

The Political Economy of Hollywood

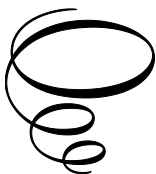
The Political Economy of Hollywood:

Politics and Film

By

Jeffrey A. Hart

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Acronyms.....	vi
List of Figures.....	vii
Introduction	1
Chapter 1	3
A Brief History of the Motion Picture Industry	
Chapter 2	23
What Makes a Film Political?	
Chapter 3	34
Imagery of Power in Films: The Example of Star Wars	
Chapter 4	49
Films about the American Political System	
Chapter 5	70
Films about Wars	
Chapter 6	82
Films about Revolutions and Terrorism	
Chapter 7	95
Identity Politics in Films	
Chapter 8	108
Conclusions	
Bibliography.....	111

LIST OF ACRONYMS

CGI	Computer-Generated Imagery
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
GLBT	Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transsexual
HUAC	House Un-American Activities Committee
IMDB	Internet Movie Data Base
IWW	International Workers of the World
LGBTQ+ (Allies)	Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer Plus
MGM	Metro Goldwyn Mayer
MMPDA	Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association of America
MPAA	Motion Picture Association of America
MPPC	Motion Picture Patents Company
PBS	Public Broadcasting System
PTSD	Post Traumatic Syndrome Disorder
SNIU	Substantial Non-Infringing Use
UFA	<i>Universum Film Aktiengesellschaft</i>
UMWA	United Mine Workers Association
VCR	Video Cassette Recorder

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1-1: First published picture of a <i>camera obscura</i>	3
Figure 1-2: Zoetrope.....	4
Figure 1-3: A Kinetoscope Parlor in San Francisco	5
Figure 1-4: George Eastman and Thomas Edison	7
Figure 1-5: Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford, Charlie Chaplin, and D.W. Griffith.....	9
Figure 1-6: Irving Thalberg	11
Figure 1-7: Still Image from “Triumph of the Will”	13
Figure 1-8: Charlie Chaplin in “The Great Dictator”	14
Figure 1-9: The Hollywood Ten.....	16
Figure 1-10: Average Movie Theater Ticket Price, 2001-2021	20
Figure 1-11: Movie Tickets Sold in the United States and Canada, 1980-2022	21
Figure 2-1: Types of Political Films.....	23
Figure 2-2: Still Image from “Mr. Smith Goes to Washington	24
Figure 2-3: Still Image from “Independence Day”.....	25
Figure 2-4: Walter Benjamin.....	28
Figure 3-1: Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s “Bad Government” Fresco	35
Figure 3-2: Napoleon I by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres.....	37
Figure 3-3: Still Images of the Galactic Senate from “Revenge of the Sith”	43
Figure 3-4: Darth Vader and Yoda with Light Sabers.....	45
Figure 3-5: Costumes of the Galactic Empire	46
Figure 4-1: Ad for “Dick”	51
Figure 4-2. John Travolta in “Primary Colors”	52
Figure 4-3: Reese Witherspoon in “Election”	57
Figure 4-4: Gregory Peck and Brock Peters in “To Kill a Mockingbird: .	58
Figure 4-5: Spencer Tracy and Frederick March in “Inherit the Wind” ...	59
Figure 4-6: Tom Hanks and Denzel Washington in “Philadelphia”	60
Figure 4-7: Ad for “Wall Street” Starring Michael Douglas as Gordon Gekko	62
Figure 4-8: Meryl Streep, Kurt Russell, and Cher in “Silkwood”	64
Figure 4-9: Ad for “9 to 5”	65
Figure 4-10: Ad for “The Long Walk Home	67
Figure 5-1: Still Image for “All Quiet on the Western Front”	71
Figure 5-2: George C. Scott as George Patton in “Patton”	73

Figure 5-3: Alec Guinness in “Bridge Over the River Kwai”	74
Figure 5-4: Rod Steiger in “The Pawnbroker”	76
Figure 5-5: Robert Duvall in “Apocalypse Now”	78
Figure 6-1: Mel Gibson in “The Patriot”	83
Figure 6-2: Marlon Brando in “Viva Zapata”	86
Figure 7-1: Jeanne Crain and Ethel Waters in “Pinky”	98
Figure 7-2: Cary Grant and Mae West in “She Done Him Wrong”	100
Figure 7-3: Demi Moore in “G.I. Jane”	102

INTRODUCTION

Politics is not just about governments. It is also about the power and authority that can be observed in society outside of governments. But even that expanded definition of politics does not cover the ground. The political content in films often deals centrally with issues of self-definition, authenticity, and group identity. That content has important implications for how we think of ourselves in relation to others. Ideas about self and group identity, which are inherently political, deeply influence our views about how we wish to be governed.

That is one of the key arguments I want to make in this book, but it is not the only one. I also want to speak about the political role of Hollywood—which here stands for the increasingly globalized, but American-dominated, film industry—in the United States and elsewhere. Hollywood is an industry and an institution. Like other industries, the film business has chains of production and distribution that can be comparatively analyzed. Its creation of jobs and income, its role in generating tax revenues and exports, and its concerns about intellectual property protection, can be compared with that of other industries.

But Hollywood is an industry with a difference. It is a key contributor to American and global popular culture. The film industry is a cultural industry. It packages and sells the collective dreams and aspirations of its audiences. Hollywood's cultural products put a particular spin on what it means to be male or female, straight or gay, or white or black in the United States.

In Chapter 1, I provide a brief history of the industry since its inception. Technological changes that the industry adapted to are a major topic, as is the rising importance of the film industry as a source of high-quality mass entertainment. The shift in ownership and control from the mostly Jewish entrepreneurs to large multinational corporations is another topic. The industry's response to attempts to censor the content of movies is yet another.

In Chapter 2, I discuss the views of others about what makes a film political, after which I provide my own perspective, arguing that films that are explicitly about political institutions are political, but so are films that deal with individual and group identities.

Chapter 3 is an essay on how the imagery of power is used in the first six *Star Wars* films. I argue that the imagery in *Star Wars* reflects the battles between democratic and autocratic regimes in World War II and the Cold War.

Chapter 4 is about how Hollywood films portray the main political and social institutions of the United States. I contend that these films are neither conservative nor liberal. Instead, they reflect ongoing domestic debates about the legitimacy of those institutions. When people are questioning that legitimacy, the movies will reflect their concerns.

In Chapter 5, I consider how Hollywood filmmakers depict American involvement in international wars. A major change occurs after the use of nuclear weapons at the end of World War II and again after the Vietnam War. I argue that the tendency to show different racial and ethnic groups fighting side by side in World War II, despite continued segregation of the military based on race and religion, is evidence of the desire of Hollywood producers to depict a kinder and gentler American society.

In Chapter 6, I turn to films about revolution and terror. Revolutionaries and terrorists are not portrayed positively in most Hollywood films, with a few exceptions. The American Revolution receives the most favorable treatment. The French, Mexican, and Russian Revolutions are depicted more negatively. After the end of the Cold War, counterrevolutionaries and counter-terrorists are generally seen as good guys—again with some exceptions.

In Chapter 7, I focus on depictions of race, gender, and nontraditional sexual preferences under the general rubric of identity politics.

In Chapter 8, I provide conclusions.

CHAPTER 1

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE MOTION PICTURE INDUSTRY

Before there could be a motion picture industry, there had to be a way of displaying moving images before audiences. In *Book of Optics*, published in 1027, Ibn al-Haytham wrote of a way to use a pinhole opening in a dark room to view an image of a candle outside the room. Translations of this work influenced Europeans like Leonardo da Vinci. There is currently much speculation about whether the great artists of the Renaissance used such a device to make breakthroughs in representing buildings and architecture in paintings and sculptures.¹

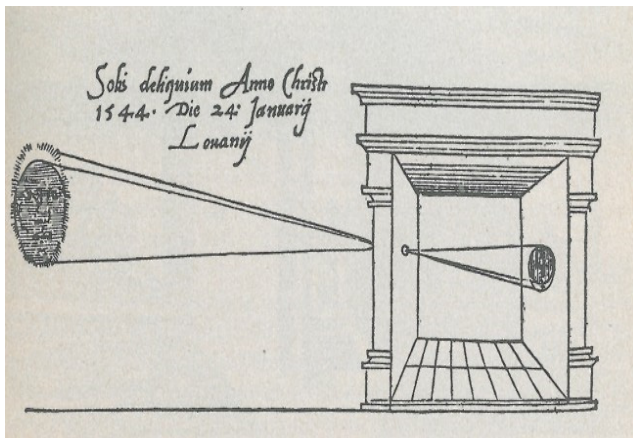


Figure 1-1. First published picture of a camera obscura²

¹Wikipedia, "Camera obscura"; Gregor J. M. Weber, *Johannes Vermeer: Faith, Light, and Reflection* (Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum, 2023); and David Hockney, *Secret Knowledge: Rediscovering the Lost Techniques of the Old Masters* (London: Viking Studio, 2001).

²Gemma Frisius, *De Radio Astronomica et Geometrica* (1545).

Christiaan Huyghens built a *camera obscura* by using a lens where the pinhole used to be. Samuel Pepys saw a *camera obscura* in London in 1666 and wrote about it in his famous *Diary*. There is still a *camera obscura* operating in Edinburgh, which provides a 360-degree view of the city skyline. There is another one at the museum of photography at the William Henry Fox Talbot Museum of Photography in Lacock Abbey, England.³

Along with dioramas and other models of urban bird's-eye views of cities, the *camera obscura* was a major tourist attraction in the nineteenth century. They produced highly realistic images, but those images could not be recorded and stored for later presentation. An early form of animation became possible with the invention of the Zoetrope in 1833, a device that involved the drawing of a sequence of images on the inside of a cylinder with slits in it that, when rotated, permitted the viewer to see a moving image through the slits.⁴



Figure 1-2. Zoetrope

Still photographs became available in the early nineteenth century, thanks to the invention of the Daguerreotype in 1837. Slide shows of drawings and still photographs were popular forms of entertainment in the

³Available at <http://www.r-cube.co.uk/fox-talbot/history.html/>.

⁴Wikipedia, "Zoetrope."

mid-1800s. The experiments of Eadward Muybridge in 1872 and Etienne-Jules Marey in 1881 allowed photographers to take the first stop-action sequences of still photographs, which were important precursors to the development of motion picture technology.

The invention of the Kinetoscope in 1891 by William Kennedy Laurie Dickson in Thomas Edison's laboratory in Menlo Park, New Jersey, made this a commercial possibility. Before the invention of the Kinetoscope, there was no easy way to record and project moving images based on photography. Dickson's invention was the culmination of several centuries of work by artists and inventors who were seeking ways to better represent the dynamism of the real world than was possible by drawings, paintings, or sculptures. Kinetoscope images could be viewed on a wooden box that allowed one person to see a small moving image on a continuous loop of film that was illuminated from behind. The first Kinetoscope viewing parlor was established in New York in 1894, but a photographer, Peter Bacigalupi, built another one in San Francisco. The Kinetoscope parlors were a smashing success.



Figure 1-3. A Kinetoscope Parlor in San Francisco

In 1895, the Lumière brothers, Auguste and Louis, invented a device called a *cinematographe*, which allowed motion pictures to be displayed in a theater setting. One of their first films showed workers exiting the Lumière factory in Lyon.⁵ The audience for another of their films, *The Arrival of a*

⁵Wikipedia, "Auguste and Louis Lumiere."

Train at La Ciotat Station, allegedly found it so realistic that some individuals ran away from the projected image as the train approached on screen.⁶ The invention of the *cinématographe* projector led to what later was called the nickelodeon. The first Lumière viewing parlor in Paris charged one franc for admission. In the United States, the entry charge was a nickel (hence, the nickelodeon).

Seeing the writing on the wall, Thomas Edison invented his own projector in 1896. By then, Dickson had left Edison to form the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company. Edison built a studio in West Orange, New Jersey, in 1892; a second in Manhattan in 1900; and a third in the Bronx in 1907. Edison Studios eventually produced close to 1,200 films, most of them short.

Edison owned patents for Kinetoscope-related technologies and was able to successfully defend them in court against challenges from Dickson and Biograph. He neglected to file for patents in Europe, however, and had to compete with Gaumont, Pathé Frères, Méliès, and Lumière, both at home and abroad. Méliès's company opened an office in New York to protect its intellectual property rights in the United States.

The first nickelodeon in the United States opened in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on June 19, 1905. By 1907, two million Americans had visited a nickelodeon. Many of those were in storefronts, mostly serving working-class patrons.⁷ Short films were also displayed in Vaudeville theaters. Erwin Panofsky wrote that there were two fundamental facts about films of this period:

First, the primordial basis of the enjoyment of moving pictures was not an objective interest in a specific subject matter, but the sheer delight in the fact that things seemed to move, no matter what things they were. Second, that films—first exhibited in “kinetoscopes,” namely cinematographic peep shows, but projectable to a screen as early as 1894—are, originally, a product of genuine folk art. At the very beginning of things, we find the simple recording of movements: galloping horses, railroad trains, fire engines, sporting events, street scenes.⁸

According to Panofsky, filmmakers at that time did not pretend to be fine artists.

⁶Wikipedia, “*L’Arrivée d’un train en gare de La Ciotat*.”

⁷David Bowers, *Nickelodeon Theaters and Their Music* (Vestal, NY: Vestal Press, 1986), p. 6.

⁸Erwin Panofsky, “Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures,” in Irving Lavin, ed., *Erwin Panofsky: Three Essays on Style* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), p. 91.

In late 1908, the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC) was founded jointly by Edison, Biograph, Vitagraph, Essanay, Kalem, Lubin, Pathé Frères, Selig Polyscope, and Méliès.⁹ Eastman Kodak was the main producer of film stock for the industry, so it was brought into the fold in January 1909. Other camera and projector manufacturers and film producers were excluded. While it lasted, the MPPC modernized film distribution by classifying theaters by size and location, pricing films accordingly and establishing a system of runs and clearances.

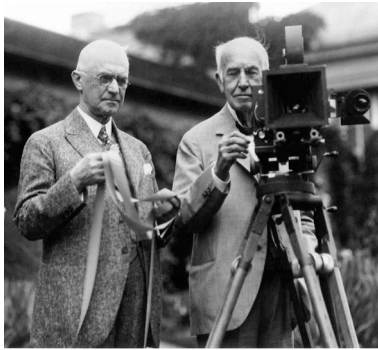


Figure 1-4. George Eastman and Thomas Edison

In February 1911, Eastman Kodak defected from the MPPC because George Eastman thought that Kodak was not benefiting sufficiently from the royalties granted to the other members. Demand for films continued to increase rapidly, both at home and abroad. Exhibitors who rented films also rebelled against the MPPC, feeling that the rental fees were too high and wanting to freely exhibit films from non-MPPC companies. By 1911, companies not affiliated with the MPPC controlled 30 percent of the U.S. market.

In 1915, William Fox of Fox Films successfully filed suit against the MPPC for violation of the Sherman Antitrust Act. The U.S. District Court in the Eastern District of Pennsylvania ruled in favor of Fox's suit.¹⁰ In 1918, the U.S. Supreme Court dismissed an appeal filed by the MPPC because by then the parties had settled out of court.¹¹ This meant that the

⁹Janet Wasko, *Movies and Money: Financing the American Film Industry* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1982), p. 8.

¹⁰Wikipedia, "United States v. Motion Picture Patents Co."

¹¹Wikipedia, "Motion Picture Patents Co. v. Universal Film Manufacturing Co."

MPPC could no longer restrict the showing of non-MPPC films on equipment patented by the MPPC or charge exorbitant licensing and rental fees.

The attempt by the MPPC to monopolize the film industry produced a backlash beyond the antitrust suits already discussed. Many independent film producers had moved to Hollywood, at least partly to escape the enforcement of MPPC patents by courts on the East Coast. California courts were less strict. The sunny weather in Southern California was also a draw.

Films produced by European and independent U.S. companies grew longer and began to tell more elaborate stories. The films produced by Georges Méliès for Lumière, such as *A Trip to the Moon* (1902), were examples of this. That film depicted a lunar voyage by elderly scientists in a bullet-shaped spacecraft that was shot out of a giant cannon. Two films directed by D. W. Griffith, *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Intolerance* (1916) were very popular feature-length narrative films. In fact, *Birth of a Nation* was President Woodrow Wilson's favorite film, despite its racist message.¹²

World War I had a major impact on the film industry. German producers were asked to contribute to the war effort by making propaganda films. The German government consolidated the industry in 1917 to form *Universum Film Aktiengesellschaft* (UFA), headquartered in Babelsberg.¹³ Chemicals used to produce celluloid for film stock were diverted to other uses, such as manufacturing explosives. Since the United States was a noncombatant until 1917, its film industry was less affected by the war. After the United States entered the war, however, the federal government encouraged the industry to produce patriotic films and to help sell Liberty Bonds. U.S. producers continued to make and exhibit films unrelated to the war effort, however. The result was a reduced role for European film companies in the global marketplace. By 1919, for example, 90 percent of films screened in Europe were produced in the United States.¹⁴

After World War I, the importance of actors in films increased, thanks

¹²Mark E. Benbow, "Birth of a Quotation: Woodrow Wilson and 'Like Writing History with Lightning,'" *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 9 (October 2010), 509–533, esp. 510.

¹³Wikipedia, "UFA GmbH." See also Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1947).

¹⁴Stuart Klawans, "Film: How the First World War Changed Movies Forever," *New York Times*, November 19, 2000, accessed at "FILM; How the First World War Changed Movies Forever." Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/11/19/movies/film-how-the-first-world-war-changed-movies-forever.html/>.

to the popularity and box office potential of stars like Mary Pickford, Charlie Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks, and William S. Hart. Casting a star in a picture reduced the financial risk of making a film. Wall Street financiers were more inclined to invest in movies with stars in them. As a result, stars commanded higher salaries than other actors.¹⁵ In 1919, D. W. Griffith formed United Artists with financier Joseph Schenk, Pickford, Chaplin, and Fairbanks as partners.



Figure 1-5. Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford, Charlie Chaplin, and D. W. Griffith

Besides United Artists, four major studios formed before, during, or immediately after World War I. Carl Laemmle started Universal Pictures in 1906. Adolph Zukor formed First National Pictures in 1917, later to become Paramount Pictures. William Fox and Darryl Zanuck founded 20th Century Fox in 1917 when they merged Fox Films and 20th Century Films. In 1918, Jack and Harry Cohn founded Columbia Pictures. In 1919, Harry Warner and his brothers established Warner Brothers. The six major studios in the United States at the beginning of the 1920s were: Universal, Paramount, Fox, Columbia, Warner Brothers, and United Artists.

Two more studios were formed later in that decade: MGM (Metro-

¹⁵See Jeanine Basinger, *The Star Machine* (New York: Knopf, 2007).

Goldwyn-Mayer) and RKO (RKO Radio Pictures). In 1924, Marcus Loew, owner of Loew's theater chain, combined his enterprise with a substantial film production business by merging three existing companies: Metro Pictures, Goldwyn Pictures, and Louis B. Mayer Pictures. Nicholas Schenk (Joseph's brother) was the main financier. David Sarnoff, head of RCA, was responsible for creating RKO in 1928, wanting to capitalize on RCA's recent invention of sound technology for films. Thus, as of 1928, there were eight large studios in Hollywood producing feature-length films.¹⁶

Walt Disney set up an animation studio in a small office in Hollywood in 1923. He started off by working for a distributor named Alice Winkler and then later for her husband, Charles Mintz, a producer. When Disney became unhappy with the arrangement with Mintz, he decided to go out on his own. He created his most popular character, Mickey Mouse, in collaboration with Ub Iwerks, a gifted animator. The first big success for the studio was a short film entitled *Steamboat Willie*, released in 1928, which took advantage of a newly developed sound recording technology for films.¹⁷ Disney Studios remained a producer of animated films until 1950, when it began to also produce live-action movies. Disney is now the largest producer and distributor of films in the United States.

Silent movies were mostly displaced by talking pictures in the late 1920s. The enormous success for Warner Brothers of Al Jolson in *The Jazz Singer* (1927), which was the first feature-length film to combine both synchronized music and speech, convinced the rest of the industry that sound was the future. The studios either adopted sound technologies created by RCA and Western Electric or they developed their own. Some silent movie actors, such as Francis X. Bushman, Clara Bow, and John Gilbert, were unable to make the transition to talkies. Studios had to be redesigned so that background noise would not interfere with filming, and theaters had to be redesigned to reproduce faithfully the sounds recorded on film. A lot of improvements to the sound were made in what came to be called postproduction.

One consequence of the introduction of sound was the growing popularity of musicals such as *Gold Diggers of 1933*, with elaborate choreography by Busby Berkeley. The film was the biggest money earner

¹⁶See Mae D. Huettig, *Economic Control of the Motion Picture Industry: A Study in Industrial Organization* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1944). It is notable that all the movie moguls of the time were Jewish. See Neil Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (New York: Anchor Books, 1989).

¹⁷Neil Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 2007); The Walt Disney Company in Wikipedia.

for Warner Brothers in that year. A string of musical films (some based on Broadway theater productions) followed the introduction of sound, such as *Top Hat* (1935), *Anything Goes* (1936), *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), and *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944).

Louis B. Mayer brought in Irving Thalberg to produce higher quality pictures for MGM. Until his untimely death in 1936 at the age of 37, Thalberg managed to produce four hundred films, recruiting numerous new stars and grooming their screen images. Among them were Lon Chaney, Ramon Novarro, Greta Garbo, Lionel Barrymore, Joan Crawford, Clark Gable, Jean Harlow, Wallace Beery, Spencer Tracy, and Norma Shearer, who became Thalberg's wife. His best remembered films were *Grand Hotel* (1932), *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1935), *A Night at the Opera* (1935), *The Good Earth* (1937), and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1939).



Figure I-6. Irving Thalberg

In its early years, Columbia Pictures relied heavily on films by the Three Stooges and Walt Disney. In 1927, the studio hired Frank Capra, who produced and directed films like *It Happened One Night* (1934), *Lost Horizon* (1937), and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939). Unlike MGM, Columbia could not afford to put major stars on contract, so instead it borrowed them for specific projects.

Darryl Zanuck became chief of production at 20th Century Films in 1933, after leaving Warner Brothers over a salary dispute with Jack Warner. Zanuck wanted to increase salaries at Warner Brothers, including his own, but Jack Warner disagreed. 20th Century became the most successful

independent studio in the 1933–1935 period before merging with Fox Films to become 20th Century Fox. Zanuck produced several Academy Award–winning films: *How Green Was My Valley* (1941), *Gentleman’s Agreement* (1947), and *All About Eve* (1950).¹⁸

Another related development in the 1930s was the building of movie palaces in major cities. These elaborate structures were designed to compete with opera houses and vaudeville theaters in attracting more affluent audiences than those who patronized nickelodeons.¹⁹

As audiences became more middle class, the film industry came under scrutiny for some of its content. In 1922, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association of America (MPPDA) emerged under the leadership of former Postmaster General Will Hays, who was tasked with providing a method to prevent censorship of films at the local level. The MPPDA proceeded to develop a production code and an administration to enforce that code so that films could not be released until they excluded material that offended certain groups. The code was promulgated in 1930 but was not fully in place until 1934 with the appointment of Joseph Breen as administrator.²⁰

By the end of the 1920s, the American film industry was enjoying a strong demand for motion pictures. National theater attendance averaged between 80 and 90 million viewers per week, even during the Great Depression. Referring to Shirley Temple, President Franklin Roosevelt remarked, “When the spirit of the people is lower than at any other time during this Depression, it is a splendid thing that for just fifteen cents an American can go to a movie and look at the smiling face of a baby and forget his troubles.”²¹ For many people in the United States at the time, going to the movies was the most affordable form of theatrical entertainment. That lasted well into the television era.²²

The studio system dominated the film industry from the late 1920s until the mid-1960s. The introduction of sound technology combined with the building of national chains of theaters mostly owned by the studios meant

¹⁸Leonard Mosley, *Zanuck: The Rise and Fall of Hollywood’s Last Tycoon* (Boston: Little Brown, 1984).

¹⁹Wikipedia, “Movie Palace,” which contains a list of major theaters built at this time.

²⁰Wikipedia, “Hays Code.” See also Will Hays, Jr., *Come Home with Me Now: The Untold Story of a Movie Czar* (Indianapolis: Guild Press, 1993).

²¹Wikipedia, “Studio System.” See also Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1988).

²²Gene Brown, *Movie Time: A Chronology of Hollywood and the Movie Industry* (New York: Wiley, 1995).

that they could outproduce and outsell most of their competitors. Actors, and especially stars, were put under contract to the studios. In exchange for a guaranteed salary, they were obligated to appear in as many films as their studio could cast them in. Major studios like MGM hired the most popular actors and the best technical people they could find and paid them accordingly.²³

The rise of Fascism in Italy and National Socialism in Germany during the Depression had an important impact on the film industry. The Nazi government in Germany used the industry not only to foster patriotism, but also to promote the leadership principle (*Führerprinzip*) that made Hitler the answer to all of Germany's problems. A great example of that is *Triumph of the Will* (1935), a documentary funded by Joseph Goebbels and directed by Leni Riefenstahl, which portrayed the Nazi Party congress in Nuremberg in 1934. In the film, Hitler descends from the clouds in an airplane to be greeted by cheering crowds. The rest of the film contains speeches by Hitler and other Nazi officials, parading troops, Nazi workers with shovels, and Hitler Youth engaged in wholesome athletic activities. *Triumph of the Will* became a model for all subsequent propaganda films, including some American ones like the series directed by Frank Capra called *Why We Fight*.



Figure 1-7. Still Image from “Triumph of the Will”

Prior to the entry of the United States into World War II in December

²³Schatz and Bach, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era*.

1941, Hollywood mostly ignored the rise of the Nazis. An important exception was a Charlie Chaplin film, *The Great Dictator* (1940), in which Charlie played Adenoid Hynkel, ruler of Tomainia. His parody of Hitler had him dancing with an inflatable globe and giving ridiculous speeches. When the Germans captured Paris in 1941, *The Great Dictator* was being exhibited in a movie theater in the city. At first, the German soldiers thought it was a tribute to Hitler, but quickly realized their mistake.



Figure 1-8. Charlie Chaplin as Adenoid Hynkel in “The Great Dictator”

The Hollywood moguls were somewhat reluctant to address the antisemitism that was at the root of Nazi ideology during the 1930s, since there were plenty of antisemites in the United States and elsewhere. In fact, Chaplin anticipated that his film might not be shown either in the United States or in Europe, so it took some courage for him to go ahead with the project. After the United States entered World War II, however, Hollywood

studios proceeded to make anti-German and anti-Japanese pictures in support of the war effort.²⁴

After the end of World War II, Americans continued to go to the movies, but in smaller numbers and with less frequency. Television did not become a big factor in moviegoing until TV sets were affordably priced and quality programming was available. By the early 1950s, however, the introduction of television reduced sales from 90 million tickets per week to an average of 40 million. The studios adapted by producing TV programs for the major networks, and by introducing Technicolor and stereo sound technology, but their viewership and profits still suffered a big hit. Gross revenues declined from \$1.7 billion in 1946 to \$1.2 billion in 1953.²⁵

As the size of the audience declined, the studios adjusted by targeting a somewhat more selective set of moviegoers. Average ticket prices increased, partly because the production costs of making films increased dramatically.²⁶ In 1980, the average production cost per film was \$9.4 million. By 2000, it was \$54.8 million²⁷; and, by 2024, it was almost \$100 million.²⁸

The beginning of the Cold War with the Soviet Union at the end of the 1940s had a major impact on Hollywood. On November 25, 1947, ten writers and directors were cited for contempt of Congress when they refused to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), which was investigating claims that the industry was harboring Communist sympathizers. When asked by HUAC, “Are you now, or have you ever been, a member of the Communist Party?” the group, later called the Hollywood Ten, refused to answer, citing the First and Fifth Amendments to the Constitution.²⁹ The studio heads then created a blacklist that excluded alleged Communist sympathizers from participating in the industry. Among those who were affected by this were Edward G. Robinson, Howard da Silva, Judy Holliday, Lee J. Cobb, Elia Kazan, Clifford Odets, Lillian

²⁴Chapter 5, below, is devoted to the topic of war movies. See also Wikipedia, “American Propaganda During World War II.”

²⁵Wasko, *Movies and Money*, p. 103.

²⁶The production cost is the cost of making a film prior to adding the costs of marketing and distribution.

²⁷Julie Salamon, *The Devil’s Candy: The Anatomy of a Hollywood Fiasco* (New York: Hachette, 2021), p. 424.

²⁸Max Scott, “20 Film Industry Statistics to Know,” accessed at <https://scottmax.com/film-industry-statistics-to-know/>.

²⁹The Ten were Herbert Biberman, Albert Maltz, Lester Cole, Dalton Trumbo, John Howard Lawson, Alvah Bessie, Samuel Ornitz, Ring Lardner Jr., Edward Dmytryk, and Adrian Scott.

Hellman, Lucille Ball, and Marsha Hunt.³⁰ The blacklist lasted until 1960.³¹



Figure 1-9. *The Hollywood Ten*³²

In addition, a new set of antitrust actions forced the producers to end the practice of “block booking”³³ and to divest their ownership of movie theaters. In *United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc.*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 1946 that movie studios could not own their own theater chains and could not distribute films through exclusive arrangements with theaters.³⁴ This was the beginning of the end of the studio system.

The founders and heads of the major studios began to die off. Carl Laemmle died in 1939, William Fox in 1952, Louis B. Mayer in 1957, Harry Cohn in 1958, and Joseph Schenk in 1961. Professional managers took their place. Lew Wasserman became the head at Universal, Dore Schary at MGM, and Abe Schneider at Columbia. As film budgets continued to increase in the 1950s, Hollywood firms became increasingly corporate-

³⁰Gene Brown, *Movie Time*, p. 209.

³¹Wikipedia, “Hollywood Blacklist.” See also Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community 1930–60* (Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

³²Front row from left to right: Herbert Biberman; attorneys Martin Popper and Robert W. Kenny; Albert Maltz; Lester Cole. Middle row: Dalton Trumbo; John Howard Lawson; Alvah Bessie; Samuel Ornitz. Back row: Ring Lardner, Jr.; Edward Dmytryk; Adrian Scott.

³³Block booking is the practice of selling multiple films to a theater as a unit.

³⁴Wikipedia, “United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc.”

owned and -managed.

Julie Salamon describes this in the following passage from her book:

Hollywood had always been seen as the land of opportunity. Its founding fathers were Jewish entrepreneurs, mostly immigrants, who saw in the movies a way to build fortunes in a new world where they could create the rules of respectability.... By 1990, however, a new breed had invaded. These new entrepreneurs were refugees not from Russia but from Wall Street. They were the young M.B.A.'s and lawyers who had come of age during the eighties, who had never built or run a company.... The only thing that mattered was the deal.³⁵

The studios began to produce films that would appeal to audiences that had criticized them earlier for undermining traditional values. A series of very successful Bible-related films resulted, notably *The Robe* (1953), *The Ten Commandments* (1956), and *Ben Hur* (1959). The invention of Cinerama, CinemaScope, Todd-AO, VistaVision, and Panavision resulted in the production of widescreen films like *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1962) and *Cleopatra* (1963).³⁶ *Cleopatra* cost \$44 million to make because its stars, Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, commanded enormous salaries, but also because of its elaborate sets. It grossed \$58 million. *The Sound of Music* was the highest grossing film of 1965, costing \$8.2 million. It grossed \$159 million. However, many high-budget films failed at the box office, contributing to the financial woes of the major studios.

The Civil Rights and Anti-War Movements of the 1960s resulted in widespread questioning of traditional values, including those that were behind the creation of the Hollywood Production Code and the adoption of the anti-Communist blacklist. In 1966, Jack Valenti, who was appointed head of the Motion Picture Association of America, decided to replace the Production Code with a voluntary rating system that went into effect in 1968. The ratings were: G (for General Audiences), PG (for Parental Guidance), PG-13 (Parental Guidance Strongly Suggested), R (for Restricted), and NC-17 (for Adults Only).³⁷ Producers could opt not to submit a film for rating, in which case the film received a rating of NR (Not

³⁵Salamon, *The Devil's Candy*, p. 297.

³⁶John Belton, *Widescreen Cinema* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

³⁷Wikipedia, "Motion Picture Association Film Rating System." NC-17 was originally X. See also Douglas Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System: A History* (London: British Film Institute, 2005); and Stephen Vaughn, *Freedom and Entertainment: Rating the Movies in an Age of New Media* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

Rated). Producers had an incentive to lobby for R ratings or higher because that increased the potential size of their audience.

All this eventually led to important changes in the content of Hollywood films. As the major studios struggled with economic and political challenges in the late 1950s, some theater owners began to look elsewhere for films that could attract an audience. They started to screen French “New Wave” films directed by François Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard. Art theaters and college campuses displayed films by Akira Kurosawa, Ingmar Bergman, and Federico Fellini. The pressure was on Hollywood to match the creativity and realism that European and Japanese producers were offering.

Hollywood began to produce a different sort of film. Mike Nichols directed *The Graduate* (1967); Arthur Penn, *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967); Roman Polanski, *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968); John Schlesinger, *Midnight Cowboy* (1969); and Dennis Hopper, *Easy Rider* (1969). Many of these films were produced by independent studios, some shot on location rather than inside studios. Although *Midnight Cowboy* was X-rated, it was a box office success.

In the 1970s, the next generation of Hollywood directors, including Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, Robert Altman, and Brian De Palma, made films that were more challenging than the films of earlier periods. Coppola, Spielberg, and Lucas produced blockbusters: *The Godfather* (1972), *Jaws* (1975), and *Star Wars* (1977), respectively. Despite costing tens of millions of dollars to make, the films brought in hundreds of millions at the box office.

Hollywood was slow to make films about the Vietnam War, at least in part because the war had not ended well. Two major films were exceptions to this: Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and Oliver Stone’s *Platoon* (1986). Both films departed from the traditional story lines and cinematic techniques of earlier war movies.³⁸

Theaters also began to change. Single stand-alone movie houses were supplemented with multiplex movie theaters, especially in suburban shopping malls. The multiplex could show several films simultaneously and did not require a separate projectionist for each film.³⁹ Theater owners increasingly relied on refreshment stands rather than ticket sales for revenues and profits. The audiences shifted toward a younger demographic,

³⁸See Chapter 5 for further details.

³⁹Gary D. Rhodes, “Modern Movie Palace: How the Multiplex Came to Be,” *Medium*, 2021, accessed at <https://gdrhodes.medium.com/modern-movie-palace-how-the-multiplex-came-to-be-868efbfb35f/>. See also Charles Acland, *Screen Traffic: Movies, Multiplexes, and Global Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

often couples who were dating. The price of tickets went up dramatically to compensate for the drop in average attendance. This had an important impact on the types of films that were exhibited.

Another trend was the growing reliance of the studios on the licensing of movie-related merchandise such as t-shirts, action toys, video games, and comic books. The basic idea was to repackage and resell content in as many different forms as possible. Some of the studios built and operated movie-related theme parks. The biggest of these initially was Disneyland, but soon there was also Disney World in Florida, Universal Studios Hollywood, and Warner Brothers Studio Tour Hollywood. A similar phenomenon was the rental/sale of recorded movies, especially video cassette tapes to be played on VCRs at home.

In 1984, the U.S. Supreme Court overruled a decision by the U.S. Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals to forbid Sony Corporation from selling its Betamax videocassette recorder. Two studios, Universal and Disney, sued Sony for making it possible for consumers to infringe their copyrights by illegally recording or purchasing illegally copied films. The Supreme Court ruled that VCRs had both legitimate and illegitimate uses and that a technology could not be banned if it had a substantial non-infringing use. This was the origin of the SNIU (substantial non-infringing use) doctrine that was applied subsequently to recording devices that could potentially be used for copyright infringement.⁴⁰

In the 1980s, the emphasis was on producing blockbusters. Studios were more likely to make sequels to successful big-budget films like *The Godfather* and *Star Wars*, rather than to produce films with new characters and plots. Action movies were popular among young people, both in the United States and abroad. The less dialogue the better. Arnold Schwarzenegger's *Conan the Barbarian* (1982) was part of this trend, as were martial arts films like Bruce Lee's *Enter the Dragon* (1973), *The Karate Kid* (1984) and *Big Trouble in Little China* (1986).

However, the earlier trend toward the increasing importance of independent studios continued. New studios like Miramax, Lions' Gate, and New Line are examples. Computer-generated imagery began to play an increasing role in big-budget filmmaking. A great example of this was James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997), the top-grossing film of the 1990s. Another example was the *Terminator* series, especially the liquid robot scenes in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991). Independent companies that specialized in digital effects and digital animation, like Industrial Light and

⁴⁰Wikipedia, "Sony Corp. of America v. Universal City Studios, Inc."

Magic, DreamWorks, and Pixar, began to thrive.⁴¹

In the 1990s, all the following directors made their feature debuts: Alexander Payne, Spike Jonze, Quentin Tarantino, Paul Thomas Anderson, David O. Russell, Noah Baumbach, Wes Anderson, Lisa Cholodenko, Lynne Ramsay, Darren Aronofsky, Sam Mendes, and Todd Haynes. Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction* (1994) stands out for its graphic depictions of violence and drug abuse. Similarly, Aronofsky’s *Requiem for a Dream* (2000) centers on the mostly gruesome consequences of drug addiction.

The event that dominated the first decade of the twenty-first century was the attack on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001, by the followers of Osama Bin Ladin. One result of that was an uptick in films about terrorists and terrorism. Abuses of power by the Bush administration led to films about torture, rendition, and certain members of the administration. Hollywood continued to focus on producing sequels of successful films such as *Indiana Jones* (1984), *The Matrix* (1999), *The Lord of the Rings* (2001), *Harry Potter* (2001), and *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003). Budgets and ticket prices continued to increase.

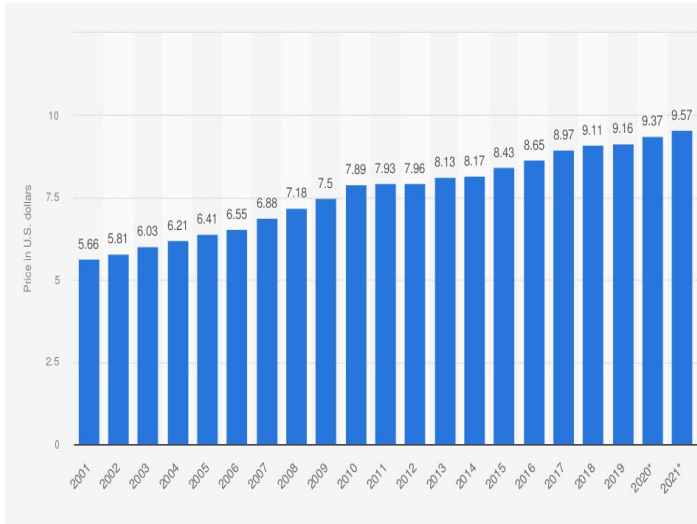


Figure 1-10. Average Movie Theater Ticket Price, 2001–2021

⁴¹Alvy Ray Smith, “How Pixar Used Moore’s Law to Predict the Future,” *Wired*, April 2013, accessed at <https://www.wired.com/2013/04/how-pixar-used-moores-law-to-predict-the-future/>.

In the 2010s, films about comic book superheroes proliferated. Marvel Comics bought back the rights to their most popular characters, such as Spiderman, Iron Man, the Avengers, Captain America, the Hulk, etc., and produced movies that did quite well at the box office. Universal Pictures produced sequels to *Jurassic Park*. Warner Brothers purchased the rights to make Batman movies. Disney acquired Pixar and the rights to produce *Star Wars* sequels and spin-offs. Box office hits for Pixar included the *Toy Story* series, the *Cars* series, and one-offs like *Up* (2009) and *Finding Nemo* (2003).

When the COVID pandemic struck in 2019, theater attendance plummeted, whereas digital streaming of movies and television programs rose dramatically. Many of the studios began to compete with Netflix for online audiences, and Netflix, Apple, and Amazon began to produce their own content. New streaming services emerged, such as Amazon Prime Video, Hulu, Disney Plus, Peacock, HBO, and Sling TV.

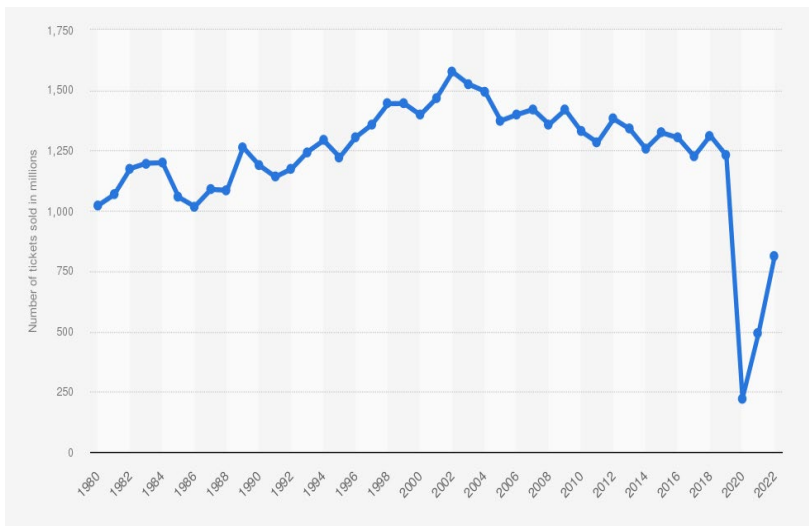


Figure 1-11. Movie Tickets Sold in the United States and Canada, 1980–2022

When COVID began to recede in 2023, a key question was whether people would go back to viewing movies in theaters, many of which had closed. Viewers had grown used to watching movies on big-screen Internet-connected TVs. Some began to return to movie theaters, but not in the numbers and frequency of the past. Two of the big box-office hits of that year were *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer*.

Conclusions

The long history of the Hollywood film industry demonstrates the importance of adapting quickly to new storytelling techniques. Silent films became talking pictures, monochrome became color, television impacted the size of audiences, digital technologies like the Internet and computer graphics changed what could be done, while also changing revenue streams. War and politics have always played a key role in the stories that people want to see on the screens and what filmmakers want to produce. In the chapters to come, I will focus on films that deal with domestic political institutions, wars, revolutions, terrorism, and identity politics.