A comprehensive and insightful examination of the representation of diverse viewpoints and perspectives in American cinema throughout the 20th and 21st Centuries

America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender and Sexuality at the Movies, now in its third edition, is an authoritative and lively examination of diversity issues within American cinema. Celebrated authors and academics Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin provide readers with a comprehensive discussion and overview of the industrial, socio-cultural, and aesthetic factors that contribute to cinematic representations of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability.

The book incorporates several different theoretical perspectives, including film genre, auteurism, cultural studies, Orientalism, whiteness, the "male gaze," feminism, and queer theory. The authors examine each selected subject via representative films, figures, and movements. Each chapter also includes an in-depth analysis of a single film to illuminate and inform its discussion of the chosen topic.

America on Film fearlessly approaches and tackles several controversial areas of representation in film, including the portrayal of both masculinity and femininity in film and African- and Asian-Americans in film. It devotes the entirety of Part V to an analysis of the depiction of sex and sexuality in American film, with a particular emphasis on the portrayal of homosexuality. Topics covered include:

- The structure and history of American filmmaking, including a discussion of the evolution of the business of Hollywood cinema
- African Americans and American film, with a discussion of *BlacKkKlansman* informing its examination of broader issues
- Asian, Latin/x, and Native Americans on film
- Classical Hollywood cinema and class, with an in-depth examination of *The Florida Project*
- Women in classical Hollywood filmmaking, including a discussion of the 1955 film, *All That Heaven Allows*

Perfect for undergraduate and graduate students in film, media, and diversity-related courses, this book also belongs on the shelves of anyone interested in diversity issues in the context of American studies, communications, history, or gender studies. Lastly, it is ideal for use within corporate diversity training curricula and human relations training within the entertainment industry.

HARRY M. BENSHOFF, PhD, is Professor of Media Arts at the University of North Texas. He received his PhD in Critical Studies at the University of Southern California's School of Cinema-Television. His research focuses include the representation of African Americans and queer people in film and television, particularly within the horror genre.

SEAN GRIFFIN, PhD, is Professor of Film and Media Arts, Southern Methodist University. He received his doctorate from the University of Southern California in 1997. He has written and studied extensively in the area of queer representation in film, as well as the history of the American musical film.

with website

A companion website with additional resources is available at
www.wiley.com/go/Benshoff/Americaonfilm3e

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Third Edition

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AMERICA ON FILM

THIRD EDITION

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PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

Many years have gone by since the first edition of this book was published in 2004, and even more than that since we first started writing it. The second edition appeared in 2009, right after Barack Obama was elected President of the United States. At that time, we – like many other Americans – thought we were looking towards a new era of American equality. Women and people of color (as well LGBTQ people and differently-abled folks) were being increasingly accepted into mainstream American life for their ideas and abilities, and not immediately excluded from it based on their perceived differences from the white male heterosexual norm (as had so often been the case in previous eras). That said, the election of Donald Trump to the Presidency in 2016 seemed to signal a sort of backlash to those ideals, as many of Trump's public statements were openly degrading to women, disparaging to people of color, and insensitive (to say the least) to people with disabilities. Perhaps ironically, the self-proclaimed billionaire Trump pitched his "Make America Great Again" campaign to working and lower/middle-class voters, Americans who were struggling to make ends meet under the harsh realities of twenty-first century corporate capitalism. He promised to restore their economic prosperity not by reigning in or regulating corporate capitalism – indeed his actions have so far been the exact opposite of that – but by promising to build a wall to keep out foreigners, who were within this rhetoric implicitly figured as thieves out to steal what did not belong to them: American prosperity. And while riding a wave of sexist invective against women and especially Hillary Clinton ("Lock Her up!") and implicit racism (the "Birther" campaign questioning President Obama's citizenship), Trump was narrowly swept into the Presidency via the Electoral College. (He lost the popular vote.)

So, what do these developments tell us about America today, versus ten years ago, or even a hundred years ago? It has always been the central thesis of this book, as a work of cultural studies, that there are different sorts of complex correlations between popular culture (in this case the movies) and the historical eras and industrial conditions in which they are produced and consumed. The first two editions of *America on Film* chronicled tremendous changes in over one hundred years of US (cinematic) history, as well as the many ways in which various diverse American identities had been portrayed on American movie screens. For most of the groups surveyed, it was a trajectory towards increasing

access to self-representation, a move away from simple-minded stereotyping, and the production of media that emphasized the basic humanity of diverse social groups. It was a trajectory demonstrating that all human beings were and are complicated and diverse, but that all of us – regardless of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, or physical ability – were deserving of fair and equal treatment under the ideals of the American Constitution. It was a hopeful story, and we hope this third edition will show that it remains one. Whether one imagines history as a pendulum, a circle, an upward spiral (hopefully not a downward one!) – theories of ideology and hegemonic negotiation suggest that history is always an ebb and flow of progress in one direction and backlash in the opposite. So, if the election of President Trump does indeed suggest a backlash to the multicultural ideals of the last few decades, it will undoubtedly not be the final word on the matter.

As the first two editions of this book demonstrated, time marches on, as do the ever-changing social meanings of identity categories like race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability. However, this edition reflects a very changed America from those first two, especially in the ways we now consume movies (and television), share ideas about them, and relate to our fellow Americans. As Chapter Two will explore in greater detail, the media landscape of 2020 is vastly different than it was when we wrote the second edition of this book, let alone the first. New technologies and opportunities for making, distributing, and watching movies – including but not limited to digital (and therefore cheaper) modes of film production, streaming distribution platforms like Netflix and Amazon (who have also entered into the world of production), and the sharing of ideas, images, clips, and entire TV shows and movies via social media – might make today's "American movie culture" seem entirely foreign to a filmgoer from Hollywood's classical era. Social media has also dramatically altered the way Americans relate to one another: while social media platforms like Facebook were originally designed to bring people together, they can also be used to divide, spread falsehoods, and inflame hatreds. Anonymous "trolls" in online forums have embraced a new form of socio-cultural criticism with absolutely no filters, concern for decorum, or social niceties; personal attacks on various films and celebrities now enter (and effect) the public discourse in ways that were impossible just ten or twenty years ago. Individuals from both the left and the right have used social media to barricade their positions, often not fully fact checking their assertions. As a result, positions have become polarized, keeping citizens from coming together as one country united in our diversity. (Evidence exists that various interests within the United States and from other countries have worked to stoke such division for their own benefit.)

As a result, there is a distrust of media prevalent in today's culture that did not exist in the same way twenty years ago. Many critics of President Trump accuse him and his supporters of disseminating false statements and doctored media. On the other side, Trump and his supporters attack the free press repeatedly with cries of "Fake News!" The so-called "cultural elite" – which of course includes Hollywood – is reported to be out of touch with mainstream American values. Education is suspect, and the liberal arts faculty of colleges and universities often find themselves under attack. Given all of that, this book may invite scorn from some sectors of contemporary American culture. It is an academic, scholarly book written for university students, based on previous research, vetted by other scholars, and published by a reputable academic press. The book's central topics – film and media and the diversity of the American experience – may also be seen as "bad objects" by those people who want to define America and its culture as being solely the purview of

white heteronormative people and institutions. To us, however, it is obvious that America means so much more than that. It is diversity that gives America its vibrancy. White, male, and heterosexual viewpoints are part of this diversity, but recognized as not the sole or "normal" viewpoints. In embracing that diversity, the American film and media industries are able to tell new stories from new perspectives, enriching the lives of all Americans. Despite the election of 2016 and the backlash it seems to represent, Hollywood has continued to give us game-changing blockbusters like *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), *Wonder Woman* (2017), and *Black Panther* (2018). It has continued to make and honor smaller and more thoughtful films on race, gender, class, and sexuality like *Moonlight* (2016), *Lady Bird* (2017), and *Get Out* (2017). While political movements and social attitudes continue to ebb and flow, the authors of this book are cautiously optimistic that the American media industries will continue to diversify, allowing new voices and perspectives to arise and challenge the inherent biases and inequities of American culture.

This new edition is dedicated to Jayne Fargnoli.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The origins of this book can be traced back to a class we both taught at Antelope Valley Community College in Lancaster, California, when we were PhD students at the University of Southern California's School of Cinema–Television. We "inherited" the class from Jaime Bihlmeyer when he took another position. Jaime had created his own set of readings for the course, because, as we quickly discovered, there were very few published texts available that covered "diversity in American film" with the historical and theoretical consistency that we desired. Thus, our colleagues and students at Antelope Valley College are the first people we wish to thank.

Sean Griffin then taught revised versions of this class at California State University at Long Beach, the University of California at Santa Cruz, and Florida Atlantic University, while Harry Benshoff developed individual courses in African American film and lesbian, gay, and queer media. Our colleagues and students throughout those years contributed to this project in myriad ways, and we especially want to thank Shelley Stamp and Michael Cowan at UCSC.

It was while we were living and working in Santa Cruz that Jayne Fargnoli, our soon-to-be editor at Blackwell, asked us what kind of textbooks were needed in film and media studies. We both immediately told her there was a need for a text like *America on Film*, and a few months later Jayne asked us if we wanted to write the book ourselves. Her support and feedback have been immeasurable, as have those of her assistant, Margot Morse. For the second edition our project manager and copy-editor, Fiona Sewell, was also extremely helpful in the final stages of the project, as was the book's production manager, Lisa Eaton.

We would like to thank our current colleagues, students, and support staff at the University of North Texas and at Southern Methodist University. Harry Benshoff's research and teaching assistants at UNT have contributed to the project in different ways. We'd also like to thank our anonymous readers and especially Alexander Doty, Peter Lehman, David Lugowski, Jacqueline Foertsch, and Travis Sutton, all of whom read various chapters and offered constructive feedback. We also wish to thank those readers who wrote or spoke to us after the first and second editions were published. Their feedback (and occasional corrections!) continues to matter to us. Much of the new material in this third edition came directly from their suggestions on how to make the book even better.

For various reasons, this third edition took a little more time to produce, but we hope we have updated its materials in a useful manner. We'd like to thank Lee Stone for her help with the research, and our editors and support staff at Wiley, especially Catriona King and Liz Wingett, and Mary Malin.

This book is dedicated to our families and friends, the people who have taught us and instilled in us the values of diversity, understanding, education, and love – in both our professional and personal lives. Such acts of sharing can lead to greater understanding and compassion across families, across communities, and across the world. We hope this book encourages people to examine and understand the biases and shaping discourses of contemporary American culture, so that the future may not just promise but also deliver the goal of equality for all Americans, regardless of race, class, gender, sexuality, or ability.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

America on Film is a textbook designed to introduce undergraduate students to issues of diversity within American film. It is the first synthetic and historical text of its kind, and provides a comprehensive overview of the industrial, sociocultural, and aesthetic factors that have shaped and continue to shape cinematic representations of race, class, gender, sexuality, and physical ability. The book aims to chronicle the cinematic history of various cultural groups, stimulate discussion of human difference, examine forces and institutions of bias, and ultimately provoke thought about the relationship between film and American national culture.

This textbook can be used in a variety of classroom settings and at a variety of educational levels. Primarily, it is suited for a class on media culture and diversity issues, although we have also used it as a supplemental text in basic "Introduction to Film Studies" and "American Film History" classes. The book could also be used for courses in twentieth-century American history, cultural and American studies, and courses devoted to specific topics surrounding race, class, gender, sexuality, and/or ability. In addition, courses in the sociology and/or psychology of human difference may also find the book useful.

The text was written with first and second year undergraduate students in mind, but would also be appropriate for advanced high school or college-prep students. The book can also be used in higher-level undergraduate or graduate student seminars, although such classes would ideally use *America on Film* in conjunction with more advanced materials and/or other primary readings. Because of its user-friendly style and general accessibility – everyone loves movies! – it may also be possible to use the text within certain types of corporate or social seminars designed to stimulate discussion of human diversity.

America on Film is divided into six parts. The first outlines the basic terms and issues of cultural theory and cinematic representation. Each of the following parts is devoted to a specific aspect of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability, and each begins with a helpful "What is ...?" introductory essay. Part II examines the cultural construction of whiteness as well as the complex historical lineages of African American, Native American, Asian American, and Latino representations. Part III explores issues of American capitalism and examines the cinematic representation of class struggle before and after the Great

Depression. Part IV explores the changing images of both femininity and masculinity within American film, and includes a chapter on how Hollywood film form itself has been critiqued as having a male bias. Part V explores how various forms of sexuality have (or have not) been figured on American movie screens. Part VI analyzes various ideas about physical ability, and how what is termed disability has been represented across American film history. The final chapter of the second edition, comprised exclusively of individual "case studies" (in-depth film analyses), emphasized the multiple and complex links between all of these various forms of identity markers. Those case studies have been moved online and can be found at www.wiley.com/go/Benshoff/Americaonfilm3e.

The book is comprised of a total of 16 chapters. While this number slightly exceeds the typical number of weeks in a semester-long course of study, the text has been designed to adapt to those parameters. Generally, each week of any given semester can be devoted to a single chapter of *America on Film* and a representative film screening, either shown in class or assigned as homework. (Many of the films suggested within the text for further screening are easily available from media libraries, streaming services, or other commercial media outlets.) Depending on the preferences of the instructor, additional readings and/or screenings can be used in conjunction with *America on Film*. Chapters may also be assigned on a more concentrated basis or even used "out of order," although we have provided a logical and easy-to-follow structure for the issues discussed.

Each chapter of *America on Film* is organized within a broad historical framework, with specific theoretical concepts – including film genre, auteur theory, cultural studies, Orientalism, the "male gaze," feminism, queer theory, etc. – integrated throughout. Each chapter features a concise and accessible overview of the topic at hand, a discussion of representative films, figures, and movements, a case study of a single film, and key terms highlighted in bold. Each chapter concludes with questions for discussion and a short bibliography and filmography. *America on Film* also contains a glossary of key terms, a comprehensive index, and over 120 photos and diagrams illustrating key points and figures.

ABOUT THE COMPANION WEBSITE

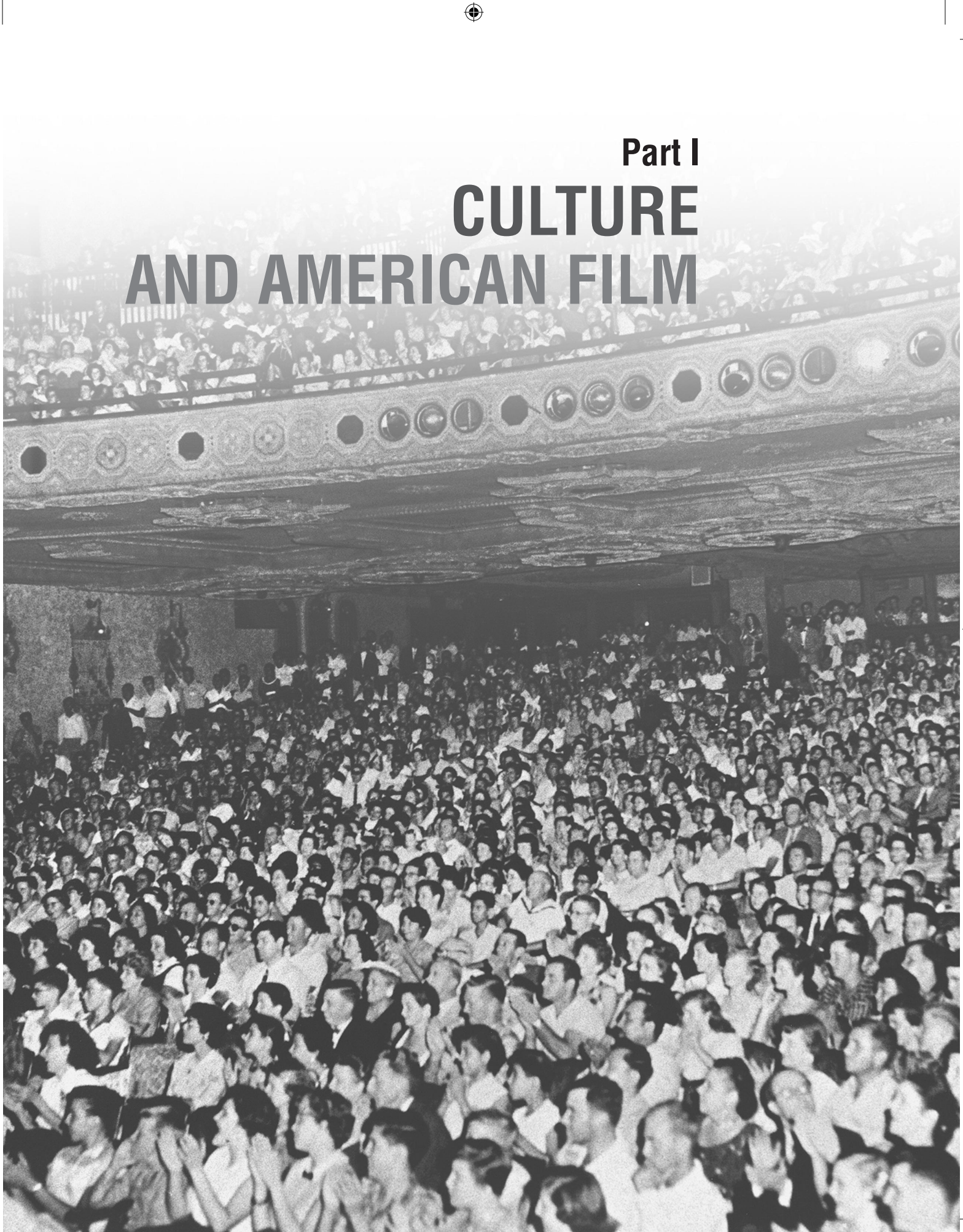
This book is accompanied by a companion website:

www.wiley.com/go/Benshoff/Americaonfilm3e 

The website includes:

- Case studies

Part I
CULTURE AND AMERICAN FILM



Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF FILM FORM AND REPRESENTATION

The purpose of this book is to analyze how American films have represented race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability throughout the twentieth century and into the early twenty-first. It is a basic principle of this work that by studying American film history, we can gain keen insights into the ways that different groups of American people have been treated (and continue to be treated). Images of people on film actively contribute to the ways in which people are understood and experienced in the "real world." As seminal cultural theorist Richard Dyer has asserted, "Images Matter." Furthermore, there are multiple and varied connections between film and "real life," and we need to have agreed-upon ways of discussing those connections and their ramifications. Therefore, before examining in detail how specific groups of people have been represented within American cinema, we need to understand some preliminary concepts: how film works to represent people and things, how and why social groupings are and have been formed, and how individuals interact with the larger socio-cultural structures of the United States of America. This chapter introduces some basic ideas about film form, American history, and cultural studies.

Film Form

Film form refers to the constitutive elements that make a film uniquely a "film" and not a painting or a short story. All works of art might be said to have both form and content. **Content** is *what* a work is about, while **form** is *how* that content is expressed. Form and content are inextricably combined, and it is an old adage of art theory that "form follows content," which means that the content of a work of art should dictate the form in which it should be expressed. For example, many different poems might have the same content – say, for example, a rose – but the content of a rose can be expressed in various forms in an infinite number of ways: in a sonnet, a ballad, an epic, a haiku, a limerick,

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and so forth. Each of these formal structures will create a different "take" on the content. For example, a limerick tends to be humorous or flippant, while a sonnet tends to be more serious and romantic. Likewise, different films with similar content can be serious, frivolous, artistic, intellectual, comedic, or frightening. Therefore, understanding how cinema communicates or creates meaning requires more than paying attention to what is specifically going on in the story (the film's content); it also requires paying attention to how various artistic choices (the film's form) affect the way the story is understood by the viewer.

Many entire books have been written analyzing the various formal elements of film but, for the purposes of this basic introduction, they can be broken into five main aspects: **literary design, visual design, cinematography, editing,** and **sound design**. The first aspect of film form, **literary design**, refers to the elements of a film that come from the script and story ideas. The literary design includes the story, the setting, the action, the characters, the characters' names, the dialog, the film's title, and any deeper subtexts or thematic meanings. Film is capable of many literary devices: metaphor, irony, satire, allegory, and so forth. Some films are black comedies and must be understood according to that form. Other films are dramas to be taken seriously while still others try to make us laugh by being deliberately juvenile. Yet other films try to shock or provoke us with new and unexpected ideas. Analyzing a movie's literary design is a good place to start when analyzing a film, but one should not ignore the four other axes of film form and how they contribute to a film's meaning.

Another broad aspect of film form has been labeled **mise-en-scène**, a French term for what goes into each individual **shot** (or uninterrupted run of film). Aspects of mise-en-scène include our second and third formal axes: the **visual design** of what's being filmed (the choice of sets, costumes, makeup, lighting, color, and actors' performance and arrangement before the camera) and the **cinematographic design** – that is, how the camera records the visual elements that have been dictated by the literary design. The cinematographic design includes things like the choice of framing, lenses, camera angle, camera movement, what is in focus and what is not. Each of these choices of mise-en-scène can affect the viewer's feelings toward the story and its characters. A room that is brightly lit may seem comfortable or even festive; that same room with heavy shadows may seem threatening or scary. If everyone in a crowd scene is wearing various shades of gray and black, the viewer will tend to see them as just a crowd; if one person is wearing red, the viewer will tend to focus on that one person. Similarly, a camera shooting up from the floor at a character will create a different feeling than a camera aimed at eye-level. In yet another example, if only one couple on a dance floor are kept in focus, the viewer will pay attention to them; if the whole ballroom is kept in focus, the viewer may choose to look in a number of directions.

The fourth axis of film form is called **montage** or **editing**, and refers to how all the individual shots the camera records are put together in order to create meaning or tell a story. Most movies are made up of hundreds and hundreds of shots which are edited together to make a full-length feature film. Many choices get made at the editing stage. Not only do filmmakers usually have multiple takes of the same scene to choose from, they also choose which shots to place together with other shots. It may seem obvious to an audience, since the editing would seem to need to follow the story (A follows B follows C),

but an editor may choose to break up a shot of a group of people talking with individual close-ups of people in the group. Such a choice affects audience understanding by forcing the viewer to pay attention to just one person instead of the entire group. Audience identification with specific characters can be encouraged or discouraged in this manner. Montage also involves choosing the length of each shot. Usually, longer shot lengths are used to create quiet or contemplative moments, while action sequences or chases often are put together with short, quick shots.

The fifth and final formal axis of cinema is **sound design**. Although cinema audiences are usually referred to as viewers or spectators, audiences both watch and listen to films, and the same types of artistic choices that are made with the visual images are also made with the soundtrack. The dialog of some of the characters on the screen is easy to hear, while the dialog of others is inaudible (thus directing the audience member to pay attention to the conversation that the filmmakers want them to pay attention to). Most films have a musical score that the audience can hear but which the characters cannot. Choosing what type of music to play under a scene will greatly affect viewer comprehension – that is why the music is there in the first place – by directing the viewer toward the preferred understanding of the images. Playing a luscious ballad during a scene between a woman and her fiancé helps create a romantic sense, but playing ominous music during the same scene may make the viewer think the man is out to hurt the woman (or vice versa).

Although this only begins to introduce the subject of film form, these few examples do point out how cinema's basic aesthetic qualities help to create meaning. Discussing how various types of people are represented in American cinema, then, requires more than analyzing only the stories and the characters. For example, let's imagine a film about both a white man and a Native American man. The story alternates between the two characters, showing their daily activities: getting up, eating, interacting with their family and friends, working, and then going to sleep. There would seem to be nothing necessarily biased or prejudiced according to this description of the film's content. Yet, in this hypothetical film, all the scenes with the white man are brightly lit, with the camera placed at eye-level; the shots are of medium length, and calm, pleasant music is used for underscoring. In contrast, all the scenes of the Native American man are composed with dark shadows, with the camera constantly tilted at weird angles; the shots are quick and choppy, and dark, brooding music is used for underscoring. Such choices obviously slant how a viewer is supposed to react to these two characters. The content of the film may have seemed neutral, but when the other axes of film form are analyzed, one realizes that the white man was presented in a favorable (or neutral) light, while the Native American man was made to seem shifty or dangerous.

The above example is an imaginary one, but throughout this book actual films will be analyzed in detail in terms of both content and form, in order to examine how various American identities are represented in American films. As the next chapters will discuss in detail, the Hollywood studio system developed certain traditions in its formal choices that would vastly affect how race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability were and are treated in mainstream narrative films. But before turning to specifics, we must also examine the social and political nature of American society itself, as well as the theoretical tools that have been developed to explore the relationship between film and "real life."

American Ideologies: Discrimination and Resistance

The Constitution of the United States of America famously begins with these three words: "We the People." Their importance highlights one of the founding principles of the nation: that the power of government is embodied not in the will of a dictator, nor in that of a religious leader or a monarch, but in the collective will of individual citizens. In conceptualizing "the power of the people," the newly formed United States based its national identity on the principle of equality or, as Thomas Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence, that "all men are created equal." Yet, as admirable as these sentiments were (and are), the United States of the late 1700s saw some individuals as "more equal" than others. Jefferson's very words underline the fact that women were excluded from this equality – women were not allowed to vote or hold office, and they were severely hampered in opportunities to pursue careers outside the home. People of African descent were treated far more differently than anyone else at this time of history. The vast majority of them were brought here as slaves, or bred into slavery on American shores. The writers of the Constitution acknowledged (and thus implicitly endorsed) this institutional system of slavery against blacks, even as they valued them (for purposes of taxation and representation) as only three-fifths of a person. This devaluation of black lives is still felt in many quarters today. Native Americans were denied even this dubious honor and were considered aliens. Even being a male of European descent did not necessarily guarantee inclusion in the great experiment of American democracy, for many statesmen at the time argued that only landowners (that is, those of a certain economic standing) should have the right to vote or hold office.

Over the years, Americans have come to understand that the Constitution is a living document, one that can be and has been changed to encompass a wider meaning of equality. In America today, there is a general belief that each and every individual is unique, and should have equal access to the American Dream of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Not everyone will necessarily reach the same levels of happiness and success, but most Americans believe that the results of that quest should be based on individual effort and merit rather than preferential treatment (or, conversely, exclusionary tactics). The United States professes that these opportunities are "inalienable rights." However, just as in the late 1700s, barriers, conflicts, biases, and misunderstandings continue to hamper these ideals. While most American citizens philosophically understand and endorse these principles of equality, many of those same people also recognize that equality has not been totally achieved in the everyday life of the nation.

Why is there such a disparity between the avowed principles of equality and many citizens' actual lived experience? First, while ostensibly acknowledging that each person is unique, most of us also recognize that individuals are often grouped together by some shared trait. This grouping comes in many forms: by racial or ethnic heritage, by gender, by income level, by academic level, by sexual orientation, by geographic region, by age, by physical ability, and so forth. Almost invariably, such categorization of various identity types becomes a type of "shorthand" for describing people – a working-class Latino, a black deaf senior citizen, a Southern middle-class gay man. Quite often, this shorthand is accompanied by assumed traits that people belonging to a certain category supposedly have in common: that women are more emotional than rational, that gay men lisp, that

African Americans are good dancers. When such oversimplified and overgeneralized assumptions become standardized – in speech, in movies, on television – they become **stereotypes**. Stereotypes are often said to contain a "kernel of truth," in that *some* women are more emotional than rational, *some* gay men do lisp, and *some* African Americans do excel at dance. The problems begin when people make unsupported leaps in logic and assume that everyone of a certain group is "naturally inclined" to exhibit these traits, thus reducing complex human diversity to simple-minded and judgmental assumptions.

In their oversimplification, stereotypes inevitably create erroneous perceptions about individuals. Stereotypes become even more problematic when they are used to favor certain groups over others, which unfortunately occurs quite commonly. While ostensibly living in a "free and equal" society, most Americans are aware that certain groups still have more opportunities and protection than others. In almost all of the categories listed above, there is one group that tends to have more access to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" than the others. Within race, those considered **white** or of Anglo-Saxon descent still seem to have more privilege and opportunity than do those of other races. Within gender, women are still working to achieve equity with men, while within sexual orientation, heterosexuality is more accepted and privileged than other orientations. And since notions of success and happiness are intricately tied to income level in contemporary US culture, one can see that working-class people hold less power than middle-class people (and that middle-class people in turn hold less power than do people of the upper classes). One need merely glance at the demographic makeup of Congress or the boardrooms of most major American corporations to see that wealthy heterosexual white men dominate these positions of power. American films over the past century also disproportionately focus on stories of heterosexual white men finding happiness and success.

In everyday conversation, less privileged groups are frequently referred to as **minority groups**. Such a term positions these groups as marginal to the dominant group that holds greater power. The term also implies that the disempowered groups are smaller numerically than the dominant group – an implication that may not necessarily be true. Census statistics indicate that there are more women living in the United States than men, yet men hold far more social power and privilege than do women. Current population projections are forecasting that, in many states, white citizens will be outnumbered by other racial or ethnic groups some time in the near future. Hence, the term "minority group" more often refers to types of people with less social power than to any group's actual size.

One common method of keeping minority communities on the margins of power has been to pit their struggles for equality against one another, while the dominant group continues to lead. Another method has been to exclude members of minority groups from being considered "American" in the first place. (The "birther" controversy about Barack Obama circulated by then-Presidential candidate Donald Trump is one rather obvious example of this tactic.) The creation of a sense of national identity consistently involves social negotiations of who gets included and who gets excluded. Identity in general becomes more fixed when it is able to define *what it is not*: someone who is white is *not* black; a man is *not* a woman; a heterosexual is *not* a homosexual. America gains a greater sense of itself through such juxtapositions: it is not a British colony, it is not the various nations of Native Americans, and it is not the other countries that make up the American continents (which can also lay claim to the name "America"). Consequently, if certain population groups can be considered "alienable," then it becomes easier to feel that they

are not entitled to those "inalienable rights" that "We the People of the United States of America" have supposedly been granted.

While women, homosexuals, and people of non-white heritage have made tremendous gains in social power during the last few decades, white heterosexual men still dominate the corridors of power in America. Many people feel that this is "how things ought to be," that this is simply the "natural order of things." In theoretical terms, considering white heterosexual males obviously or essentially better (stronger, more intelligent, etc.) is called an ideological assumption. **Ideology** is a term that refers to a system of beliefs that groups of people share and believe are inherently true and acceptable. Most ideological beliefs are rarely questioned by those who hold them; their beliefs are naturalized because of their constant and unquestioned usage. They are, to use a word made famous in the Declaration of Independence, "self-evident." No one needs to explain these ideas, because supposedly everyone knows them.

When an ideology is functioning optimally within a society or civilization, individuals are often incapable of recognizing that these ideas are socially constructed opinions and not objective truths. (In fact, a Pew Research Center study released in June of 2018 found that many Americans – of all political stripes – have trouble distinguishing between facts and opinions in the news.) Cultural theorists call these prevailing opinions and assumptions **dominant ideologies**, because they tend to structure in pervasive ways how a culture thinks about itself and others, who and what it upholds as worthy, meaningful, true, and valuable. The United States was founded on and still adheres to the dominant ideology of **white patriarchal capitalism**. This does not mean that wealthy white men gather together in some sort of conspiracy to oppress everyone else in the nation, although such groups have been formed throughout American history in order consolidate and control power. Rather, white patriarchal capitalism is an ideology that permeates the ways most Americans think about themselves and the world around them, regardless of their own race, class, gender, sexuality, or ability. It also permeates most American films.

White patriarchal capitalism entails several distinct aspects. The first – **white** – refers to the ideology that people of Western and Northern European descent are somehow better than are people whose ancestry is traced to other parts of the world. **Patriarchal** (its root words mean "rule by the father") refers to a culture predicated on the belief that men are the most important members of society, and thus entitled to greater opportunity and access to power. As part of American patriarchy, sexuality is only condoned within heterosexual marriage, a situation that considers all other sexualities taboo and reinforces women's role as the child-bearing and child-raising property of men. The third term – **capitalism** – is also a complex one, which multiple volumes over many years have attempted to dissect and define, both as an economic system and as a set of interlocking ideologies.

For the working purposes of this introduction, capitalism as an ideology can be defined as the belief that success and worth are measured by one's material wealth. This fundamental aspect of capitalism has been so ingrained in the social imagination that visions of the American Dream almost always invoke financial success: a big house, big car, yacht, closets full of clothes, etc. Capitalism (both as an economic system and as an ideology) works to naturalize the concept of an **open market economy**, that the competition of various businesses and industries in the marketplace should be unhindered by governmental intrusion. (The US film industry, a strong example of capitalist enterprise, has spent much

of its history trying to prevent governmental oversight.) One of the ideological strategies for promoting capitalism within the United States has been in labeling this system a "free" market, thus equating unchecked capitalism with the philosophies of democracy. Capitalism often stands in opposition to the ideology and practice of **communism**, an economic system wherein the government controls all wealth and industry in order to redistribute that income to the population in an equitable fashion. (The history of the twentieth century showed that human greed usually turns the best communist intentions into crude dictatorships.) **Socialism**, an economic and ideological system mediating capitalism and communism, seeks to structure a society's economic system around governmental regulation of industries and the equitable sharing of wealth for certain basic necessities, while still maintaining democratic values and a free market for most consumer goods. Since the United States was founded under capitalism, American culture has largely demonized socialism and communism as evil and unnatural, even though many US government programs can be considered socialist in both intent and practice.

The ideology of white patriarchal capitalism works not only to naturalize the idea that wealthy white men deserve greater social privilege, but to protect those privileges by naturalizing various beliefs that degrade other groups – thus making it seem obvious that those groups should not be afforded the same privileges. Some argue that capitalism can help minority groups gain power. If a group is able to move up the economic ladder through capitalist means, then that group can claim for itself as much power, access, and opportunity as do the most privileged Americans. As persuasive as this argument is (as can be seen by its widespread use), capitalism has often worked against various minority groups throughout US history. The wealthy have used their position to consolidate and insure their power over multiple generations, often at the expense of the rest of the population. Since this wealthy group has almost exclusively been comprised of white men and their families, the dissemination of racist and sexist stereotypes has helped keep people of color and women from moving ahead economically. To use an early example, arguing that individuals of African descent were not fully human allowed slavery to continue to thrive as an economic arrangement that benefited whites. Today, attitudes of racism, sexism, homophobia, and **ableism** work to create in corporate culture a **glass ceiling,** a metaphoric term that describes how everyone but white heterosexual males tend to be excluded from the highest executive levels of American industries.

In this way, one can see how the impact of social difference (race, gender, sexuality, physical ability) can have an impact upon one's economic class status. In fact, the social differences that this book attempts to discuss – race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability – cannot be readily separated out as discrete categories. For example, people of color are men and women, rich and poor, straight and gay. Cultural theorists refer to this complexity of identity as **intersectionality**: every human being on the planet is marked by various signifiers of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability in similar-but-different ways. Being a deaf working-class white male suggests a person who has certain privileges and opportunities based upon being white and male, as well as certain disadvantages based on being deaf and working class. Being a black female means dealing with both patriarchal assumptions about male superiority *and* lingering ideas of white supremacy, while white women only have to deal with patriarchy (and possibly class). Being a lesbian of color might mean one is triply oppressed – potentially discriminated against on three separate levels of social difference. Encountering real-world prejudice on account of those

differences, non-white, non-male, non-heterosexual people, as well as those considered disabled, may have trouble finding good jobs and subsequent economic success. The point is not to find out "which group is more oppressed than some other one," but to recognize how all of these various forms of social difference can and do interact in complex ways, producing complex identities and social groupings.

Most ideologies, being belief systems, are only relatively coherent, and may sometimes contain overlaps, contradictions, and/or gaps. The dominant ideology of any given culture is never stable and rigid. Instead, dominant ideologies and ruling assumptions are constantly in flux, a state of things referred to by cultural theorists as **hegemony** – the ongoing struggle to maintain the consent of the people to a system that governs them (and which may or may not oppress them in some ways). Hegemony is thus a complex theory that attempts to account for the confusing and often contradictory ways in which modern Western societies change and evolve. Whereas "ideology" is often used in ahistorical ways – as an unchanging or stable set of beliefs – hegemony refers to the way that social control must be won over and over again within different eras and within different cultures. For example, we should not speak of patriarchal ideology as a monolithic concept that means the same thing in different eras and in different situations. Rather, the hegemonic struggle of patriarchy to maintain power is a fluid and dynamic thing that allows for its ongoing maintenance *but also the possibility of its alteration*. For example, specific early twentieth-century patriarchal *ideologies* were challenged and changed when women won the right to vote in 1920, but that did not destroy the *hegemony* of American patriarchy.

Thus, the dominant ideology of a culture is always open to change and revision via the ebb and flow of **hegemonic negotiation**, the processes whereby various social groups exert pressure on the dominant hegemony. In another example, over the last fifty years, American civil rights groups have worked to expose and overturn the entrenched system of prejudice that has oppressed their communities for generations. Often, these fights include attempts to instill pride and self-worth in the minority groups that have been traditionally disparaged. In the process, the ideological biases of racial superiority are being challenged, but the basic assumption that individuals can be grouped according to their race is not. While these efforts attempt to disrupt one level of assumptions, a more basic ideological belief is kept intact. In this case the dominant hegemonic concept of racial difference as a valuable social marker remains untouched, even as the individual ideologies of white supremacy are challenged. (More recent cultural theorists have begun to challenge the very notion of such rigid categorizations, a topic explored more fully in future chapters. For example, the obvious fact of biracial or multiracial individuals inherently challenges the idea that race is some sort of stable category.)

Ideological struggle is therefore an ongoing political process that surrounds us constantly, bombarding individuals at every moment with messages about how the world should and could function. Such struggles can be both obvious and subtle. One obvious way of disseminating and maintaining social control is through oppressive and violent means, through institutions such as armies, wars, police forces, terrorism, and torture – institutions known as **repressive state apparatuses (RSAs)**. Violent, repressive discrimination is part of American history, as evidenced by terrorist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, political assassinations, police brutality, and the continued presence of hate crimes. More subtly, the state can also enforce ideological assumptions through legal discrimination. For example, the so-called **Jim Crow Laws** of the American South during the

first half of the twentieth century legally inscribed African Americans as second-class citizens. Current examples would be the lack of federal laws that prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation; in fact, "religious freedom" laws are an attempt to enact statutes that would expressly protect such discrimination. Legal discrimination tacitly helps maintain occupational discrimination. What these few examples also show is that discrimination and bias are systemic problems as well as individualized ones. Just as a single person can be a bigot, those same biases can be incorporated into the very structures of our "free" nation: this is known as **institutionalized discrimination**.

While institutionalized discrimination and other oppressive measures overtly attempt to impose certain ideologies upon a society, there are still more subtle means of doing so that often do not even feel or look like social control. Winning over the "hearts and minds" of a society with what are called **ideological state apparatuses (ISAs)** usually proves more effective than more oppressive measures, since the population acquiesces to those in power frequently without even being aware that it is doing so. ISAs include various nonviolent social formations such as schools, the family, the church, and the media institutions – including film and television – that shape and represent our culture in certain ways. They spread ideology not through intimidation and oppression, but by example and education. In schools, students learn skills such as reading and math, but they are also taught to believe certain things about America, and how to be productive, law-abiding citizens. The enormously popular *Dick and Jane* books taught many American youngsters not only how to read, but also how boys and girls were supposed to behave (and most importantly, that boys and girls behave differently). Institutionalized religion is also an ideological state apparatus, in which theological beliefs help sustain ideological imperatives. Many Christian denominations during the country's first century used the Bible to justify slavery and segregation of the races. Some faiths still demonize homosexuality and argue that women should subjugate themselves to men. Historically, people have considered children born with differing physical abilities as signs of sin or evil; it was not that long ago when left-handed children were forced to use their right hand, because the left hand was considered sinister or Satanic. Even the structure of the family itself is an ISA, in which sons and daughters are taught ideological concepts by their parents. In the United States, families have traditionally been idealized as patriarchal, with the father as the leader.

All of this points to how ideologies function through what cultural theorists call **overdetermination**, which means that any given ideology is disseminated through culture via multiple cultural institutions. Patriarchal masculinity, for example, is pervasive. It is upheld in many religions, foregrounded in much media, taught in schools (see *Dick and Jane* above), celebrated through sports, honored through warfare, rewarded through capitalism, and thought to be the bedrock of both the nuclear family and society itself. This is one of things that makes challenging (let alone changing) dominant ideologies so difficult. Our cultural institutions' ideologies are deeply intertwined; they support and implicitly value and validate one another. For example, take the **#MeToo movement**, which has rocked Hollywood by calling attention to the sexist behaviors of powerful men in the media industries. The #MeToo movement is but one front on the struggle to undermine patriarchal attitudes and sexist behaviors towards women. #MeToo may be slowly spreading (or not) to churches and the military and the sports industries and the US government itself, but it remains to be seen how successful it will be in checking male abuses. Ideally,

the movement will have some lasting effect as hegemonic negotiation responds to it. Some men's behaviors may change, even while other men-behaving-badly will continue to use their wealth and power to buy off accusers and shield their misdeeds.

As these various examples hopefully demonstrate, ideology functions most smoothly when it is so embedded in everyday life that more overt oppressive measures become unnecessary. In fact, the use of oppression usually indicates that large sections of a society are beginning to diverge from the dominant ideology. At their most successful, ISAs act as reinforcements for individuals who have already been inculcated into dominant ideology. Such individuals are said to have **internalized ideology**, or to have adopted socially constructed ideological assumptions into their own senses of self. Such internalizing can have significant effects on people, especially members of minority groups. No matter what social group one might identify with, we all are constantly bombarded by images, ideas, and ideologies of straight white male superiority and centrality, and these constructs are consciously and unconsciously internalized by everyone. For straight white men, those images can reinforce feelings of superiority. For everyone else, those images and ideas can produce mild to severe self-hatred or create a psychological state in which individuals limit their own potential. In effect, we might allow the dominant ideology to tell us what we are or are not capable of – that women are not good at math, that African Americans can only excel at sports, that people from the lower classes must remain uneducated, that someone in a wheelchair cannot be an elected official, or that being homosexual is a shameful thing. Possibly the least noticeable but potentially most damaging, this type of **internalized discrimination** is sometimes termed **ego-destructive**, because it actively works against an individual's sense of psychological well-being. Such ego-destructive ideologies may be especially harmful because they are often fostered by those groups and individuals who allegedly love and nurture us: rejection from families and religions is still a common occurrence for many people who are considered different from the "norm."

The strength and tenacity of such internalized ideology within an efficiently working hegemonic system allow people to consider their society open and free, since it appears that no one is forcing anyone else to live a certain way, or keeping them from reaching their highest possible levels of achievement. Yet the subtlety of ideological state apparatuses and the subconscious impact of ego-destructive discrimination severely undercut and problematize the avowed principles of liberty and equality upon which the United States was founded. Hallowed as these principles are, the functioning of white patriarchal capitalism as our nation's dominant ideology militates against social equality in a variety of ways.

Culture and Cultural Studies

While the school, the church, and the family serve as classic examples of ideological state apparatuses, potentially the most pervasive of ISAs (at least in the past century) is the mass media – newspapers, magazines, television, radio, film, video games, and now the Internet and the World Wide Web. Many theorists feel that in today's electronic world, the media has more influence on cultural ideas and ideologies than do schools, religions, and families

combined. The bulk of this book will examine historically how one branch of this mass media, the American cinema, has worked to exemplify and reinforce (and more rarely challenge) the hegemonic domination of white patriarchal capitalism.

One of the first arguments used to resist focusing on American cinema as a conveyer of ideological messages is that Hollywood movies are merely "entertainment." Consequently, as the argument goes, academics are reading too much into these things. What do ideas like ideology and hegemony have to do with mindless escapism? To answer such questions, one has to recognize that cinema (and all other mass media) are important parts of American culture. **Culture** refers to the characteristic features of a civilization or state, or the behavior typical of a group or class. Culture is thus deeply connected to ideology: one might say it is the "real-world" manifestation of ideology, since characteristic features, social behaviors, and cultural products all convey ideology.

Historically, European culture judged itself to be superior to all other cultures on the globe. "True" culture was thought to be synonymous with Western notions of **high art** – classical music, "serious" literature and theater, etc. – and other cultures were judged to be deficient by those standards. Today we try to discuss different cultures without making such value judgments; we also understand that any given group's culture is more than just its most "respectable" and officially "important" art works. Culture also encompasses the modes of everyday life: how one behaves in a social situation, the type of clothes one wears, the slang one uses when talking to friends, etc. This definition of culture includes the so-called **low art** of popular music, comic books, paperback novels, video games, movies, and television – forms of culture that interact with far more people than do those found only in museums or opera houses. Even language itself shapes and is shaped by culture, and thus conveys ideological meanings. For example, the Euro-American cultural tradition that associates "white" with goodness and "black" with evil cannot help but influence how we think about race, which we often define in the same terms.

Within any given society, there are multiple cultures that differ in varying degrees from one another. In the United States, one can find a variety of cultures: hip-hop, Chicano, Mennonite, conservative Christian, millennial, just to name a few. As intersectional theory posits, cultural identities co-exist and overlap (for example, a black female hip-hop millennial), but cultural groupings rarely exist in equal balance with one another. Rather, the culture of the ruling or most powerful group in a society tends to be the dominant culture, expressing its values and beliefs through ideologies and other cultural forms. The group with the most control has the greater means to produce and disseminate their preferred cultural attitudes throughout the rest of the society – *their* music, *their* literature, *their* standards of behavior become the norm for the rest of the society. For example, Native Americans have historically had less opportunity than Anglo Americans to get the funding or training necessary to make films or television programs. Consequently, the white man's version of "how the West was won" has been filmed and televised literally thousands of times, while Native Americans have had very little chance to present their viewpoint of that era on film or video.

The culture of any marginalized or minority group is often labeled a **subculture**. Subcultures can have their effect on the dominant culture by contributing to the active hegemonic negotiation of dominant ideology, but usually this only happens to the extent that a subculture's concerns can be adapted to the needs of the dominant ruling interests.

For example, hip-hop and rap music styles have crossed over into mainstream popular music – but in an altered (and some might say watered-down) version. This is broadly called **commodification** (turning something into a product for sale) and more specifically **incorporation** (the stripping of an ideology or cultural artifact's more "dangerous" or critical meanings so that the watered-down artifact can be sold to mainstream culture). Another good example of this process is the history of earrings worn on men. Some men in the 1970s started to wear earrings as a "coming out" gesture – to announce to the world that they belonged to the emerging gay male subculture. As an act of coming out, the gesture was political and meant to challenge a dominant culture that ignored or suppressed the existence of gay men. Today, however, many, many men wear earrings – not because they want the world to know that they are gay, but because earrings for men have become a commodity that can be bought and sold as part of a depoliticized fashion trend. The gay political meaning of men wearing earrings has been stripped from the act – it was commodified and incorporated within the dominant culture. In perhaps a more recent example, tattoos were once the province of a small minority of people: mostly sailors and working-class men who perhaps once were sailors. Tattoos signified a sort of gruff masculinity, which was initially appealing to women and gay men of decades past. Today, tattoos have been commodified and incorporated into dominant culture – people from all walks of life acquire them for a variety of reasons. It is highly unlikely that a young female film scholar with a tattoo of Atticus Finch and his daughter Jem from *To Kill A Mockingbird* (1962) is trying to convey her rough-and-tumble working class masculinity.

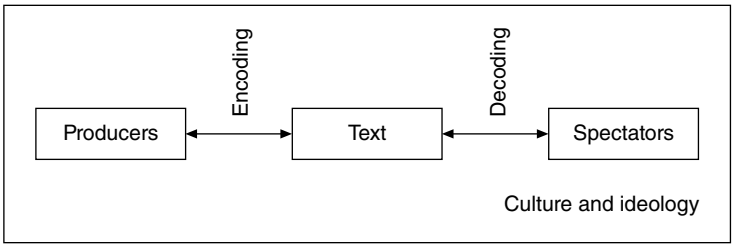
In recent decades, scholars in various disciplines (sociology, political science, literature, communications, history, media studies) have begun to study and theorize concepts and issues surrounding culture and ideology. This interdisciplinary research has coalesced under the term **cultural studies**. As its theorists come from such different backgrounds, cultural studies as a field of academic inquiry has consistently focused on multiple aspects of how culture works (and needs to be analyzed), but one of the basic foundations for this new discipline has been that every **cultural artifact** – book, movie, music video, song, billboard, joke, slang term, earring, etc. – is an expression of the culture that produces it. Every cultural artifact is thus a **text** that conveys information, carrying the ideological messages of both its authors and the culture that produced it. As a result, many cultural studies scholars are interested in how media texts express a view of the world, how these expressions create ideological effects, and how the users of such texts make meaning from them. This area, sometimes called **image studies**, looks at the processes of **representation** – the systems we use to communicate and understand our world – language, art, speech, and more recently TV, movies, and newer forms of media. These are **representational systems** that show us reconstructed (or **mediated**) versions of life, not "real life" itself. Most US citizens have never been to China, but probably know something about it from reading books or newspapers, or seeing images of it on television or at the movies. Since all media texts reflect in some way the ideological biases of the culture from which they emanate, the images of China shown in Hollywood movies or on American television will be different from the mediated images of China made in some other area of the world (and different from China's *own* images of itself).

There are two stages of making meaning within any given text: **encoding** and **decoding**. **Encoding** encompasses the actual production of the text. A common method of analyzing encoding in film studies has been termed **auteur studies**. French for "author," the

auteur concept understands film or films as the imaginative work of a single specific artist, usually the director. By examining a number of films made by the same auteur, one can supposedly find common stylistic choices (ways of using the camera, editing, etc.) as well as common themes. Auteur studies became popular during the 1960s, and even now journalists will refer to "the latest Quentin Tarantino film" or "a typical Steven Spielberg picture." The auteur theory argues that it is important to know *who* made a film, because aspects of a filmmaker's personality and social position will affect the meanings encoded within it. Historically, straight white men in Hollywood made most American films; it has only been in recent decades that women, people of color, and/or homosexuals have had greater opportunities to make films.

Thus, during the encoding stage, the maker(s) of a film place meaning, including ideological meaning, into the text. Sometimes this involves specific, overt editorializing: a character gives a speech about a certain issue, or the entire story attempts to teach a moral lesson. However, the encoding of ideological meaning need not be so obvious; it might be done casually, and even unconsciously. Certain choices in creating mood or emotion, or in fostering audience sympathy (or antipathy), will also carry ideological weight. (Recall our earlier discussion of the hypothetical film about a white man and a Native American man.) To many, the process of encoding may initially sound like it applies solely to the production of **propaganda**, in which ideas, opinions, or allegations are presented as incontestable facts in order to sway public opinion toward or away from some cause or point. Texts that are labeled propaganda are usually encoded with overt ideological messages – cultural artifacts like advertisements, public service announcements, and political speeches. Hollywood movies are rarely labeled propaganda, yet they always encode certain ideologies. In other words, while all propaganda conveys ideological messages, not all texts are or should be labeled propaganda. In one contemporary example related directly to Hollywood, some male *Star Wars* fans have objected to the newer films' emphasis on female characters, arguing that the films have become "too ideological" – meaning too feminist for their tastes. What these fans fail to see – or maybe they do – is that the original films themselves were ideological in the ways that they upheld patriarchal values in the first place.

Students sometimes want to ask about a film text, "Did the author really mean it that way?" Such a question assumes that filmic analysis is "reading too much into things" unless one can find definite evidence of a filmmaker's intent. The response to this criticism is that *all* texts encode ideological meanings and messages, but those messages are not always *consciously* embedded in the text by its producer(s). Usually, filmmakers simply want to make a good film, tell an entertaining story, and sell tickets. Yet what is considered good or entertaining is itself going to differ according to cultural and ideological standards. Furthermore, the makers of cultural texts are not somehow removed from or above the society in which they live. They are just as much shaped by the dominant ideology as anyone else – and this can have an unconscious effect on what they put into their work. A white heterosexual middle-class Protestant male is going to have had a certain experience of life that will translate in some fashion into the films he writes or directs, even if he is not aware of it. Similarly, a non-white or female or homosexual filmmaker is going to have had a different life experience that will result in him or her making a different type of film (consciously or unconsciously). Also, a film from the 1980s is recognizably different from a film from the 2010s, not only because of the changes in cars, phones, and



A cultural studies model of encoding and decoding.Producers, texts, and spectators all exist within larger spheres of culture and ideology.

fashions, but also because of the changes in the ideological assumptions about social issues (such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability).

The other stage of making meaning, **decoding**, involves the reception of a text. Once a text is produced, it is distributed to others (to be read, listened to, watched, worn, etc.). Those who use the produced text (that is, the audience) then decode the text's meanings on the basis of their own conscious and unconscious cultural, ideological positioning(s). In other words, producers, texts, and receivers make up a system of communication or meaning production, and that system exists within the larger social spheres of culture and ideology. Like encoding, decoding can be overt or subliminal. At certain times, an audience member will consciously recognize she or he is being "preached to." If an ideological position becomes too strong or apparent, people may easily reject it as propaganda (especially if the ideology being espoused challenges their own). Yet, at other times, the messages may be decoded below one's consciousness. An imbalance that favors men instead of women as the main characters of Hollywood films might be decoded by audiences (without ever stopping to really think about it) as meaning that men are more important (or do more important things) than women.

When producers and readers share aspects of the same culture, texts are more easily decoded or understood. (If you doubt that, try decoding a website written in a language you do not understand!) However, not every reader is going to take (or make) identical meanings from the same text. Depending upon their own cultural positioning, different people may decode texts in different ways – sometimes minutely different, sometimes greatly so. Readings that decode a text in accordance with how it was encoded are said to be **dominant** (or **preferred**) **readings**. On the other side of the spectrum are **oppositional readings**, which actively question the ideological assumptions encoded in a text. Most readings lie somewhere in between these two extremes. **Negotiated readings** resist some aspects of what has been encoded, but accept others. Frequently, members of minority groups have social standpoints that differ from those encoded in mainstream texts, and sometimes this allows such individuals to perform readings that are more regularly negotiated or oppositional.

In most cases, Hollywood filmmakers don't want moviegoers to question the politics of their films. Hollywood promotes its films not as political tracts but as mindless escapism, and an audience member who accepts that tenet will rarely be alert to the cultural and ideological assumptions that the films encode and promote. (One should

remember that ideology is often most effective when it goes unnoticed.) The fact that Hollywood films are generally understood as mere entertainment (without political significance) is itself an ideological assumption, one that denies the importance of image studies and therefore represents white patriarchal capitalist film practice as neutral, natural, and inevitable.

Yet the act of performing a negotiated or oppositional reading is not in and of itself a radical denunciation of dominant cinema, or dominant ideology. (After all, even the oppositional spectator has signaled his or her "approval" of the text by purchasing a ticket to the film.) While such readings may criticize and critique certain ideological notions, they are nonetheless created within the same basic hegemonic framework as are dominant readings. They cannot completely negate the ideological messages found in the text, only resist them. Still, oppositional and negotiated readings can have an effect on the hegemonic negotiation of dominant ideologies throughout time. When a certain oppositional reading strategy grows within a culture to the point that future similar texts are no longer accepted by consumers, then certain ideological assumptions must be altered, and future texts may exhibit those changes. As we shall see throughout this book, the overtly racist and sexist images that were found in many films from previous decades are – in many cases – no longer considered acceptable in the twenty-first century. Nonetheless, white patriarchal capitalism maintains its hegemonic dominance, in both American film and culture-at-large.

Case Study: Two *Lion Kings* (1994 and 2019)

Issues of culture and ideology can be illustrated by examining texts that many people would probably consider totally apolitical and meaningless except as mere entertainment – the Walt Disney Company's animated feature *The Lion King* (1994) and its **CGI** (**computer generated imagery**) remake (2019). Let our discussion begin with the first film. One of the biggest box office successes in motion picture history, *The Lion King* embodies what most people refer to as escapist family entertainment. Since the film was about animals – and cartoon animals at that – the film might seem to have little to say about human relations or ideologies. Yet, since cultural artifacts always reflect in some way the conditions of their production and reception, it is not surprising that *The Lion King* has interesting things to convey about late twentieth-century American culture and its dominant ideology – white patriarchal capitalism. These messages reflect the place and time in which the film was made: the songs are typical 1990s soft rock music, some of the jokes refer to current events, and the storyline evokes concepts popularized in the 1990s by New Age spirituality. Using ideas and concepts that were familiar and reassuring to many Americans probably helped strengthen the film's popularity.

According to our cultural studies model, the **cultural artifact** *The Lion King* is the **text** under consideration, its **producer** is the Walt Disney Company (the animators, performers, and other employees involved in making the film), and the **readers** are all the people who have seen the film since its release in 1994. The Disney filmmakers **encoded** meaning into the cartoon, and every viewer, whether preschooler or senior citizen, works to understand the text by **decoding** it. The film was arguably as popular as it was because it playfully and joyfully encoded dominant hegemonic ideas about white patriarchal capitalism into its form and content: the film's story is a coming-of-age tale in which Simba, a young male lion, learns that his proper place in the world is to be the leader of those around him. Readers who enjoyed the film were probably performing **dominant readings** of the text, as they cheered on the young lion's rise to the throne, defeating his adversaries amid song and dance and colorful spectacle.

Scar's moronic and evil sidekicks are voiced by actors of color, Whoopi Goldberg and Cheech Marin.
The Lion King, copyright © 1993, The Walt Disney Co. Top left, photo: Umberto Adaggi; top right, photo: Michael Ansell.

Yet, while the film was a huge box office hit, there emerged a small but vocal opposition to *The Lion King*, criticizing it on a number of levels. These critics of the film performed **oppositional** and/or **negotiated readings**. For example, some readers were annoyed that the film focused on patriarchal privilege by dramatizing how a son inherits the right to rule over the land from his father. The film literally "nature"-alizes this ideology by making it seem as if this is how real-life animals behave, when in fact female lions play dominant roles in the social structure of actual prides, a detail the film minimizes (and which, by extension, minimizes the importance of females in human society). The female lions in the film are minor "love interest" characters, and females of other species are almost non-existent. One might also note that the film's very title is suggestive of male authority and supremacy – lions and kings are longstanding symbols of patriarchy.

Other oppositional or negotiated readings noted that the first Disney animated feature to be set in Africa had erased all

Uncle Scar preens with an arched eyebrow (a stereotypical signifier of male homosexuality) as he plots against Simba, the "true" and "rightful" ruler of the jungle, in Walt Disney's *The Lion King* (1994). *The Lion King*, copyright © 1993, The Walt Disney Co.

evidence of *human* African culture, and employed white musicians to write supposedly "African" music. (This is a good example of the dominant culture industry **commodifying** and **incorporating** African style while ignoring the politics of race and nation.) Furthermore, Simba and his love interest are both voiced by white actors. Disney did hire a few African American actors as character voices (including the assassinated patriarch), but some viewers felt that these characters came close to replicating derogatory racial stereotypes. For example, although the baboon character Rafiki (voiced by African American actor Robert Guillaume) holds a place of respect in the film as the community's mystic/religious leader, he frequently acts foolish and half-crazed, a variation on old stereotypes used to depict African Americans. Furthermore, two of the villain's dim-witted henchmen were also voiced by people of color (Whoopi Goldberg and Richard "Cheech" Marin), linking their minority status to both stupidity and anti-social actions.

Villainy in the film is also linked to stereotypical traits of male homosexuality. The villainous lion Scar is voiced by Jeremy Irons with a British lisp and an arch cynicism; the Disney animators drew him as weak, limp-wristed, and with a feminine swish in his walk. Other characters refer to him as "weird," and, in his attempt to usurp the throne for himself, he disdains the concept of the heterosexual family. Scar's murder of Simba's father and his attempt to depose the "rightful" heir to the throne posit him as a threat to the "natural order" itself (a fact made literal when Scar's rule results in the environmental devastation of the savanna). It is only with the restoration of Simba to the throne that the land comes back to life, in a dissolve that makes the change seem miraculously immediate. Perhaps most disturbingly, the film connects Scar's implied homosexuality with one of the twentieth century's most heinous evils: his musical solo, complete with goose-stepping minions, is suggestive of a Nazi rally.

Immediately, the question of which reading is "correct" gets raised. Are all these people who were bothered by *The Lion King*, those who performed oppositional readings, getting antagonistic over nothing? Or do they know what is *really* going on in the film, while everybody else (performing dominant readings) is just not "getting it"? A cultural studies theorist would answer that there are no right or wrong readings, but rather different interpretive strategies. There is no single definitive reading of any text. If a reader decodes a certain understanding of *The Lion King*, and can point to specific examples from the film to support his or her reading, then that reading is valid. And in order to make a persuasive defense of one's reading of a film (instead of just saying "I liked it – I don't know why"), one needs to work at finding supporting textual evidence – the specific ways the text uses **film form** to encode meaning. (Note how the oppositional reading just presented pointed out story elements, the actors involved, how the

Pop music superstar Beyoncé starred as the voice of Nala in Disney's CGI remake of *The Lion King* (2019), part of a deliberate effort to include more black talent in the cast. Photo: Tinseltown/Shutterstock.

characters were drawn, the use of music, and even aspects of editing.) This process of analysis need not destroy one's pleasure in the text. Learning to analyze film form and ideology can enrich and deepen one's experience of any given text, and one can become a more literate, and aware, media consumer.

The second *Lion King* film, released twenty-five years later reveals interesting things about its era, just as the first film did; for example, its ecological message seems even stronger in the current era of climate change awareness. The new *Lion King* also demonstrates the active hegemonic negotiation of some of the first film's ideological messages. It tries to address some of the criticisms of the first film vis-à-vis race by hiring far more African American actors and singers to voice the lead roles (including Donald Glover and Beyoncé). The familiar score is still by Elton John and Tim Rice, but Disney brought in Pharrell Williams to produce some of it. The female characters do more in this remake. Beyoncé's Nala has a new song all to herself. Simba's mother Sarabi (Alfre Woodard) chases away hyenas (off screen) near the start of the film, and she and the female members of the pride fight ferociously to drive off the hyenas at the end. The leader of the hyenas (Shenzi) in the new version is also a much stronger female character. Perhaps the most interesting thing about the new film is the way its photo-realistic CGI animation (what some people mistakenly refer to as "live action") tones down the stereotypes present in the first version. Scar (Chiweitel Ejiofor) no longer has swishy gay connotations; in fact, he wants to marry Simba's mother. There is no longer a suggestion of a Nazi rally in his big number, "Be Prepared." Similarly, other characters who also had vaguely stereotypical behaviors in the first film, are herein treated with more reverence (Rafiki) and menace (the hyenas). Still, even with these "corrections" to characters some audiences and critics found stereotypical, the new film maintains the hegemony of patriarchal rule, by retelling the central story of a father passing his power down to his son. This is often what happens with remakes in Hollywood; instead of telling new stories (as Disney did in films like *Frozen* [2013] and *Moana* [2016]), remakes frequently make concessions to some aspects of diversity even as they also retain central ideological messages from the original film, an excellent example of hegemonic negotiation.

This book hopes to provide its readers with the tools and encouragement to become active decoders – to help students develop the skills needed to examine media texts for their social, cultural, and ideological assumptions. Throughout this book, specific films will be decoded from divergent spectator positions, pointing out how the context of social and cultural history can and does influence different reading protocols. Furthermore, one will see that judging textual images as merely "positive" or "negative" vastly oversimplifies the many complex ways that cultural texts can be and are understood in relation to the "real world." This textbook itself is part of American culture, and thus meshes in its own way with the dominant and resistant ideologies within which it was forged. Its ultimate aim is not to raise its readers somehow out of ideology (an impossible task), but to make its readers aware of the ideological assumptions that constantly circulate through American culture, and especially through its films.

Questions for Discussion

1 What labels do you apply to your own identity? What labels do other people apply to you? Ultimately, who has the right to name or label you?
2 Can you think of other cultural artifacts (like rap music or tattoos) that have been developed in a specific subculture and then **incorporated** into dominant culture? How was the artifact changed when it went mainstream?
3 What is your own ideological positioning? What are some of the ideologies you may have internalized? Do any of them clash with your own self-identity?

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Chapter 2

THE STRUCTURE AND HISTORY OF HOLLYWOOD FILMMAKING

This chapter examines what Hollywood film is and how it developed. Hollywood film can be identified by a specific set of formal and stylistic structures as well as by a set of historical, industrial, and economic determinants. These underlying structures affect how Hollywood films represent America, and how they conceive of issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability. Because Hollywood film is so prevalent in American culture (and world culture), many people think that the way Hollywood makes movies is the only way to do so – that there are no other possible methods for making films. However, there are many types of movies and many different ways to make them. As we shall see throughout this book, these other, non-Hollywood movies often present different **representations** of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability than do Hollywood films, partly due to the (comparatively) greater opportunities for women, people of color, homosexuals, and differently abled individuals that exist outside the Hollywood system. Both Hollywood and non-Hollywood films have evolved since the beginning of the twentieth century, in conjunction with the broader social, political, and cultural events of American history. This chapter broadly addresses those concerns, and will lay the basis for future chapters' more detailed analyses of how these issues relate to specific cinematic representations of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability.

Hollywood vs. Independent Film

Hollywood film refers to movies made and released by a handful of filmmaking companies located in and around Hollywood, California. The names of most of these companies – Universal, MGM, 20th Century-Fox, Paramount, Warner Brothers, etc. – have been recognized as cinematic brand names around the world since the 1920s. These companies have produced and distributed tens of thousands of films, films that

America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies,
Third Edition. Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin.

Companion website: www.wiley.com/go/Benshoff/Americaonfilm3e

have found long-term success at the box office, and often make it seem (especially in other countries) that Hollywood film *is* American film. Hollywood's global predominance obscures its historical development, and in effect works to naturalize the structure and style of its films. This is itself another example of ideology working to erase the socially constructed nature of a specific cultural institution: Hollywood gains strength and power by making its form and practice seem to be basic common sense. This tends to hide the fact that Hollywood form and practice developed over time in response to specific socio-political factors, and it also works to erase awareness that there are *other* ways of making (and understanding) film as a cultural artifact.

Hollywood films so dominate American theaters (as well as cable programming schedules and streaming services) that US citizens have relatively little access to other types of films – films often made by minority filmmakers that tell stories and express viewpoints and that are ignored or underexplored in Hollywood movies. These non-Hollywood films are sometimes broadly referred to as **independent films**. For example, **avant-garde** or **experimental films** explore the multiple formal possibilities of cinema (not just storytelling), and they are often tied to specific movements in the other arts, such as Surrealism. **Documentaries** are films that use actual events as their raw material – they are usually made without actors or fictional stories, and attempt to convey these events as realistically as possible. (For many of the groups discussed in this book, documentary films were one of the first ways that minority filmmakers could and did challenge Hollywood stereotypes and misrepresentations.) Americans classify films made outside the United States as **foreign films**. They can be fictional films that look more or less like Hollywood films, or they can be avant-garde or documentary films. Finally, the term "independent film" also describes fictional feature films that are made in America, but outside the usual Hollywood channels. Broadly speaking, independent, foreign, avant-garde, and documentary films tend to represent a broader spectrum of humanity than do Hollywood films, which tend to be made and sold as merely "entertainment."

Sometimes, to audiences weaned solely on Hollywood films, these other types of films can seem weird, boring, or badly made. If avant-garde films (for example) were trying to play by the rules of Hollywood film, such judgments might have merit, but these films have consciously decided to use other rules. These types of films make formal choices (in mise-en-scène, montage, sound, and narrative design) that often differ vastly from those used in Hollywood films. Most of these films are also produced in different ways than are Hollywood films – they can be funded and filmed by a collective, for example, or by one individual working on his or her own project over a number of years. Unlike Hollywood filmmaking, sometimes these types of films are even made without the intention of turning a profit. Avant-garde and experimental films usually only play at museums, or in film classes at universities. Documentaries might play on television or at film festivals, or occasionally be screened at independent or **art-house theaters**, theaters usually located in urban areas that specialize in off-beat, non-Hollywood film fare. Currently, specialized streaming services or websites are good resources for finding such work online.

Experimental films, documentaries, and independent fictional films are an important part of American film history and culture, even though they are quite frequently a lesser-known part. As might be expected, these types of films often differ from Hollywood films in the ways that they depict issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability (as well as a host of other topics that are often considered taboo by Hollywood filmmakers). However,

while one may in practice contrast fictional Hollywood film with fictional independent film, the distinction between these two terms is not always so clear cut. Frequently there are similarities and connections between independent films and Hollywood. Sometimes successful independent filmmakers go on to sign deals with the major Hollywood companies, and many Hollywood employees dabble in independent filmmaking. A popular independent film such as Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1991) may seem somewhat different from most Hollywood films, but it is much closer to a Hollywood film (in both subject matter and style) than most experimental films. By the start of the twenty-first century, the line between independent and Hollywood film became even more blurred, with most of the major Hollywood film companies also releasing smaller "independent" films under labels like Focus Features (a division of Universal) or Fox Searchlight.

For the purposes of this book, Hollywood and independent film practice might best be understood as the end points of a continuum of American fictional film production, and not as an either/or binary. One of the best ways to distinguish between independent and Hollywood films is to see *where* the film is playing. If it is playing on 3,000 screens in America at once, at every multiplex across the nation, it is probably a Hollywood film. If it is playing at one theater in selected large cities, it is probably an independent film. Because Hollywood films reach far wider audiences than do most independent films (much less avant-garde films or documentaries), it might be said that they have a greater ideological impact on American culture (and arguably, the world). And although Hollywood film is not as popular a medium as it once was (having been surpassed by television and even now competing with video games and the Internet), Hollywood film remains a very powerful global influence. Indeed, most of the stylistic choices developed by the Hollywood studios during the first half of the twentieth century have strongly influenced the "rules" of how TV shows and computer games make meaning. As we hope to show, many of Hollywood's representational traditions have also carried over from its classical period to the present. The rest of this chapter examines how the style, business, and history of Hollywood have structured and continue to structure cinematic meaning, specifically the various meanings of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability.

The Style of Hollywood Cinema

Over the first few decades of the twentieth century, Hollywood filmmakers developed a set of formal and stylistic conventions that came to be known as the **classical Hollywood style**. (Recall that film **form** refers to specific cinematic elements such as mise-en-scène and editing; the term **style** refers to a specific way in which those formal elements are arranged.) Classical Hollywood style is not rigid and absolute – slight variations can be found in countless Hollywood films – but this way of cinematically telling stories is basically the same today as it was in the 1930s. And because Hollywood's business practices have dominated both American and global cinema, classical Hollywood style is often considered the standard or "correct" way to make fictional films.

The main objective of classical Hollywood style is to "spoon feed" story information to the spectator, thus keeping everything clearly understood by the audience. Hollywood filmmakers believe that that if some plot point or stylistic maneuver is too different or

challenging, the audience will become disoriented, dislike the movie, tell their friends not to see it, or even demand their money back. Classical Hollywood style is sometimes referred to as the **invisible style**, because it does not call attention to itself as even being a style. It permits the viewer to stay emotionally enmeshed in a film's story and characters, instead of being distracted by obvious formal devices (or thinking too much about the ideological meanings of the text). Indeed, when classical Hollywood style is working at its best, audiences are barely aware that any formal choices are being made at all: most untrained spectators don't consciously notice the lighting of the sets or the edits between shots. Obscuring the formal decisions not only keeps the viewer centered rather unthinkingly on following the story, but also limits the viewer's choice in what she or he is meant to find important. Say, for example, a film shows a white business tycoon praising American capitalism while his black butler brings him a mint julep. A viewer might be interested in learning the butler's reaction to the tycoon's statement. However, if the camera does not keep the butler in focus, or never cuts to show the butler's reaction, then it becomes impossible to see what his reaction might be. In helping to keep things understandable, Hollywood's invisible style subtly eliminates complexity, and in this example, implicitly makes the white tycoon more important than his butler.

All of the formal aspects of cinema under the classical Hollywood style work to keep the story clear and characters simple and understandable. Lighting, color, camera position, and other aspects of mise-en-scène consistently help the audience remain engaged with the story. The most important details are the ones most prominently lit, kept in focus, and framed in close-up shots. Hollywood films also employ various rules of **continuity editing**, a system of editing in which each shot follows easily and logically from the one before. If a person looks over at something, the next shot is of that something; if a person walks out of a room through a door, the next shot is of that same person coming through the door into a new room. Sound design in Hollywood films also keeps audiences aware of the story's key points, often by making the main characters' dialog louder than the noise of the crowd around them. And the Hollywood film score is there to tell an audience exactly how they are supposed to feel about any given scene.

Style is thus subordinated to story in classical Hollywood style. The way Hollywood films structure their stories is referred to as **(classical) Hollywood narrative form**. Hollywood stories usually have a **linear narrative** – they have a beginning, middle, and an end, and story events follow one another chronologically. (Flashbacks are an exception to this format, but they are always clearly marked – often with a shimmering dissolve – so as not to confuse the viewer.) Hollywood narrative form usually centers on a singular character or **protagonist**, commonly referred to as the hero. Sometimes the protagonist might be a family or a small group of people. The narrative is driven by carefully and clearly laying out the goals and desires of the protagonist – the desire to get home in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) or to kill the shark in *Jaws* (1975). Obstacles to this desire are created, usually by a villainous force or person, called the **antagonist** (the wicked witch, the shark). Hollywood narrative also usually pairs the protagonist with a **love interest**, who either accompanies the main character in reaching the goal, or functions *as* the protagonist's goal.

The differences between heroes and villains in Hollywood film are obvious and simplified. Sometimes, as in old-fashioned Westerns, the good guys even wear white hats while the villains wear black. Even when dealing with complex social issues, Hollywood usually

reduces them to matters of personal character: in Hollywood films there are rarely corrupt institutions, merely corrupt people. In seeking to make conflicts as basic and uncomplicated as possible, the antagonist is often "pure evil" and not the bearer of his or her own legitimate world view. Protagonists and antagonists are not the only ones simplified in a Hollywood film, as other roles are also represented by quickly understood stock characters such as the love interest, the best friend, or the comic relief. Such "instant characterization" often draws upon pre-existing social and cultural **stereotypes**. Some may seem benign, like villains wearing black. Others, like repeatedly casting Asians as mysterious mobsters, or Hispanics as gang members, can have vast effects on how those identified as Asian or Hispanic are treated outside the movie house.

In the linear design of Hollywood narrative form, each complication in the attempt to reach the protagonist's goal leads to yet another complication. These twists and turns escalate toward the **climax**, the most intense point of conflict, wherein the antagonist is defeated by the protagonist. In the final moments of the film, all the complications are resolved, and all questions that had been posed during the film are answered. This is known as **closure**. Hollywood's use of the **happy ending**, a specific form of closure, ties up all of the story's loose ends and frequently includes the protagonist and the love interest uniting as a romantic/sexual couple. Even when the couple is not together at the end of the film (as in *Titanic* [1997]), the narrative is designed to make that separation acceptable to the audience. In *Titanic*, the ending may be sad, but the mystery of the diamond necklace has been resolved, and the film suggests that Jack and Rose will reunite in heaven. Closure is a potent narrative tool in managing ideological conflict, because closure makes it seem as if all problems have been solved. Any actual ideological issues or social strife that may have been raised by a film are allegedly resolved by narrative closure, and thus there is no longer any need for spectators to think about them. Closure in Hollywood film tends to reaffirm the status quo of American society.

Since the ideological status quo of American society is **white patriarchal capitalism**, it should come as no surprise that most Hollywood films (throughout its history and still today) encode white patriarchal capitalism as central and desirable via both Hollywood narrative form and the invisible style. First, the protagonist of most Hollywood films is constructed as a straight white male seeking wealth or power. He emerges victorious at the end of the film, proving his inherent superiority over those who challenged him. In consistently drawing audience attention to and celebrating his acts, the invisible style reinforces his "natural" abilities while not allowing the audience to think about the often far-fetched qualities of those heroics. Since the white male commands the most narrative attention, the (usually white) female love interest is relegated to a minor or supporting part. Whereas the male is defined by his actions, job, and/or principles, the heroine is defined chiefly by her beauty and/or sex appeal. Their romance affirms patriarchal heterosexuality as well as the desirability of same-race coupling. If homosexuals or people of color appear in the film at all, they might be associated with the villains or relegated to smaller supporting parts, in effect supporting the dominance of the white male hero and his female love interest.

Imagine any of the "Indiana Jones" movies as typical of this formula. Our hero or protagonist, Professor Jones, is a straight white man of charm, wit, intelligence, and social standing. He is opposed by evil male super-criminals or antagonists who are out to destroy or dominate the world. Frequently the villain is from another country or is non-white: in

Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom (1984), Professor Jones must first battle double-crossing Asian gangsters and then face off against a corrupt cult of Indians who enslave children and practice human sacrifice. Good and evil are thus reduced to simplified and racialized stereotypes: white male hero versus villains of color. In this particular film, Professor Jones is accompanied on his adventures by a small Asian boy who idolizes him, and a dizzy blonde heroine whose screaming distress is meant to be a running gag throughout the film. The film proceeds in a linear manner through a series of exciting twists and turns (action-filled set pieces) until the climax, when Jones saves the woman and the child, destroys the Indian temple, and restores harmony to the land. The closure of the film sets up a symbolic nuclear family, with white man as heroic patriarch, woman as helpmate and romantic/sexual object, and the Third World quite literally represented as a child under

In *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984), the white male hero protects both his white love interest and Third World children from the villainy of an evil Asian cult. In this still, he is figured as a symbolic father of all the other characters.
Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom, copyright © 1984, Paramount.

their protection. Among the film's basic ideological messages are that straight white men can do anything, that women are hysterical nuisances, and that non-white people are either evil or childlike.

But haven't Hollywood representations of women and minorities changed over the years? Haven't the formulas been adapted to be less sexist and racist? Yes and no. There are now Hollywood films made in which the hero is not white, not male, or (more recently) not heterosexual. Recent films like *Wonder Woman* (2017), *Black Panther* (2018), and *Captain Marvel* (2019) have been understood by filmmakers and audiences alike as real game changers on that front. And Hollywood has always made a type of film that features female protagonists, the so-called **woman's film** or **chick flick** (discussed more fully in later chapters), but these stories usually emphasize the female character's desire for a man, and thus reinforce patriarchy in their own way. It is true that black and Hispanic actors in Hollywood have made gains in the last few decades and now regularly play the hero part in a handful of movies every year. But even then, these are hegemonic negotiations within the dominant white patriarchal ideology and not inversions of it: most African American protagonists are still male, and most female protagonists are still white. The very few homosexual protagonists in recent Hollywood film are usually male *and* white. While the real world is comprised of people of all different races, genders, classes, sexualities, and physical abilities, the world depicted in Hollywood film usually posits straight white men as central and heroic, and everyone else as peripheral (or even non-existent).

The drive for simplicity and obviousness in the classical Hollywood style has other implications for Hollywood narrative form. Not only are Hollywood storylines excessively linear, using simplified stock characters engaged in clear-cut struggles ending in closure, but Hollywood often consciously reuses popular (that is, already understood) storylines and characters. The proliferation of remakes and sequels guarantees that most audiences are already familiar with many main characters and basic narrative situations. The *Saw* and *Paranormal Activity* film franchises, for example, rely on audience knowledge not only of the previous films in the series, but also of the specific formal elements that go into making a scary movie. Many Hollywood films are thus identifiable by their **genre**, a term that this book uses to refer to a specific type of fictional Hollywood film such as the horror film, the Western, the war movie, the musical, or the gangster film. As will be explored in future chapters, racial and ethnic markers are activated within genres in unique and interesting ways. For example, Americans of Italian descent (and more recently Americans of African heritage) have been closely tied to the gangster film, while the representation of Native Americans in Hollywood film is almost exclusively tied to the Western.

A genre can be identified by its surface structure or **iconography** – what the genre looks and sounds like. (The iconography of the **horror film** might include monsters and mad scientists, blood and gore, dark woods at night, screams, and so forth.) Genres can also be defined by their deeper ideological concerns, sometimes referred to as their **thematic myth**. Genres are popular with audiences when these thematic myths in some way relate to current social concerns, and as such, genres function as a sort of feedback loop between filmgoers and filmmakers. Certain genres make money and flourish when their specific thematic myth correlates to something the public is interested in or wants (or needs) to see dramatized. Other genres "die" when their thematic myths are no longer thought valid within the

ever-changing spheres of history and culture. For example, the musical was once a staple of Hollywood filmmaking, but it grew generally unpopular after the 1960s. Today, many audiences reject the classical genre's convention of characters spontaneously breaking into song and dance, and our cynical age sees their simple thematic messages of love and harmony as outmoded. Contemporary musicals that are successful tend to be either animated films for kids (like *Frozen* [2013] or *Trolls* [2016]) or live-action Broadway adaptations that explore darker thematic material (such as *Chicago* [2002] or *Les Misérables* [2012]).

Thus, the popularity (or unpopularity) of certain genres can tell the film historian interesting things about the culture that produced them. Genre films reflect social concerns, but only rarely do they challenge the underlying ideological biases of Hollywood narrative form itself. (Most genre films, being Hollywood films, still feature straight white able-bodied male protagonists, while women and people of color are relegated to peripheral roles.) Rather, popular Hollywood genres often attempt to shore up the dominant ideology by repeating over and over again certain types of stories that seem to resolve social tensions. For example, the horror film's emphasis on the threat posed to "normality" by the monstrous reinforces social ideas about what is considered normal. Not surprisingly, in classical Hollywood horror films, "normality" is conventionally represented by middle-to-upper-class, white, heterosexual, and able-bodied couples and patriarchal institutions. Monsters and villains, on the other hand, are often coded as non-white, non-patriarchal, non-capitalist, and/or differently abled.

The Business of Hollywood

By examining the structure of Hollywood filmmaking, and exploring when and why certain films were popular with American audiences, one can gain insight into the changing ideological currents of twentieth- and early twenty-first-century America. Yet one must also take into consideration the specific economic and industrial conditions that determine how Hollywood produces its films. Indeed, Hollywood must be understood not just as a set of formal and stylistic structures, but also as an industry that produces certain types of fictional films *for profit*. As such, Hollywood is an excellent example of capitalism at work. Hollywood companies make and sell films that they think people want to see (that is, films that in some way reflect the dominant ideology), and Hollywood's business practices use every tool at their disposal to lessen competition, increase buyer demand, and reduce the cost of production. Though Hollywood films are sometimes discussed as "art" by critics and some filmmakers, a Hollywood film's merit is chiefly judged by its box office revenues. Even when awards are given for artistic achievement, these too are drawn into a film's economic evaluation – winning a Best Picture Oscar will usually boost a film's profits. (There are exceptions: Best Picture Winners *The Hurt Locker* [2008] and *Moonlight* [2016] are among the least seen Oscar-winners, ostensibly because of their subject matter.)

Since the earliest days of cinema, film as an industry has been divided into three main components: **production**, **distribution,** and **exhibition**. **Production** involves the actual making of a film: the financing, writing, shooting, editing, etc. **Distribution** refers to the shipping of copies (or prints and now digital files) of the finished film to various

theaters (or more recently, to digital streaming systems). The theaters where the film is actually projected to audiences make up the third arm, or **exhibition**. Cable television sales, Blu-ray purchases, access via Netflix, etc. also comprise film exhibition. Hollywood producers have always been highly dependent upon the distribution and exhibition arms of the business: no matter how many films you make, or how high-quality they are, if no one ships them or shows them, then they cannot make any money. Hollywood companies have thus consistently worked to maintain close ties with distribution networks and theaters. One method of doing this is called **vertical integration**, in which one parent company oversees the business of all three branches. This was the strategy adopted by the major studios in the first half of the twentieth century, and it helped to ensure that American theaters were almost exclusively dominated by Hollywood film during that period.

Another strategy that helped Hollywood come to dominate the US film industry was the creation of an **oligopoly**, a state of business affairs in which a few companies control an entire industry. (An oligopoly is thus very similar to a **monopoly**, wherein *one* company controls an entire industry.) In an oligopoly, several large companies agree to work together, keeping potential competitors weak or driving them out of business altogether. In the case of film in America, the Hollywood oligopolies worked throughout the twentieth century, and continue to work, to keep foreign and independent American films marginalized. This has had a specific effect on minority filmmakers. Excluded from the Hollywood studios, independent films made by non-white, non-patriarchal, and/or non-capitalist people often had trouble being distributed and exhibited. Furthermore, Hollywood's control of production, distribution, and exhibition has not been limited to the United States alone. Motion pictures have been one of America's leading exports for at least a century, and Hollywood maximizes its profits by distributing its films globally. Since Hollywood films usually make back their cost during domestic release, most of the money earned from foreign exhibition is pure profit. Consequently, Hollywood films can offer foreign theater owners their films at a discount – a price calculatedly lower than the cost of films made locally in their native country. This makes it very difficult for other countries to support their own film industries.

As such, the Hollywood system is an example not just of industrial capitalism but also of **cultural imperialism**, the promotion and imposition of ideals and ideologies throughout the world via cultural means**. Imperialism** means one country dominating another through force and economic control, but in cultural imperialism, one nation doesn't conquer another with force, but rather overwhelms it with cultural products and the ideologies contained within them. People around the world are inundated with American ways of viewing life when they go to the movies, and often they have little or no access to films made by people of their own nationality. Furthermore, since Hollywood films dominate the world, Hollywood *style* tends to define film practice for all filmmakers around the world, since Hollywood style is what most people are accustomed to seeing and understanding. Many filmmakers in other countries, having grown up themselves watching Hollywood films, make pictures that duplicate the Hollywood style, again reinforcing its dominance.

As the following history hopes to show, various restructurings of Hollywood's business practices have affected the ability of other types of films (and their different representations of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability) to get made and to find audiences.

Yet, although new technologies and legal decisions have occasionally challenged and disrupted the business strategies of the Hollywood oligopoly, its dominance has not changed very much in a century. Most of the major companies that founded the Hollywood industry are still around: Paramount, Warner Brothers, Universal, Columbia, and 20th Century-Fox (which was recently acquired by Disney). If anything, these companies have grown stronger and more diversified, becoming global corporate entities. The main purpose of Hollywood's business practices – to keep profits high and inhibit competition by maintaining centralized control over the industry – has been upheld. Hollywood film, with its formulas and genres that uphold white patriarchal capitalism, affects not just people in America, but people around the globe.

The History of Hollywood: The Movies Begin

The United States did not always dominate the international film industry, and a number of people around the globe could arguably take credit for inventing motion pictures at the end of the nineteenth century. In America, **Thomas Edison**'s company first demonstrated moving images in 1894 through a mechanical peep-hole device, the **kinetoscope.** In France, the **Lumière Brothers** first projected their moving pictures upon a screen in 1895, giving birth to cinema as a shared social phenomenon for paying audiences. The Lumières' method of exhibition soon became the standard worldwide, and French filmmakers often led the way in cinema's early years. French film companies

Arcades filled with Thomas Edison's Kinetoscopes, such as this one in New York City, were a popular early space for exhibiting motion pictures. Courtesy of the Museum of the City of New York, The Byron Collection.

such as Pathé became the first to accomplish vertical integration, long before the Hollywood studios even existed.

The first movies were short travelogs, documentaries, and "trick" films shown at traveling tent shows and vaudeville theaters. As the novelty of seeing photographs brought to life faded, filmmakers moved to telling fictional stories, first in one-reel shorts (which lasted about 5–10 minutes) and then in two-reel and four-reel short features. Films grew so popular that a wave of **nickelodeons**, small store-front theaters devoted solely to showing films, opened their doors across the United States. During this period, American filmmakers began refining the methods of storytelling, methods that eventually became Hollywood's invisible style. Since films were silent during this period, filmmakers had to learn how to emphasize key narrative points without the use of sound. Often this involved exaggerated gestures by the actors, but filmmakers also learned how to communicate through the choice of camera placement, lighting, focus, and editing. Simultaneously, audiences learned and accepted what these choices meant. By the 1910s, fictional films that told melodramatic or sensationalistic stories over the course of one of more hours were becoming the norm.

In the United States, Hollywood was incorporated as a town in 1911 and, for a number of reasons, quickly became the center for the nation's film production. Southern California provided almost year-round sunny weather (needed to illuminate early cinematography). The diversity of terrain in and around Los Angeles (beaches, mountains, forests, and deserts) allowed many different locations for filming. In the 1910s, Los Angeles was still a relatively small town and film companies could buy land cheaply to build their mammoth studios. Growing unionization in all US industries had not made a significant impact in Los Angeles yet, and the availability of cheap labor also drew filmmakers to Hollywood. These pioneering filmmakers were also seeking an escape from Thomas Edison's east-coast patent lawyers, who wanted them to pay royalties.

When American filmmaking was still a small cottage industry, individuals from various minority groups had more opportunity to move into the business. While a consortium of **WASP** (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) males and their lawyers were trying to control the American film industry, women and some racial/ethnic minorities were able to carve out a niche. Many pioneering Hollywood film businesses were started by recent European Jewish immigrants such as Samuel Goldwyn, Adolph Zukor, and Carl Laemmle. However, as film in America became a bigger and bigger business, more controlled by companies rather than individuals, the opportunities for minorities behind the camera dwindled. Laemmle, Zukor, and others of Jewish descent were able to maintain their power, but people of color were rarely permitted any creative control behind the scenes in Hollywood. Increasingly, the producing and directing of motion pictures was regarded as man's work, and women were pushed aside. American women did not even have the right to vote prior to 1920, and non-white people were rarely permitted into white social spheres or business concerns during these decades.

During the 1910s, cinema was commonly regarded in the United States as entertainment for immigrants and the working class. Some middle-to-upper-class white Americans felt that cinema was potentially a disturbing social institution that promoted "dangerous" ideas to the lower classes, and thus many local and state censorship boards began to monitor the content of films. (In 1915, the Supreme Court ruled that cinema was not an art form protected as free speech, but simply a business and therefore open to regulation.)

The Comet Theatre in New York City was a typical nickelodeon; note the price of admission and the various short films advertised. Courtesy of the Quigley Photographic Archive, Georgetown University Library.

The film industry thus felt pressure to become more "respectable," a euphemism for affirming the social ideals of the era's white patriarchy. The industry also wanted to capture the more lucrative middle-class audience. One of the ways it did this was by replacing nickelodeons with opulent theaters known as **movie palaces**. It was not unusual for movie palaces to have marble foyers, crystal chandeliers, and curtained boxes. Able to seat thousands of patrons at once, the palaces helped elevate the cultural status of film to something closer to that of live theater.

During the 1910s and 1920s, studios also developed the concept of the **movie star** (an actor or actress the public recognizes and likes), realizing that a star's fans would pay to see any of the star's films. Stars are thus used to sell films, giving them a kind of brand-name appeal. Often stars were (and still are) associated with a specific type of role or a stereotypical **persona**. **Charlie Chaplin**'s beloved "Little Tramp" character was a poor but

This interior shot of the Majestic Theatre shows the size and opulence of a typical movie palace. Courtesy of the Quigley Photographic Archive, Georgetown University Library.

optimistic everyman figure, while **Lillian Gish** and **Mary Pickford** usually played helpless ingénues, dependent upon swashbuckling heroes like Douglas Fairbanks to save them. In this way, the Hollywood star system (in conjunction with the form of Hollywood narrative itself) endorsed middle-class American values of strong physically active men and passive women, heterosexual romance, and the centrality of **whiteness**. At its most basic level, the star system is a caste system, creating a class of individuals who supposedly shine brighter than the rest of us, and, as the word "star" suggests, glitter in the night sky *above* us. Indeed, the terms "movie god," "movie goddess," and "Hollywood royalty" have been part of the Hollywood publicity machine for many years. The star system thus elevates some human beings above others, and constructs specific ideals of beauty, appropriate gender behavior, skin color, class, sexuality, and so forth.

The Classical Hollywood Cinema

By the 1920s (sometimes known as the Golden Age of Silent Cinema), Hollywood had streamlined its production, distribution, and exhibition practices, and was regularly exhibiting its opulent entertainments in lush movie palaces attended by middle- and upper-class patrons. In 1927, sound was added to the silent movie, and by the 1930s, Hollywood had entered what many historians now call its classical phase. During this period of **classical Hollywood cinema** (roughly the 1930s to the 1950s), Hollywood developed a standardized product that employed classical Hollywood narrative form and the invisible style. Film production occurred mostly under the oligopolistic control of eight Hollywood companies. The so-called **Big 5** or the **major studios** (Warner Brothers, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer [MGM], 20th Century-Fox, RKO, and Paramount) were each vertically integrated, while the **Little 3** or **minor studios** (Columbia, Universal, and United Artists) did not own their own theaters and had fewer assets with which to produce the lush expensive movies for which the Big 5 were famous. At the bottom of the economic ladder in Hollywood were the **Poverty Row studios** (such as Monogram, Mascot, and Producers Releasing Corporation), studios that made cheap genre films and serials that were often used by exhibitors to fill out the second half of a double feature.

Most of these Hollywood companies were centralized around their own production facilities, referred to as **movie studios**. A Hollywood movie studio housed any number of large sound stages, on which sets could be built and torn down as needed, so that multiple films could be shot simultaneously. Most studios included a number of permanent (or standing) sets, such as a Western town, an urban street, a European village, a jungle, etc., that could be used repeatedly in different films. The studios also had large lists of actors, directors, camera operators, editors, screenwriters, musicians, costumers, set designers, and makeup artists under contract. Studios also employed janitors, bookkeepers, electricians, carpenters, and security guards. The major Hollywood studios even had commissaries, hospitals, and their own fire departments. Without exception, white men held most of the creative and executive positions at the studios, while people of color and women – if they were hired at all – were usually relegated to manual labor or assistant-type jobs.

The **studio system** of motion picture production increasingly forced workers to specialize in certain areas. While early filmmakers did multiple tasks (wrote the scripts, directed the actors, worked the camera, and edited the film), classical Hollywood movie studios divided these jobs into various departments. This kept any individual, other than the (straight, white, male) heads of the studios themselves, from having too much control over the films being made, and it streamlined the filmmaking process. Much like Henry Ford's assembly-line production of automobiles, studio employees figuratively stood at certain places on a filmmaking conveyor belt, contributing their own small area of expertise to the product as it rolled smoothly down the line toward completion. During its classical period, the Hollywood industry produced about 500 films a year, or about a film per week per studio. (Today's Hollywood output is considerably less.)

Some American movies were made independently of these companies during the classical period, but it was difficult to get these films distributed or exhibited without making a deal with one of the major Hollywood studios. Smaller independent filmmaking companies that produced Hollywood-type films (examples of which would include the Walt

During Hollywood's classical era, the studios (such as Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer) were huge industrial complexes that filled several city blocks. Unidentified publicity photo, authors' personal collection.

Disney Company and the Samuel Goldwyn Company) often distributed their work through one of the Big 5 or Little 3. Other independent filmmakers produced work that the Hollywood majors had little interest in distributing. For example, independently produced films starring African Americans or all-Yiddish casts were produced during Hollywood's classical period, but these films never reached wide audiences outside of specific ethnic movie houses. For many years these films were ignored or dismissed by film historians, but in the last 40 years or so, film scholars have begun to study them in more detail. One thing that is immediately apparent about many of these independent films is that they allowed people of color to be in control behind the camera, representing issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability in different ways than did Hollywood.

The studio system was established to minimize costs and reduce possible financial liabilities – and the risk of financial ruin ran high during the **Great Depression** (1929 until the start of World War II). Hollywood maintained profitability in the first few years after the stock market collapsed through audience interest in the new sound technology. But by 1932, all of the major studios had begun to feel the effects of the country's economic despair. Ticket sales began to dwindle, and by 1933 every studio (except powerhouse MGM) had