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A History of Turner Classic Movies

“There’s no such thing as an old movie, there are only great films you haven’t seen yet,” was a slogan used on Turner Classic Movies (TCM). Thanks to TCM, a cable television station dedicated to classic film, viewers get to experience these great “old movies” twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week (as TCM is commercial free). Such a channel seems too good to be true. By looking at the history of TCM we can learn how such an amazing channel came to be.

Turner Classic Movies is famous for its large collection of films. How did TCM acquire such an extensive catalog? The answer is: Ted Turner. Ted Turner was behind the creation of successful television stations like CNN, a news station, the Cartoon Network which, obviously, airs cartoons, and TNT, which airs sports and more current productions. The media shown on Ted Turner’s TV channels was supplied by Hollywood studios. Turner decided to invest in a studio because he believed that in the future these studios would charge extremely high licensing fees for use of their material, or they would create their own TV channels (Turner 237). Therefore, in 1986, Ted Turner bought MGM for \$1.4 billion dollars (Turner 241). However, Turner was in debt after a failed attempt to take over CBS so he later sold the MGM real estate (the Culver City studio) and retained only the MGM library (“Metro...”).

The MGM library contains the United Artists library, which MGM acquired as the result of a merger in 1981. The United Artists library includes the catalogs of Warner Brothers (films made before 1948) and RKO (“Metro”). Thus Ted Turner, and therefore TCM, owns the libraries

of MGM, United Artists, Warner Brothers and RKO. This amounts to around 3,300 classic films (McConville “TCM vs. AMC”).

As he continued to focus on his other stations, Turner felt that his classic film library was not getting any use. In 1993 he set out to create a classic movie channel (Turner 300). The channel had trouble finding distribution due to chaos in the cable industry caused by new FCC regulations (Kolbert). TCM eventually found carriers and on April 14, 1994 Turner Classic Movies held its first broadcast in Times Square, screening *Gone With the Wind*.

In 1995 Turner Broadcasting merged with Time Warner. This gave TCM access to the Warner Brothers films it did not already own; WB films made after 1948. TCM has since gained use of the Columbia Pictures library. TCM entered a contract with Columbia which allowed it to borrow 36 films: *It Happened One Night*, *Dr. Strangelove* and *Suddenly Last Summer* are among these 36 films (McConville “TCM Gets Rights...”). TCM has also gained eight episodes of the Dick Cavett Show; interviews with Woody Allen, Ingmar Bergman, Bette Davis, Alfred Hitchcock, Groucho Marx and Robert Mitchum and a two-part interview with Katharine Hepburn (Morfoot). Cavett even resumed his hosting duties for a TCM original presentation, interviewing Mel Brooks.

Including the above titles, TCM licenses a few thousand films from the libraries of Columbia, Universal Pictures, 20th Century Fox, Disney and Paramount Pictures. This puts the number of titles in TCM’s library around 6,000 (Werts). TCM’s senior vice president of programming, Charlie Tabesh, says that TCM must be very particular about what it licenses because certain titles can be very expensive to procure. He says that TCM often partners with the other Turner channels, TNT and TBS, when licensing; when TNT and TBS spend money on newer titles TCM get deals on older films. Tabesh also says that they often have to reserve titles

years in advance, and there are very strict time limitations on how long they can show these films. (“Inside...”).

Because it has access to so many films, TCM is valued for its diverse programming. In fact, in 2008 TCM won a Peabody Award for excellence in programming. Why? Firstly, because TCM offers between 350 and 400 films per month, more than is offered by most, if not all, cable networks (Lynch). Secondly, TCM not only offers classic talking pictures, but also silent films, which are presented on “Silent Sundays.” In addition, TCM screens foreign films, “TCM Imports,” and short films, which are shown as “One Reel Wonders.” TCM used to air cartoons during “Cartoon Alley,” but this segment was canceled.

In “The Essentials” TCM’s knowledgeable host, Robert Osborne, and a co-host (the current co-host is Alec Baldwin) present and discuss “movies that define what it means to be a classic:” *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Random Harvest*, *A Place in the Sun*, etc (“Turner Classic Movies.”). Past “Essentials” hosts have been Rob Reiner, Sydney Pollack and Peter Bogdanovich. Robert Osborne’s past co-hosts include Carrie Fisher and Rose McGowan. Started in 2008, “The Essentials Jr.,” which airs in the summer, is TCM’s attempt to present must-see classics to a younger audience. A similar program geared towards children aired in the summer of 2007 called “Funday Night at the Movies.”

Every month a different actor or actress is featured as TCM’s “Star of the Month;” this stars’ films are showcased throughout the month. Past “Stars of the Month” have included: William Holden, James Cagney, Deborah Kerr, Elizabeth Taylor and Humphrey Bogart. During the Academy Award season TCM presents “31 Days of Oscar” and only plays films which were Oscar winning or Oscar nominated for any Oscar category, i.e. best art direction, actor,

screenplay, etc. “Summer Under the Stars” is the theme for the month of August. Every day in August is dedicated to a different film star.

TCM also dedicates months to films that are controversial or underappreciated. For its “Hollywood and Race” series, TCM explored “Blacks on Film,” “Asians in Film” and “Latino Images in Film,” which take a look at how minorities have been portrayed in film and treated by the film industry. Similarly, TCM aired “Screened Out: Gay Images in Film” which explored homosexual images in film. “TCM Underground,” hosted by Rob Zombie, is dedicated to cult and independent films like *Plan 9 From Outer Space* and *Freaks*.

TCM’s original programming is another reason to tune in to the channel. A great feature of TCM is that host Robert Osborne and, weekend host, Ben Menkiewicz present introductions and conclusions to these films which provide background or trivia. There have also been many TCM produced documentaries such as, *Brando*, *Spielberg on Spielberg*, *Moguls and Movie Stars: A History of Hollywood* (about tycoons like Samuel Goldwyn and Darrel Zanuck), *Stardust: the Bette Davis Story*, *Men Who Made the Movies* (about renowned directors) and *Steve McQueen: the Essence of Cool*.

In 2008, TCM started airing interviews conducted by critic Elvis Mitchell for the “Hollywood: Under the Influence” series. Mitchell has conducted interviews with Joan Allen, Edward Norton, Quentin Tarantino, the late Sydney Pollack, and many more, about how classic film has influenced them. The channel also features interviews in their “Private Screenings” segments where classic film stars discuss their work with Robert Osborne. Interviewees have included Tony Curtis, Shirley MacLaine, Leslie Caron, Jane Powell and Anthony Quinn.

TCM frequently invites guest programmers to present their favorite classic films. Guest programmers have been as varied as David Mamet and Kermit the Frog. In April 2009, for its

15th anniversary, TCM ran a contest of which there were 15 winners. Their prize was the chance to be a guest programmer.

Turner Classic Movies is not only appreciated for its variety of films and original programming, but also for the fact that these films are shown in their original formats and are “uncut and commercial free,” as the TCM slogan states. TCM struggled with its decision to not edit their films. In 1998, TCM edited Martin Scorsese’s *Raging Bull* and Sidney Lumet’s *Network* because of their adult content. The channel experienced a backlash from fans that did not like these edited versions (Dempsey “Racy...”). It was decided that Turner Classic Movies would avoid airing films with adult content if it meant they had to edit and compromise “the creative intent of the filmmakers” (“Turner Classic Movies.”). TCM now airs more films with mature content, which are played in later time slots and are preceded by a rating. TCM has also issued an apology on its website to viewers who are offended by these films.

TCM believes in showing films in their original and purest forms. Therefore, TCM has been commercial free since its inception. This is because, similar to the reason why TCM does not edit their films, commercial interruptions would harm the integrity of these films, as they would not be seen as they were intended (Werts). Even when TCM changed hands and merged with Time Warner there was never a question that TCM would remain commercial free (Karralt). The other Turner channels bring in enough advertising revenue that TCM can afford not to have commercials (Werts). In fact, TCM even saves Turner/Time Warner millions of dollars a year by not subscribing to Neilson ratings (Dempsey “TCM Sticks...”). However, because foreign “business models differ,” TCM does air commercials overseas (Karrfalt).

If Turner Classic Movies is commercial free and does not rely on advertising, how does it make money? TCM earns money from licensing fees which it acquires for the use of the films in

its library. In 2006 TCM earned \$199 million from licensing fees and in 2007 it earned around \$210 million (Dempsey “TCM Sticks...”).

TCM also makes money by selling DVDs. Starting in 2009, TCM partnered with Universal Studios Home Entertainment to sell DVDs of re-mastered classic films. Among the first released were three early Cary Grant films and *Remember the Night*, starring Barbara Stanwyk (Anonymous “Turner Classic Movies and Universal...”).

Time Warner’s Warner Home Video is also very active in re-mastering classics and selling DVDs. George Feltin, senior vice president of Warner Home Video, has been a major force behind the restoration of the films in the Warner library which include titles such as *Casablanca*, *Citizen Kane*, *Gone With the Wind*, *King Kong*, *Singin’ in the Rain*, *The Wizard of Oz* and Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers films, to name a few. Feltin is also a believer in adding special features to the DVDs released from Warner. Special features include commentary, footage that may have been missing from the original films, and interviews. As of 2005, Warner Home Video had conducted over 300 interviews with people who have worked for Warner, MGM and RKO, which are the studios represented in the TCM library (“George...”).

In addition to selling DVDs, TCM makes money by selling clothing, books and soundtracks. It also sells subscriptions for their “Now Playing Guide,” which include the viewing schedule for the month, an introduction by Robert Osborne about whichever star is being showcased, articles and even a crossword puzzle. As of 2008 there were 176,000 subscribers to the “Now Playing Guide” (Dempsey “Classics Conscious...”).

TCM also spends money. When one tunes in to Turner Classic Movies he/she will see images that look just as they did when these films were originally released. This is because TCM is devoted to preserving film. TCM has inspired Time Warner to spend millions of dollars on

preservation. As of 1998 Time Warner spent \$50 million on this effort. However, the revenue TCM made from showing these films offset the cost of what it spent on restoration (Dempsey “Turner Cash...”).

TCM is currently planning the first “TCM Classic Film Festival” during which it will show the restored versions of *A Star is Born* (1954) and *Breathless* (1960). Also premiering at the festival is the new version of *Metropolis*. Thirty minutes worth of material missing from the original film was recently discovered in Buenos Aires (“First Ever...”).

In addition to film preservation TCM is involved in other endeavors. TCM sponsors an academic program called “the Story of Movies,” created by the Film Foundation. This program teaches middle school students the “cultural, artistic and historical significance of film” (“The Story...”). *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* are two of the films students study in this curriculum. In 2000, TCM started its annual Young Film Composers Competition in which composers must provide a 90 second original score that will accompany a silent film. The winner of the competition gets to score a full-length silent film; the 2009 winner will score the 1924 *Beau Brummel*.

The TCM website offers fans yet another way to experience Turner Classic Movies. As previously mentioned, there is a shopping section which sells DVDs, clothing, books and soundtracks. There is also a section for games and trivia. TCMDb, TCM’s online database, includes information on 162,747 titles and 1,429,375 performers. The “MediaRoom” contains film clips and trailers. Also in the “MediaRoom” are videos for “Now Playing the Show,” which is a video version of the “Now Playing Guide”. TCM even has a podcast where fans can download past “Private Screening” interviews. And of course, one can find a schedule of the films airing during the current month.

Also on the TCM website, fans can join the “Classic Film Union” and can create a profile and have online discussions with other fans. Another fan-friendly feature of the site is “Suggest a Movie” where viewers can suggest what films they want to see aired on TCM. There is also a link to the TCM blog, “Movie Morlocks” where bloggers write about everything related to classic film.

TCM was not always the go-to channel for classic film. When TCM first aired, the American Movie Channel (AMC) was its main competitor. In 1993, Turner Broadcasting even tried to buy AMC, but the deal fell through (Higgins). In 1995, a year after TCM began broadcasting, TCM only had 3 million viewers compared to AMC’s 54 million (Mifflin). However, TCM soon became the more popular channel for several reasons, the first being that AMC has an extremely limited library compared to TCM; in actuality AMC does not have a library, it licenses all of its films (Katz). As a matter of fact, in 1992 AMC paid TCM \$48 million dollars to borrow 700 titles from the RKO collection. AMC sued TCM for breach of contract because TCM aired some of the films that AMC was exclusively promised. TCM did not renew its agreement with AMC when this contract expired (McConville “TCM vs. AMC”). In addition, because AMC’s “library” is so limited, it spends over \$50 million dollars a year in licensing fees (TCM spends \$20 million). AMC also pays twice as much as TCM on programming costs (Dempsey “Movie Channels...”); TCM spends less than 40% of their finances on programming (Dempsey “TCM Sticks...”).

Another reason TCM gained popularity over AMC was because AMC, which had been commercial free for many years, began airing commercials. Because AMC was spending so much on licensing and programming, and it had a new commercial-free competitor in TCM, AMC needed to take on advertising. In 1999, AMC started having limited commercials

(Dempsey “Movie Channels...”). In 2003, regular commercial interruptions were introduced (Dempsey “TCM Sticks...”). Around the same time AMC began taking advertising, it began to show more contemporary films and less classic films. Because American Movie Classics was no longer dedicated to “classics” it changed its name to only the letters A-M-C (Dempsey “Movie Channels...”).

Fox Movie Channel is another competitor. Like TCM, Fox Movie Channel airs its movies uncut, commercial free and in their original formats, and offers original programming. However, like AMC, Fox Movie Channel has a limited library compared to TCM; the 20th Century Fox library has about 1,500 films (Applebaum). Fox plays contemporary films in addition to their classics and promotes Fox films that have yet to be released. A commercial-free channel that offers classic and current films seems ideal for a movie fan. However, Fox Movie Channel, which was started the same year as TCM (1994), only has 35 million subscribers due to limited cable carriers.

Where is TCM today? When it first aired, TCM only had 500,000 subscribers (Karralt) but, as of 2009, TCM has 80 million subscribers (Anonymous “Turner Classic Movies Launches...”). Apart from the U.S., the channel is available in Asia, Africa, Australia, Canada, Europe and Latin America. In total, TCM is broadcast in approximately 51 countries and 24 islands.

As previously mentioned, TCM recently celebrated its 15th anniversary in April of 2009. Hopefully TCM will continue to bring us classic film for many years to come. TCM’s commitment to showing unedited and uninterrupted classics is admirable and very much appreciated by its viewers.

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