one of the most famous melodramatic silents.



Poster: Erich Von Stroheim's *Greed* (1924)



Poster: F. W. Murnau's *Sunrise* (1927)

2.2 Sound Films or Talkies:

Small theaters typically featured a pianist or organist, but larger places could afford to provide an industrious orchestra organization. Sometimes films contained intertitles, printed cards between scenes that explained what was going on, but usually audiences had to rely on actors' gestures and expressions to understand the subtleties of the film. This, however, was about to change with the introduction of sound in films.

2.2.1 Difficulties and New Avenues:

The idea of sound in film was not new in 1925. In fact, movie pioneers Thomas Edison and William Dickson had been playing with ways to incorporate sound since the 1890s. They kept running into technical difficulties, though. Pictures and sound had to be recorded on different machines, and it was extremely difficult to synchronize the two. What's more, it was also hard to amplify the sound enough for everyone in the audience to hear.

Inventors kept trying to conquer these problems, but it wasn't until the mid-1920s that they made any real progress. By this time, technology had developed enough to permit a phonograph to hook up to a movie projector. This sound-on-disc system, called the Vitaphone, allowed recorded music to accompany a film with relatively good synchronization, but it still wasn't accurate enough for dialogue.

Soon, however, a new development changed the movie world forever. Inventors discovered that they could record sound information on a small strip of celluloid that ran down one side of a strip of film. This process, called sound-on-film, or Movietone, allowed the picture and the sound to play together in perfect synchronization, at least in theory. This new development encouraged filmmakers to incorporate sound directly into their movies, but it did not solve other sound issues, including recording and amplification difficulties. These would only be ironed out over time.

2.2.2 Sound in Films:

When filmmakers learned about the new capabilities for sound in film, they were excited to try them out. Warner Brothers Studios released the film *Don Juan* in 1926, the first feature length movie with a recorded music soundtrack played back using the Vitaphone system.

The next year, 1927, saw an even greater sound in film novelty with the release of Warner Brothers' *The Jazz Singer*. This film also used the Vitaphone, but it featured six songs performed by actor Al Jolson, as well as snippets of dialogue improvised by Jolson. *The Jazz Singer* can be considered the first feature length **talkie**, or movie with synchronized dialogue, but really, it was only one fourth of the entire film with a little over 350 words in total. Nonetheless, it was a hit, and it changed the history and geography of film and film-making.

The Jazz Singer was followed by all kinds of new developments in movie sound. No one seemed to want to go back to silent films. Talking movies made money, lots of it, and movie studios kept pushing straight ahead into the world of sound. The wide path of talkies is paved by:

- *They're Coming to Get Me* (1927), the first short film made with the Movietone sound-on-film system that would soon become an industry standard,
- *Lights of New York* (1928), the first all-talking movie,

- Walt Disney's Mickey Mouse cartoon *Steamboat Willie* (1928), which was the first cartoon with synchronized sound,
- Alfred Hitchcock's *Blackmail* (1929), which was Great Britain's first all-talkie film,
- *The Broadway Melody* (1929), the first feature length musical film,
- Warner Brothers' *The Show of Shows* (1929).



The Broadway Melody (1929)



Lights of New York (1928)

References and Web-links

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***Note: I am hereby acknowledging my thorough indebtedness to the books, web links and portals referred in the preparation of the module. I would advise the students to go through these for better understanding of the issues discussed here.**