## Chapter 1 - Film

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Cinema, which was perhaps the single most popular medium of the twentieth century, has faced growing competition in the twenty-first from online media. Digital technologies offer forms of entertainment that differ fundamentally from the feature film, from social networks to fifteen-second videos. They have also transformed the movie business in both obvious and subtle ways. These include filming with digital cameras instead of celluloid ones and projecting films from digital files stored on hard drives rather than from 35mm reels. These technological shifts open up new possibilities, but have not dramatically changed the look of films in most cases. By contrast, the ability to stream films without leaving home poses a threat to the financial health of movie theaters. Yet this concern is not new, but rather dates back to the widespread introduction of television in the 1950s. Despite the availability of new forms of audiovisual entertainment, films have continued to play a major role in our routines and emotional lives.

Despite significant changes, many aspects of the movie business also continue to be shaped by long-established practices. Understanding its history can help us understand why change in the film industry can be so slow, despite many audience members calling for greater diversity in front of and behind the camera. To give a sense of the current situation, a 2020 study found that of the 100 top-grossing films released in 2019, less than five percent of the characters were Latinx or Hispanic ([Annenberg Inclusion Initiative](https://web.archive.org/web/20210101110625/https:/assets.uscannenberg.org/docs/aii-inequality_1300_popular_films_09-08-2020.pdf) 2). When top-grossing films from 2007 to 2019 were examined, under four percent of directors were Latinx or Hispanic (Annenberg Inclusion Initiative 4). In 2019, the US population was 18.5 percent Latinx ([United States Census Bureau](https://web.archive.org/web/20210101080209/https:/www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/RHI725219)). Top-grossing films would need to include three and a half times more Latinx characters than they currently do to accurately represent the US population.

This chapter seeks to shed light on the factors behind those numbers. It will provide you with basic tools developed by the academic area of film studies to make sense of multiple dimensions of the movies, including audiovisual style, the economics and technology of the industry, and cinema as a social experience.

Writing in film studies often overlaps with everyday conversations about cinema, including the comments we make about films to friends and family or online, reviews by influential critics, and industry buzz in newspapers, magazines, television, and social media. Yet it also differs from these conversations in important ways. Our ordinary discussions of films tend to focus on story, stars, and directors. We often consider first how the characters and events depicted in a movie make us feel and whether or not we find them believable. We might also think about the physical attributes or acting abilities of its performers and how the film fits with our understanding of its director’s personal style based on their other work. Without neglecting story, stars, or directors, the academic study of film explores dimensions of cinema that may be less high-profile, but nevertheless are key for understanding why movies look and sound the way they do and how they affect us.

When considering individual films, film studies devotes as much attention to **film style** (visual and audio choices) as to story. It also looks at the impact of all aspects of the film industry—business practices, technology, and audience experiences—rather focusing on the most prominent film industry workers, namely stars and directors. While many but not all film scholars accept the widespread idea that movies reflect their directors’ personal vision, taking a broader view of cinema makes it clear that this vision is not the final word on a film’s meaning and impact. Most films would never be successfully made and screened without the labor of hundreds of people on both the business side and the creative side. And without the engagement of critics and audiences, who may find significance in a film in ways that differ from or even go against the creators’ intentions, the film would not take on a meaningful existence in a broader world.

### Film Style

In paying attention to style, film studies seeks to grasp what is unique about the medium. Movies can and often do take their plots from novels, plays, and other sources, but they use artistic resources specific to film and television to bring these stories to the screen. Analyzing film style means focusing not only on *who* and *what* is shown onscreen (characters, performances, dialogue, and plot) but also on *how* it is shown. Audiovisual style can reveal or withhold important information about the plot and create a tone or mood, all without the actors uttering a word. This section offers an introduction to the elements of film style.

Film, television, and digital video create the illusion of movement by presenting a series of images (usually twenty-four or thirty per second) in rapid succession. Since the brain is unable to process images individually when shown at this speed, they begin to blur together, giving the impression of smooth motion. Through this illusion, live-action films offer a realistic reproduction of events that unfold over time in a three-dimensional space, rendered in a two-dimensional frame. (The term frame refers both to the fixed dimensions of the image and to an individual photographic image or its digital equivalent). Both animation and computer-generated imagery (CGI) use the same illusion of motion, but create fictional worlds from scratch.

While watching a movie, we as viewers can make educated guesses about why the creative team made specific choices affecting each of these aspects: the three-dimensional world created or selected to be placed in front of the camera; the two-dimensional **frame** (what we actually see onscreen); and the dimension of time. Of course, in the vast majority of films, time is not presented continuously. Rather, **editing** is used to assemble various **shots** (unbroken runs of the camera) recorded at different times and in different places to construct a fictional time and space. Finally, **film sound** (dialogue, noise, and music), recorded at the time or added later, is incorporated, shaping our interpretation of the images. All of these dimensions of film work together and are interconnected.

Before filming begins, the creative team must assemble a group of actors (**casting**) and create or adapt a three-dimensional space to be filmed via set design, location scouting, costume design, and lighting. These are all aspects of what is sometimes called **mise-en-scène**, meaning the elements of cinema borrowed from theater.

Before and during the shooting of a film, directors and cinematographers work to design the two-dimensional space of the film frame as it changes over time. This aspect of film style is referred to as framing or composition. It is defined by choreographing the movement of the camera and the actors in relation to the setting. Directors and cinematographers consider the camera’s position relative to the subjects: **camera angle** (low, high, or straight-on) and **camera distance** (the apparent distance between the camera and the main subject in the frame, usually a human figure, ranging from extreme close-up to extreme long shot).

<Insert Figs. 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 1.5, and 1.6>. *From top to bottom: an example of an extreme close-up, close-up, medium close-up, medium-long shot, long shot, and extreme long shot from* Lowriders *(Ricardo de Montreuil, 2016).*

They also take into account the visual effects of **camera movement**, or a change in the camera’s position in the course of a shot. Types of camera movement include **pans** (side-to-side movements of the camera pivoting on a fixed point, typically a tripod), **tilts** (up-and-down movement of the camera pivoting on a fixed point, typically a tripod), **tracking shots** (movement forwards, backwards, or parallel to the plane of the frame using train-like tracks or a dolly with wheels), **crane shots** (movements that involve the camera being lifted through space and moving freely on a device similar to a construction crane), and **traveling shots** (shots that combine one or more types of camera movement). They also plan a shot’s **composition**; that is, how shapes, colors, and contrasts of light and shadow will appear within the final image. In some cases, storyboarding is used to sketch out the composition of shots in advance.

While films occasionally manipulate the unfolding of time directly using slow motion, fast motion, or reverse motion, most simply combine takes using editing. Editing can show a staged event from different angles, but it can also bring together objects or people that were never anywhere near each other during shooting (known as creative geography) to create new meanings. The pace of editing—that is, how many cuts, or changes from one take to another, happen per minute—can also impact the mood of a scene, with rapid editing often creating tension and a slow pace of editing lending a relaxed feel. In conventional fiction films, editing is specifically designed *not* to be noticed by the viewer, which makes it particularly challenging to observe and comment on. Several strategies, such as cutting in the midst of an onscreen movement (a match on action) are used to conceal edits and make the flow of images appear smooth.

In some cases, viewers can make sense of spatial relationships across cuts in an intuitive way. For example, in a **shot-reverse shot structure** often used for dialogue scenes, the camera might film one character (A) from behind the other character (B) in an over-the-shoulder shot. A sliver of B’s shoulder is visible in a close-up of A. When the scene cuts to a **reverse angle** (a 180-degree change in perspective), a sliver of A’s shoulder is included in a close-up of B, allowing us to understand that the characters are facing each other.

<Fig. 1.7 and Fig. 1.8 here> *Shot-reverse shot structure with an over-the-shoulder shot in a scene from* Lowriders *featuring Demián Bichir and Theo Rossi.*

Other editing patterns are conventions; that is, they don’t necessarily make sense on their own, but they are an accepted practice in filmmaking that we can absorb from watching many movies. Take the example of a **point-of-view shot structure**. First, we see a character looking. Then, we see what they are looking at. It is a convention of film style that we are seeing through the character’s eyes. Another example is **parallel editing**, when a scene cuts back and forth between actions happening in different locations. The viewer understands that these actions are happening at the same time because it is a convention of film editing, although there may be nothing to indicate it directly.

<Fig. 1.9 and 1.10 here> *Point-of-view shot structure in a scene from* Lowriders *featuring Tony Revolori and Yvette Monreal.*

Sound works with the visual aspects of film style to provide story information and create atmosphere. Dialogue informs us about situations, characters, and relationships, while noise tells us about the physical characteristics of the environment. In discussing sound, critics make two distinctions. First, is the source of the sound visible or not (**onscreen sound** vs. **offscreen sound**, including voiceover)? Second, does the sound believably belong to the fictional world or diegesis of the film (**diegetic** **sound** vs. **nondiegetic sound**)? The most common form of nondiegetic sound is the musical score included in many films. Usually, we are not meant to imagine that musicians are playing just out of sight. That is, they do not inhabit the same fictional world as the characters.

The next section goes beyond what we see and hear while watching a film to consider what needs to be in place for a film to get made and consumed by audiences. This context helps us understand cinema’s broader impact.

### The Lifecycle of a Movie: Production, Distribution, Exhibition

Critics often divide the lifecycle of a film into three stages: production, distribution, and exhibition. Since they are happening simultaneously for different films, **production**, **distribution**, and **exhibition** can also be considered distinct sectors of the movie business. Defined broadly, production includes everything that happens from the original idea for a movie to a finished product that can be passed on to distributors. Distribution refers to the business deals, marketing, and logistics needed for films to be shown to the public. Exhibition refers to the presentation of films in theaters and (usually later) on television, home video, and streaming services. We could also include the film’s **reception**—the response of critics and audiences—as part of its lifecycle.

The way that each of these phases typically unfolds in Hollywood also helps explain why it remains rather unwelcoming to groups that have historically been marginalized from the industry. Beginning in the 1920s, major Hollywood studios have limited the success of competitors by cooperating closely and integrating all stages of a film’s lifecycle. Until the late 1940s, the “Big Five” studios (MGM, Paramount, RKO, Universal, and Warner Bros.) had achieved **vertical integration,** meaning they not only produced movies, but also had control over distribution and exhibition. Owning theaters gave them a guaranteed venue for their slate of releases and allowed them to shut out independent films. Studios could also oblige independent theaters to screen their entire line-up of films. In 1948, the Supreme Court ruled that the studios’ business practices unfairly stifled competition in violation of US law. Studios were forced to sell off their movie theater chains, but they still controlled distribution, meaning that the range of films available to audiences did not change radically. In 2020, this ruling was reversed at the federal government’s request ([Department of Justice](https://web.archive.org/web/20210614142633/https:/www.justice.gov/opa/pr/federal-court-terminates-paramount-consent-decrees)). By this time, Netflix, which was not covered under the earlier ruling, had already started to purchase its own movie theaters while also being involved in the production of films.

Production is the phase of a film’s lifecycle that typically gets the most attention; we usually think less about what is involved in getting a film in front of audiences once it is complete. Production can be divided into four phases: development, pre-production, shooting, and post-production. Development refers to the process of going from an idea to a complete script and then to a viable film project with a director, main actors, and financing lined up. The film’s producer works to bring these elements into place. In pre-production, casting is completed and the other aspects of the mise-en-scène are created to prepare for shooting. Post-production refers to the processes like editing, color correction, and sound mixing, which are necessary to assemble and polish the footage created during shooting to create a finished product.

As practiced in Hollywood, the production of films is an incredibly expensive activity that requires significant financial backing. Most films require not only complex technology, but also the labor of hundreds of workers with highly specialized skills. One of the factors that allowed the US film industry to dominate internationally starting in the 1920s was a high level of investment not from the studios themselves, but from banks (Bordwell et al. 313-317). Although not every film in a studio’s line-up was big-budget, film industries in other countries and independent producers found this level of spending difficult to match. Today, outspending the competition continues to be a strategy used by the major US film studios to maintain their market share.

If there are financial obstacles to making a film outside the Hollywood system—which are challenging but not impossible to overcome—entering the system is also difficult. The studio labor force is organized in a very top-down manner with a clear chain of command, but this does not mean that workers advance along a clear career ladder. Entry-level workers often advance slowly, making lateral career moves rather than moving up to high-profile creative roles like that of the director. Historically, this was the sole option for newcomers wanting to break into the business. It was not until the 1970s that attending film school became a viable path for aspiring filmmakers to hone their skills, but this path does not guarantee success. Along with agents and managers, whose representation is often necessary for creatives to secure work, Hollywood unions also play a role in limiting the entry of newcomers to the industry. By bringing workers together in collective action—including strikes if deemed necessary—unions help set fair wages and enforce safe and humane working conditions. Major film shoots are governed by union agreements. For the most part, only directors, producers, writers, stars, and crew who already belong to the relevant union are able to work on major films. When a new creative team is assembled for each film, there is rarely a formal recruiting process. Personal recommendations weigh very heavily. The importance of personal connections eliminates many opportunities to counter bias related to race, gender, sexuality, and other factors during the hiring process.

Over time, the popularization of 16mm (which is more affordable than the standard 35mm film) and later digital cameras made it cheaper to make independent films. However, arranging distribution and exhibition continue to be the main barriers to these films’ success. Although a film’s distribution and exhibition can happen only once it is complete, these phases of its lifecycle must be considered from the development phase. Producers must find a company or companies to place their films in theaters at home and abroad. Distributors also negotiate the financial terms that govern how much money from ticket sales goes to the movie theater and how much ultimately goes back to the studio and creative team. The presale of distribution rights is now a key aspect of the development phase and serves as an important source of financing for films. Essentially, this is a cash advance on a film’s potential future profits. Distribution deals are difficult to obtain without the backing of an established production company—although film festivals can sometimes help directors land them—and ultimately determine how widely a movie will be shown in theaters. Home viewing on TV, DVD/Blu-Ray, or streaming has only become more important in recent years. Yet a theatrical release is still pivotal for raising a film’s profile and helping it find an audience among home viewers.

Beyond the role of a theatrical run in generating attention for a film, streaming services do not offer as many possibilities for filmmakers to get their work seen as they might seem to at first. With so much content online, it is difficult for independent films to find interested audiences. In addition, a small number of huge, powerful media companies own the most popular portals for online streaming. These companies can quickly change the rules regarding what kind of content they accept and the terms governing the financial returns can see from their work. When Amazon Prime Video Direct launched in 2016, anyone could upload a film to the service. If it was accepted, creators would collect a flat fee for every hour customers watched. In early 2021, Amazon announced it would no longer accept unsolicited submissions of documentaries or shorts ([Lindahl and Hannis-Bridson](https://web.archive.org/web/20210614135757/https:/www.indiewire.com/2021/02/amazon-prime-video-direct-stop-accepting-documentaries-1234617608/)). Similarly, in 2018, YouTube made it impossible for users to make videos available for rent or purchase on the platform, though they can still monetize their content in other ways if their videos are sufficiently popular [(“Paid Content Discontinued January 1, 2018”](https://web.archive.org/web/20210614141132/https:/support.google.com/youtube/answer/7515570?hl=en)). Other sites like Vimeo still allow creators to sell and rent videos online, but they are less familiar to casual viewers.

When streaming services get into the business of producing films, it can be a double-edged sword for filmmakers. These companies are not necessarily more open than others to unproven talents; rather, they often seek to offer lucrative deals to established creatives. However, filmmakers have little to no control over whether their film will receive a theatrical release at all. Typically, they receive no financial benefits based on how popular a film proves to be with viewers on the platform or elsewhere. In fact, unlike box office figures or television ratings, streaming services’ viewing numbers are usually not revealed to the public and can’t be independently verified.

Whether films find an audience is pivotal, not only for recouping the high costs of production, but also for its impact on the culture at large. From the perspective of film studies, one can study a movie in isolation, but the full picture does not emerge until one considers how different viewers received it and what proved meaningful for them about the themes, characters, and style. As the academic area of fan studies recognizes, engagement with media may go far beyond viewing and listening to encompass fan fiction, cosplay, and participation in online fan communities. Given the present-day impact of social media, fans can even make their opinions known publicly and even pressure studios to include or cut specific characters or storylines.

In making sense of the reception phase of a film’s lifecycle, some scholars try to establish general principles of how audiences engage with films based on their basic technical set-up—for example, screening films in a darkened room that isolates viewers from the outside world—or their style. One example is the influential idea of a male gaze in cinema (Mulvey). This refers not solely to shots from male characters’ point of view, but rather to all aspects of a film’s style that present women as beautiful but passive objects to be looked at. Other film scholars take an ethnographic or historical approach to delve into the reactions of actual audience members. They might use interviews and oral histories with living viewers or historical documents like diaries or film reviews, which represent the opinion of critics but can give some sense of how a film was received. Of particular interest are the reactions of spectators whose perspective does not align with the film’s implicit point of view, which in Hollywood has historically been white, straight, and middle-class. Viewers may suspend their own sense of personal identity and align themselves with a hero who does not resemble them; read a film against the grain (one example would be taking pleasure in a homoerotic subtext, intentional or otherwise, in a film that lacks overt queer themes); or react actively by boycotting or campaigning against a film.

Gaining a fuller understanding of the lifecycle of a film, including the importance of reception, reminds us that while industry barriers may have limited the presence of Latinx individuals in front of and behind the camera, the community has nevertheless exercised considerable agency in its reception of films. Later chapters will explore the history and present of Latinx film (and media) production through a variety of lenses.

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