

THE AMERICAN CINEMA OF THE FIFTIES

I) Postwar Hollywood: Glory and Glamour

The post-classical era: “the fantastic fifties”

- 1) **War films:** making America great; guts and glory!
 - *Trailer of “The Caine Mutiny”, 1954, with Humphrey Bogart.*
- 2) **Epic films:** inspiration from the Bible, Greek or Roman Antiquity and also Jules Verne’s novels (Around the World in 80 Days, 1956). Long, expensive, spectacular movies.
 - *A scene from “The Ten Commandments”, by Cecil B. DeMille, in 1956, with Charlton Heston and Yul Brynner: the opening of the Red Sea.*
 - *Trailer from “Ben Hur”, 1959, with Charlton Heston (the most expensive film of the decade).*
- 3) **Westerns:** classic films by John Ford, Howard Hawks, etc. Starring John “The Duke” Wayne, James Stewart, Gary Cooper... Celebrating the beautiful landscapes of the West and the bravery of the cowboys. But heroes: more tormented, ambivalent than before.
 - *Trailer of “The Searchers” (John Ford, 1956)*
- 4) **Dramas, Melodramas and Classic Comedies:** Often adapted from famous books (like Moby Dick). Famous directors like John Huston, Douglas Sirk, George Cukor made beautiful, but rather classic films starring already famous actors such as Humphrey Bogart or Katharine Hepburn.
 - *The scene of Whitewater Rapids from “The African Queen” (John Huston, 1951)*
- 5) **Musical Films:** the genre reached new heights in the 1950s with major films from Stanley Donen and Vincente Minelli.
 - *A scene from “Singing in the Rain” with Gene Kelly (Stanley Donen, 1952)*
 - *The Girl Hunt scene from “The Band Wagon”, with Fred Astaire and Cyd Charisse, 1953*

- *Doris Day singing “Que sera sera” in the film “The Man who Knew too Much” (Alfred Hitchcock, 1956)*

II) Threats from outside and from Inside: anti-communism, social conscience and adult themes

1) The effects of the Cold War:

a) Anti-communism in films:

- blatantly anti-communist propaganda films showing spies, traitors, blackmailed scientists. Ex: **The Red Menace**, 1949 or **The Atomic City**, 1952.

- Cold war paranoia illustrated in science fiction, horror and fantasy films. Invasion of the planet by aliens (= communists).

- *Trailer of “The War of the Worlds”, 1953*

B series movies by Ed Wood which are now iconic because unwittingly hilarious. Fear of outsiders, trying to destroy the world and control humans.

- *A scene from “Invasion of the Body Snatchers”, 1956 (the alien scientists and the couple of heroes)*

b) **The HUAC Witch Hunt:** campaign to chase communists and sympathisers by the House Un-American Activities Committee. Hollywood = targeted.

The Ten of Hollywood: trials and blacklisting.

Elia Kazan’s case.

- *A scene from “A King in New York” (Charlie Chaplin, 1957) (dialogue with a boy, Chaplin’s son Michael)*

2) Films with a social conscience:

In the 1950s, more realistic films denouncing the evils of American society: noir movies, by directors like Orson Welles, Stanley Kubrick or Sidney Lumet.

Against injustice, prejudice, racism, etc.

- *Trailer of “Twelve Angry Men” (Sidney Lumet, 1957, with Henry Fonda)*

3) **Adult Themes in Thrillers and Comedies: introspection and censorship:**

Wonderful source of inspiration: the secrets inside American people's homes and heads.

a) **Strictly in private:** comedies and psychological thrillers exploring adult themes, considered daring or even shocking at the time (relationship within and outside the couple, homosexuality, woman emancipation, interracial marriage...)

Three new young actresses:

- Audrey Hepburn, a falsely naïve girl ("**Sabrina**", Billy Wilder, 1954)

- Elizabeth Taylor, the hot brunette trying to escape her destiny:

- **Trailer of "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof", adapted from Tennessee Williams's play, 1958**

- Marilyn Monroe: the sex symbol in films like "**Niagara**" (1953) and comedies by Billy Wilder: "**The Seven-Year Itch**", 1955 and "**Some Like It Hot**", 1959, a hilarious gender-bending film.

- **A scene from "Some Like It Hot" (learning to kiss), with Marilyn Monroe and Tony Curtis**

b) **Devious minds and neuroses in Alfred Hitchcock's movies:**

A British director, but made some of his best thrillers in Hollywood during the 1950s. The "Master of Suspense": "**Strangers on a Train**" (1951) with an amoral exchange of crimes, "**Rear Window**" (1954), revisiting the theme of voyeurism, "**Dial M for Murder**" (1954) in which Ray Milland tries to get rid of his lovely unfaithful wife played by Grace Kelly, "**Vertigo**" (1958), a tale of masculine romantic obsession and "**North by Northwest**" (1959) in which Cary Grant plays an innocent man caught in a complex series of circumstances.

And finally, his low-budget masterpiece: "**Psycho**", with Anthony Perkins.

- **Trailer of "Psycho", 1960**

c) **Censorship challenges:** The two faces of American society reflected in films: freedom and tolerance on the one hand, puritanism and sanctimony on the other.

Censorship: films couldn't deal with or even mention drugs, abortion, prostitution, or even kidnapping. The Hays Production Code.

Also various decency leagues which denounce any film they believe offensive.

Some directors refused to comply, like Otto Preminger (**"The Man With The Golden Arm"**, 1956, about heroin addiction) or Elia Kazan.

- ***Trailer of "Baby Doll", 1956, by Elia Kazan (about a young girl who refuses to give up her virginity to her older husband)***

Interracial romances were also banned by the Hayes Code, but films like Darryl Zanuck's **"Island in the Sun"** (1957) defied the Code and contributed to its weakening.

III) Times are already changing: towards the swinging sixties:

1) Youth and rebellion: new targets and new subjects:

- Disney Studios still thriving in the fifties, with feature-length story animations like **"Cinderella"** (1950), **"Peter Pan"** (1953) or **"Sleeping Beauty"** (1959).

- But a new kind of audience was taken into account: teenagers. Young people benefited from more freedom, sometimes money, and they were looking for new idols. Hollywood started to make films for them: cheap teen movies like **"The Blob"** (1958), but also rock 'n' roll movies using music as a soundtrack as **"Blackboard Jungle"**.

- ***The "Daddy-O" scene from "Blackboard Jungle" (Richard Brooks, 1955)***

Youth was also seen as a fascinating (but also a little scary) subject for films, like the juvenile delinquents of **"Highschool Confidential"** (1958).

2) Three idols for the young:

- Elvis the Pelvis: attractive, daring. Films: **"Love Me Tender"** (1956) or **"Jailhouse Rock"** (1957).

- Marlon Brando: a symbol of adolescent anti-authoritarian rebellion. The bad boy of the times. Especially because of his part in **“The Wild One”** in which he played biker Johnny. In the film, a man asks him “What are you rebelling against?” and Brando replies: “Whadda ya got?”.

- **Trailer of “The Wild One”, 1954**

- James Dean: “the first American Teenager”. Anguished, introspective: the epitome of adolescent pain. Forever young (died in a car crash at 24), only 3 films: “East of Eden” (Elia Kazan, 1955), “Giant” (1956), but especially **“Rebel without a Cause”** in which he played a mixed-up, sensitive and defiant teenager.

- **The “Stand Up for Me” scene from “Rebel Without a Cause” (Nicholas Ray, 1955) (quarrel with his parents)**

2) Towards a New Society:

a) The decline of the studio system:

Big studio moguls like Louis B. Mayer or Howard Hughes had financial difficulties. Loss of power and grip on the actors and directors. Many new directors became independent.

The movie production had dropped by 50% by 1959, and theatrical attendance had been cut in two.

Studios became depleted with the exit rush of directors, actors and technicians (mostly for the burgeoning television industry).

b) Television: a threat and an opportunity:

First, Hollywood: **fearful of television**. Tries to retain audiences with spectacular movies, using new techniques like CinemaScope, Panavision, 3-D, etc. Even Aroma-Rama!

Even tried to fight television with “theatre television” (closed-circuit screening of TV programs), but it failed.

Everything was done to tear viewers away from their TV, especially families (as they were television’s first targets). Actors were forbidden to work for TV.

Yet, film audiences kept declining. In 1951, NBC became America's first nationwide TV network and **in a few years 50% of American homes had at least one TV set.**

The studios had to admit television wasn't going away and that **collaboration would be mutually beneficial:**

- they started to advertise for their films on TV.
- actors and directors were allowed to work for TV.
- by 1953, major studios became actively involved in TV shows, like Disney with its afternoon TV show "The Mickey Mouse Club" which started in 1954).
- Hollywood also started selling old black-and-white films to TV networks by the mid-fifties.

Finally, by the end of 1957, more than 100 Hollywood-produced television series were being broadcast or in production. By 1960, Hollywood dominated prime time.

A police movie called "**Dragnet**" became the first film based on a TV show: it was the feature-length colour version of a popular series which ran from 1951 to 1959 on TV (with a famous "Dum, de Dum Dum" theme music, and the phrase "The names have been changed to protect the innocent")

- *Trailers of "Dragnet" the series and "Dragnet" the film*

Another example of the collaboration between the cinema and television: "**Alfred Hitchcock Presents**", in which Alfred Hitchcock brought his macabre sense of humour to the small screen (it started in 1955).

- *Trailer of "Alfred Hitchcock Presents"*

The fantastic fifties: both a time of continuity and change. The cinema and the studios managed to survive, but had to adapt to numerous changes, in business, in society and in technology. What is sure: the fifties in the US was an extraordinarily rich period in which were created masterpieces of the 7th Art.