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How WW1 Evolved the Film Industry

As an emerging medium of entertainment, film was not widespread or popular at the time of World War 1. The moving picture was invented in the 1880's but wasn't nearly efficient enough to be used for crowds in an entertainment setting or as a means of news and communication, as they often could only be a few minutes and required a large amount of equipment. The art of film was in its early stages, but frequent innovation made it clear that the future of entertainment laid with the camera. The First World War offered a chance for film to show its utility both as a diversion and an informer for the people back home. Film was gaining traction in the US when WWI began, and like most industries, it wasn't the same when it came out the other end. The period of WWI gave rise to significant changes in the content of films and the art form as an industry.

During and after the First World War, the content that people wanted to see on the screen underwent a significant change. Because this was the first war to take place since the invention of film, it played an important role in dictating what people would watch for years to come.

Knowing that people didn't want to see actual war footage, the film industry shifted its focus to historical fiction. Wasting no time, the French film "J'Accuse" was released in 1919 and it addressed the trauma and shellshock experienced by a veteran readjusting to life at home.

Themes in line with this would follow all over the world, as seen in "All Quiet on the Western

Front” which followed a group of young German soldiers slowly realizing that war wasn’t as glorious as they’d been led to believe. The change in subject matter was dramatic and its influence on the film industry can be felt even today.

This time in film also brought about the beginning of an incredibly diverse industry in terms of content. Realizing that not everyone wanted to see images of war in a time when that’s all they could think about, some filmmakers took the comical approach. This doesn’t mean that the comedic films were completely independent of the war. In fact, many of them were created for the sole use of poking fun at the opposition. Lancelot Speed, a British filmmaker created animated cartoons that ridiculed the Kaiser and his military and they were a great success with the people. This early form of parody conveys the same attitude that you might see in a lot of political coverage today, but since it was aimed at the enemy, there was no opposition to it and it thrived. The introduction of comedy along with drama laid the foundation for the film industry to cover a great amount of material as it evolved.

Another use of film during the war was to spread the news. Since television broadcasting was still far from being introduced, people still primarily receive their news from the paper. They knew what they were about to see when they went to watch the war footage, but what they were looking for was the experience, that maybe they could share the feelings of the soldiers on the battlefield. In a sense, film was never used to break news, but rather to supplement the stories for the viewer. Films about the ongoing war had a way of being used as propaganda, whether that was the intended purpose or not. If the movie showed the war in a bad light, it could be used as anti-war propaganda and if it was shown in a glorious light, then it would be pro-war propaganda. For example, *The Battle of the Somme* was a British documentary that was released

while the battle raged on. Its aim was simply to inform, but the British government adopted it as propaganda aimed at both allied and neutral countries. This foreshadowed the role of the media in future wars such as the Vietnam War, in which war footage was used in heavy opposition to the war effort. One thing that challenged filmmakers in the war was how to capture real footage that would be engaging to the audience. While these men were devoted to their young craft, they weren't willing to go on the front lines with massive equipment and no weapons. This left them relatively few windows of opportunities to get high-quality footage. This shortage led to the introduction of staged battles. After all, how would the people back home tell the difference? It may not have been the most honorable or authentic way to bring the war home, but it certainly made it more entertaining and lucrative.

The United States was competing not only in the war, but in the new global film industry, and this led to the creation of the modern motion picture capital of the world: Hollywood. While it was a relatively young neighborhood, Hollywood quickly became a hotspot for film studios. The first studio appeared on Sunset Blvd. in 1911 and attracted many more from the east coast in the following years because filmmakers couldn't be sued for infringing on Thomas Edison's patents there. Hollywood's meteoric rise to success only accelerated during WWI as stars like Charlie Chaplin and the Marx Brothers began to emerge. Hollywood's role in the war may not have directly helped the war effort, but the diversion it provided became a precedent for all future wars and conflicts. This American economic success was only propelled by the fact that there was no actual fighting taking place in the US. In countries with growing film industries like Britain and Germany, there was constant bombing and attacks which made it hard to patronize a young and relatively impractical business. In terms of equipment, it was one thing to create a

movie, but a whole new set of challenges came with screening them for the public. It required both venues and customers, neither of which was guaranteed in a country in the midst of all-out war. On top of the chaotic disruption of screening opportunities, countries at war would no longer play their opponents' films, which meant foreign films would significantly decline during and shortly after the war. With this being the case, the most fit to succeed would be the countries with the largest domestic audiences, which again favored America. While the troops were away at war, the people back home needed to take their minds off of it and the American film industry gave them movies of drama, comedy, and more.

WWI played an incredibly important role in the early years of the film industry. The effects that it had can easily be seen nowadays as war films are some of the most expensive and publicized motion pictures to hit the screen. The formative years of the industry were in a way dictated by the global conflict because the citizens of the world needed an outlet in the trying times. The circumstances of the war favored the American economy due to its geographic isolation and large population, a trend that would repeat itself in WW2. America was not a true competitor in the global film industry at the beginning of the war, but fortunately for them, they were given the chance to excel in it. With the success of Hollywood and the emergence of film as a news source, the United States was able to get in at the perfect point to come out above the previous leaders, including Germany, Denmark, and possibly even Britain. World War 1 was a trying time for the world and may not be remembered for the film cameras, but had it not been for the global conflict, the film industry's potential may not have been truly recognized for many more years.

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