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Introducing Mass Communication

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CHAPTER 9

MOVIES: THE WINDOW SCREEN

The cinema is as rich, broad, complicated and simple as life itself.

Arthur Lennig

CHAPTER PREVIEW

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

• Describe the role movies play in your life
• Explain why movies are a social and psychological happening
• Enumerate and explain key developments and stages in the history of the movies
• Compare the three-part structure of the movie industry with the industry structures of other mass media
• Explain the present legal status of censorship of the movies
• Discuss the significance and purpose of the MPAA movie ratings

• Identify the steps involved in the production and release of a film
• Explain how awards, critics and reviewers, and film festivals can contribute to the success of a film
• Identify the basic shots, camera angles, and camera movements film directors use to communicate with audiences
• Discuss why many documentaries and short films remain “invisible” today
• Explain the relationship of film to video
• Compare the television experience and the film experience
It's Saturday night. What to do? Study? Read a book? Fiddle with the computer? Watch television? Same old thing. A friend calls, "Let's go to a movie." But there are movies on TV, movies on the pay channel, movies on videocassette! Why go out, pay four or five bucks for a ticket, another dollar for eatables, take a chance on getting stuck in somebody's old chewing gum... But out you go, and the film industry racks up another ticket sale (see Figures 9-1 and 9-2).

MOVIES: THE PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

The movies have been around for about a hundred years now. For most of those years, and for most people, the movies have been a special experience. But what kind of a moviegoer are you?

Moviegoing is much more a matter of conscious choice and personal preference than such media-consuming activities as watching television and listening to the radio. In many ways, moviegoing might be compared to purchasing records: most people listen to music, but some people devote time and money to developing a record collection. And age seems to affect patterns of moviegoing more than sex does. For some reason, movies are largely made for and consumed by young people, especially teens and young adults. And attendance patterns vary considerably from one individual to another. Some people describe themselves as film "freaks" or "buffs," while others are quite indifferent to the medium. Into which of these groups do you fit?

However you as an individual feel about movies, they continue to have a large and influential place in the mass media and mass culture of America. Let's examine why.

Why Movies Are Special

First of all, moviegoing is getting out. Movies become special because of the effort of choosing and spending time and money getting to them. We tend to discount television and videocassettes just because they are easily at hand. We tend to value "going out" because of the effort and specialness of it.

MEDIA PROBE

The following questions will help you assess the role moviegoing plays in your life:

How many movies have you seen in the theater in the last thirty days? Name them and rate them (one to four stars, tops). Have two friends do the same thing.

How do the number of films you have seen compare to the number of films your friends have seen? To what extent do you and your friends rate films similarly? Why do you think this is so?

Do you know people who go to the movies much more frequently than you do? Why do you believe they have adopted these viewing patterns?

To what extent, if any, do you find there is a pattern of sex differences in those who attend more or less regularly than you do? To what extent, if any, is there an age difference in those who attend more or less regularly than you do?

Can you distinguish any patterns from your observations? What are they?

Did you attend more movies when you were younger? Why?

Do you now see more movies than you want to, or fewer? Would you just as soon watch a movie on TV as in the theatre?

Is moviegoing "special" for you or just another going-out activity?
Second, the movie theater is a kind of magical place, big and dark, familiar yet strange, perfumed with the evocative scent of stale popcorn. The ritual of buying the ticket, getting the eats and drinks, perhaps waiting with the crowd to get in, builds a sense of anticipation which intensifies our response to the film. (It also intensifies our disappointment when the film doesn’t work for us.) We also share the experience with a group of individuals who become one in their reaction to the film.

Third, the movies are big! The screen is big, the stars are big, the budget is (usually) big, and what we experience is “bigger than life” or seems to be. In a purely physical sense, movies are the most intense, dominating, involving form of mass-media entertainment. The darkened theater, the giant screen, the enveloping sound, and the response of the audience are combined into a perceptually powerful form of presentation.

The movie industry has been counted out a number of times in its almost 100-year hist-
What makes a film buff? This is a rate-yourself test. Award yourself 1 point every time you answer yes.

Do you ever go to the movies alone?
Do you regularly read a particular movie critic?
Do you ever go to see foreign films?
Have you ever taken a film course?
Have you ever made a film or videotape?
Are you the first one in your group to suggest a movie?
Do you go back and see favorite films a second or third time?

A score of 7 to 11 indicates a high preference for moviegoing.
A score of 0 to 3 indicates that you are not a serious moviagoer.
A score of 4 to 6 is average.

Radio was going to finish the movies, then the depression was going to, or television, or cable and the videocassette. Although film did suffer a temporary decline in the 1950s owing to the increased popularity of television, and cable and cassettes have made their presence felt, the dismal fate prophesied for the film industry has never materialized. Says Joel H. Resnick, president of the National Association of Theatre Owners: "The doomsayers missed the boat. They forgot the American people have two great loves: cars and going out to the movies." In fact, movies today—that is, those feature films produced for theatrical release—are one of the basic program supports for television, cable, and videocassette. According to Goldman, Sachs and Company, about 24 percent of the studios' U.S. revenue from theatrical films in 1983—some $1.07 billion—came from pay-TV and videocassettes. Theatrical movies are somehow more real, more authentic, than any product "made for TV"—even the multimillion-dollar multination miniseries. It is the movies that make "real" stars, not television or theater, or the recording industry.

"It's only a movie." What beautiful words. At the movies, you're left gloriously alone. You can say it stinks, and nobody's shocked. That's something you can't do with a Dickens novel or a Beethoven symphony or even a poem by Browning, and because you can't, because they're all pre-selected and pre-judged and graded for greatness, you don't talk about them with the other kids the way you do about the movies.

GOING TO THE MOVIES

The June 6, 1983, issue of USA Today notes that there is an average of one movie theater for each 27,264 persons in the USA. No wonder we have to wait in line for the best movies. But that's not the case in these ten metropolitan areas, where the ratios are the lowest in the country.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RANK</th>
<th>METRO AREA</th>
<th>RESIDENTS PER THEATER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Killeen/Temple, Texas</td>
<td>8,390</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Des Moines, Iowa</td>
<td>8,420</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Columbia, Mo.</td>
<td>9,692</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Billings, Mont.</td>
<td>9,722</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Sioux Falls, S.D.</td>
<td>9,973</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Sarasota, Fla.</td>
<td>10,057</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Eau Claire, Wis.</td>
<td>10,174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Lewiston/Auburn, Maine</td>
<td>10,302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Yakima, Wash.</td>
<td>10,367</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Anniston, Ala.</td>
<td>10,649</td>
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Source: U.S. Department of Commerce.

For nearly seventy years, the movies have had the power to create larger-than-life plots and characters that affect the fantasy and cultural lives of whole generations. The Star Wars trilogy, including Return of the Jedi, has certainly had that impact. (AP/Wide World)

Hoffman in The Graduate, or John Travolta in Saturday Night Fever. Or, as one 4-year-old proclaimed intensely to his nursery school classmates, “Luke Skywalker... that’s me!”

When a movie effectively taps into powerful psychological needs, we forget ourselves and pass through the frame of the picture and into the world of the film, be that world in a distant galaxy or in an antebellum southern mansion called Tara. And the experiences we have in this transported state are as vivid,
THE DREAM . . . ACCORDING TO INGMAR BERGMAN, FILMMAKER

No other art-medium—neither painting nor poetry—can communicate the specific quality of the dream as well as the film can. When the lights go down in the cinema and this white shining point opens up for us, our gaze stops flitting hither and thither, settles and becomes quite steady. We just sit there, letting the images flow out over us. Our will ceases to function. We lose our ability to sort things out and fix them in their proper places. We're drawn into a course of events—we're participants in a dream. And manufacturing dreams, that's a juicy business.


process was invented by Joseph Niepce in 1822 and rapidly developed into an art by his collaborator, Louis Daguerre. At the same time, numerous inventors were producing gadgets for the parlor which reproduced motion from drawings and, later, from still photographs. Most importantly, in 1824, Peter Mark Roget (author of *The Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases*) published a scientific paper setting forth his theory on *persistence of vision* which argued that a series of sequential still pictures rapidly scanned would produce the illusion of motion because the brain “retained” each image for a fraction of a second. Despite the fact that contemporary perceptual psychology would find Roget's theory a crude oversimplification of the process of motion perception, its practical application was correct: a series of still pictures can be perceived as moving. Since this is the fundamental principle of cinema, let's take a minute to explore how it works.

Every time you attend a film, you actually spend half of your viewing time looking at a blank screen. The reason you fail to perceive the screen as blank is because the process of seeing is delayed: the eye's retina (the part of the eye responsible for sending visual images to the brain) retains images for about 1/30 to 1/10 of a second after an object is out of sight. Thus every time you view a film you experience an optical illusion—the illusion of as real, as any in our lives. The experience possesses us, and we will possess it for the rest of our days.

Since the early days of film, viewing a movie has been compared to dreaming. As with a dream, a movie causes us to become involved in an adventure from which we cannot easily escape. Our eyes become fixed upon the screen—the one light area in the darkened theatre—and the channel through which the dream will be shared. To be sure, as critic Hollis Alpert has written, "the movies are the stuff American dreams are made of."

Finally, as you have discovered by now, behind every mass medium there looms a complex industry which generates the media products we consume. The motion picture industry is no exception. The motion picture industry has a fascinating history stretching back more than 100 years. It has a way of doing business unlike any other medium, and it has a special (and more interactive) relationship to the other mass media. In this chapter, we will explore the history, the business structure, and the intermedia relationships of this creative and exciting industry.

THE BEGINNINGS OF CINEMA: FROM DREAMS TO PIONEERS

The nineteenth century was preoccupied with possibilities for the image. The photographic
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1822</td>
<td>Joseph Niepce invents photographic process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1839</td>
<td>Louis Daguerre develops silver plate photography, the daguerreotype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1889</td>
<td>George Eastman begins making film attached to flexible celluloid base</td>
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<tr>
<td>1889</td>
<td>Peter Mark Roget publishes theory of persistence of vision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1894</td>
<td>Etienne Marey records first series photographs of live action with a single camera</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1895</td>
<td>Eadweard Muybridge simulates motion through sequential photographs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1899</td>
<td>William Dickson, Edison lab assistant, invents Kinetoscope for viewing sequential photographs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1907</td>
<td>D. W. Griffith hired by Biograph; actor turns director</td>
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<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>Motion Picture Patents Company formed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>Birth of the star system: Carl Laemmle hires Florence Lawrence from Biograph</td>
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<tr>
<td>1914</td>
<td>Adolph Zukor's Famous Players releases feature-length Queen Elizabeth with Bernhardt.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1915</td>
<td>Griffith releases The Birth of a Nation</td>
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<tr>
<td>1916</td>
<td>Griffith releases four-hour $2-million Intolerance; film fails</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1919</td>
<td>Chaplin earns first $1-million salary from First National</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1922</td>
<td>Chaplin, Pickford, Fairbanks, Griffith form United Artists to produce and release their pictures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1926</td>
<td>Valentino dies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1927</td>
<td>The Jazz Singer released by Warner Brothers, first feature sound film with talking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1929</td>
<td>Tough motion picture code authority formed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td>Legion of Decency formed</td>
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<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>Chaplin releases last &quot;Tramp&quot; picture, Modern Times</td>
</tr>
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MOVIES: THE WINDOW SCREEN
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td>Gone With the Wind becomes top award-winning and box office film</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>Orson Welles' Citizen Kane amazes, shocks film world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1942</td>
<td>Casablanca released as America enters World War II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1946</td>
<td>The Best Years of Our Lives wins Academy Awards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1947</td>
<td>Hollywood Ten jailed for refusing to testify in HUAC communist witchhunt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>Supreme Court strikes down &quot;vertical integration&quot; of major studios; television boom begins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>Cinerama process—a widescreen, multi-camera process—introduced; Bwana Devil released as first 3-D film</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1953</td>
<td>The Robe introduces anamorphic wide-screen process, initiates &quot;blockbuster&quot; films; The Moon Is Blue released without Production Code approval</td>
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<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>Fellini's La Strada wins Academy Award as Best Foreign Film</td>
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<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td>French &quot;New Wave&quot; begins with Truffaut's The Four Hundred Blows</td>
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<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>British &quot;New Cinema&quot; begins with Saturday Night and Sunday Morning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>Richard Lester's A Hard Day's Night initiates Beatles' cycle of films</td>
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<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>Bonnie and Clyde and The Graduate top the box office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>Easy Rider initiates wave of motor cycle and drug films</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>Financier Kirk Kerkorian liquidates famous MGM studio and real-estate holdings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>Coppola's The Godfather dominates box office and popular culture images</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>Supreme Court, in Miller vs. California, lays down criteria for determining obscenity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>Time, Inc., establishes Home Box Office for cable distribution of films</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>Woody Allen's Annie Hall wins Best Actress Academy Award</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Robert Redford wins Best Director award for first film: Ordinary People</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>Michael Cimino's Heaven's Gate becomes top Box Office loser: over $40 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>HBO, Columbia Pictures, and CBS form Tri-Star studios</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>Gandhi takes five of six top Academy Awards</td>
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</table>
movement. A movie camera, like a snapshot camera, takes only still pictures. When the pictures are viewed, however, the movie projector’s gears and claws jerk the film in front of the lens in a stop-and-go fashion. Each frame is stopped in front of the light for a split second (1/24 of a second today). Light is alternately blocked and let through by the projector shutter as a frame of film is pulled into place. During the time that light is blocked, the audience is viewing an empty screen but fails to realize this. Why? The persistence-of-vision principle is working; audience members are watching afterimages. (By the way, for a certain period of time each day, you walk around with your eyes closed. Without realizing it, you blink. But you do not perceive these moments of darkness. Why? The answer again lies in the persistence-of-vision principle). So we understand that movies are nothing more than a series of still pictures presented before the eye in rapid succession.

However, over sixty years passed from Roget’s pronouncement before the possibility of cinema was realized. A combination of factors had to come together before the first motion picture could be produced: (1) a strong, steady light source—the electric light; (2) a tough, flexible, transparent medium for the photographs—George Eastman’s celluloid; and (3) a mechanism which would draw the film in front of the light source rapidly enough to produce the illusion of motion, yet stop each frame for an instant behind the lens. The device was produced independently in at least four countries, with Edison of the United States and the Lumière brothers of France as the primary claimants. Edison’s basic patent was dated 1891, but years of patent fights were to follow.¹

The first films were a mere minute long, but they were a sensation to the viewers. The Lumière brothers were the first documentarists. They lugged their camera to the entrance of the Lumière factory and photographed the employees going home. They photographed waves crashing on the shore and, in one of

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**MEDIA VIEW**

One of the minor ironies in cinema history emerges from the fact that Edison always wanted movies to “talk.” More specifically, he wanted a visual accompaniment to the earlier invention, the phonograph, and assigned lab assistant William Dickson to develop a machine to project images in synch with the music. In 1889 he succeeded in developing the Kinetograph, which permitted a single individual to view the film through a peephole. Edison took full credit for the invention. In another irony, Edison failed to consider the possibilities of the projected image, preferring to collect his revenues a penny at a time. His delay in developing this next stage permitted other inventors to stake out patent claims which would be upheld in court.


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**YOU WERE THERE**

1896: *THE NEW YORK TIMES REVIEWS FIRST SCREENING*

When the hall was darkened last night, a buzzing and roaring were heard in the turret and an unusually bright light fell upon the screen. Then came into view two precious blonde young persons of the variety stage, in pink and blue dresses, doing the umbrella dance with commendable celerity. Their motions were all clearly defined. When they vanished, a view of the angry surf breaking on a sandy beach near a stone pier amazed the spectators. . . . A burlesque boxing match between a tall, thin comedian and a short, fat one, a comic allegory called “The Monroe Doctrine,” an instant of motion in Hoyt’s farce, “The Milk White Flag,” repeated over and over again, and a shirt dance by a tall blonde completed the views, which were all wonderfully real and singularly exhilarating.

their more sensational early efforts, a locomotive pulling into a station. Viewers in the front rows are reported to have screamed with alarm.

Edison became the first studio impresario. He built a large (and remarkably ugly) rotating structure, the famed Black Maria, in West Orange, New Jersey. The entire studio swiveled to face the sun, admitting the bright light required for the slow film stock of the day. Into the studio, Edison brought the famous, the fascinating, and the bizarre, to be photographed by the new medium: Sandow, the Strong Man; John C. Rice and Mary Irwin in The Kiss (1896), which caused a scandal at the time; and the sensation of the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1895, Fatima, the belly dancer. More about her later.

The first excitement at seeing motion on the screen quickly faded, and filmmakers turned to telling stories. Films were now one reel in length—about twelve minutes—and the camera looked at the action like a spectator in the theater—dead center about eight rows back. One of the early masters of this stage of development was George Melies, a witty French magician who realized the camera’s capacity for creating illusions and exploited this in a series of clever and charming films in the early 1900s. Perhaps the most famous of these was A Trip to the Moon. But, despite his lively imagination, it never occurred to Melies to move the camera.

The next step was taken by Edwin S. Porter, an American film director who carried the medium forward a giant step with his revolutionary 1903 film, The Great Train Robbery. Among the devices Porter used in this film were the medium closeup, the camera pan, rear projection, and, most importantly, the “meanwhile, back at the ranch” shot. Porter also discovered the possibility of presenting parallel action, that is, action occurring in different places at the same time. This innovation permitted the director to shoot two or more story lines, apparently occurring simultaneously, and draw them together for a conclusion. To this day, it remains one of the basic devices in filmic storytelling. Ironically, Porter himself did not really grasp the significance of what he had done and went back to making conventional pictures. Despite Porter’s “retreat,” the challenge of effective “cinematic” storytelling was met by a man who would make a far greater contribution to the history of cinema—D. W. Griffith.

David Wark Griffith, an out-of-work stage performer and would-be writer, took an acting job with Biograph Studios in 1907—a great comedown for a theatrical performer at the time. After appearing in Rescued from the Eagle’s Nest (directed by Porter), Griffith soon realized that the creative potential in cinema existed behind the camera, and he moved into the role of director. In the next ten years, almost single-handedly, he took the crude communications medium of the cinema and turned it into an art form. With his master cameraman, Billy Bitzer, Griffith poured his creative intuition into the development of cinema language, which was powerful, effective, and even subtle. He drew the camera ever closer to his actors, experimented with lighting and framing, refined acting styles, and developed longer and more
complex stories. This process culminated in 1915 with the first great masterpiece of cinema, *The Birth of a Nation.* Although viewed today as bad history and racist, the film constituted a significant film history milestone.

**Sharing the Wealth: A System Develops**

As Griffith was rising to preeminence among directors, a new institution was developing which would dominate American cinema for the next forty years: the major studio. If, as we have seen, the development of cinema technology was difficult, then so was the development of a financial system for sharing the costs of producing films and the income from them. Originally, the simplest and most direct system was used. Studios produced films, bore the cost, reproduced prints of the films, and sold them to the exhibitors who showed the films. There were two problems with this system, however:

1. Once the exhibitor had "used up" the film he was showing (usually in a week), he was stuck with a costly and useless property.

2. There was nothing to prevent the exhibitor from copying and reselling the print. (In fact, this became the illegal but standard practice!)

In 1903 the Miles brothers of San Francisco set up a film exchange, buying prints from the studios and leasing them to exhibitors for a fraction of the purchase price. This solution benefited all parties and rapidly spread across the country. At the same time, permanent theaters were being designed and built primarily for showing films, and these quickly became known as nickelodeons by reason of the 5-cent price, then the standard. With the multiplication of theaters came the demand for more films, and the fledgling industry began a period of rapid expansion. Thus, the basic three-part structure of the industry came about and remains essentially unchanged to the present. It consists of (1) production: the making of the film either by a studio or by an independent producer; (2) distribution: the complex process of releasing the picture; and (3) exhibition: the showing of the picture to the public. It would not be long before it would occur to someone that con-
YOU WERE THERE

WEST COAST PREMIERE OF BIRTH OF A NATION

I'll never forget that first big showing. It was here in Los Angeles, and the picture was still called The Clansman. The audience was made up largely of professional people and it was our first big showing—the whole industry's first big showing.

I have never heard at any exhibition—play, concert, or anything—an audience react at the finish as they did at the end of The Clansman. They literally tore the place apart. Why were they so wildly enthusiastic? Because they felt in their inner souls that something had really grown and developed—and this was a kind of fulfillment. From that time on the picture had tremendously long runs at high seat prices.


control of all three parts would lead to a guaranteed source of revenue.

The Struggle for Control: The “Trust”

As the industry grew, and the financial potential of the movies became more apparent, so did the desirability of gaining control of the industry. This was near the end of the great age of monopolies in America (the Sherman Anti-Trust Act was written in 1890) and the great robber barons of the nineteenth century showed the way to the rising young cinema entrepreneurs: get control of the competition! As was mentioned previously, Edison made an early attempt at this through equipment patents. A much more serious attempt was made in 1909, with the formation of the Motion Picture Patents Company, or MPPC, also known as “the Trust.” Nine companies, including the Edison Company and Pathé, the French company which held the Lumière patents, came to an agreement whereby they would share rights to equipment use and deny it to outsiders. They made an exclusive agreement with the Eastman Kodak Company. Kodak would sell raw film stock only to MPPC producers. Having gained virtual control of the production side of the business, MPPC then required “exclusivity” of its exhibitors. That is, if an exhibitor wanted to rent Trust films, he or she could not rent films from any other distributor. Further, the exhibitor was required to lease equipment from the Trust and to pay a weekly fee for the right to do so. In 1910, MPPC bought up all major film exchanges across the country and forced the competitors out of business. Finally, MPPC decreed that a picture was to be one reel (ten to twelve minutes) in length, leading to such curiosities as a ten-minute silent version of *Hamlet*. The Trust, it seemed, had locked up the industry.

But they locked it up too tight, excluded too many producers and exhibitors who were bitten with the movie bug and who were not about to be forced out of business. Chief among these were Carl Laemmle of the Independent Motion Picture Company (IMP) and William Fox, a film renter in New York. The independents went abroad for film stock and equipment and continued to produce and release pictures. In addition, they imported foreign pictures of greater length with considerable success. (Language was not a problem—they simply spliced in English title cards in place of the French or Italian cards.) In particular, Adolph Zukor’s production company, Famous Players, imported the
world-famous Sarah Bernhardt in a four-reel silent version of the play *Queen Elizabeth* (1912). People flocked to the anomaly of a silent-stage play recorded on film. It proved the box office potential for “feature length” films, and MPPC lost a round in its struggle for survival.

They lost again when they attempted to resist the rise of individual film stars. The producers realized early on that certain individuals had special appeal to the audiences—box office drawing power—and they also realized that they would have to pay a premium if the identity of these individuals became known. Consequently, the MPPC studios attempted to hide the identity of their stars: Mary Pickford was “little Mary” and Florence Lawrence was “The Biograph Girl.” In 1910, Carl Laemmle lured Lawrence from the security of Biograph Studios (one of the MPPC companies) by increasing her salary and permitting her pictures to be released under her own name. Thus, Florence Lawrence became the first of the long list of special individuals we know as “stars.” Mary Pickford followed quickly, along with “Bronco Billy” Anderson (who had two small parts in *The Great Train Robbery*), Gloria Swanson, Charlie Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks, William S. Hart (Rio Jim), and a host of others.

The war of the Trust and the independent producers was waged in the courts and in the streets. Although MPPC won most of the early battles, their clear violation of the antitrust laws and changing public sentiment regarding trusts led to a government suit which ended the monopoly. By 1915, the Trust began to disband and the independents were growing into major studios.

**The Major Studios and Vertical Integration** Although the independent producers had won the struggle against the patents company, this did not mean that they were opposed to control over the industry. They just wanted that control for themselves. Adolph Zukor led the way. Paramount Pictures, formerly Famous Players Lasky, already a large producer and distributor of films, began to purchase motion picture houses around the country and initiated the practice of block booking: if an exhibitor wanted to lease a certain Paramount picture, the exhibitor was obliged to take with it a whole block of less desirable films. The other film producers quickly followed Paramount’s example, and the system of vertical integration was set in place, to last until the 1950s. Vertical integration meant that all aspects of the industry (production, distribution, and exhibition) were under a single control. It was, obviously, a form of limited monopoly, and it

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**MEDIA VIEW**

It's the jungle. It appeals to my nature. . . . It's more than a place where streets are named after Sam Goldwyn and buildings after Bing Crosby. There's more to it than pink Cadillacs with leopard-skin seat covers. It's the jungle, and it harbors an industry that's one of the biggest in the country. A closed-in, tight, frantically inbred, and frantically competitive jungle. And the rulers of the jungle are predatory and fascinating and tough. (*John Huston, 1950*)

The new Hollywood is very much like the old Hollywood. (*David Chasman, executive vice president, MGM, 1981*)

contributed to the development of a limited number of dominant studios which came to be called “the Majors.”

MODERN TIMES

Traditionally, films are identified with particular time periods or styles. Considered carriers of our culture, films help provide us with a mirror of our changing society.

The Twenties: Hollywood Triumphant

With the end of World War I in November 1918 and the return of the troops from Europe, American society was plunged into a period of intense social change, and the movies represented a leading edge of this change. In the words of a popular song of the time, “How you gonna keep ‘em down on the farm, after they’ve seen Paree?” From a society dominated by small-town and rural America, traditional values, and Victorian morality, America was plunged into the jazz age—the Roaring Twenties, prohibition (a hangover from the old morality), speakeasies, bathtub gin, and the rise of the gangs. The values of the young characterized the popular arts, marked by the writings of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Earnest Hemingway, the hot jazz records of Louis Armstrong and Bix Biederbeck, and the rapidly multiplying stars of the newly matured movie industry.

The system which dominated movie making for the next thirty-five years had reached its maturity. The industry was controlled by the major studios and the great box office stars. Hollywood was the glamour city and scandal center for the nation, and the dream of thousands of young people was to make their way to California and be discovered.

American films were important abroad as well. Given the ease of converting titles from one language to another, American films dominated the screens of Western Europe, and the passionate young revolutionaries in Russia studied the prints of Griffith’s films until they fell apart. The preference for American films, particularly comedies, was so strong in Europe that native film production had difficulty establishing itself. This was particularly true in England and, oddly enough, Italy. One film historian estimates that in the period after the war, 70 percent of the films screened in Italy were American-made. Chaplin was the greatest star in the world and a particular favorite in France.

THE MAJORS AND THE MINORS: 1930

THE MAJORS

Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (from merger of Metro Pictures, Goldwyn Pictures, Louis B. Meyer Productions, and Loew’s theatre chain)
Paramount (from merger of Famous Players Lasky and the Paramount distribution exchange)
Warner Brothers (from a takeover of First National Studios by Warner Brothers)
Twentieth Century-Fox (from a merger in 1935 of Fox Film Corporation and Twentieth Century Pictures)
RKO (from Radio-Keith-Orpheum, a subsidiary of RCA, formed to market the RCA phonograph sound system)

THE MINORS (NO THEATER CHAINS)

Universal (found by Carl Laemmle in 1912)
Columbia (founded by Harry Cohn in 1924)
United Artists (formed by Chaplin, Pickford, Fairbanks, and D. W. Griffith in 1919)

B-PICTURE STUDIOS

Republic (specialized in westerns)
Monogram (specialized in gangster films)
Grand National (specialized in comedies)
THE GREATEST STAR: CHARLIE CHAPLIN

An internationally famous vaudeville star in 1913, Chaplin, aged 24, was hired by Mack Sennett for $150 a week to star in a series of one-reel films. In a little over a year he made 35 keystones varying in length from a half reel (six minutes) to six reels. He then made 14 films for Essanay in 12 months (1915–16). At Essanay he enjoyed a measure of directorial and authorial freedom plus the tidy salary of $1,250 a week. Next, he made 12 films for Mutual in 18 months (1916–17), and received $670,000. Then he made eight films for First National in the next five years (1918–22), several of them exceeding the two-reel length of most of his previous films. He received a million dollar contract (the first such ever) plus bonuses and percentages of the profits. Finally, he had eight feature films for United Artists over the next 30 years (1923–52), all of which made money. From any point of view—salary, creativity, longevity, consistency, or universal appeal—Charlie Chaplin was the greatest star the cinema has ever produced.


Some European films did make their way to American screens. Germany in particular, which went through a brilliant period of filmmaking following World War I, contributed The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, Variety, The Last Laugh, The Joyless Street, Metropolis, and M, among others. Discriminating audiences in the larger cities sought out these films. The cash-rich American studios were not above hiring away both stars and directors from the European studios, which made for additional European influence on American films. Thus came to our shores Emil Jannings, Pola Negri, Victor Seastrom, Asta Nielsen, Mauritz Stiller, and his young star, Greta Garbo.

For the most part, however, Hollywood preferred to manufacture its own stars. The exotic Theda Bara, perhaps the movies’ first sex goddess, is a good example. Born Theodosia Goodman, a banker’s daughter from Cincinnati, Theda Bara (an anagram for Arab Death) became “the Vampire” who lured men to destruction by her dark powers. She contributed the term “to vamp” (seduce) to the language.

The greatest romantic star of the 1920s was, far and away, Rudolph Valentino, whose “Latin lover” glances devastated the women, young and old. Born Rodolfo Guglielmi di Valentina d’Antonguolla, an Italian-American dancer from the Bronx, New York, he

Douglas Fairbanks, Sr. and Charlie Chaplin were the principal founders of United Artists in 1919. (Cinemabilia)
Who do you believe is the top male romantic star of our own time? What are the special qualities which make him attractive to you? To what extent is there wide agreement on your choice?

In your opinion who is the female "sex goddess" today? Does she play similar roles from film to film? To what degree has the women’s movement made the notion of a "sex goddess" repellent to today’s audiences? To you?

was catapulted to fame by *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1920) but may be best known for his title role as *The Sheik* (1921). He died in 1926 at the height of his fame, shortly after completing *The Son of the Sheik*. The funeral was a national event, and mourners, mostly women, visited his grave in vast numbers for decades.

**The Coming of Sound and the 30s**

Until this point in history, the growth of the movies could be described as an evolution—technical, artistic, financial, administrative—but the advent of sound was a revolution which affected all parts of the industry. As we have seen, sound existed with film from the very beginning, with the Edison-Dickson Kineto-graph. Several other processes had been developed in the intervening years, films were made, and theaters were specially equipped to show them. But the major studios adamantly resisted the coming of sound.

In 1926, Warner Brothers, a minor studio willing to gamble on making the big time, bought the rights to Vitaphone, a technically superior sound-on-disc process developed by Western Electric. Warners thought of the process as a way to bring the richness of full orchestra to silent films. (The silent films were never silent, as we all know, but normally accompanied, at least by a piano, sometimes by a small pit orchestra.) In October of the same year, Warners released *Don Juan*, a John Barrymore costume drama with a full orchestral score, and the film ran successfully in major cities across the country. Of course, theaters had to be extensively (and expensively) rewired to accommodate the new system.

The release of *The Jazz Singer* in 1927 confirmed (and indeed increased) the impact of the new medium. Originally intended only as another silent movie with songs and music, the irrepressible Al Jolson burst into speech in the middle of his famed rendition of "Mammy": “Wait a minute, wait a minute! You ain’t heard nothing yet.” Ostensibly speaking to the nightclub audience in the film, Jolson was also addressing the film audience, and they were electrified. The “talkies” had arrived. The worldwide success of *The Jazz Singer* forced the hands of the major studios, and the rush was on. In just three years, the silent picture was dead.

The early talkies were just that, using the sound as a novelty, with the actors awkwardly clustered around hidden microphones or moving pointlessly from one microphone to another on the sound stage. A more serious
problem occurred when the studios realized that the speaking voices of many of the great stars did not match their screen images. Some voices were too high, some too effeminate, too raspy, too shrill, or too heavily accented. (The coming of sound to the movies is parodied wonderfully in the 1952 musical classic *Singing in the Rain*. Speech coaches rushed to Hollywood from all over the nation, but many careers could not be saved. Among these were the great silent comedians. Keaton spoke and was soon forgotten. Chaplin understood that the Little Tramp must never speak and released two films in the sound era in which he did not speak a word. (*City Lights* has a music track but no dialogue, as well as many jokes about sound, including the final gag of the film in which the Tramp is forced into a situation in which he must sing a song.)

Quickly, however, the studios discovered
In Gone With the Wind a young girl comes to womanhood against the backdrop of a great national calamity, the Civil War. By cunning and determination she not only survives, but transforms defeat into good fortune. Scarlett O'Hara secures a place for herself in Atlanta society after three marriages, several family deaths and the destruction of the South.

Gone With the Wind appeared at the end of the decade that had contained the Depression; its narrative line subscribes to the traditional American pattern of getting ahead; it was overwhelmingly popular.

Just before the intermission, after Scarlett has returned to the gutted fields of Tara, she digs her hands into the rich, red soil, stands and tells the camera, "As God is my witness, I will never go hungry again!" Those words were on the lips of a whole population in the early thirties. Scarlett was swearing to rise from the ashes, not of the Civil War, but of the Great Depression.

The Forties: Hollywood Goes to War

In 1940, the mood of the United States was isolationist—the problems in Europe were "none of our business." The attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, brought a total reversal of that attitude, and Hollywood geared up for a major propaganda effort. A single film which perfectly captures the tran-
Only moments after it opened— with a long shot of a revolving globe ("With the coming of the second world war, many eyes in imprisoned Europe . . .")—this tale of intrigue and frustrated romance galvanized the audience's emotions.

"Casablanca" became a box-office hit and won the Academy Award as best picture. Its stars, Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman, were launched on their way as screen immortals.

The movie went on to capture an enduring place in the hearts of American moviegoers and critics, a pantheon occupied by only a handful of legendary films from the 1930's and 1940's—movies such as "King Kong," "The Wizard of Oz," "Gone With the Wind," and "Citizen Kane." For many, "Casablanca" is the definitive World War II picture.

The popularity of "Casablanca" has grown during the four decades since its release. It draws standing-room-only crowds at revival theaters and invariably tops any competition during frequent TV showings. The movie has inspired at least four full-length books and hundreds of critical essays, as well as Woody Allen's "Play It Again, Sam."

"We used to think of it as a young people's picture, since college students rediscovered it in the 1960's. Now it seems to have become everybody's picture," said Howard Koch, who shared an Oscar for the movie's screenplay with Julius and Philip Epstein. Recalling the film's often turbulent genesis recently at his home in Woodstock, N.Y., the 80-year-old writer offered his theory on the durability of "Casablanca."

"I think it's a little more than nostalgia. Today it is very hard for people to find values they can identify with," said Koch, a staunch liberal who was blacklisted in Hollywood during the 1950's and is now active in the "nuclear freeze" movement. "So they go back to 'Casablanca' and a time when there were values worth living and worth dying for."

Koch also pointed out that "Casablanca" embodies all the virtues of the old Hollywood studios—a superbly crafted film with a top-flight cast and first-rate talent behind the cameras.

Lou Lumenick, "Play It Once Again!" *The Record*, November 26, 1982.

Position is 1942's *Casablanca*. Rick, the cynical, cool, tough American (Bogart's ultimate role), is converted in the course of the film to the cause of the Allies, gives up the girl, and strides off into the fog with his French ally to do further battle with the Nazis. The movie remains one of the most popular and memorable of all American films.

Hollywood had three major tasks during the war: to show our troops as heroes defeating the evil Nazis and Japanese; to help the folks at home carry on by showing their pluckiness and loyalty and providing entertainment and comic relief; and to bring images of the war through the newsreel and documentary series. Perhaps the best-known documentary films made during this time were the *Why We Fight* series, using documentary footage put together by major Hollywood directors such as Frank Capra, John Ford, and John Huston. The Huston documentaries, in particular, were so graphic that the War Department, fearing a negative impact on public morale, refused to release them. On the home front, the MGM musicals were the cream of the entertainment crop, often dealing with a nostalgic past and highlighting the American virtues of home and
family. *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944) was among the best and most typical of these.

At the same time, the B-picture studios were releasing a remarkable series of low-budget black-and-white pictures which revealed the dark underside of American culture. Called *film noir* (black film), these films cataloged the lives of losers, gamblers, thieves, and killers—not as glamorous gangsters but as sleazy lowlifes. The recurring themes were cynicism, betrayal, and death, and the police portrayed in these films were seldom better than the criminals. The action of these films took place mainly at night, in alleys, dimly lit bars, cheap hotels, and docksides. The grayness mirrored this dark look in American culture. Of these films, perhaps the best example is *The Killers* (1946), which was
Burt Lancaster made his movie debut in *The Killers*, a movie in the mid-forties film noir genre. (Bettman Archive)

based on the short story by Hemingway. It was directed by Robert Siodmak with Burt Lancaster making his film debut in this movie.4

The end of the war signaled the “return to normalcy” as a theme, best captured in the candid and touching *Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), which swept the major Academy Awards for the year. The film retains its sense of decency and candor today. For the first time in many years, filmwise Americans were also being exposed to foreign films in small, expensive (tickets were $2!) “art houses,” and the experience was a revelation. First came the neorealism of Italian films like *Open City* (1946). These were dramas with the force and the conviction of documentaries. These films featured earthy and often scantily clad Italian actresses (Anna Magnani, Silvana Mangano, Sophia Loren, Gina Lollabrigida) and scenes of sexual candor not seen on American screens since the 1920s. French sex comedies followed in the 1950s, the best known of which features Brigitte Bardot, the ultimate French sex goddess. The darker, brooding Swedish films of Ingmar Bergman also came to the American screen about this time. The British cinema produced a brilliant series of comedies featuring a whole stable of convincing British character actors.

Finally, the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and increasing knowledge of and fear about the effects of nuclear warfare, radiation, fallout, and so on, generated a series of science fiction films, which dealt with these themes in fantasy and provided a kind of hope for the viewers. One such influential film was *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), technically archaic compared to present standards but still effective in its threat/plea for “peace, or else.”

**MEDIA PROBE**

Science fiction has remained an important film genre since the early 1950s. Some titles include *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the *Star Trek* movies, the *Star Wars* series, and *E.T.: The Extraterrestrial*. What messages do you believe these films deliver about science and technology? About the moral responsibility and wisdom of scientists? About political systems? About the future?
The popularity of 3-D movies eventually waned as audiences wearied of the cumbersome glasses. (Nancy Pierce, Photo Researchers)

The Fifties: A Confrontation with Television

Television became the dominant mass medium in the United States in the years between 1948 and 1952. As sales of television sets soared Americans discovered a new and compelling "at home, at hand" medium—free! At first, Hollywood chose to ignore television. The major studios refused to lease any of their vast film holdings to television. Television, desperate for cinematic material, leased or bought westerns from the old B-picture studios and British films of the 1930s, mostly detective stories.

As it became clear that television was not going to go away, the major studios geared up for war. The first response was 3-D, a process involving colored glasses and the color filtering of prints to produce the illusion of three dimensions. Arch Oboler's Bwana Devil (1952) was the first of a brief spurt of 3-D films; the fad had virtually ended by 1954 when the limited dramatic possibilities of the process had been explored. (In the 1970s the process was resurrected for a series of soft-core pornographic films, and in the 1980s for a couple of science fiction films, in each case with very limited success.)

Next the studios embarked on a campaign emphasizing the slogan "Movies are better than ever." What they really meant was "bigger than ever" as Hollywood unveiled a series of wide-screen processes intended to underline the contrast between the tiny television screen and the large movie screen. Epic films got production emphasis with lots of scenery to fill the giant screens. "Big" westerns and Biblical tales predominated. But box office erosion continued. As the graphs indicate, movie attendance peaked in 1948 and has steadily declined since then, although rising ticket prices have kept the box office figures inflated. The decline in attendance is even more dramatic when considered against the sharp rise in American population during the baby boom years.

In point of fact, the role of movies in the popular culture mix in America was changing. Television had become the family medium; its contents, especially in the 1950s,
MEDIA PROBE

Joseph M. Boggs in *The Art of Watching Films* notes: "The motion picture has progressed step by step from drawings, to photographs, to projected images, to sound, to color, to wide screen, to 3-D." He reports that experiments were conducted that attempted to add the sense of smell (Smellarama) to the film experience by releasing fragrances through the theater—odors designed to reinforce or intensify the visual image projected on the screen. And he goes on to add that in his *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley had predicted that future motion pictures would go even further, highlighting "toucharama"—a complex electrical system positioned at each patron’s seat, a device that would enhance the visual image on the screen by adding a sense of touch to it. What do you think of motion pictures that rely on such special devices to achieve an effect? To what extent do you approve or disapprove of them? Why? Can you think of any type of artificial device that could be used to enhance the viewing experience today?

were very much G-rated. Film was becoming the medium for young people who wanted more sex, more action, more reality, and more social criticism.

The 1960s: The "Film Generation"

By the end of the 1950s, the United States was rapidly entering a period of cultural revolution, with popular taste dominated by an increasingly affluent and critical young-adult group—a group that was raised on the antiestablishment rhythms of the new rock and roll. As young teenagers they had reveled in the antiparent, antisystem images of movies such as *The Wild Ones* (1953), *Blackboard Jungle* (1955), and most of all, Nicholas Ray’s *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), starring James Dean. With only three feature films to his credit, Dean perished in a fiery high-speed car crash, which fixed his public image at a high point of adulation.

The invasion of the Beatles in 1963 and the success of their first film, *A Hard Day’s Night* (1965), marked the youth takeover of popular culture. *The Graduate* (1967), the most popular film of the 1960s, most clearly captures the sense of the times. The adult world was characterized as uptight and repressive, while the world of young people was marked by a determined but rather aimless quest for "freedom." *In the Heat of the Night* (1967), which took the Academy Award for Best Picture and also received two other top awards, galvanized black audiences when Sidney Poitier slapped the upper-class white villain across the face. The intoxication of the early days of the revolution gave way to a darker, more pessimistic national mood. The polarization of the nation, the confusion of values, and the sense of hopelessness is perfectly caught in the low-budget, box office sensation of 1969, *Easy Rider*, which spawned a whole generation of freedom-of-the-open-road, drug-doing, disaster seekers on the screen. The sordid revelations of the Watergate scandal and the resignation of President Nixon left the "hippie generation" both vindicated and villainless.

The late 1960s and 1970s mark the gradual decline in the importance of women on the screen. This decline may be seen in several ways, perhaps most graphically in the Quigley Publications poll, an annual survey of exhibitors to name the year’s top box office stars. "The lists neatly trace the decline of female stars: whereas women make up 50 percent of the top stars of the 1930’s, for example, they..."
comprise little over 10 percent during the 70s and this ten percent stems from the indomitable presence of Barbra Streisand."

What could take the place of the conventional romantic relationship which had formed the emotional dynamic of American films for fifty years? Hollywood's answer was the "buddy film." In the buddy film the central emotional dynamic lies in the relationship between two male figures, a relationship neither sexual nor friendly, but usually marked by a joking, tough often violent, competitiveness which issued into a grudging respect and a tight male bonding. Two 1969 hits clearly illustrate the buddy film: *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, the box office champion of the year, and *Midnight Cowboy*, which won the Academy Award for Best Picture of the Year. In *Butch Cassidy* the Katherine Ross character, Etta Place, floats between the two men, commits herself to neither, has primarily a mothering role to the two "boys," and finally disappears from the picture altogether. In the much darker *Midnight Cowboy*, Joe Buck (Jon Voight) unsuccessfully aspires to be a male prostitute in New York City but is used and manipulated by women and finally settles for a tender (but nonsexual) and ultimately tragic relationship with Ratso Rizzo (Dustin Hoffman).


**Films Today: Forms of Escape**

Trend spotting is a popular pastime for massmedia film critics. Any three successful films which appear to have something in common may look like a trend. Considering films over a larger historical perspective, however, we find that movies serve different functions for the audience in different times. Film goers wanted escape during the great depression, patriotism during the war, ideological support during the 1960s. When things look bleak in the real world, film goers look to the movies for escape. Realism in films gives way to magic and style. Escape can be found in a nostalgic retreat into the past, in adventures in the future, or in magical manipulations of the "way things are" to bring about an unlikely happy ending. Rocky Balboa, a third-rate club fighter, becomes heavyweight champion of the world. Luke Skywalker becomes a Jedi Knight and repeatedly rescues Princess Leia from the dark forces of the Empire. The star of *Flashdance*, a welder by day and a bar dancer by night, is plucked from obscurity for the corps de ballet. We know these things do not happen, but we want to believe that they can.

In the difficult decade following Watergate, Americans faced a loss of faith in their political system, an oil shortage, rampant inflation, high unemployment, and a general sense that the American Dream was fading. George Lucas's *American Graffiti* (1973), a surprise box office hit, demonstrated the viability of nostalgia at the box office, first signaled by *Summer of '42* (1971) and echoed by *Grease* (1978) and a number of lesser imitators. The amazingly successful *Star Wars* series ignored the more serious possibilities of the science fiction genre and concentrated on exciting action and special effects, cute minor characters, and the mystical workings of the Force.

**Dealing with the War and Watergate**

Hollywood's long silence on the Vietnamese war indicates the ambivalence about the war which divided the nation. Only John Wayne's independently produced and hawkish *Green Berets* (1968) treated the war directly and it was largely ignored by film goers. Peter Davis's *Hearts and Minds* (1974) won the Academy Award for Best Feature-Length Documentary and achieved a respectable theatrical release, but *The Deer Hunter* (1978), directed by fledgling Michael Cimino, was the first Hollywood
film to bring the war to the screen. This film was closely followed by *Coming Home* (1978) and Francis Coppola's long-awaited and trouble-plagued *Apocalypse Now* (1979). As a measure of public acceptance, *The Deer Hunter* and *Coming Home* took five of the six top Oscars in that year.

*All the President's Men* (1976), a journalistic detective story ripped from the front pages, details the dogged investigation by *Washington Post* reporters Woodward and Bernstein (played by Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman) which ended with the Nixon resignation in 1974. From that point, interest in Watergate as a subject for film was relegated to the level of TV movie.

**Women and the Working Class** In 1976 there emerged a decided preference for blue-collar heroes on the part of film audiences. Three of the five nominees for Best Picture—*Bound for Glory*, *Taxi Driver*, and *Rocky*—featured working-class heroes in leading roles. Sylvester Stallone's appealing pugilistic story took the top award and threatens to engender sequels for a long time. The runaway success of *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), with John Travolta as the disco dancer trying to escape his environment, confirmed the trend. Recent blue-collar films—*Norma Rae* (1979), *Urban Cowboy* (1980), *Coal Miner's Daughter* (1980), *An Officer and a Gentleman* (1982)—have included women in the central roles.

Despite the continuance of the buddy film trend, a number of "feminist" films have received good box office attention recently. In addition to *Norma Rae* and *9 to 5*, *An Unmarried Woman* (1978), *It's My Turn* (1980), and to some degree, *Kramer Vs. Kramer* (1979) have probed feminist issues. Ironically, the most popular feminist film to date has been *Tootsie* (1982), with Dustin Hoffman as the out-of-work actor turned actress, who discovers the world from a woman's point of view.

Molly Haskell, a feminist film writer, notes that recently there have been better roles for
female stars, with Meryl Streep and Jessica Lange in a series of memorable performances, Diane Keaton alternating between comedy and serious roles, Jill Clayburgh representing the rise of the professional woman, and Jane Fonda in a wide range of roles. While all these are “bankable,” as Haskell notes, none of them are as big as any one of the ten male stars.6

Minor Trends The success of *Saturday Night Fever* reminded the film industry that dancing is a highly cinematic activity, and a series of films featuring forms of dance have followed, including *The Turning Point* (1977), *Grease* (1978), *All That Jazz* (1979), *Fame* (1980), and *Flashdance* (1983).

Another trend which has proved to be big box office in recent years involves the resurrection of comic book heroes, beginning with *Superman*, the top grossing film of 1978. The man in the red cape was quickly followed by *Buck Rogers in the 20th Century* (1979)—a rather unsuccessful attempt to salvage expensive props and footage from the failed TV series *Battleship Galactica*. Other films featuring comic book heroes are *Flash Gordon* (1980) and the *Superman* sequels. (A Superman film is currently in production.) The comic strip heroes provide, at their best, a blend of fantasy and nostalgia, which attracts audiences of all ages and provides the base for an enormous box office gross.

Undoubtedly the most bizarre attempt to cash in on the comic strip hero trend was 1981’s *Tarzan: The Ape Man*. Budding sex symbol Bo Derek, with her husband John as director, attempted to resurrect the durable Tarzan (the subject of dozens of films dating back to 1919) as a foil for a comic, feminist, sex film adventure. Most of the crew was fired or quit during the shooting, and the resulting mishmash is of interest primarily to film students who want to examine the details of a disaster.

CENSORSHIP: TOO CLOSE FOR COMFORT

Films have been subject to censorship attempts from the very beginnings of the medium. Because films have the power to bring us close to the subject and to depict human behavior graphically, they have an equal power to offend and outrage the guardians (often self-appointed) of taste and morality. One of Edison’s first films, *The Kiss* (1896)—a minute-long recreation of a famous stage scene of the time—shocked prudish audiences and generated attempts to have the film withdrawn. To our eyes, *The Kiss* is a pretty mild business in which the principals spend most of their time puckering up, but we must remember that this was at the height of the Victorian age and standards have changed considerably.

An even more bizarre example of early censorship concerned Edison’s *Fatima* (1897). Fatima was the famed Little Egypt of the Chicago Centennial Fair of 1895, and Edison, with a keen eye for the sensational, brought the bellydancer into the Black Maria and made another short film. In response to the instant outcry upon the film’s release, Edison released a second version, with a kind of white-picket-fence pattern super-imposed over the crucial areas of the dancer’s body. The censored film is far more “provocative” than the original. Again to our eyes, Fatima is a heavy-set, fully clothed woman, moving repetitively in a kind of modified hula, but she raised the temperatures of the audiences of the time.

It is worth noting that American censors have been concerned almost exclusively with sex and nudity. Protests have been made about violence and sometimes sacrilege, but it was sex that was censored. European censors have been considerably more concerned about violence and more permissive about sex and nudity.

An important Supreme Court decision in
All-Time Box Office Grossers

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<tr>
<th>TOP GROSS LIST</th>
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<td>8. The Exorcist (1973)</td>
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<td>12. The Sting (1973)</td>
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<td>14. Gone With the Wind (1939)</td>
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1915 opened the door to censorship activities. In a suit concerning Birth of a Nation, the Court ruled in Mutual Film Corporation v. Ohio that the movies are a business and therefore not protected by the First Amendment. Censorship boards for states and hundreds of local communities were set up and either refused release to films which offended them or simply cut out the objectional portions. Some films arrived back at the distributor’s exchange considerably shortened.

The Hays Office: Puritanism and Public Relations

In the late teens and early 1920s Hollywood had become known across America as “sin city.” Publicity agents did little to discourage this, often manufacturing scandal where none was to be found. In 1921 things went too far. A beloved comedian, Fatty Arbuckle, was charged with the rape and murder of a young starlet, Virginia Rappe, at a wild party in San Francisco. The Hearst papers played up the sordid details of the affair and the nation was outraged. Although he was acquitted after three trials for lack of evidence, Arbuckle’s career was ended two years later. The Hollywood producers had to respond. They formed the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association of America (MPPDA), hired Will Hays, the former U.S. postmaster general and a Presbyterian elder and conservative Republican, to head the organization, and promulgated a code for the movies. Although the office did little actual censorship and functioned largely as a public relations organization for films, it did serve to stave off federal intervention and censorship. The crucial notion in the code was that films should contain “compensating values,” whereby ten reels of sin could be made ac-
ceptable by one reel of repentance or just rewards.

Since nothing was really done by the Hays office, the tides of public protest were rising again by the 1930s. A strict Production Code had been written in 1929 by a Catholic layman and a Jesuit priest, and Hays set up the Office of Production Code Administration to review and approve scripts, scenes, and the completed picture. Release of a film without Production Code approval would generate a heavy fine. The strictures of the code were severe. As film historian David Cook points out:

The Code prohibited the showing or mentioning of almost everything germane to the situation of normal human adults. It forbade depicting "scenes of passion" in all but the most puerile terms, and it required that the sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home be upheld at all times (married couples, however, were never to be shown sharing a bed). Adultery, illicit sex, seduction or rape could never be more than suggested, and then only if they were absolutely essential to the plot and were severely punished at the end. Also prohibited were the use of profanity and racial epithets, any implication of prostitution, miscegenation, sexual aberration, or drug addiction; nudity of all sorts; sexually suggestive dances and costumes; "excessive and lustful kissing" and excessive drinking.7

Also forbidden were details of crime, any justification of crime, attacks on religion, cruelty to children or animals, and excessive brutality.

The Legion of Decency

Despite the fact that the Production Code was written by Catholics and administered by another Catholic (Joseph Breen), the American bishops were suspicious of the Hays office and, in 1933, set up the Legion of Decency. The legion rated films according to a scale of acceptability (from Unobjectionable for All, through Objectionable in Part, to the dread Condemned). The ratings were published weekly and church members were required to pledge to respect them. If the weapon of the Production Code Administration was prior censorship, the weapon of the Legion was boycott or the threat of boycott. Between them, they sanitized the silver screen and their power lasted into the 1950s.

The Supreme Court Decisions: Censorship in Check

In 1952, the state of New York opposed the release of the Italian film The Miracle. The movie, written by Federico Fellini and directed by Roberto Rossellini, tells the story of a feeble-minded peasant woman seduced by a stranger whom she thinks is St. Joseph. Bitterly attacked by the archdiocese of New York and Cardinal Spellman as sacrilegious, the film generated much controversy but few ticket sales. At the Supreme Court, the justices reversed the 1915 decision by ruling that films were a medium for the communication of ideas and thus deserved the protection of the First Amendment. They also held that "sacrilege" is too vague a concept to be used in the censoring of a film.

In 1961, a high court ruling upheld the legality of prior censorship. In effect, the court rejected the argument that the First Amendment precluded prior censorship of movies. This ruling, which presently covers the rights and limits of film censorship, was enunciated in Miller v. California. (June 21, 1973). Justice Burger, who wrote the majority opinion, attempted to clear the legal underbrush and gave three practical criteria for censors to make their decision:

1. Whether the average person, applying contemporary community standards, would find that the work, taken as a whole, appeals to the purient interest
2. Whether the work depicts or describes anything in a patently offensive way that is specifically defined by an applicable state law prohibiting it
In the words of Justice Tom Clark: "It cannot be doubted that motion pictures are a significant medium for the communication of ideas." In your opinion should films fall within the range of speech protected by the First Amendment? Why or why not? Can you cite specific ideas advanced by motion pictures? In what ways have these ideas influenced you? people whom you know?

3. Whether the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value

While providing a clear legal basis for censorship, Miller v. California made the practice of censorship almost impossible to defend in court. The U.S. Supreme Court attempted to clarify its position on prior censorship of motion pictures in the 1965 Freedman v. Maryland case. In an unanimous decision, the Court reversed the conviction of Baltimore theater manager Ronald Freedman for exhibiting the film Revenge at Daybreak without a license. Holding that Maryland had failed to provide adequate procedural safeguards “against undue inhibition of expression,” the Court shifted the burden of proof from the exhibitor to the censors.

From Control to Advice: The MPAA Ratings

In the meantime, producer-director Otto Preminger began releasing a series of films which violated the previously sacrosanct Production Code, but nevertheless achieved resounding commercial success. The films included The Moon Is Blue (1953), which used the term “professional virgin,” The Man With the Golden Arm (1955), which showed drug addiction, and Anatomy of a Murder (1959), which dealt with rape. The Production Code had lost its teeth. At the same time, the Legion of Decency, which had been gradually liberalizing with the times, split over the issue of nudity in The Pawnbroker (1966), with half the panel acknowledging the seriousness of the theme and the dramatic necessity of the brief nude scene, the other half demanding the “condemned” rating as a stance against screen nudity. The film was condemned but widely honored and viewed; the Legion of Decency lost credibility and, despite reorganization as the National Catholic Office for Motion Pictures, waned in influence and no longer issues ratings.

By the late 1960s, American films were becoming more violent, more overtly sexual, and more socially critical. Public outcry against the movies was, once again, mounting. The Motion Picture Association of America (the former MPPDA) abandoned the Production Code for a rating system, which is still in place. With a G rating for the totally innocuous, and an X rating for the overtly sexual or excessively violent, most films (about 85 percent) fall into the PG (parental guidance advised) or R (restricted to those 17 and older) categories, largely on the basis of nudity. The G rating is considered to be death at the box office, so even an obvious children’s fantasy like E.T.: The Extraterrestrial, contains the phrase “penis breath” in order to earn the more commercial PG. On July 1, 1984, PG-13, the first rating to be introduced since the voluntary industry movie rating system began in November 1968, went into effect. PG-13 carries the following explanatory statement in all advertising and movie preview trailers: “Parents are strongly cautioned to give special guidance for attendance of children under 13. Some material may be inappropriate for young children.” According to Jack Valenti, MPAA president, PG-13 “gives a resting place for films that were bursting out of PG but not leaping high enough to get into R.” As with the original Production Code, the MPAA ratings are generally viewed as a public relations device with
JACK VALENTI ON ART AND GOOD TASTE

We simply cannot discard the right of the artist to film what he chooses, in the way he chooses. Sometimes to shock is to seize the truth, and sometimes to unsettle is to make a visible revelation. Moreover, one must buy a ticket to see a movie; no one is forced to enter a movie theatre.

We have created a film-rating system which tells parents in advance what kind of movie is playing at the local theater, and allows them to judge whether or not they should take their children. This system rates films on the acceptability of the material, as it pertains to children. With the cooperation of the National Association of Theater Owners, viewing of certain films is restricted to adults.

But even this film rating does not repeal the basic rules of public decency. No responsible person ought ever to defend the fakery of those who construct vulgarity and call it art. When discipline and discretion disappear, we will have gone culturally berserk. There is such a think as good taste, and if one has to ask what it is, he plainly doesn't have it.

The majority of creative film-makers and executives are allied in their judgment that excellence, not hokum, is what endures. But the public has a responsibility, too: the obligation to stay away from trash and give their patronage to quality.

To what extent do you agree with what Valenti has written? Do you think you have good taste? Why or why not? How do you differentiate a "trashy" film from a quality film? In your opinion, is it enough for films to be classified as either G, PG, PG-13, R, or X, or should viewers also be told why the film was given the rating?

little important influence on the content of the films or the intended behavior of the audience.

THE MOVIE BUSINESS

Film is a medium of communication, cinema is an art form, movies are entertainment, but the motion picture industry is a business—a business like no other. With the breakup of the old studio system and the rise of independent production, every major film is virtually a company unto itself. It has been said that the true art of the movies is putting together the deal, that is, the complex and interlocking series of agreements which will guarantee the financing required.

The Property

The deal usually begins with the "property," that is, the subject matter of the film. (See Figure 9-5.) This may be no more than a one-sentence idea, but someone must own the rights to that idea. The ideal property, however, is "presold," that is, it has been before the public in some form and proved popular. Examples include popular novels, Broadway plays, television series, old movies, comics, and sometimes even recordings, such as "Take This Job and Shove It." Presold properties are expensive, however, with the current high-price record held by Annie. (Columbia Pictures paid $9.5 million for the rights to the long-running Broadway musical.) Commonly, however, the property is a story or scenario that may have been floating around Hollywood for years.

The Package: Making the Deal

Although there are a hundred variations on how a film deal is put together, the person who makes the deal is usually the producer, the person who is responsible for the financial side of the film. The producer's job is to attend to the business side of the movie. During the years when the big studios controlled
DECLARATION OF PRINCIPLES OF THE CODE OF SELF-REGULATION
OF THE MOTION PICTURE ASSOCIATION

This Code is designed to keep in close harmony with the mores, culture, the moral sense and change in our society.

The objectives of the Code are:

1. To encourage artistic expression by expanding creative freedom and
2. To assure that the freedom which encourages the artist remains responsible and sensitive to the standards of the larger society.

Censorship is an odious enterprise. We oppose censorship and classification by governments because they are alien to the American tradition of freedom. . . .

The creators of motion pictures undertake a responsibility to make available pertinent information about their pictures which will assist parents to fulfill their responsibilities. But this alone is not enough. In further recognition of our obligation to the public, and most especially to parents, we have extended the Code operation to include a nationwide voluntary film rating program which has as its prime objective a sensitive concern for children. Motion pictures will be reviewed by a Code and Rating administration which, when it reviews a motion picture as to its conformity with the standards of the Code, will issue ratings. It is our intent that all motion pictures exhibited in the United States will carry a rating.

MEDIA VIEW

The playground opens early. Mechanics push out the giant arc lights that simmer in the morning gloom. There is the muffled sound of carpenters, the slam of a door on a coffee van. A giant image flickers on the other side of a vacant hanger, and solemn men sit and debate how best to mix the sound that will match that image. This playground is a factory.

Studio executives pass the guards and put their glossy cars carefully into the parking spaces that are marked with their names. When each man quits the studio, his name will be painted over. This playground is no place for permanency.

On the fifty-fourth floor of the Bank of America tower on South Flower Street, men settle in their open-plan offices. They are blind to the dizzying view that stretches from ocean to mountains to the bleached, white bones of the Hollywood sign. They talk seriously of points and profit. They examine credit ratings and collateral. The bankers care about the playground because it is a business.

In Cincinnati a group of lawyers meet. They want to shelter their income from taxes. For that reason a banker in Los Angeles will advance money. From that money an executive will assemble his profit. Carpenters hammer for it, stars act for it, writers invent for it, and directors shape it. The playground will come to life. . . .

This playground is a machine, an assembly line, a brokerage for artificial images. But it is also a sizeable part of the emotional reality of our past. It bred the images we share. We remember crying at the movies almost more than real tears. Our adolescent ideas grew on the models in the films we were offered. The playground helped shape our culture and our assumptions. What it produces is consumed on a mighty scale. The playground manufactures popular culture.

filmmaking, the producer was an employee assigned by a studio to oversee the spending of studio funds. As the reign of the big studios came to an end, the independent producer assumed responsibility for the whole organization of the film—including finding the story or property. Once the producer acquires the rights to a property, he or she then attempts to build a cast and crew. The director, the person responsible for shooting the film, is normally chosen first. Then the producer and the director look for a writer (often a series of writers) to put together a shooting script. The writing is usually going on while the deal is being put together, and as each major person is added changes are called for, and adjustments are made to elements in the script that the new person does not like.

Finally, the producer and the director look for a “bankable” star, one whose presence in the film will virtually guarantee exhibitor bidding and ticket sales. Current bankable stars are John Travolta, Richard Gere, Dudley Moore, Barbra Streisand, and, above all, Richard Pryor. Recently bankable but fading after a series of weak performances at the box office are Clint Eastwood and Burt Reynolds. Many major stars who appear in hit after hit never become bankable—their success is tied to the film in which they appear. Examples of nonbankable major stars are: Dustin Hoffman, Meryl Streep, Robert De Niro, Roy Scheider, Donald Sutherland, Dolly Parton,
YOU WERE THERE

THE (CONDENSED) HISTORY OF A DEAL

In the fall of 1982, George Roy Hill, the movie director (The Sting, Butch Cassidy), traveled to Switzerland to meet the English novelist David Cornwell, better known as John Le Carré. Hill wanted to direct Le Carré’s just completed novel, The Little Drummer Girl. Attorney Morton Leavy, an entertainment/literary lawyer, who represented both Hill and Le Carré, convinced Warner Brothers to buy the film rights to the book and assign them to Pan Arts Corporation (Hill’s production company), which had a financing and distribution deal with Warners. The deal was made.

The motion picture agent for John Gregory Dunne (novelist and screenwriter) and Joan Didion (novelist, screen writer, and Mrs. Dunne) had heard a rumor of the deal and discovered that there was “interest” at Pan Arts in having Dunne/Didion as the script writers.

Though Hill and Le Carré preferred a British screen writer, their choice was unavailable, and Pan Arts turned to Dunne/Didion. They read the manuscript, agreed to do the script, and worked for two days with Hill, blocking out the story.

The Dunnes’ agent proposed asking for $500,000 guaranteed for the writers, based on the assumption that the budget for the film would exceed $20 million. The Dunnes, having only five days to settle before a planned vacation, agreed to ask for a guaranteed $300,000 for a first draft and one set of changes, against a final fee of $450,000, the same amount they had received on their previous picture.

Hill, through Pan Arts, offered $250,000 for a first draft and a set of changes, against a final fee of $450,000. Although the $50,000 difference would have been made up in the second draft, neither Hill nor Dunne budged, and in Dunne’s words “this mutual display of ego and hubris finally caused the negotiations to fall apart.” Dunne returned the manuscript to Pan Arts, and Hill sent the Dunnes a case of expensive French wine and a card with a single word: “Thanks.”

See John Gregory Dunne in Esquire, August, 1983.

Jane Fonda . . . the list is long. The presence of such stars in the deal are guarantees of financial support for the film but not for ticket sales.

When the property is put together and the writer, director, stars, and a price tag is arrived at, the producer has a “package.” The producer then goes with the package to the sources of finance: banks, studios, distributors, cable networks, and videocassette releasing firms. With some films, early perceived as big box office, licensing agreements for related products such as T-shirts, toys, and record albums can often generate significant revenues. Licensing agreements for the famed Star Wars trilogy have been estimated at over $500 million. Despite the high production cost of Annie (well over $40 million), master dealer Ray Stark had put together licensing agreements worth $50 million even before the film was released.

The Finances: Megabucks and Megarisk

It should be clear to you by now that any mass-media enterprise is identified by one characteristic: high cost. Even if a movie can
be produced for "peanuts" (less than $1 million), the cost of distributing the film will run many times that amount.

The average production cost presently runs around $12 million with a range running from $40,000 (Chan Is Missing) to more than $50 million (the Superman series). The budget (see Figure 9-6) for the average picture breaks down as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ITEM</th>
<th>PERCENT OF TOTAL COST</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Story costs</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stars and cast</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sets and properties</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Studio overhead</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Production costs</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income taxes</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net profit</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FIGURE 9-6** Costs of making a movie.

**MEDIA VIEW**

"**PROFIT PARTICIPANTS**" Seldom See Any Profits

Hollywood—In the entertainment industry, "net profits" almost always means "no profits." With rare exceptions, no matter how much a film or television series earns, so-called profit participants never see any money. This is a major reason that salaries of actors, directors and others have risen so much in the last few years.

"I've been a 'profit participant' too many times not to realize that those things aren't worth the paper they're written on," says actor James Garner, whose pay as the co-star of Victor/Victoria was $650,000 plus 5 percent of the net profits. "Everyone knows you can't depend on paper promises. You have to get your money up front."

The problem, actors and others say, is that studios charge an arbitrary overhead fee on all projects (usually 15 percent to 25 percent of the total budget) regardless of the actual administrative and studio expense; get a distribution fee as high as 50 percent; and charge continuing interest on all costs until the break-even point is reached. And the definition of when a film or series has reached that point is subject to negotiation and can be different on every project.

Studio chiefs such as Sidney J. Scheinberg, the president of MCA, Inc., say that their accounting practices are open and above board and that profit participants who complain have merely negotiated a bad deal for themselves.

(Garner is sueing MCA because he has not received any proceeds from his 35.5 percent share of the net profits from the highly successful "Rockford Files" TV series.)

"The studios can do just about anything they want and get away with it," Mr. Garner charges. "We're helpless unless we can get Hollywood to change its accounting practices."

People who make films . . . must be pitchpersons first. They must be able to go out and sell themselves and their ideas to strangers. Or they must have rich families and friends, or access to people with so much money that they embrace the possibility of tax-loss carryforwards. Then, once the film is made, the moviemaker must be able, in industry terminology, to “sell it,” to get someone to put it into theatres and then to persuade people to come to those theatres in huge numbers. It makes no difference if a movie is great if no one sees it.


The producer can acquire the rights to a property (the material on which the film will be based) and have it developed into a shooting script for relatively little financial risk, but once the shooting starts, the major portion of the funding must be available. The funding is based on the estimate of audience potential for a given property, and it may come from a number of sources, including private financing, corporate financing, or financing by a distributor. For big-budget pictures, the money usually comes from one of the seven major producer-distributors, since they have both the know-how to market (and thus to estimate the market value of) the picture, and the cash flow from previous films to spread the risk.

The situation in the late 1970s, then, was one in which six (Columbia, Paramount, 20th Century Fox, United Artists, Universal and Warner Brothers) of the seven major producers had a distribution unit (MGM being the only exception). The dominance of these major producer-distributors is demonstrated by the fact that, although the market share in terms of movie rental revenues has remained quite high, “it has been estimated that the percentage of rental revenues which the major producer-distributors receive is 83% for the top six firms and 92% for the top eight firms.”

It is easy to see from these figures that the majors have found a way to retain control of the industry despite the antitrust actions of the courts.

In recent years, the major producers have opted to fund and distribute relatively few films, aiming for big box office and foreign distribution to secure their profits. This leaves exhibitors short of films to show and therefore less able to bargain with the distributor. Deals for good box office films are so favorable to these exhibitors that it has been estimated that 60 to 80 percent of exhibitor profit comes from these nonticket revenues.

Distribution: Strategy and Second Guessing

If the production of the average film costs $12 million the cost of releasing the film may double that. Release costs include the lab costs for the number of prints to be made (at $2000 a print), advertising and promotion for the film, and, of course, overhead and profit for the distributor. These costs will be influenced by the “release strategy” of the distributor, which may be crucial to the film’s ultimate success or failure. Timing the release is as crucial as the form of the release. (Do you open “wide,”—that is, at many theaters across the nation—or “tight,”—that is, at a few select theaters? For major pictures, distributors aim for a release near the two peak film-viewing periods—Christmas or early summer, when schools are not in session.)
NOT COMING TO A THEATER NEAR YOU

When Steve McQueen died in 1980, the press eulogized him as one of Hollywood’s last superstars. His movies, some of the most profitable and widely seen in the past decade, made millions for the studios releasing them and for the actor himself. There is one startling exception. McQueen made a movie in 1976 that has never been released commercially—an adaptation of Henrik Ibsen’s classic play *An Enemy of the People*, co-starring Bibi Andersson and Charles Durning.

This film is only one among hundreds of unreleased films that are gathering dust in Hollywood’s vaults, movies which include: Robert Altman’s *Health*, a satiric look at a healthfood convention, starring Carol Burnett, Lauren Bacall, Glenda Jackson and James Garner; *Second Hand Hearts*, starring Robert Blake and Barbara Harris and directed by Hal Ashby; *Just a Gigolo*, starring David Bowie and Marlene Dietrich; *Tilt*, with Brook Shields as a teenage pinball wizard; *Phobia*, a thriller directed by John Huston; and *The Picasso Summer*, with Albert Finney and Yvette Mimieux. Some of these movies may have had a very limited release in three or four theatres, and some may have been shown on television years after they were made. But they have never been seen as they were meant to be seen—in your local neighborhood theatre. They are orphans of a billion-dollar industry.

How can a studio spend several million dollars making a movie and then decide not to release it? The basic explanation is economic. In the past few years movie advertising and distribution costs have skyrocketed—to such an extent that studios have decided even a picture with Steve McQueen or Faye Dunaway may be cheaper to shelve than to release. To open a film nationwide now costs a minimum of $3 million, sometimes as much as $8 to $10 million.


Once the film is released, word-of-mouth becomes the most influential form of advertising. If the word is good, the film will have “legs,” that is, it will retain or even build an audience after its release. If a film’s audience begins to slip in the second week, no matter how large the first week grosses, the chances of its becoming a box office hit are almost nil.

**Release Patterns: The Channels Multiply**

It is monumentally difficult to get a movie made, both because of the enormous sums involved in most productions, and because of the complexity of the deals that must be made. And sometimes, once a film is made, it does not get released. The producers, in effect, admit to a terrible mistake and take a tax write-off, often more valuable to them financially than a marginal film.

If a film is reasonably successful in theatrical release, its release on videocassette and video disc follows almost immediately. This is intensely distressing to exhibitors, but they have no control over the distributors, and the distributors want to get their money back as quickly as possible. The next stage of release is sale to cable companies like HBO or Showtime. Even if a film has bombed in theaters, there is a place in the cable schedules which, despite repeat showings, require a large number of films monthly. If a film has performed so poorly that no sale to cable television is possible, there is the possibility of sale to airlines for use as in-flight movies, to hotel chan-
Hollywood, July 8, 1983—During the last two weeks, this summer's blockbuster movie "Return of the Jedi" has been stolen six times, from theaters in three states and in Britain. The movie industry is certain that the objective in each case was to turn these 35-millimeter prints into illegal home video cassettes to be shipped around the world.

"A low estimate of the film industry's loss from piracy is $100 million a year," said Richard Bloeser, the former Federal FBI agent who heads the film security office of the Motion Picture Association of America. "It could be as high as $500 million a year."

Industry officials say illegal film laboratories turn the stolen prints into videotapes that are then duplicated and sold to the public in the United States and usually rented by the public in stores abroad. The price charged for a videotape varies according to how long the film has been out. The price for a pirated tape of "Jedi" at present ranges from about $85 to $150, Mr. Bloeser said.


nels, and to prisons—the end of the line in film releasing. It should also be noted that many films today are shown for the first time on cable. For example, in January 1983, Universal Studios offered Pirates of Penzance for pay per view on the same date as its theatrical release.

Theatrically successful films will be leased to networks for prime-time airing and finally will make their way into the syndication market, to be leased (usually in blocks with other films) to individual stations.

Some films have a remarkable life on television. Although The Wizard of Oz only did marginally well in theatrical release, it has become an annual event on CBS, and over the years has garnered seven of the top fifty ratings for films on television. No other movie appears on the list even twice. The king of syndication ratings is Casablanca.

**PROMOTING THE FILM: OUTSIDE INFLUENCES**

The three factors which "sell" a film are, in ascending order of importance: the anticipation of the potential viewer, the promotion campaign which addresses that anticipation, and the word-of-mouth reaction of early viewers. In special circumstances, other factors can promote a film, among them awards and festival prices and critical acclaim.

**Awards**

It is safe to say that every filmmaker likes to receive awards—but some awards are better than others. Chief among awards that promote a film are the Academy Awards. One of the top five awards can add 20 percent to a film's gross, and a sweep of major awards can double a film's pre-Award gross. (Such was the case for Ordinary People, but not for Gandhi.) New York Critics Awards are somewhat influential in the East, but serve primarily as a predictor for the later Academy Awards. The Golden Globe Awards (by foreign journalists) are of such little importance that they are rarely mentioned in advertising.

**Critics and Reviewers**

In the words of a thousand embittered creative people, "everybody's a critic." And to be sure, all viewers are critics.

According to movie critic Vincent Canby, every viewer "brings into the motion picture..."
MEDIA PROBE

After attending a film, listen to the comments of audience members as they leave the theater. To what extent do people appear to have diverse opinions regarding the value of the movie they just viewed? By what standards do you judge a film?

Some of us are near sighted, some farsighted, some hard of hearing, and some have ears almost too sensitive for modern movie sound." As Canby concludes, "it's a wonder that any two people ever agree on what they've just seen." Unlike regular viewers, some people make a living by criticizing films. Almost every newspaper and general-interest magazine has a film critic, and more and more television stations are doing film reviews. Some of these people are merely reviewers. They summarize the film and react to it, pretty much as they think their audience will react. Essentially, their function is to give information about the film.

Some critics are primarily word stylists. They use the occasion of a review to display their literary talents, usually in panning the film (John Simon is a classic example). Some writers are serious critics, who are given the space and time to explore films in depth.

Recently, PBS initiated a half-hour weekly review series called Sneak Previews with Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel, film reviewers for two Chicago newspapers. The series was so successful the Ebert and Siskel left the show and began to syndicate their own show, At the Movies, to commercial television stations; Sneak Previews continues with Jeffrey Lyons and Neil Gabler.

The Influence of Critics

In the New York theater, critics can and do make or break plays. A play with poor reviews will often close the next night. Rave reviews can signal the beginning of a long and lucra-

MEDIA VIEW

WHAT THE CRITICS HAD TO SAY ABOUT A FILM THEY SAW

In the first thirty seconds, this film gets off on the wrong foot and, although there are plenty of clever effects and some amusing spots, it never recovers. Because this is a major effort by an important director, it is a major disappointment. (Stanley Kauffmann in The New Republic)

The world's most extraordinary film. Nothing like it has ever been shown in Boston before, or, for that matter anywhere. (Majorie Adams in The Boston Globe)

-is not the worst film I've ever seen. It's simply the dullest. (Petter Dibble in Women's Wear Daily)

-is just such a bolt of brilliant, high-voltage cinema. (John Allen in The Christian Science Monitor)

A regrettable failure. . . (John Simon in The New Leader)

Each critic was writing about the same film: 2001: A Space Odyssey. What did the critics write about 2010? Was there as much disparity?
tive run. Almost the opposite is true for films! Negative reviews from serious critics often serve to indicate a film’s popular appeal. For example, critics savaged the Burt Reynolds vehicle, *Smokey and the Bandit* (1977), which rapidly moved to fifteenth place on the All-Time Box Office Grossers list, and has generated two sequels and dozens of imitations.

On rare occasions, a critic can resurrect a film which has been overlooked by the system. *The Great Santini* (1979) had already been sold to HBO (under the alternate title, *The Ace*) after release at a single New York theater. A highly favorable review from Vincent Canby of *The New York Times* began to build box office for the film, which led to wider distribution, respectable box office, and an Academy Award nomination for newcomer Michael O’Keefe as Best Supporting Actor.

Critical reviews are often important for foreign films, which have a difficult time getting American distribution. In one celebrated case, a single rave review by influential *New Yorker* critic Pauline Kael got wide American distribution for Bernardo Bertolucci’s controversial *Last Tango in Paris* (1973). In wide release, the film got mixed reviews and Kael later admitted that she didn’t think the film was all that great. She gave the favorable review in order to get U.S. distribution for the film.

**Film Festivals**

Film festivals can sometimes be influential in getting distribution for a film. Top prizes at the major European festivals (Cannes, Berlin, Venice) usually guarantee a U.S. release for foreign films. The fourth major festival, the New York Film Festival, is not a prize-granting festival but does serve as a showplace for foreign films which might not otherwise be seen here. The impact of the festivals on American films is rather minimal. For example, despite highly favorable reviews and reactions at the New York Film Festival, Jon Demme’s engaging *Handle With Care*, which died on its first release, was released again after the festival (as *Citizen’s Band*) and died again. It may safely be said that the awards and festivals are only influential for the small segment of the mass audience which has a special interest in films.

**FILM WATCHING:**

**A VIEWER’S GUIDE**

Film is a form of communication. The message a film sends, and the message a viewer receives is dependent, at least in part, on the shots a director chooses to use. In fact, the shot is itself the basic unit of film communication: it is the base upon which a film will be built; it is the means through which a director speaks to the audience. The director must decide where to place the camera, how to move it, what to reveal to the viewer, and what to conceal from the viewer. *Film shots* are divided into *scenes* (a single shot or group of shots usually unified by time and place), and scenes are divided into *sequences* (a grouping of scenes unified by a common purpose or setting).

The movie itself, however, is composed simply of a number of different shots, shots that are taken from different positions and angles, cut, and then joined together. Let us now explore the key types of shots, camera angles, and movements a director uses to communicate.

Basically there are five shots from which a director selects: the extreme long shot, the long shot, the medium shot, the close-up, and the extreme close-up. The extreme long shot is almost always an exterior shot that reveals the entire area of action or a locale. It is used to impress viewers with the vast scope of an event and to communicate grandeur or a sense of space. The long shot, sometimes referred to as an establishing shot, reveals where the people or objects are located. The medium shot, depicts a character or subject in
its immediate surrounding. Typically, it depicts a figure or figures from the knees or waist up. Sometimes called a two-shot, the medium shot is a functional shot, and the most effective shot to use when two people are talking to each other. The close-up focuses in on a relatively small object—the face of the main character for example; it reveals very little, if any, locale. By magnifying its subject, the close-up, tends to elevate the importance of that which it depicts. An extreme close-up, a variation of the close-up, will focus in on its subject to an even greater extent; thus, it may show us the eyes or the clenched teeth of a character. The basic order of shots is a long shot (the director establishes where things are), a medium shot (the director shows you who is involved), a close-up (the director reveals the focus of his or her attention), and a long shot (the director reminds you of what surrounds the focus of his or her attention). While this basic order of shots is widely used, there are many exceptions to this basic order. For instance, one way to achieve a shock response is to start with an extreme close-up of a daisy in bloom, cut to a medium shot that reveals that the daisies are being caressed by a woman, and finally, a shocking long shot—showing that the daisies and the woman are all that remain in a bombed-out neighborhood. If this sequence had been shot in normal order its impact would have been lessened.

The shots described above may be taken from one of three basic angles: normal angle, low angle, and high angle. Normal angle shots are taken from the eye level of the subject and place the audience on the same level as the subject. Subject and audience could be said to share a symmetrical relationship; viewers are led to look at the subject as their equal. In contrast, in the low angle shot, the camera looks up at the subject; thus, the low angle shot heightens the importance of the subject, making it appear superior and making the viewers feel less secure; in effect, a low angle shot compels viewers to look up to the subject. For this reason, a low angle sets up a complementary relationship between viewers and audience, one in which the subject is in a one-up position. The high angle shot has just the opposite effect. In a high angle shot, the camera looks down at the subject; thus, the viewer is led to look down on the subject too. The high angle shot places the viewer in the one-up position; the audience member is
made to feel superior while the subject is made to appear smaller or inferior. When a director changes the camera's angle, a message is being sent to viewers to change their perspective and the way they feel about the subject as well.

As a viewer, in addition to being able to identify shots and camera angles, you should also be able to recognize a number of commonly used camera movements: a pan shot, a tilt shot, a tracking shot, a dolly shot, and a hand-held shot. In a pan shot, the camera is moved from left to right or vice versa. It can be used to show a vast expanse of scenery, to introduce a character as part of the environment, or to follow a moving object. A vertical (up and down) pan is called a tilt shot. Such a shot gives viewers a trip up or down a person, thing, or object. When the director uses a tracking shot, tracks are laid, and the camera is mounted on a rubber-tired vehicle and moved along the rails, enabling the director to follow a moving object or person. If the ground is smooth, the director may opt to simply have the camera pushed along the floor on a rubber-wheeled dolly—thus, we have the dolly shot. When the director uses neither a track nor a dolly, but instead has someone carry the camera around, this is called a hand-held camera shot; most frequently used in filming documentaries or news, this type of shot is used to add a sense of reality to a feature film.

**DOCUMENTARIES AND SHORT FILMS**

It has been estimated that 80 percent of the cinema footage (including film and video) shot in the United States in any one year is not feature film footage. Hundreds of documentary and instructional films are shot by professional filmmakers, schools, corporations, and other institutions. The Pentagon is far and away the major filmmaker in the United States. In addition, hundreds of experimental (avant-garde or art) films and videotapes are made each year. Very few of these productions reach a mass audience. Many are amateurish or mechanical, many are brilliant and even award-winning efforts by gifted filmmakers, films made with care and passion which will be seen by a tiny audience and never heard of again.

One of the exceptions to the rule of the invisible documentary was 1974's *Hearts and Minds*, a feature-length documentary which explored the background, impact, and lingering effects of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Documentarist Peter Davis made no attempt to conceal his opposition to the Vietnamese war but was able to interview top spokesmen for the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations as well as disillusioned veterans, peace movement activists, and North Vietnamese civilians. The ambitious and emotionally powerful film was so realistic that veterans of the Vietnamese war were reported to be unable to watch the film because it reminded them too strongly of their own experiences. *Hearts and Minds* received the Academy Award for Best Feature-Length Documentary and was accorded wide theatrical release across the United States.

Another documentary which received fairly

**MEDIA PROBE**

Select a comic strip or comic book to work with. Cut out examples of close-ups, medium shots, and long shots, high angle shots, low angle shots, and normal angle shots. Label each and be prepared to discuss the effect each type of shot had on the way you responded to the story.

Using a nursery rhyme like "Little Miss Muffet" or "Humpty Dumpty" turn it into a short film script. That is, divide the lines of the nursery rhyme into shots—being certain to indicate the type of shot, shooting angle, and camera movement you intend to use for each line or line segment.
wide distribution following its Academy Award was Barbara Kopple’s *Harlan County, U.S.A.* (1977), a harrowing study of a coal miner’s strike in Kentucky. In the process of shooting the film, Kopple and her crew were threatened, shoved, and shot at, which did nothing to diminish the intensity of their involvement.

More typically, a feature-length documentary receives a brief theater release, often in an art house, in the two cities (New York and Los Angeles) which qualify it for Academy Awards. Then it is consigned to the back shelves of film distribution libraries, for rare rentals to film societies and film classes. Sometimes a documentary is resurrected by public television stations or PBS and thus reaches a much larger audience. Such was the fate of Ira Wohl’s *Best Boy* (Academy Award for Best Feature-Length Documentary, 1979), a touching story of an elderly couple preparing their 52-year-old retarded son for life after their deaths.

Despite the skill and dedication lavished on these films, the documentary is generally perceived by the public as an educational experience, and the public goes to the theater and watches television primarily for entertainment. The result is that, without awards, and without money for publicity, few documentaries are even known to the public, much less available for their viewing. Some documentaries which have appeal for particular audiences, such as 1983’s much-praised *Say Amen, Somebody*, which traces the rise of gospel singing in American black churches, may circulate within this smaller context. Other documentaries like *The Flight of the Gossamer Condor* receive support from corporations whose products are featured in the film. (In this case, DuPont’s Mylar was the basic material used for construction.)

If oblivion is the fate awaiting most feature-length documentaries, it is almost inevitable for short films, either documentary or animation. Formerly a staple of the “A Feature” show, with newsreel, cartoon, documentary and feature, the short cinema form exists now largely in the category of “art” and is dominated by the new video technology.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that some of the best filmmakers in America shoot television commercials. Some commercials have enormous shooting budgets, making them—foot for foot—the most expensive films ever shot. (The current record: $750,000 for a one-minute commercial for Great American Soups featuring dancer Ann Miller.) These filmmakers have a minute or less to reach their audience and put across their message; the competition they face from rivals is formidable. Some ads are cinema at their best.

### FILM AND VIDEO:
### TWO MEDIUMS OR ONE?

From a technical viewpoint, film and video are totally different mediums. The film medium consists of a complex set of processes: physical (the film itself passing through the camera, the developing machine, the editor, the projector); chemical (the photosensitive particles in the emulsion reacting to light, being chemically fixed, and gradually fading
and changing over time), and electrical (the power drives for the equipment, plus the light source for the projector). Video is an electronic process, whereby the light and sound images are converted to electronic equivalents by the camera, recorded on magnetic tape, and transformed by the monitor or receiver back into light and sound images. Film wears out with use and colors change, but videotape may be used repeatedly without loss of picture quality and the images do not fade.

Standard theatrical film is circulated in a 35-mm format. It contains the equivalent of about 1000 lines of television information. A home television receiver reproduces about 280 lines of information, roughly equivalent to super 8-mm film. Thus, at present, the theatrical film image contains about four times as much information as a transmitted television image. This means, in effect, that a film image is four times as well defined as a television image. High-resolution video systems of 1000-line-plus magnitude have been developed but are not presently available to the public. In addition, the video medium is currently undergoing rapid miniaturization, making the equipment lighter, more flexible to use, and cheaper to produce. The film technology has nearly reached the limits of its development.

**Cinema: One Medium, Many Channels**

From the point of view of the film producer and the viewer, as well as the student of mass media, the difference between the technologies of the mediums is not important. The growth of the electronic channels of distribution—television, cable, videocassette—have been a boon to filmmakers and audiences alike. Only the exhibitors suffer. As we have seen, the financing of a picture now normally involves sales to a cable company, a television network, and a film syndicator. These revenues may almost equal the production cost of a low-budget film.

At home, movie lovers may now view their favorite films repeatedly and even build a collection of cassettes, either prerecorded or recorded off the air. In June 1983, the U.S. Supreme Court refused to rule on a lawsuit by Buena Vista Studios (The Disney Corporation) against the makers of VCRs, charging that home recording is a violation of copyright laws. It is the general opinion, however, that the home video-recorded movie is primarily used for “time-shift” functions, that is, to record a program in order to watch it at a more convenient time. (This also permits the user to fast-forward past the commercials.)

The primary concern today is developing films people will go to see. As Paramount’s Bob Evans notes: “The habit of going to the movies is over. But the desire to see a movie is bigger than ever.” Thus, while pay-TV probably will not put the neighborhood theater out of business, it may compel theaters to change for the better. Time will tell.
SUMMARY

The movies occupy an important place in our popular culture. While some individuals and some segments of the audience (particularly people in the teen through young-adult demographic categories) prefer movies more than others, movies do affect us all. Since major films are social events, even nonmoviegoers are aware of these films, their subjects, and something of their meanings. Those who do go to movies expose themselves to the most psychologically powerful of the mass media.

The 100-year history of the motion picture industry has seen a continual development of the technology of the medium, including better lighting and projection, sound systems, color film stock, wide screen and 3-D techniques, and multiscreen projectors. Technological development of the medium has probably peaked. This history has also seen repeated struggles to gain a monopolistic control over the industry. While this has not succeeded, the motion picture in America have been dominated since the 1920s by the major studios, despite successful antitrust actions by the government.

Censorship has marked another on-going struggle between the movies and society. City and state governments have set up censoring boards, but the industry's various efforts at self-regulation have managed to stave off federal censorship. At the present time, Supreme Court rulings extend the protection of the First Amendment to films, while still protecting the rights of states and local communities to censor. The present criteria for legal censorship are difficult to apply successfully, however.

The electronic channels for distribution of motion pictures, including videocassettes, cable telecasting, and television broadcasting, once seen as a threat to the movies, are now becoming important sources of supplemental revenue for film distributors, though not for exhibitors. The financial operations of the industry, for the most part, continue to be vast, complex, shady, and shot through with "creative bookkeeping." Yet, despite the enormous financial risks, the industry continues to thrive, enriching both itself and the American popular culture.

KEY TERMS

Persistence of vision  Long shot
Pan  Medium shot
Parallel action  Close-up
Vertical integration  Extreme close-up
Legion of Decency  Normal angle shots
Censorship  Low angle shots
MPAA rating  High angle shots
system  Pan shot
Property  Tilt shot
Film shots  Tracking shot
Film scenes  Hand-held camera
Film sequences  shot
Extreme long shots  Documentary

NOTES

3Arthur Knight, op. cit., pp. 91-93.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING


Cook, David A.: A History of Narrative Film, Norton, New York, 1981. More than a history, this text is crammed with information on the movies.

Film Comment: A bimonthly publication of the Film Society of Lincoln Center. Represents top critical writing on films from a New York point of view.


Steinberg, Cobbett S., ed.: Reel Facts: The Movie Book of Records, Vintage, New York, 1982. Contains every movie list imaginable, including all film awards, top grossers, and so on.

Weekly Variety: Published by Variety, “must” reading for all show business professionals.