Movie-making in the USA

The first silent films were made by the Lumière brothers in Paris in 1895, and in the early days France and Italy dominated the film industry. However, this changed during World War I. The European movie industry crashed, but in the USA things were just beginning.

1 Hollywood – the early years

Movie production companies moved to California because of the warm climate and natural sunlight. (Electric lights weren’t powerful enough to use for movie making.) The first studio in Hollywood, near Los Angeles, opened in 1911. Within a year there were fifteen other studios.

2 From silent pictures to the talkies

By the 1920s, Hollywood was producing more than 800 movies a year and silent movie stars, like Charlie Chaplin, became household names. The first showing of a commercial movie with synchronised sound was in New York in 1923. These first films were called ‘talking pictures’, or ‘talkies’, and this technology meant that Hollywood dominated movie-making.

3 The studio system and the Golden Age of Hollywood

From the 1920s to the 1950s, the large studios like Paramount, 20th Century Fox, Warner Brothers and MGM had complete control of movie-making and cinema distribution, as well as the stars themselves. This made them extremely powerful. This period is called the Golden Age of Hollywood, when classic films and westerns with big stars like Humphrey Bogart, John Wayne, Clark Gable and Bette Davis were produced and seen all over the world. Famous movies of this period include Gone with the Wind, King Kong and Casablanca. Most of the films at this time were made in black and white.

4 The 50s and 60s

This studio system’s practice of complete control became illegal in 1948, and by the mid-1950s, the Golden Age was over. The introduction of television, and the post-war years of economic depression also contributed to the decline. Another factor was that many actors and directors were ‘blacklisted’ because of allegations of ‘un-American, communist’ activities. So movie companies had to find other ways to attract audiences: Technicolor and new widescreen formats, like Cinemascope, made exciting epics, like Ben-Hur possible, and new icons like Marilyn Monroe and James Dean appealed to younger generations.

5 The 1970s to the present

During the 1970s, new movie-makers like George Lucas and Steven Spielberg began to dominate film-making with their blockbusters like Star Wars and Jaws – movies made with enormous budgets and special effects. In the 1990s computer-generated imagery (CGI) was introduced, for example, the dinosaurs in Jurassic Park in 1993. The same technology was used in Toy Story, and it changed animation.

Warm-up

1 Look at the dates and descriptions below (1–5) about the film industry in the USA. Match them to the photos (A–E).

2 ___ 1911: Early movie-making
3 ___ 1970s: The birth of the blockbuster
4 ___ A Hollywood icon: Marilyn Monroe
5 ___ 1923: A star is born!

The future

Nobody can be sure what the future will be for Hollywood. The Internet, digital technology and satellite TV on demand mean that change is inevitable. But there’s no doubt that it will be another exciting chapter in movie-making’s rich history.
Reading

2 Read the article about the movie-making industry in the USA and check your answers to exercise 1. Match the photos (A–E) to the paragraphs (1–5).

Vocabulary

3 Find the English translations for these words in the article.

1 crollò (L.05) __________
2 potenti (L.09) __________
3 nomi famosi (L.15) __________
4 pratica (L.35) __________
5 messi sulla lista nera (L.42) __________
6 accuse (L.42) __________
7 attirare (L.45) __________
8 piacevano a (L.49) __________
9 su richiesta (L.62) __________
10 capitolo (L.65) __________

Check

4 Answer the questions.

1 Why did the European movie industry crash in the early 20th century?
2 Why did California become the centre of the movie industry in the USA?
3 When was the first movie with sound shown in the USA?
4 How did the studio system of the 1940s make the producers so powerful?
5 Give three reasons for the decline of the Golden Age of Hollywood.
6 How did movie companies get people interested in the cinema again in the 1950s and 1960s?
7 How were blockbusters different from other movies?
8 What three factors will influence movie-making in the future?

Speaking

5 In pairs. Ask and answer the questions.

1 Do you like Hollywood movies? What’s your favourite? Who are your favourite actors?
2 Do you prefer Italian or American films? Why?
3 Where are films made in Italy? Does Italy have a successful film industry? When was its Golden Age?
4 What kinds of films are associated with Italian film-making?
5 Who are the most famous Italian cinema icons?

A Do you like Hollywood movies?
B It depends. I like...

Writing

8 Write a short text (100–150 words) about an important Italian director or actor. Include this information:

- an introduction: who the person is, and why he/she is important
- some information about the person’s life
- their most important films