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The State of Hollywood between the World Wars

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STATE OF HOLLYWOOD

BETWEEN THE WORLD WARS

- The dominant film industry in the world. World War I has devastated the major competitors, France, Germany, Italy and the UK. The coming of sound has de-globalized film – now you need subtitles (or dubbing) to enter other markets – and the U.S. is uniquely well-positioned to crack that barrier.

- Through the 1920s the film industry has rationalized itself internally, gradually evolving the business practices that will allow for the greatest efficiency, productivity and profit. The result is a business in which producers have the most control over economic issues, answering only to the studio executives (and the East Coast money men).
- Equally important, it is an industry that is vertically integrated. The corporations that control the seven major studios are in command of every step in the film business. Production/distribution/exhibition and all the ancillary financial elements as well (music publishing, etc.)

- The film industry has become a community unto itself. Los Angeles is a company town, like Henry Ford's Dearborn, Illinois, and the film companies have a tight grip on almost every aspect of city life (at least as it affects their interests).
- Outside of Los Angeles, however, things are somewhat different. History of the Production Code, local censorship boards, anti-Semitic attacks on the film industry spearheaded by Ford and the leadership of the Catholic Church in the U.S.

**THIS IS THE STATE OF THE INDUSTRY.
BUT HOW DOES IT AFFECT WHAT WE SEE ON
THE SCREEN?**

Filmmakers learned early that an audience will commit itself to the diegesis and will follow along unless something knocks them off the tracks. The trick, then, is to keep them “in the story.” Certain strategies evolved for that purpose. As we have seen “continuity editing” developed to smooth their path.

- The 180-degree rule
- The 30-degree rule
- Three-point lighting
- Adherence to a certain level of “realism” in production design
- Genre

And, perhaps above all, the unstated idea of the “suture.”

BUT WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A FILMMAKER COMES ALONG WHO DELIBERATELY PULLS AT THE STITCHES?

Let's call him Orson Welles. He's a theater and radio personality, he knows film well as an outsider, but he either doesn't know or doesn't care about Hollywood's rules, written or otherwise. Tomorrow we'll see what happens when a movie studio gives him a completely free hand and what he will call "the best electric train set a boy ever had."