



American Cinema  
**1920s** *of the*

THEMES AND VARIATIONS

edited by Lucy Fischer

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## American Cinema of the 1920s

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**S C R E E N**



**D E C A D E S**

AMERICAN CULTURE / AMERICAN CINEMA

Each volume in the Screen Decades: American Culture/American Cinema series presents a group of original essays analyzing the impact of cultural issues on the cinema and the impact of the cinema in American society. Because every chapter explores a spectrum of particularly significant motion pictures and the broad range of historical events in one year, readers will gain a continuing sense of the decade as it came to be depicted on movie screens across the continent. The integration of historical and cultural events with the sprawling progression of American cinema illuminates the pervasive themes and the essential movies that define an era. Our series represents one among many possible ways of confronting the past; we hope that these books will offer a better understanding of the connections between American culture and film history.

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Themes and Variations

EDITED BY  
LUCY FISCHER



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In memory of my aunt Emma Fischer Pinkus  
and my uncle Reuben Levine,  
who both were young in the 1920s



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# T I M E L I N E



## The 1920s

### 1920

- 10 JANUARY The League of Nations is established in Geneva, Switzerland; the Treaty of Versailles is ratified by Germany.
- 16 JANUARY The Eighteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution goes into effect, prohibiting the making, selling, possession, and consumption of alcoholic beverages. It would be repealed in 1933.
- 28 MARCH The marriage of Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks, after a three-year affair, is a Hollywood sensation.
- 18 AUGUST The Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution is ratified, giving women the right to vote.
- 28 SEPTEMBER The “Black Sox” scandal rocks Major League Baseball when eight Chicago White Sox players are indicted on charges of fixing the 1919 World Series.
- 2 NOVEMBER The Republican ticket of Warren G. Harding and Calvin Coolidge defeats Democrats James M. Cox and Franklin Roosevelt in the U.S. presidential election.

### 1921

- 31 MAY–1 JUNE Race riots in Tulsa, Oklahoma.
- 14 JULY Italian immigrant anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti are convicted of first-degree murder in Massachusetts.
- 30 AUGUST The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) sues Famous Players–Lasky for violating antitrust laws by refusing to allow independent films to play in its theaters.
- 5 SEPTEMBER Comic actor Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle injures Virginia Rappe during a sexual encounter. She later dies of acute peritonitis.
- 7 SEPTEMBER The first Miss America Pageant is held in Atlantic City, New Jersey.
- 2 OCTOBER Babe Ruth finishes the baseball season with a record fifty-nine home runs.

**1922**

- 2 FEBRUARY Forty-five-year-old film director William Desmond Taylor is found murdered in Los Angeles with a bullet in his back.
- 19 MAY American inventor Charles Francis Jenkins makes the first laboratory transmission of a television picture signal.
- 30 MAY Built at a cost of \$3 million, the Lincoln Memorial opens on the Mall in Washington, D.C.
- 27 SEPTEMBER *The Power of Love*, the first 3-D feature film, plays to a paying film audience. It is projected dual-strip in the red/green anaglyph format, making it both the earliest known film that utilized dual strip projection and the earliest known film in which anaglyph glasses were used.
- 26 NOVEMBER King Tut's tomb is found in the Valley of the Kings by British Egyptologists George Carnarvon and Howard Carter.
- 26 NOVEMBER *The Toll of the Sea*, directed by Chester M. Franklin for Metro Pictures, is the first two-color Technicolor film released. The two strips, made of film stocks thinner than regular film, were then cemented together base to base to create a projection.

**1923**

- 3 MARCH *Time*, the first weekly newsmagazine, is published by Henry Luce and Briton Hadden.
- 4 APRIL The four Warner brothers' film distribution and production business is incorporated and called Warner Bros. Pictures Inc.—one of the first large film studios.
- 15 APRIL Lee de Forest shows the first "talkies" at the Rivoli Theatre in New York using the Phonofilm system, projecting a series of short musical films featuring vaudeville performers. He was forced to show his films in independent theaters such as the Rivoli, since Hollywood movie studios controlled all major theater chains.
- 5 JULY The Kodak Model A film camera and Model A motorized Kodascope projector—the first complete 16 mm system—are introduced in the United States.
- 2 AUGUST President Warren Harding dies of bronchial pneumonia in a San Francisco hotel room. He is succeeded by Calvin Coolidge.
- 25 OCTOBER The Teapot Dome scandal comes to public attention. It would result in the conviction of Harry F. Sinclair of Mammoth Oil, and later Secretary of the Interior Albert B. Fall, the first cabinet member in American history to go to jail. The scandal, named

for the Teapot Dome oil reserves in Wyoming, involved Fall secretly leasing naval oil reserve lands to private companies.

## 1924

- 24 JANUARY C.B.C. Film Sales Company (founded by brothers Jack and Harry Cohn, and Joseph Brandt) officially changes its name to Columbia Pictures Corporation.
- 3 FEBRUARY Former president Woodrow Wilson dies.
- 17 APRIL Metro and Goldwyn combine to form the Metro-Goldwyn studio.
- 2 JUNE Native Americans are declared U.S. citizens under the Snyder Act.
- 2 JULY The Immigration Act of 1924 limits the number of immigrants from any particular country to 2 percent of the number of people from that country who were already living in the United States according to the Census of 1890. It thus excludes Asian immigration to the United States.
- 4 NOVEMBER Calvin Coolidge is elected to a full term as president.

## 1925

- 21 FEBRUARY Harold Ross publishes the first issue of the *New Yorker*.
- 18 MARCH The worst tornadoes in U.S. history kill about 700 people in the Midwest (Missouri, Illinois, and Indiana).
- 22 MAY Vitagraph, one of the oldest studios, sells out to Warner Bros., who inherit all the research undertaken by Vitagraph in the field of sound (Vitaphone).
- 21 JULY John Scopes is found guilty of teaching evolution in Dayton, Tennessee.
- 8 AUGUST Fifty thousand Ku Klux Klansmen march on Washington.
- 28 NOVEMBER The “Grand Ole Opry,” a weekly American radio program featuring live country and western music, begins broadcasting. The nation’s oldest continuous radio show, it was first broadcast on Nashville’s WSM as an amateur showcase.

## 1926

- 16 MARCH Robert H. Goddard launches the first liquid fuel rocket in Auburn, Massachusetts.
- 6 AUGUST Gertrude Ederle becomes the first woman to swim the English Channel.

- 6 AUGUST In New York, Warner Bros. debuts *Don Juan*—the first Vitaphone film (developed by Bell Telephone Laboratories in 1926) and the first publicly shown sound film—starring John Barrymore. It is the first mainstream film that successfully coordinates audio sound on a recorded disc synchronized to play in conjunction with a projected motion picture. The sounds in the film consist of effects and music, but no dialogue.
- 23 AUGUST Film star Rudolph Valentino dies at thirty-one of septicemia after surgery for a perforated gastric ulcer.
- 9 SEPTEMBER NBC, the National Broadcasting Company, is incorporated in the United States as an offshoot of the Radio Corporation of America (RCA).
- 31 OCTOBER Magician Harry Houdini dies of gangrene and peritonitis that develops after his appendix ruptures.
- 15 NOVEMBER NBC is inaugurated as a radio network, comprising twenty-four stations, with a 4½-hour program hosted from the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York and involving feeds from Chicago (soprano Mary Garden) and Independence, Kansas (Will Rogers).

## 1927

- 11 MAY The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences is founded by Louis B. Mayer. Its first president is Douglas Fairbanks.
- 18 MAY Grauman's Chinese Theater, later famed for hand- and footprints of various film stars and celebrities, opens in Hollywood.
- 20–21 MAY Cheers greet *The Spirit of St. Louis* when Charles Lindbergh lands his plane in Paris. He makes the first nonstop solo transatlantic flight in the history of aviation, flying 3,600 miles in over thirty-three hours from New York to Paris, forsaking a radio for additional gasoline.
- 30 SEPTEMBER In baseball, Babe Ruth sets a new record, hitting his sixtieth home run in a season. The record will stand for thirty-four years.
- 6 OCTOBER *The Jazz Singer*, a part-talking film, opens.
- 27 OCTOBER Fox Movietone News premieres the first sound newsreel in New York.

## 1928

- 15 AND 18 MAY Mickey Mouse debuts in the silent cartoon *Plane Crazy* and in *Steamboat Willie*, the first fully synchronized sound cartoon.

- 28 MAY All major Hollywood studios adopt sound-on-film systems, rejecting Warner Bros.'s Vitaphone sound-on-disc format.
- 17–18 JUNE Amelia Earhart becomes the first woman to fly across the Atlantic (as a passenger).
- 6 JULY Warner Bros.'s *The Lights of New York* premieres as the first all-talking feature-length motion picture.
- 31 JULY For the first time, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer films start with a logo of a roaring lion shown in a frame, accompanied by MGM's new motto, "Ars gratia artis" (Art for art's sake). The logo was based on the original Goldwyn Pictures logo and the Lion was called Slats.
- 3 SEPTEMBER Penicillin is discovered.
- 6 NOVEMBER Republican Herbert Hoover, secretary of commerce in the Coolidge administration, is elected the thirty-first president of the United States, defeating New York governor Al Smith.

## 1929

- 14 FEBRUARY The St. Valentine's Day Massacre, a gangland "hit," takes place in a Chicago garage. Seven are killed.
- 16 MAY The first Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences awards ceremony (the Academy Awards) is held at the Roosevelt Hotel in Hollywood to honor the films of 1927 and 1928.
- 28 MAY *On with the Show!*, the first all-color, all-talking picture, premieres.
- 27 JUNE Bell Laboratories makes the first U.S. public demonstration of color television in New York. The images they show are those of roses and an American flag.
- 24 AND 29 OCTOBER The stock market crash begins with "Black Thursday" and "Black Tuesday."
- 2 NOVEMBER The first news cinema—the Embassy on Broadway in New York City—opens. It would close in 1949 due to competition from television.



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## American Cinema of the 1920s



*Foolish Wives* (1922). Count Karamzin (Erich von Stroheim) romances Mrs. Hughes (Miss DuPont) on the porch of a European hotel.

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# INTRODUCTION



## Movies and the 1920s

LUCY FISCHER

"It was an age of miracles, it was an age of art, it was an age of excess . . ."

—F. Scott Fitzgerald

### An Age of Miracles

Writing in November 1931, F. Scott Fitzgerald stated: "It is too soon to write about the Jazz Age with perspective" (13). It may have been then, but it is not now. Furthermore, there are many aspects of the decade that make it an especially fascinating one to chronicle—both in terms of American cultural and film history.

As for the first realm, it was an age of great drama, book-ended, as it was, between two cataclysmic events—World War I and the stock market crash. Beyond that, it begins and ends with a depression (though the earlier crisis is less spectacular than the later). Furthermore, the decade has been seen as a highly representative one. As Joseph Wood Krutch noted at the decade's finale: "The 1920s illuminates fundamental issues of the twentieth century" (12). Years later, Nathan Miller came to a similar conclusion: "It is indeed a judgment call to select one decade to describe the warp and woof of American history, but the 1920s present themselves admirably for such treatment. To an astonishing extent, the 1920s resemble our own era, at the turn of the twenty-first century. . . . Much of what we consider contemporary actually began in the Twenties" (1). Likewise, the classical Hollywood cinema also had its roots in the twenties: the studio and star systems, talking pictures, color photography, bona fide theaters, and the movies' status as a major American industry. In fact, ever since, the fates of American society and the movies have been inextricably entwined.

The twenties began on the heels of the Great War—a momentous global conflict pitting the United States and her allies (France, Britain, Russia, Italy) against the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Turkey). This international catastrophe was to cast a long shadow on the decade that followed. As Frederick Lewis Allen observed at the time: "Since 1919 the circumstances of American life have been transformed" (1). Clearly, this

metamorphosis entailed an end to American isolationism. As Ronald Allen Goldberg later noted: “For the first time in history, the mass of Americans had been brought into contact with events abroad and the previous nineteenth-century insular American view of the world was under serious challenge” (2). In part, such internationalism was disillusioning. Allen observed that, for some, there was a sense that “life was futile and nothing mattered much” (67). For F. Scott Fitzgerald, “the events of 1919 left [people] cynical” but simultaneously emboldened. As he remarked: “We were the most powerful nation. Who could tell us any longer what was fashionable and what was fun?” (14).

Though a few American films tackled wartime subjects early on (notably *Hearts of the World*, directed by D. W. Griffith, and *Heart of Humanity*, directed by Allen Holubar, both from 1918), it was not until the mid- to late-twenties that a series of significant works on the topic emerged. One of the most notable was Paramount’s *Wings* (1927), directed by William Wellman, which focused on American pilots overseas—their camaraderie and the tragedy of lives lost. One lighthearted sequence in the film, however, contrasts naive Americans with their sophisticated European counterparts, in line with the era’s song lyric: “How You Gonna Keep ‘em Down on the Farm after They’ve Seen Patee?” (1919). Following a hard-fought battle, American soldiers are given leave in France’s capital, which is represented as a gleeful site of mass debauchery (in contrast to the Puritanical USA). Once in the city, the doughboys frequent a café where, unlike Prohibition-era America, liquor flows freely. The film’s hero (played by Charles “Buddy” Rogers) immediately gets drunk and hallucinates bubbles floating before his eyes. Beyond inebriates, the club is populated by women in shocking, low-cut gowns as well as by lesbians garbed in masculine attire. While war news brought Americans closer to their allies (the French and English), at home German Americans were suddenly suspect, which is clear from the treatment of a character in *Wings*. Herman Schwimpf (El Brendel), a U.S. soldier, must constantly prove his patriotism to distrustful anti-Prussian platoon mates. The title of the film also foregrounds American aviation of the period, an important aspect of the fighting corps in World War I; Wellman, who had been a pilot, was the perfect director for the project. Beyond the battlefield, American aviation saw great progress on the commercial front—with Charles Lindbergh’s nonstop flight from New York to Paris in May 1927 and Amelia Earhart’s journey as the first transatlantic female airplane passenger in June 1928.

As the twenties dawned, America also experienced massive social change. As Robert Sklar writes in *The Plastic Age*: “American culture was

newborn" (1). While some have seen this transformation as a compensatory reaction to the shock of worldwide conflagration, others have found it prefigured in the teens (Dumenil 3). One of the major alterations was a shift from rural to metropolitan life. As Allen notes, the decade saw the "conquest of the whole country by urban tastes and urban dress and the urban way of living" (152). This change is articulated in numerous ways in the films of the decade. First, there is the avant-garde "city symphony," almost always set in New York. *Manhatta* (1921), made by photographer Paul Strand and painter Charles Sheeler, is a realist but poetic paean to the beauty and majesty of the city—its ports, skyscrapers, automobiles, bridges, and trains. Similarly, Robert Flaherty's *Twenty-four-Dollar Island* (1926) is a documentary "Camera Impression" of New York that casts the metropolis as its "central character." Some works, however, were more experimental in expressing their love affair with the city. Fox News released a "Loony Lens" series. Some footage, shot by cameraman Al Brick between 1924 and 1927, displays anamorphic images of the city, spinning views, and split screen shots that make it look like buildings are collapsing into one another. As an intertitle quips, New York is a "dizzy" place that is "all a whirl." There were those cultural critics, however, who took a more cynical view of the urban terrain—emphasizing the alienation of the anonymous masses. As Harold Stearns noted:

Consider . . . the average city man's daily routine. He gets up. . . . He shaves and washes his teeth, using a standardised razor and soap and tooth-brush. He gets into standardised clothes and eats a more or less standardised breakfast. Then he comes to his office by train or subway, reading his morning newspaper; which again hundreds of thousands of others are doing at that same moment of time. . . . At his office he goes through the routine of his business, sharing the crowd-assumptions of the organisation of which he is a part, and in general sharing the wider assumptions of the whole business-world in which his particular organisation functions. After a hasty lunch eaten with the crowd he goes back to the afternoon routine; and then goes home with the crowd. . . . Thus he spends the larger part of the day as a member of a crowd. (59–60)

Even *Manhatta* referenced intimidating crowds in its view of hordes of people exiting a ferry at rush hour and in titles that spoke of a "million footed Manhattan" that, when "unpent, descends to its pavements." But feature films like Paul Fejos's *Lonesome* (1928) take this critique of the city to a higher level through its portrait of two working-class youths—a man and woman—who each toil separately at their respective jobs (machinist and phone operator). Isolated and anonymous in the harsh city, they are desperately lonely until they meet in Coney Island only to realize that they

have lived in the same rooming house all along. Here, we are reminded of a statement by journalist/sociologist Agnes Smedley, who recalled her early days in New York in the 1920s as “vast, impersonal [and] merciless”: “Always before I had felt like a person, an individual, hopeful that I could mold my life according to some desire of my own. But here in New York I was ignorant, insignificant, unimportant—one in millions whose destiny concerned no one. New York did not even know of my existence. Nor did it care” (234–35).

Significantly, while much of urban space was seen as cold and alienating, the amusement park was regarded as a site of pleasure and excitement, not only in *Lonesome* but in *The Crowd* (1928) and *Sunrise* (1927). In several such films couples travel to Coney Island by subway (or, in the case of *Sunrise*, by trolley). Here, we are reminded that the twenties was the age in which electricity became ubiquitous in urban America. As David Kyvig notes, by 1920, some 24 million homes were electrified—a factor primary in “differentiat[ing] urban from rural life” (56, 45). Starting in the twenties, in fact, electrical appliances began to appear on the consumer market: sewing and washing machines, toasters, refrigerators, and vacuum cleaners (the latter being an object that the hero of *The Crowd* half-heartedly sells door-to-door). Indicative of this, filmed advertisements for electrical products became commonplace in the era, as is clear from one made in 1926 (by the Electric League of Pittsburgh) promoting a refrigerator available at a local store. Similarly, the instructional film *De-Light: Making an Electric Light Bulb* (1920), produced by the Ford Motor Company, touts the marvels of modern-day lighting. Even a fiction film took on the subject. James Young’s *Welcome Stranger* (1924) tells the story of a Jewish man who moves his family to a Christian New England town and overcomes provincial prejudice by bringing the town prosperity through investing in a local electric light factory.

While America had enjoyed a boom economy during wartime (since Europe was in chaos and its commercial and agricultural resources decimated), the immediate postwar period brought a mild depression that affected farmers most of all. As the twenties progressed, however, succeeding business-friendly Republican presidential administrations (those of Warren Harding [1921–1923] and Calvin Coolidge [1923–1929]) brought “seven years of unparalleled plenty” (Allen 138). Between 1922 and 1927 the purchasing power of American wages increased at a rate of 2 percent annually. Among the industries responsible for the boom were those producing automobiles, radio, rayon, cigarettes, refrigerators, telephones, cosmetics, electrical devices, and movies (Allen 140–44). Much of this output was due to the continued industrialization of America.

With consumerism on the rise (as spurred by an emphasis on salesmanship), the department store became a major commercial site (Allen 144). Fred Newmeyer's and Sam Taylor's *Safety Last* (1923) is set in one such establishment, with Harold Lloyd cast as a salesman. As the story proceeds, Lloyd tries to impress his supervisors by proposing an exciting promotional publicity stunt to bring business to the emporium: having someone scale its tall façade. Though he means for his friend to execute the feat, he ends up having to do it himself—the source of much comedy. As Allen notes, “Never before [the twenties] had such pressure been exerted upon salesmen to get results” (146).

It was the affluence of the period (and what Fitzgerald deemed its attendant “excesses”) that earned the decade the moniker of “Roaring Twenties.” Not surprisingly, countless films depicted scenes of wealth and glamour, with well-dressed socialites partying in smartly appointed rooms—works like Harry Beaumont's *Our Dancing Daughters* (1928) and Jack Conway's *Our Modern Maidens* (1929). In many of these, people are seen drinking liquor despite Prohibition, which lasted the entire decade. In the depiction of such luxurious settings, the high production values of Hollywood were fully marshaled—with each studio employing a stable of chic costumers (like Adrian, Orry-Kelly, Travis Banton, and Max Rée) and set designers (like Cedric Gibbons, Joseph Urban, Richard Day, and William Cameron Menzies).

But it was not only the economy that “roared” in the twenties. Women were empowered by their new voting rights, sanctioned in the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1920. As Miller observed: “The emancipated woman was the standard-bearer of the modern age” (46). On screen, however, the decade began with some rather conventional portrayals of female characters. In *Way Down East* (1920), D. W. Griffith (a director associated with codes of nineteenth-century melodrama) revived an old theatrical standard concerning a Victorian heroine (Lillian Gish) duped into false marriage and made pregnant by her “groom.” Thereafter, she faces the stigma of being an unwed mother, despite the fact that she has lost her child. Even here, however, there is a moment of rebellion as the young maid accuses men of perpetrating a double standard, by which they are blameless for their sexual intrigues while women are culpable. But it is the “flapper” who constitutes the most notorious feminine icon of the period—the young woman (often middle or upper-middle class) who revolts against the trappings of Victorian propriety by wearing short skirts, smoking, applying makeup, dancing, drinking, and partying. It is such a figure we see embodied by Joan Crawford and her girlfriends in *Our Dancing Daughters* or

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