

# CARL LAEMMLE AND LOUIS B. MAYER

## Carl Laemmle and Louis B. Mayer

**Lesson Length:** 45 Minutes

**Grade Levels:** Recommended for high school grades, though elementary and middle school teachers may be able to incorporate concepts from this lesson plan into their teaching



### Overview

In this lesson, students examine how Carl Laemmle and Louis B. Mayer helped transform motion pictures from a novelty into one of America's most influential industries. Students analyze how immigrant entrepreneurs built powerful entertainment institutions and consider the responsibilities that come with shaping national culture. Through their example, students explore how vision, risk-taking, and system-building can influence how millions of people see the world.

### Objectives

#### Students will:

- Analyze how Carl Laemmle and Louis B. Mayer transformed the American film industry through challenges to monopolies and the development of the studio and star systems.
- Evaluate how vision and entrepreneurship reshaped cultural institutions and contributed to Hollywood's global influence.
- Explain how economic systems and business strategies influence storytelling and celebrity culture.
- Evaluate primary source excerpts within their historical and economic context.
- Apply the concept of cultural responsibility to modern forms of media and influence.

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## Historical Background

In the early 1900s, motion pictures were short novelty films shown in storefront theaters and nickelodeons. The industry was dominated by the Motion Picture Patents Company, often called the “movie trust” or “Edison Trust,” which controlled key camera and projector patents and restricted film stock to licensed producers. In 1915, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against the trust in *United States v. Motion Picture Patents Co.*, weakening its control and opening space for independent studios to expand.

Carl Laemmle, a German Jewish immigrant, challenged this system by founding the Independent Moving Pictures Company (IMP) and later Universal Pictures. He competed with the trust and promoted actors by name, helping create what became known as the “star system.” In 1915, he opened Universal City, one of the first large-scale, vertically integrated movie studios, combining production facilities, backlots, and public tours.

Louis B. Mayer, born in what is now Ukraine and raised in poverty in Canada and the United States, later helped build Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) into one of Hollywood’s most powerful studios. Mayer refined the star system into a structured, contract-driven model, and under his leadership MGM specialized in polished, big-budget productions that became hallmarks of the Golden Age of Hollywood.

Many early studio heads were Jewish immigrants or children of immigrants who built a new cultural industry in California during a period when social barriers and informal discrimination limited opportunities in other sectors of American business and culture. By the 1920s and 1930s, Hollywood had become a global cultural force, exporting American stories, images, and ideals around the world.

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## Primary Source

**Carl Laemmle (paraphrased from later historical accounts of the early star system)**

*“The public wanted to know the names of the film performers. A desire was already there.”*

**Louis B. Mayer**

*“The idea of a star being born is bushwa. A star is created, carefully and cold-bloodily, built up from nothing, from nobody.”*

**Teacher Note:** These excerpts appear in later historical analyses of early Hollywood and illustrate how studio leaders understood the construction of celebrity and cultural influence.

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## Lesson Flow (45 Minutes)

### Warm-Up (5 minutes)

“Who has more influence today: elected officials or entertainment figures? Why?”

### Historical Context (10 minutes)

Teacher presentation covering:

- Early film industry and nickelodeons
- Motion Picture Patents Company and patent control
- Supreme Court ruling weakening the trust
- Laemmle’s creation of IMP, Universal Pictures, and Universal City
- Mayer’s rise and the formation of MGM
- Development of the studio and star systems

Students note key terms: trust, independent, studio system, star system.

### Primary Source Analysis (10 minutes)

Students annotate and analyze the quotation, and annotate the Laemmle and Mayer excerpts, identifying:

- What assumptions they make about audiences
- How they describe the construction of celebrity
- How hindsight may shape their descriptions
- How these views might empower some performers while limiting others

### Small Group Discussion (10 minutes)

- What responsibilities cultural system-builders have
- Whether cultural institutions can shape attitudes as powerfully as political institutions

Groups share one key takeaway.

### Whole-Class Discussion (10 minutes)

- Innovation and risk-taking in a new industry
- Immigrant entrepreneurship and opportunity
- System-building and antitrust challenges
- Cultural influence and responsibility

Keep discussion principle-centered and historically grounded while allowing thoughtful comparisons to modern media.

## Guiding Questions

### Walk-In-The-Shoes

**You are Carl Laemmle in 1909.**

- The movie trust controls key technology and restricts independents. Why risk challenging the existing system?
- What might you gain—for audiences, performers, and your own company—if you succeed?

**You are Louis B. Mayer building MGM.**

- What responsibilities come with shaping public imagination through films and stars?
- How do you balance profit, studio stability, and the kinds of stories you choose to promote?

### Observation

- What was the “movie trust,” and how did it attempt to control the film industry?
- Why did Laemmle and other independents oppose it?
- How did naming actors and developing stars change the relationship between studios, performers, and audiences?
- What distinguished MGM’s structured star system from earlier arrangements?
- How did MGM’s scale and organization differ from smaller film companies?

### Discussion

- In what ways can building a powerful entertainment system be a public good—for example, by creating jobs, stories, and shared cultural experiences?
- In what ways might concentrated cultural power create risks, such as reinforcing stereotypes or limiting viewpoints?
- How do business incentives shape the stories that get told and the stars that get promoted?
- Who ultimately determines cultural influence in a market system: audiences, creators, or investors? Explain your reasoning.
- Should cultural leaders primarily follow market demand, or should they also consider long-term social impact? Why?
- How does media today influence how people define success, beauty, or heroism, and how is that similar to or different from Laemmle and Mayer’s era?

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## Research Base and Source Documentation

### Carl Laemmle

- Immigrant Entrepreneurship Project, “Carl Laemmle” - <https://www.immigrantentrepreneurship.org/entries/carl-laemmle/>
- *Smithsonian Magazine*, “This Hollywood Titan Foresaw the Horrors of Nazi Germany” - <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/this-hollywood-titan-foresaw-horrors-nazi-germany-180961828/>

### Movie Trust / Motion Picture Patents Company

- Britannica, “Motion Picture Patents Company” - <https://www.britannica.com/money/Motion-Picture-Patents-Company>
- Kids Britannica, “Motion Picture Patent Company” - <https://kids.britannica.com/students/article/Motion-Picture-Patent-Company/330658>

### Star System Scholarship

- Sage Publications chapter: “The Emergence of the Star System in America” - <https://sk.sagepub.com/book/edvol/download/stardom-and-celebrity/chpt/emergence-the-star-system-america.pdf>

### Louis B. Mayer Quotes

- SenQuotes, Louis B. Mayer quotes page - <https://senquotes.com/louis-b.-mayer/>
- AZQuotes, quote page (Mayer excerpt) - <https://azquotes.com/quote/1387417>