

THE START OF AN ERA

Title Cards (Intertitles)

In lieu of sound and spoken dialogue, title cards, also called intertitles, were first seen in 1903 and consisted of frames of text, either drawn or printed, that were inserted intermittently between sequences of the film for one of a variety of purposes. Generally, there were two types of title cards: dialogue intertitles, which, as the name suggests, were used to convey dialogue, and expository intertitles, which provided supplemental narrative material in case what was photographed couldn't convey the full situation by itself. Once motion pictures became more than minute-long novelties and were becoming a form of entertainment, filmmakers began inserting title cards in order to add more detail to their films. This expanded the potential of filmmaking and allowed for greater storytelling by making dialogue possible. Title cards were also used for narration in much the same way that films today use voiceovers.

Live Music and Sound

Instead of having spoken dialogue and background music synched to a film like you see today, silent films had a particular style of sound accompanying the motion pictures. The earlier silent films were accompanied by a phonograph recording or, more commonly, live music, such as a guitarist or pianist. Just like contemporary film, music was seen as essential to the viewing experience, reinforcing the atmosphere or mood of a film as well as providing the audience with emotional cues. Theaters in small towns usually had piano accompaniment, while larger theaters would bridge the gap between a piano and a full orchestra with massive theater organs. Though sheet music was provided for use with each film, the theater organists and pianists would improvise dramatic flourishes to emphasize some of the more intense screen moments. In other countries, sometimes, singers would perform behind the screen while an operetta played, or for some pictures, someone would provide live narration and voice the characters' dialogue.

Acting Techniques in the Silent Era

Acting in silent films was a much more physical process. Unable to communicate emotion with dialogue and speech, actors and actresses relied on body language and facial expressions so the audience could glean character and situational details from the performances. Looking back on performances in silent films, modern audiences would consider those performances to be campy, overdone, or simplistic. In some cases, directors actually required their actors and actresses to deliver larger-than-life body language and expressions for added emphasis in a scene. Slapstick comedy was a common acting form due to it being very visual; actors could be funny with their outlandish movements and not need to have much emotional range or depth as an actor. However, American audiences began to express their

preferences for more natural and realistic performances as early as 1914. As the frame sizes grew and audiences could see more detail, it allowed for more subtleties and encouraged actors to experiment with emotional nuances rather than boisterous and over-the-top emotion.

Projection Speed

The first silent films were shot and played at variable speeds, or frame rates, of between 12 and 26 frames per second (fps). It wasn't until motion pictures gained momentum as a popular form of entertainment and the development of sound films, or "talkies," that frame rates were standardized at 24 fps by 1930. Cameramen who operated the projectors at the time often claimed that the standard silent film projection speed was 16 fps, but modern analysis has shown that such slow frame rates were intentional due to a slower cranking technique that would emphasize action and comedy sequences. Projectionists would often receive instructions for silent films with cue sheets that would tell them at which points in the film they were to crank faster or slower. Theaters could also request the films to be cranked faster at certain times of day, such as during matinees, for which tickets were cheaper, so that the films would be shorter or could be worked into a tighter time slot.

Most Popular Films from the Silent Film Era

Though silent films tend to get lost and overlooked today, especially with all of the high budgets, CGI, and stunning special effects you see in contemporary films, there are many silent films that were not only hits back in their heyday but have withstood the test of time and remain favorites among movie buffs today. Whether it's due to groundbreaking visuals like those seen in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* or career-making performances like that of Maria Falconetti in *The Passion of Joan of Arc* and Max Schreck in *Nosferatu*, silent films have left deep impressions on critics and viewers and been sources of inspiration for countless films made in the hundred years that followed.

Transition Into the Sound Era

Though experiments in synch-sound motion pictures date back to the Edison lab in 1896, it wasn't until the 1920s that the necessary technology, such as vacuum tube amplifiers and high-quality loudspeakers, was available to make "talkies" commercially viable. Over the next several years, there was a technological race to see which company could bring silent films into the sound era in the best, most efficient way. It could have been done in a number of ways. Sound-on-disc would involve using a phonograph to play a film's sounds in sync with the film, but as a separate system with some sort of mechanical interlock to keep the audio and video systems synchronized. A more viable and dependable option was sound-on-film, which involved physically recording the sound onto a strip of film alongside the frames of the picture. This made synchronization of sound and picture seamless but

involved newer and more expensive projection equipment. During the period when silent films were fading and talkies were becoming the industry standard, many silent films had one or more talkie sequences added onto them so they'd be more appealing to audiences who wanted to see the newer films featuring sound; these silent films with sections of sound added onto them were called goat-glanded films.

All About Subtitles

After the invention of film, exploring methods of communicating dialogue to the audience led to the use of title cards, or intertitles. First used in 1903's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, intertitles made translating films for foreign audiences simple; all you'd have to do is replace those title cards with translations of the text in another language, put the new cards back in their same place in the film, and the film could then be enjoyed by viewers in other countries. This is the very first iteration of subtitles, as it is where the idea for [subtitling](#) came from. However, with the invention of sound on film in the 1920s, intertitles were no longer used, so foreign audiences could hear the dialogue, but unfortunately, they could not understand it. Studios considered making films in which the actors would shoot multiple versions in different languages, but this was seen as too costly and would take too much time. Dubbing was also considered, where a native speaker would translate the dialogue and speak in sync with the characters in the film, but though this has sometimes been done, it is considered costly and complex. Producers decided to bring back the intertitles, but instead of placing them in between scenes of the film, they would layer the translations on top of the motion picture so that foreign viewers could watch the film and read the dialogue in their native tongue simultaneously. With this technique costing at least one-tenth of what it would to dub the translations, the only question was where to place the text in the frame. The words ended up usually being placed at the bottom of the frame, hence the name "subtitles," and this technique remains the industry standard for making films accessible to foreign audiences. Today, sources say that Americans are generally very comfortable seeing foreign films as long as they have subtitles to read.