

PART I
THE COMMERCIAL
AESTHETIC

CHAPTER ONE

Taking Hollywood Seriously



You can take Hollywood for granted like I did, or you can dismiss it with the contempt we reserve for what we don't understand. It can be understood too, but only dimly and in flashes. Not half a dozen men have ever been able to keep the whole equation of pictures in their heads.

F. Scott Fitzgerald¹

“Metropolis of Make-Believe”²

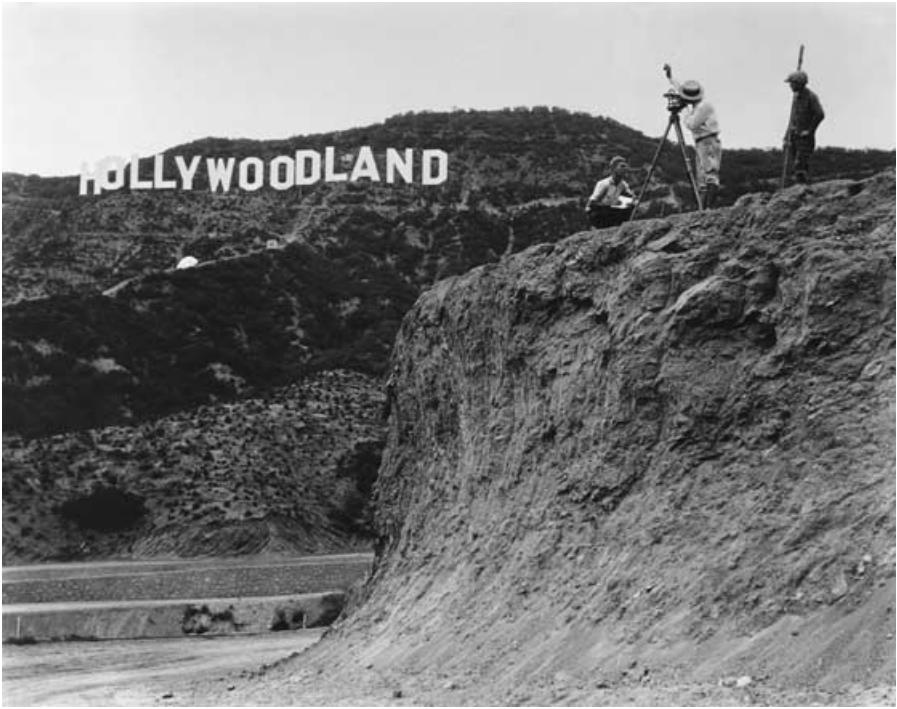
Welcome to Hollywood, what's your dream? Everyone comes here. This is Hollywood, land of dreams. Some dreams come true, some don't, but keep on dreamin'.

Happy Man (Abdul Salaam El Razzac) in *Pretty Woman* (1990)

You can't explain Hollywood. There isn't any such place.

Rachel Field³

The sign said “HOLLYWOODLAND.” A real estate company put it up in 1923, to advertise a housing development in Beechwood Canyon, Los Angeles. Each letter was 50 feet tall, 30 feet wide, and studded with 4,000 electric light bulbs. It cost \$21,000. The “land” was taken down in 1949, but the rest of it is still there, and on its fiftieth anniversary, the sign became an historic-cultural monument. But if you go looking for Hollywood the sign won't help you find it, because the place you're looking for isn't really there. As private detective Philip Marlowe



The Hollywood sign, 1923

Courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

observes in Raymond Chandler's 1949 novel *The Little Sister*, "you can live a long time in Hollywood and never see the part they use in pictures."⁴ You can't find the entertainment capital of the world, the "Metropolis of Make-Believe," simply by following directions to Schwab's drugstore on Sunset Boulevard.

Instead, you will find Hollywood much closer to home, in the familiar surroundings of the neighborhood movie theater, the back seat of the family car at the local drive-in, and now most often in your living room, on television, video, or digital "home cinema." With every viewing, these mundane places are transformed into Hollywood, the movies, a never-never land of wish-fulfillment, fantasy, and immediate gratification, where, as the song says, "every shop girl can be a top girl" and every office worker can fulfill her dream of being, for a while, Joan Crawford or "the wrenchingly beautiful Winona Ryder in everything she ever was cast in."⁵ Hollywood is a state of mind, not a geographical entity. You can visit it in the movies, and make it part of the soap opera of your own life. But as anyone who has walked down Hollywood Boulevard after dark will tell you, you wouldn't want to live there.

This introduction to Hollywood cinema is less concerned with the art of film than with the phenomenon of cinema. Film is a material and a medium. Cinema is a social institution, and the concerns of this book are primarily with questions of culture rather than of art. There is a critical tradition that makes significant claims

for Hollywood cinema as an art practice comparable to the practice of literature or painting. This tradition has many strengths. Its weakness lies in its tendency to take movies out of the context of their production and consumption as objects in an industrial and commercial process. This book argues that we can only understand Hollywood's movies by examining that context. Most introductions to film studies propose that the common technological and aesthetic properties of film allow the various forms of cinema to be treated together as a single subject for study. The more limited focus of this book concentrates exclusively on mainstream American cinema. Hollywood differs in distinct and definable ways from other national cinemas or international film movements. Two Hollywood movies separated by 80 years, such as *Way Down East* (1920) and *Titanic* (1997), have more in common with each other than either does with contemporary European art cinema, documentary, or avant-garde film. Within this book's specific focus, however, we shall look not only at how movies work formally and aesthetically, but also at their cultural function as consumable goods in a capitalist economy.

Throughout this book, I make a distinction between the terms "film" and "movie." I use **film** to refer to the physical, celluloid material on which images are registered and a soundtrack recorded, and **movie** to refer to the stream of images and sounds that we consume as both narrative and spectacle when the material is projected. This distinction between film and movie is similar to the distinction between print and literature: the material (film) and the experiential (movie) forms have different properties. Most critical writing, however, uses the two terms "film" and "movie" interchangeably. Making this distinction emphasizes that my principal concern is with the experience of Hollywood's viewers rather than the intentions of its producers.

Art and Business

Moviemaking is a marriage between art and business.

Jack Valenti⁶

In 1968, as film studies began to appear on the curricula of American universities, the *New Yorker's* film critic Pauline Kael complained that students who interpreted a movie's plot as a mechanism for producing audience response were being corrected by teachers who explained it in terms of a creative artist working out a theme, "as if the conditions under which the movie is made and the market for which it is designed were irrelevant, as if the latest product from Warners or Universal should be analyzed like a lyric poem." Kael wanted to preserve Hollywood from the excesses of academicization. *Morocco* (1930), she thought, was "great trash," and "trash doesn't belong to the academic tradition." Part of the pleasure in trash was "that you don't have to take it seriously, that it was never meant to be any more than frivolous and trifling and entertaining." What draws us to movies, Kael argued, is the opening they provide "into other, forbidden or surprising, kinds of experience," "the details of crime and high living and wicked



At the end of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), Dorothy (Judy Garland) wakes up to discover that her journey to Oz took her no further than her own back yard.

Produced by Mervyn LeRoy; distributed by MGM Pictures.

cities . . . the language of toughs and urchins . . . the dirty smile of the city girl who lured the hero away from Janet Gaynor.” As the title of this chapter indicates, I want to take entertainment seriously. But in doing so, it is important to bear in mind Kael’s stricture that “If we always wanted works of complexity and depth we wouldn’t be going to movies about glamorous thieves and seductive women who sing in cheap cafés.”⁷ Taking Hollywood seriously involves acknowledging the cultural importance of the entertainment industry and examining its products for what they are, rather than evaluating them according to criteria borrowed from other critical traditions.

If Hollywood is not a suburb of Los Angeles, perhaps it is best thought of as a place in our communal imaginations, or as a gateway to a place of common imagining. In *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), when the screen turns from black-and-white to Technicolor, Dorothy (Judy Garland) tells her little dog, “I don’t think we’re in Kansas any more, Toto.” It turns out that she is both right and wrong. The inhabitants of Oz are all familiar figures from the Midwest farm she left, and when Dorothy finally achieves her ambition to get back to Kansas, she realizes that “If I ever go looking for my heart’s desire again, I won’t go looking any further than my own back yard, because if you can’t find it there, then you probably never lost it in the first place.” This inscrutable observation encapsulates the

relationship Hollywood proposes between itself and the everyday world of its audience: Oz is Kansas, but in Technicolor. It has, at the same time, the familiarity of home and the exoticism of a foreign country. In the very proposition that it gives its audiences what they want, Hollywood lays claim to benevolence, much like the Wizard of Oz himself. Hollywood – the movies – is the space in our lives where dreams come true, time after time after time.

Many people who have visited Los Angeles to look for Hollywood have written about their encounters as if they were discovering a familiar foreign land. European writers of travel books about America in the 1920s and 1930s often included a chapter detailing some of the exotic features of the place, and in due course it fell prey to the investigations of anthropologists. In 1946 Hortense Powdermaker, whose previous fieldwork had been among the Melanesian peoples of the south Pacific, spent a year among the natives of Hollywood. Her book, *Hollywood the Dream Factory: An Anthropologist Looks at the Movie-Makers*, provided the model for a stream of later journalistic and sociological investigations. In it she compared ex-cannibal chiefs and magicians to front-office executives and directors. In Hollywood's atmosphere of permanent crisis and its belief in "the breaks" as the cause of success, she found elements of magical thinking that might have been recognizable in New Guinea: "Just as the Melanesian thinks failure would result from changing the form of a spell, so men in Hollywood consider it dangerous to depart from their formulas. . . . The Melanesian placates hostile supernatural forces through a series of taboos; Hollywood attempts to appease its critics and enemies with the [Production] Code." Stressing the absence of planning on the part of studio executives ("The god is profits, and opportunism the ritual of worship"), Powdermaker found Hollywood to be a fundamentally irrational place, where a "pseudo-friendliness and show of affection cover hostility and lack of respect." The Hollywood she observed was a site of irretrievable contradictions, both "a center for creative genius" and "a place where mediocrity flourishes;" at the same time "an important industry with worldwide significance" and "an environment of trivialities."

For Powdermaker, the contradictory nature of the place revealed itself most vividly in one essential opposition: "Making movies must be either business *or* art, rather than both." For many filmmakers, she suggested, "there seems to be a continuous conflict, repeated for each picture, between making a movie which they can respect and the 'business' demands of the front office. It is assumed . . . that a movie which has the respect of the artist cannot make money." This opposition also structured her own account of Hollywood, as it has structured so many other writers' tales. Describing one of her informants, "Mr Literary," a successful writer of A-features, she suggested that:

He regards his work at the studio as a form of play and rather enjoys it as such. He uses the word "play" because he says that he cannot take it seriously. . . . He has never worked on any movie which has even moderately satisfied him. Each time he starts with high hopes that this one will be different, but each time it is the same: so many interferences, so many changes, that the final script is not his, although he has far more influence over it than do most writers. He does not have this attitude of "play"

toward writing a novel or a short story. That is deadly earnest. Then he is concerned with working out a real problem and any interference with it he would regard as a real crisis.

Powdermaker saw the contradiction between business and art as ordinarily resolved only in failure, when business and aesthetic weakness combine to produce “the confusion, wastefulness and lack of planning . . . which is taken for granted in Hollywood.”⁸ Writing three decades later, Steven Bach echoed Powdermaker’s criticism, suggesting that the “art versus business” conflict “has remained stubbornly resistant to resolution and remains the dominating central issue of American motion pictures to the present day.” Bach’s book, *Final Cut*, is an account of the production of *Heaven’s Gate* (1980), a Western directed by Michael Cimino that went catastrophically over budget. Intended to be “a blockbuster with ‘Art’ written all over it,” the movie’s epic failure in fact led directly to the sale of United Artists, the company which had financed it. Bach, head of production at United Artists at the time, argues that the movie’s commercial failure was inextricably interwoven with its aesthetic pretensions. Characters and story were sacrificed to the director’s indulgence in “an orgy of brilliant pictorial effects.” *Heaven’s Gate* failed, according to Bach, not because its budget escalated to \$44 million, way beyond any hope of profit, but because it failed as entertainment: it did not “engage audiences on the most basic and elemental human levels of sympathy and compassion.”⁹

Bach’s definition of Hollywood’s entertainment purpose was little different from that of successful screenwriter Frances Marion in 1937. What the audience wanted, she argued, was to have its emotions aroused:

it wants something that will pleasantly excite it, amuse it, wring it with suspense, fill it with self-approval, or even arouse its indignation; it cries . . . “console me, amuse me, sadden me, touch me, make me dream, laugh, shudder, weep!” and above all things, it wants to be “sent home happy.” It looks to the photoplay to provide it with a substitute for actual life experience, and to function in such fashion the screen story must contain elements that are emotionally satisfying. Something approaching the ideal life is what this audience prefers to see, rather than life as it actually knows it. It wants to see interesting things which, within the limits of possibility, might happen to it; preferably things to which its own day dreams turn.¹⁰

The Commercial Aesthetic of *Titanic*

The desires of Hollywood’s audiences have not greatly changed. *Titanic* (1997), the first movie to gross more than \$1 billion, delivered all the emotions Marion enumerates, principally by focusing its spectacular disaster story through a romance, since according to director James Cameron, “only by telling it as a love story can you appreciate the loss of separation and the loss caused by death.”¹¹ As its production ran massively behind schedule and over budget, *Titanic* was fre-

quently compared to *Heaven's Gate*, but its release showed that unlike Cimino, Cameron was a “fiscally responsible *auteur*” whose personal vision had resulted in a commercially immensely successful product, justifying its budgetary excesses by its unprecedented profits. What Justin Wyatt and Katherine Vlesmas have called *Titanic*'s “drama of recoupment” was supplied with its “obligatory happy ending” through the movie's astonishing commercial success.¹²

Titanic's commercial and aesthetic success depended on its ability to provoke a range of emotions in a wide variety of audience groups. Only because it had what one reviewer called “enough different moves, moods, and ideas to keep everyone happy at least part of the time” could it succeed on the scale that it did.¹³ That commercial success relied not on the movie's underlying aesthetic unity or coherence, but rather on the sheer diversity of its various elements, which allowed its different audiences to turn it into the experience they wished to have. *Titanic* was, at the same time, a teenage love story, a heritage movie, a special effects spectacular, a costume drama, a “chick flick,” a disaster movie, a cross-class romance, an intimate historical epic, and the most expensive movie ever made. Different audiences could view it as a celebration of selflessness and self-sacrifice, a subversive commentary on class relations, a sumptuously nostalgic display of bygone opulence, a denunciation of capitalist greed, a brilliant exercise in state-of-the-art special effects, a demonstration of the transcendent triumph of love over death, a feminist action-adventure movie, or an extended opportunity to gaze at Leonardo DiCaprio. Its commercial success, indeed, relied on its appealing across the usual audience categories, to both sexes and all ages. The movie's appeal to its most devoted fans, women under 25 – “costless liberation brought to you by a devoted, selfless, charming, funny, incredibly handsome lover [who] points you toward a long, richly eventful future and dies, beautifully, poetically and tragically” before he can disappoint you – was not necessarily the same quality that persuaded older men to see it.¹⁴

Titanic's commercial success relied to a great extent on repeat viewings. According to a *Newsweek* survey two months after the movie's release, 60 percent of *Titanic*'s American audience were women, and 63 percent were under 25. Forty-five percent of women under 25 who had seen the movie had seen it twice, while 76 percent of all repeat viewers planned to see it again.¹⁵ The satisfaction these audiences found in the movie was clearly repeated on subsequent viewings, while the high number of repeat viewers (20 percent of the total audience, as against a norm of 2 percent) also meant that *Titanic* stayed longer in more theaters, giving other viewers more opportunities to see it.

Titanic's aesthetic success was dependent on its commercial success to the same extent as *Heaven's Gate*'s aesthetic failure depended on its commercial failure. If it had not demonstrated its popularity at the box-office, *Titanic* would not have won eleven Academy Awards. Neither the Oscars nor Hollywood's aesthetics are solely a matter of money, but both are inextricably bound to the industry's existence as a commercial activity. The title of part I of this book, “The Commercial Aesthetic,” deliberately confronts the contradiction between art and business by insisting on addressing the ways in which Hollywood's aesthetic practices serve commercial purposes. In Hollywood, commerce and aesthetics are symbiotic, or in the industry's



The Utopian resolution of *Titanic* (1997) sees the abolition of class distinction and the marriage of commerce and aesthetics.

Produced by James Cameron and Jon Landau; distributed by Twentieth Century-Fox, Paramount Pictures; directed by James Cameron.

current terminology, synergistically intertwined. Like Rose and Jack in the fantastic, Utopian happy ending of *Titanic*, in Hollywood's most successful products commerce and aesthetics embrace each other for everyone's delight.

Like most Hollywood movies, *Titanic* contains two distinct plots, a love story and, in this case, an account of the disaster. These two plots are as connected to each other as any individual viewer requires. Chronologically, they are almost completely separate. The love story reaches its climax and resolution 100 minutes into the movie's 194-minute running time, when Rose (Kate Winslet) tells Jack (DiCaprio) that she intends to leave the ship with him. Immediately afterwards, the ship hits the iceberg and the spectacular action movie begins. This coincidence allows viewers to connect the two sequences of events if they choose to do so: Rose, who has described the *Titanic* as "a slave ship, taking me back to America in chains," rejects the luxurious repression the ship represents, and by her act of free will dooms the ship. For those viewers who choose such an interpretation, the story "moves from Rose's sexual objectification and her suicidal frame of mind (in which she turns her anger against herself) to her sexual liberation and the externalization of her aggressive impulses in the spectacle of the ship's destruction."¹⁶

In his book on *Titanic*, David Lubin suggests that the simultaneity of the kiss and the crash "adhere to the governing rule of historical fiction, which is that public and historically significant events are best understood by taking measure of the private and personal struggles of fictitious characters put forth as ordinary people whose lives happen to be directly affected by those events."¹⁷ We witness the disaster from the perspective of Rose, Jack, and the other characters we have met in following their love story. In the end, the spectacle of the sinking takes on

its meaning through Rose's telling of her story. Other viewers may pay less attention to the love story and take their pleasure simply in sheer vertiginous amazement at the movie's spectacle. What film historian Tom Gunning has called the cinema's "aesthetic of astonishment" has always been an integral element of Hollywood's appeal to its audiences.¹⁸ In 1907, entertainment entrepreneur Frederick Thompson observed that his customers:

are not in a serious mood, and do not want to encounter seriousness. They have enough seriousness in their every-day lives, and the keynote of the thing they do demand is change. Everything must be different from ordinary experience. What is presented to them must have life, action, motion, sensation, surprise, shock, swiftness or else comedy.

Thompson was not, in fact, describing cinema audiences but the clientele of his Luna Park amusement park on Coney Island. In Luna Park, which one journalist described as "an enchanted, storybook land of trellises, columns, domes, minarets, lagoons, and lofty aerial flights," Thompson sought to create "a different world – a dream world, perhaps a nightmare world – where all is bizarre and fantastic" for his visitors, and invited them not simply to observe that world, but to become participants in its spectacular attractions.¹⁹

Gunning has described early cinema – before 1906 – as a "cinema of attractions," engaging its viewers' attention through an exciting spectacle, in which the story, if there was one, simply provided "a frame upon which to string a demonstration of the magical possibilities of the cinema":

Display dominates over narrative absorption, emphasizing the direct stimulation of shock or surprise at the expense of unfolding a story or creating a diegetic universe. The cinema of attractions expends little energy creating characters with psychological motivations or individual personality.²⁰

Gunning takes the term "attractions" from the Russian filmmaker and theorist Sergei Eisenstein, who developed a concept of cinema as a "montage of attractions," a calculated assembly of "strong moments" of shock or surprise stimulating the audience's response.²¹ The purpose of Eisenstein's didactic, political cinema was "the moulding of the audience in a desired direction," to be achieved by subjecting them "to emotional or psychological influence, verified by experience and mathematically calculated to produce specific emotional shocks in the spectator."²² Eisenstein himself took the term "attraction" from the fairground, possibly indeed from the roller-coaster in Petrograd's Luna Park; he later described his term "montage of attractions" as being "half-industrial and half-music-hall."²³ In its earliest years, the cinema was most frequently exhibited as an attraction on a vaudeville or variety bill. The appearance of dedicated motion-picture theaters after 1905 encouraged the integration of cinema's spectacular attractions into longer sequences, held together by a story. But, as Gunning argues and as a viewing of *Titanic's* final 94 minutes demonstrates, the cinema of attractions remains an essential part of popular cinema, not necessarily contained or disguised within narrative.

As well as being a love story and a disaster movie, *Titanic* is an emotional roller-coaster ride for its audience. Not all of the ride is made up of spectacular thrills; the first half of the movie provokes a quieter range of emotions. Its purpose is not necessarily to mold its audience's ideological beliefs in the way Eisenstein intended, although the material for such a molding exists in the thematic relationships that can be identified between characters and class, for instance, and commentators in the *Washington Post* charged Cameron with "kindergarten Marxism."²⁴ Cameron himself summarized the movie's more straightforward entertainment purpose: "I hope we make people feel like they've just had a good time . . . Not a good time in the sense they've seen a Batman movie, but a good time in the sense that they've had their emotions kind of checked out. The plumbing still works."²⁵

As Cameron's remark suggests, audiences go to the movies to consume their own emotions. In order to consume their emotions, spectators have first to produce those emotions, in response to the movie's stimulation. Through the integration of attractions into their plots, moviemakers have to organize movies so that spectators will produce their emotions in a sequence and pattern that they find satisfying. Hollywood's **commercial aesthetic** is grounded in this objective. *Titanic*'s division into love story and action-adventure movie provides what is in fact a very simple and schematic model of this process, but its exceptional commercial success demonstrates that its admixture of attractions provided its audiences with a range of aesthetic satisfactions.

A Classical Cinema?

The very name Hollywood has colored the thought of this age. It has given to the world a new synonym for happiness because of all its products happiness is the one in which Hollywood – the motion-picture Hollywood – chiefly interests itself.

Carl Milliken, 1928²⁶

Hollywood's history is as unreliable as its geography. Its products are designed to be consumed in a single viewing, and the audience's experience of an individual movie is fleeting, lasting only as long as the movie is on the screen. Theater advertisements told their patrons to see a movie "today, tomorrow and Thursday – then *Chang* will be gone forever."²⁷ Like other industries of fashion engaged in the production of ephemeral commodities, Hollywood views itself as in a state of constant change, and in this process it discards, reuses, or reinvents its past as its present requires. Since the 1960s, in particular, Hollywood has persistently been described as not being "what it was," and a succession of both journalistic and critical works have talked of *The Fifty-Year Decline of Hollywood*, *Hollywood in Transition*, *The New Hollywood*, or *Hollywood and After*.²⁸ Part II of this book will look at a number of different ways in which we can view Hollywood's history, but it is important to recognize that, beyond its technological, organizational, or stylistic changes, Hollywood's essential business has remained the same: entertaining

its audience, producing the maximum pleasure for the maximum number for the maximum profit. The continuity of its economic purpose enables us to make generalizations about Hollywood over a period spanning nearly a century.

If we are to take Hollywood seriously by understanding its business, the first thing we must do is to describe the way American movies work. The most influential critical work written on Hollywood in the last twenty years has been *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*, by David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson. In it, they delineate the formal features of what they call the **Classical Hollywood** style, and trace its evolution in tandem with the organizational history of Hollywood's production practices. They argue that the essential features of the classical style were in place as early as 1917. Since then, these features – the way that a movie organizes narrative time and space, the continuity script, the management structure, and the division of labor in production – have remained fundamentally unchanged.

Published in 1985, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* set new standards for historical research in film studies, and also gave a new precision to ideas of “the classical” in relation to Hollywood. The French critic André Bazin (whose work is discussed on a number of occasions in the following pages) first described Hollywood as “a classical art,” to be admired for the richness of its traditions and its capacity to absorb new influences creatively. He also suggested that the genius of the Hollywood system should be analyzed through a sociological approach to its production, since a crucial element of that system was the way in which it “has been able, in an extraordinarily competent way, to show American society just as it wanted to see itself.”²⁹ The idea of a classical cinema has influenced most critical accounts of Hollywood, although it has most frequently been invoked as a background against which exceptional works could be defined and distinguished. Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, however, chose to investigate the formal organization of the “ordinary film,” basing their account of “Classical” style on an analysis of a randomly selected sample of Hollywood movies. Their analysis of style thus addressed what Bazin had suggested was most admirable about Hollywood, with a precision that had been largely absent from previous descriptions of “classic narrative film.” The authors of *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* argue that “the principles which Hollywood claims as its own rely on notions of decorum, proportion, formal harmony, respect for tradition, mimesis, self-effacing craftsmanship, and cool control of the perceiver's response – canons which critics in any medium usually call ‘classical.’”³⁰ The idea of “the classical” implies the observance of rules of composition and aesthetic organization that produce unity, balance, and order in the resulting artwork. “Classical” works conform. They are bound by rules that set strict limits on innovation.

By contrast, this book argues that Hollywood functions according to a commercial aesthetic, one that is essentially opportunist in its economic motivation. The argument that Hollywood movies are determined, in the first instance, by their existence as commercial commodities sits uneasily with the ideas of classicism and stylistic determination. Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson acknowledge that economic factors have strongly affected the development of the classical style, but regard stylistic factors as providing the most interesting explanation of Hollywood

filmmaking. For them, a set of formal conventions of narrative construction, spectacle, verisimilitude, and continuity “constituted Hollywood’s very definition of a movie itself.”³¹ From the critical perspective adopted in this book, these investigations of Hollywood’s formal conventions can address one of the two sets of questions we can ask about the way movies work: the way in which Hollywood is, in David Bordwell’s phrase, “an excessively obvious cinema.”³² There is, however, another set of issues not examined in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, dealing with the relationships that exist between movies and their audiences, and with external forces at work in the Hollywood system. As Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson acknowledge, the sociological approach that Bazin advocated requires a history of Hollywood’s reception – of “the changing theater situation, the history of publicity, and the role of social class, aesthetic tradition, and ideology in constituting the audience” – to accompany their history of its stylistic evolution.³³

Answers to questions about what Hollywood is for must be sought not only in its movies but also in the social, cultural, and institutional contexts that surround it. In examining Hollywood’s commercial aesthetic, we shall be concerned at one level with how viewers use movies “to learn how to dress or how to speak more elegantly or how to make a grand entrance or even what kind of coffee maker we wish to purchase, or to take off from the movie into a romantic fantasy or a trip.”³⁴ At another level, we must consider how Hollywood movies are organized to deliver pleasure to their audiences. Take something as obvious as Hollywood’s happy endings. The authors of *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* found that 60 percent of the movies they analyzed “ended with a display of the united romantic couple – the cliché happy ending, often with a ‘clinch’ – and many more could be said to end happily.”³⁵ In contrast to a strictly formal analysis that sees classical movies as driven by the logical progression of their narratives, Rick Altman has argued that the obligation to arrive at a happy ending leads classical narrative to “reason backward,” “retrofitting” the beginning so that it appears to lead logically to the predetermined happy ending. “The end is made to *appear* as a function of the beginning in order better to disguise the fact that the beginning is actually a function of the ending.”³⁶ More generally, movies are engineered to produce a sequence of audience responses, “thrilling us when we should be thrilled,” as a writer in *Nickelodeon* put it in 1910, “making us laugh or cry at the appointed times, and leaving us, at the end of the film, in a beatific frame of mind.”³⁷ Screenwriting manuals and practicing screenwriters alike emphasize that scripts are engineered to maintain a level of engagement on the part of the audience. When John Sayles was hired to rewrite *Piranha* (1978), the producers told him:

“Make sure you keep the main idea, the idea of piranhas being loose in North American waters.” I said, “Okay, how often do you want an attack? About every fifteen minutes?” They said, “Yeah, but it doesn’t have to be an attack. Maybe just the threat of an attack – but some sort of action sequence about that often to keep the energy going.” I said, “Anything else?” They said, “Keep it fun.”³⁸

As a final level of our inquiry into the movies’ commercial aesthetic, we must examine the institutional and ideological constraints on Hollywood. Movies have

happy endings because part of their cultural function is to affirm and maintain the culture of which they are part. The industry's **Production Code**, which regulated the content and treatment of movies between 1930 and 1968, inscribed this cultural function as a convention of every Classical Hollywood product. (The Production Code is discussed in detail in chapters 3 and 16, and is reproduced in appendix 1.) The fact that 85 percent of Hollywood movies feature heterosexual romance as a main plot device should be seen in the light of this regulatory framework. If the movie theater is a site in which cultural and ideological anxieties can be aired in the relative safety of a well-regulated fiction, we might well ask why we need quite so much reassurance that heterosexual romance is supposed to end happily. Questions such as this require us to look beyond the movie theater to explain what happens on the screen. Although these questions raise a different set of issues from those explored in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, the two kinds of analysis complement each other.

One further question about Classical Hollywood has to do with whether it still exists. Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson conclude their analysis in 1960, a date that they acknowledge is "somewhat arbitrary."³⁹ By then, Classical Hollywood's mode of production, the vertically integrated company operating a studio, had come to an end, but the style it produced persisted. Although the style altered after 1960, it had also altered before, and the style of the New Hollywood of the 1970s can best be explained, they suggest, by the same process of stylistic assimilation that had operated throughout Hollywood's history: "As the 'old' Hollywood had incorporated and refunctionalized devices from German Expressionism and Soviet montage, the 'New' Hollywood has selectively borrowed from the international art cinema."⁴⁰ In her 1999 book, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood*, Kristin Thompson argues strongly that "contemporary Hollywood's most important and typical narrative strategies . . . are in most respects the same as those in use in the studio era . . . The ideal American film still centers around a well-structured, carefully motivated series of events that the spectator can comprehend easily." She suggests that those critics who have identified a "post-classical' cinema of rupture, fragmentation and postmodern incoherence" in the New Hollywood of the 1970s and the "high concept" style of production since 1980 overstate the extent to which movies made after the demise of the studio system deviate from the classical norms of narrative clarity and coherence.⁴¹

Some of the questions of emphasis raised by Thompson's argument are addressed in the discussion of post-Classical space in chapter 11. More importantly, perhaps, her argument also raises the question of how we conceptualize Hollywood's history. Thompson's own analysis emphasizes narrative, and in doing so makes a strong case for the continuity of "a tradition which has flourished for eighty years."⁴² Other approaches, more concerned with economic or technological aspects of Hollywood's history, stress moments of change or discontinuity, arguing that the introduction of sound or the break-up of the studio system divide Hollywood's history into distinct periods. As part II of this book makes clear, however, different emphases produce different patterns, and it is more accurate to describe Hollywood as having several interconnected histories than to impose a single dominant perspective.

Each of these histories describes a dialog between continuity and change, which may help explain how a “classical” style can persist in a “post-Classical” cinema. The use of capital letters allows us to distinguish between the set of aesthetic norms identified by Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, and the historical period in which they were developed and flourished under the studio system of production. Throughout this book, I use “Classical Hollywood” to refer to a specific period of Hollywood’s history from the early 1920s to the late 1950s, and as a description of the style, the mode of production, and the industrial organization under which movies were made in that period.

This book is not a history of Hollywood so much as a thematic investigation of what Hollywood is, and what Hollywood movies are. It is, however, informed by the belief that we need to understand Hollywood from a range of historical perspectives. Hollywood has at least three separate but overlapping histories. The history of production, the story of the studios and their stars, has preoccupied the majority of movie historians. Much less notice tends to be taken of movie reception, but Hollywood’s audience has a history, too, and that history – the history of the box-office – has shaped the history of production, as I begin to describe in the next section. Third, Hollywood has a critical history: a history of the changes in what critics have understood Hollywood to be. Most critical histories of Hollywood are descriptive, charting its high and low points, although different critics, of course, describe that history differently. Chapters 17 and 18 discuss the history of criticism of Hollywood, and aspects of this critical history arise in several other places, such as the discussion of auteurist criticism in chapter 2.

These three overlapping accounts of Hollywood are narratives of continuity as well as change. All are in competition with Hollywood’s history of itself, projected in fan magazines, star biographies, and “exposés,” as well as in movies about Hollywood. Much of what passes for Hollywood’s history has been written as if it were itself a Hollywood story and as if the history of entertainment were under an obligation to be entertaining. *Singin’ in the Rain* (1952), for instance, provides us with a history of Hollywood’s introduction of sound, in which Cosmo Brown (Donald O’Connor) discovers the principles of sound dubbing by standing in front of Kathy Selden (Debbie Reynolds) and moving his mouth while she sings. This is a much more entertaining version of history than the more accurate but more mundane account of the development of multiple channel recording and post-synchronization.

The most common explanation for the introduction of sound, that it was a last desperate gamble by an almost bankrupt Warner Bros., is likewise a Hollywood fantasy, disproven by research that has shown that the major companies’ transition to sound was a much more orderly and considered process.⁴³ Nevertheless, this explanation is still widely reproduced, because its story of the kids from the ghetto making good with an invention the big studios had turned down fits in with the mythological history of Hollywood, the *Singin’ in the Rain* history, which proposes that the history of Hollywood must conform to the conventions of its own narratives. This Hollywood was the invention of press and publicity agents. It served as a disguise for the American movie industry, the means by which public attention was diverted away from the routine, mechanical, standardized aspects of

the industry's central operations toward its more attractive, glamorous periphery. That disguise has worked almost as well for many of Hollywood's critics and historians as it did for the readers of its fan magazines in the 1930s. Despite the media attention now paid to opening weekend grosses, which depict movies competing against each other in a form of sporting contest, the economic forces and business practices involved in selling entertainment remain largely concealed behind the images of Hollywood as "Metropolis of Make-Believe."

Hollywood and its Audiences

The last couple of years, I thought that a large proportion of the American public wanted to see blood or breasts. Now I think they want to see cars. Our biggest film to date, *Eat My Dust!*, just piles up one car after another.

Roger Corman, 1977⁴⁴

Our dream was to make a movie about how movies screw up your brain about love, and then if we did a good job, we would become one of the movies that would screw up people's brains about love forever.

Nora Ephron on *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993)⁴⁵

Although Hollywood's goal of entertainment has remained constant, the audience it has sought to entertain has changed as many times in the 80 years of Hollywood's existence as have the ways of producing and packaging movies. Since 1950, moviegoing has been a minority activity. In 1946, one third of the American public went to a movie every week. By 1983, fewer than a quarter went once a month, but that group of regular viewers accounted for 85 percent of all movie admissions.⁴⁶ In 2000, 30 percent of the American population over 12 went once a month, while 26 percent never went.⁴⁷ The industry's idea of its audience has also changed. In the late 1920s, the industry estimated that between three-quarters and four-fifths of its audience were women.⁴⁸ Although the reliability of this estimate is open to question, for most of the 1930s and 1940s there was a widespread assumption among production and distribution personnel that the large majority of movie audiences in the US and Europe were female. In 1939 a sociologist reported that "it is really that solid average citizen's wife who commands the respectful attention of the industry."⁴⁹

From the mid-1920s to the 1940s the industry's understanding of its audience was closely interwoven with the way that it classified both its pictures and its theaters. Pictures were conceived by the industry and evaluated by the trade press as suitable for exhibition in different types of theater, which were attended by different types of audience. Exhibitors classified audiences according to a series of overlapping distinctions between "class" and "mass," "sophisticated" and "unsophisticated," "Broadway" and "Main Street," as well as distinguishing between groups of viewers by gender and age. Industry rhetoric promoted the idea of an undifferentiated audience in support of Hollywood's claims to practice a form of

cultural democracy, but in actuality distributors classified theaters hierarchically from first-run picture palaces to neighborhood double-bill houses, allocating each theater a position in a movie's commercial life-span on the basis of its potential audience.

Classical Hollywood's principal mechanism for understanding its audience was through its theater managers. Theaters were assumed to have local and fairly stable audiences, with a particular make-up and characteristics known to the manager. This local knowledge was amassed through the distribution company's sales department, and then fed back to production. Decisions about the location, architecture, and entertainment policy of new theaters were based on the economic character and leisure habits of their surrounding population, and information on the operation of the major companies' theaters was forwarded to the main office in New York, to be used in the planning of future programs. Companies used this information to assess the appeal that the various component parts of their output held for different sectors of the audience and to guide their decisions about the content of future productions. In the process, audience tastes were categorized implicitly by income and class as well as explicitly by gender and age.

Classical Hollywood organized its output to provide a range of products that would appeal to the different groups of viewers it identified. Movies were assembled to contain ingredients appealing to different, generically defined areas of the audience, so that their marketing and exploitation could "position" each picture in relation to one or more of those "taste publics." Apparent changes in the generic tastes of audience groupings were often invoked to justify shifts in production policy, such as the deliberate creation of a "family" audience for a bourgeois cinema of uplift in the mid-1930s. In this way, Hollywood periodically reinvented and reconfigured its audience, typically discovering a "new" audience who had previously not attended, and devising products that would unite this audience with existing ones.

Some audiences were, however, more important than others. Surveys in the 1920s and early 1930s supported the industry assumption that women formed the dominant part of its audience, and all the evidence from the trade press and other industry sources makes clear that during those decades the motion picture industry assumed that women were its primary market, both through their own attendance and through their roles as opinion leaders, influencing the males with whom they attended. Fan magazines of the 1920s insistently promoted the image of a "new and improved" female movie fan – the flapper – a young metropolitan woman aspiring to the condition of Clara Bow or Alice White. These "Woolworth sirens," who made up "the stenographer trade" and read the fan magazines in the largest numbers, were constructed as idealized consumers, fascinated by the star system and dependent on movies to generate their needs and desires.⁵⁰

By the mid-1930s the "flapper" had evolved into "Tillie-the-Toiler, the busy, yearning little girl who supports the box office," named by *Motion Picture Herald* editor Terry Ramsaye after a comic strip character. Tillie, he claimed, "does not want to go home from the show with any more problems than she had when she started out for the evening. Tillie wants action and satisfaction. She wants to feel, not to think and worry and reason."⁵¹ During the 1930s, the industry's concep-

tion of its target viewer – the opinion-leader making decisions about which movie to attend on behalf of a group – changed neither age, gender, nor class. The specifically male audience, “the boys who go for the gangster stuff,” was relatively small, exclusively metropolitan, and catered to by such stars as James Cagney. According to *Variety*, when a new Cagney picture opened at the Strand theater on Broadway, it would gather a 90 percent male audience in the expectation of “this player socking all and sundry including all the women in the cast.” The potential audience for a Janet Gaynor–Charles Farrell musical was, however, “larger than that drawn by the gun mellers, and it’s tradition that a technically mediocre talker of this type will do a lot better than a rougher feature of equal rating.”⁵²

In an industry dominated by men, the assumption that to be profitable its products had to appeal mainly to women had profound effects on Classical Hollywood’s development of the star system and on the eventual emergence of the “woman’s film,” as the industry employed women screenwriters to craft mainly female-centered stories. This assumption also encouraged the development of an increasingly elaborate system designed to use movies to sell consumer goods, and stimulated the growth of the discursive apparatus of fan culture.

Industry assumptions about the composition of its audience were to some extent challenged by the methodologies introduced by George Gallup’s Audience Research Institute in the 1940s. Gallup identified three key components in the composition of Hollywood’s audience: age, gender, and income or class; he argued that the audience was younger, more male, and poorer than the industry had previously assumed. In its most important aspects, however, Gallup’s research largely duplicated the results of the major companies’ earlier procedures, confirming existing industry wisdom that, for instance, men preferred action films and women were drawn to romance, and that movies needed to contain elements that appealed to both audience groups. His findings therefore validated the conventional Hollywood practice by which the overwhelming majority of pictures combined a love story with another plot.⁵³

Audience research in the 1950s began to suggest that as Hollywood’s audience declined, its social composition also changed. In 1941 Gallup had suggested that the great majority of movie tickets were purchased by people on low or average incomes. Surveys in the 1950s, by contrast, indicated that people in higher socioeconomic brackets attended more frequently than did others. Not until the early 1960s, however, did the industry begin to reconsider its idea of its principal target viewer, and the process was not complete until the late 1960s. This redefinition of the primary audience for Hollywood has most often been explained as a “juvenilization of the movie audience.” But the discovery that teenagers were “the best picture-goers in the country at this time – the most consistent, the best equipped with leisure time and allowance money, the most gregariously inclined, and to be sure the most romantic – ” simply echoed the findings of Gallup in the 1940s and the assumptions that the major companies had made in the 1920s and 1930s.⁵⁴

In the 1960s, the movie industry gradually came to the conclusion that its principal target viewer had changed gender. This change was most concisely captured in a strategy developed by American-International Pictures (AIP), an independent company specializing in “exploitation” pictures, which had its first major

commercial success in 1957 with *I Was a Teenage Werewolf*. “The Peter Pan Syndrome,” as AIP executives called it in 1968, proposed that younger children would watch anything older children would watch, and girls would watch anything boys would watch, but not vice versa. Therefore, “to catch your greatest audience you zero in on the 19-year-old male.”⁵⁵

It can be argued that this shift in the gender of Hollywood’s principal target viewer was the real marker of the change from Classical to post-Classical Hollywood. It was also closely related to a major shift in the age distribution of the American population. The two decades between 1946 and 1964 saw an explosion in live births, which came to be known as the “baby boom.” By 1965, four out of every ten Americans were under the age of 20. Birth rates then fell until around 1980, before rising again to levels similar to the baby boom period until 1994, when they began to fall once more. The demographics of the postwar “baby boom” described an ascending curve of live births, so that for more than a decade after 1965, there were always more 16- or 17-year-old females in the American population than there were 19-year-old males to date them at the movies. By 1972, *Variety* was regularly expressing the then-operative Hollywood wisdom that women’s visits to the movies were now “dominated by their male companion’s choice of screen fare.”⁵⁶

The effects of this change were most strikingly indicated in the shift in the gender balance of top-ranking box-office stars. In Classical Hollywood a roughly equal number of male and female stars appeared in exhibitors’ polls of leading box-office attractions. Since the late 1960s, however, these lists have become increasingly dominated by men, to a proportion, by the late 1980s, of nine to one. A 1987 survey in which adults were asked to name their three favorite celebrities gave an indication of how this came about. It reported that 59 percent of the females polled selected a male celebrity as one of their top three favorites, but none of the men selected a female.⁵⁷ Just as the influence of the young female viewer dominated Classical Hollywood’s system of representation to a far greater extent than attendance figures would have suggested was appropriate, the male domination of Hollywood cinema has continued well beyond the demographic conditions that may have originally contributed to it.

Ratings and Franchises

The change in gender of Hollywood’s principal target viewer coincided with a major alteration in the industry’s production policy. Although censor boards in many foreign countries had long prohibited children from attending some movies, Classical Hollywood’s distributors had always resisted any proposals for similar schemes in their domestic market, asserting their commitment to providing universal entertainment for undifferentiated audiences. Instead they preferred to use the Production Code as a system of regulation to ensure that all Hollywood movies would only offer entertainment that would prove harmless to all their audiences. (The operation of the Production Code is discussed in chapter 3.) By the mid-

1960s, however, shifts in American cultural values had undermined the credibility of the Production Code, and in 1968 it was replaced by a **rating system** which classified certain movies as unsuitable for sections of the potential audience. The industry's decision to introduce a ratings system was immediately provoked by two decisions of the US Supreme Court, upholding the rights of local governments to prevent children being exposed to books or movies considered suitable only for adults. In the wake of these decisions the industry faced a flood of state and municipal legislation establishing local schemes for film classification. The introduction of a rating system administered by the industry's trade association, the Motion Picture Association of America (**MPAA**), was an attempt to outmaneuver that legislation.

The Code and Rating Administration (**CARA**) divided movies into four categories: G, suitable for general admission; M, allowing unrestricted admission, but suggesting that parents should decide whether the movie was suitable for children under 16; R, restricting attendance by requiring children under 16 to be accompanied by an adult; and X, restricting attendance to those over 16. Since 1968, the system has been modified several times. (Appendices 2 and 3 show versions from 1968 and 2002.) In 1970 the M category became GP, when the age restriction was raised to 17; in 1972 GP was renamed PG (for parental guidance suggested); and CARA itself was renamed the Classification and Rating Administration in 1977, abandoning any reference to the existence of a Code governing movie production as well as the practice of vetting scripts in advance of production. In 1984, CARA added another category, PG-13, providing a "strong caution" to parents of children under 13. In 1990, CARA renamed its X category NC-17 in an attempt to create a category for art movies restricted to the over-17s, since X was generally understood as referring to pornography. The major companies have continued to show no enthusiasm for the adults-only rating, however, particularly after the 1995 box-office failure of *Showgirls* confirmed the industry's conventional wisdom that NC-17 movies could not make money at American theaters.

The rating system has imposed few actual limitations on attendance, but it has required producers to conceive of their audiences differently, engineering their movies to achieve a particular rating – a requirement often built into a movie's finance agreements. Distributors will not handle X- or NC-17-rated movies, and movies such as *Dressed to Kill* (1980), *Angel Heart* (1987), and *South Park: Bigger, Longer and Uncut* (1999) have been re-edited to qualify for an R. The G rating has been almost equally firmly avoided, an indication of the extent to which Hollywood scaled down the production of big-budget movies aimed at the female-led "family" audience after 1968. Of 336 films rated in 1981, for example, only seven were rated G, and it has been common industry practice to insert swearing, nudity, or violence to ensure a PG or R rating.⁵⁸

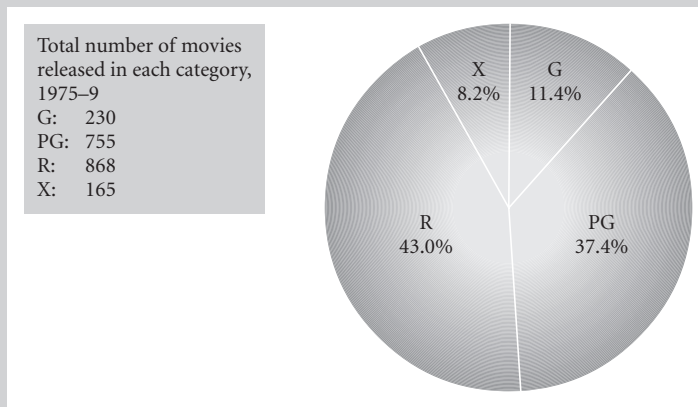
The abandonment of the Production Code for the rating system also made the movie theater an increasingly uninviting venue for women. Taken on a date to see *Taxi Driver* (1976), for instance, a woman would witness Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro) taking Betsy (Cybill Shepherd) to a porn movie, and extracts from the porn movie, as well as the culminating scenes of violence. In the two decades after 1970,

Box 1.1 Rating the movies

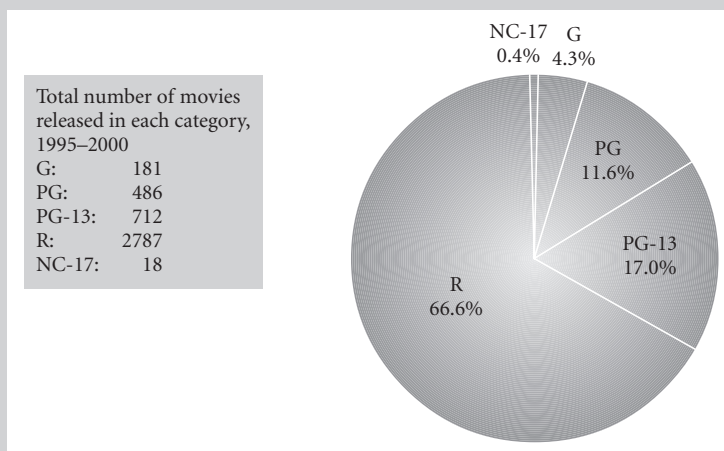
Since 1968, the Classification and Rating Administration (CARA) has classified Hollywood’s output as a means of offering “advance information about movies so that parents can decide what movies they want their children to see or not to see.”

From 1968 to 2000, CARA rated 16,320 movies. Over the whole period, 7 percent were rated G, 34 percent PG or PG-13, 56 percent R, and 3 percent X or NC-17. These figures include all movies submitted for rating, including imported foreign pictures, and thus do not simply represent Hollywood’s output. The vast majority of imported features are rated R.

A 1981 study indicated that R-rated movies were significantly less likely to be successful at the box-office than either PG- or G-rated pictures. Between



CARA ratings, 1975–9



CARA ratings, 1995–2000

1969 and 1979, only 13.7 percent of R-rated movies were reported by *Variety* as earning more than \$1 million in domestic rentals (1969 dollars, with figures adjusted annually for inflation), while 26.7 percent of PG-rated movies and 24.2 percent of G-rated movies earned that amount. The authors concluded that “there was a constant market for a certain volume of R films, no matter how many were released: between 20 and 33 R films reached the adjusted million-dollar level each year, even though the total released varied from 83 to 276 annually.”⁵⁹

women were rarely specifically addressed as an audience, and then only by modestly budgeted pictures. Female stars no longer occupied the top positions as box-office attractions, and barely a handful of actresses were regarded as “bankable.” During the 1980s, the most successful female-oriented pictures – *Tootsie* (1982), *Flashdance* (1983), *Rain Man* (1988) – tended also to be male-centered, and at best earned only half the revenue of their male- or family-oriented competitors.

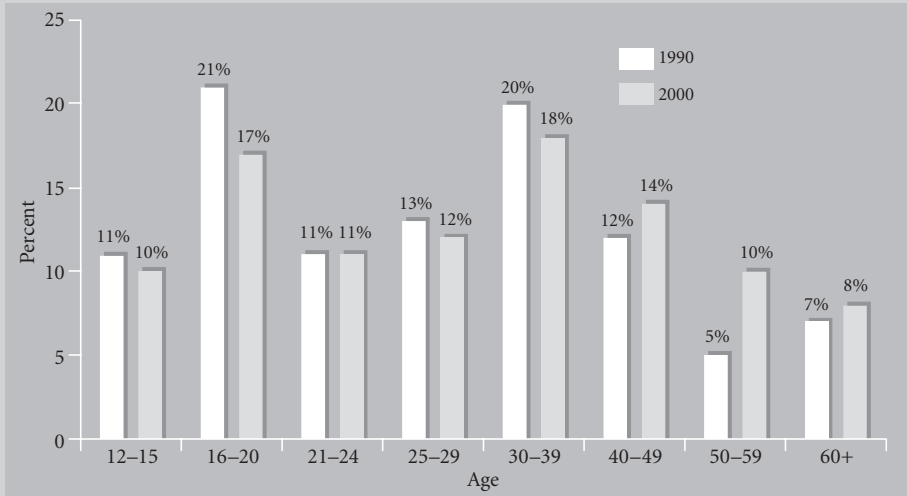
By the late 1980s, however, marketing strategists in the major companies were beginning to pay attention to the “graying of the movie-going audience.” In 1984, only 15 percent of the audience was over 40. In 1990, the over-40s made up 24 percent of the audience, providing a more viable target market. Fox production chief Roger Birnbaum suggested that these changes in audience composition meant that “a studio can develop a slate of pictures that doesn’t just cater to one demographic.” In a return to much earlier assumptions, he reported that “the demographic on women, today, is very strong.”⁶⁰ The exceptional box-office performance of two 1990 movies, *Pretty Woman* and *Ghost*, indicated the commercial potential of female-oriented pictures, which the industry identified as romantic comedies and “dating movies,” capable of generating repeat viewings, the key feature of post-*Star Wars* (1977) box-office success. Despite this success, industry executives in the 1990s continued to target young male viewers, believing that young women could not persuade their boyfriends to see a picture without a bankable male star. Like Classical Hollywood’s long-term attachment to “Tillie-the-Toiler,” post-Classical Hollywood’s reluctance to revise the identity of its 19-year-old male target viewer is perhaps best understood as a basic commercial conservatism.

Post-Classical Hollywood’s increasing acceptance of the “demographic vistas”⁶¹ of audience research also acknowledged its close interrelationship with television, where the measurement of audiences and the identification of “lifestyle” groups through statistical factor analysis has become an integral aspect of both program production and economic organization. When the baby boom generation passed beyond the age of most frequent movie attendance in the late 1970s, the industry sought to narrow the gap it had previously maintained between cinema as an entertainment for the young and television as a product for older people, most obviously through the extraordinarily rapid development, between 1984 and 1990, of a secondary market for video release.

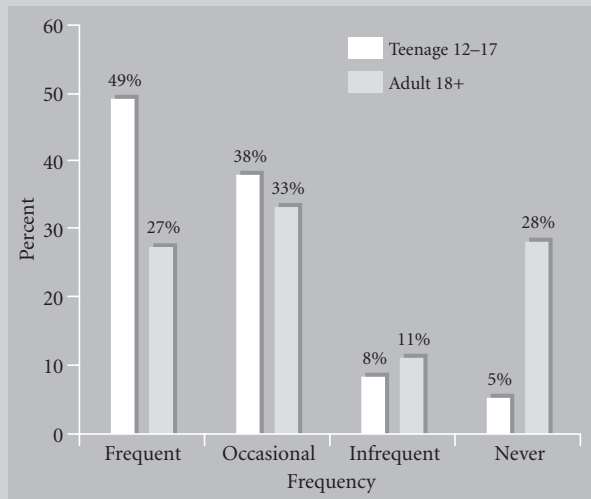
More influential on production trends in the 1990s than the over-40 audience, however, was “Generation Y,” the 72 million Americans born between 1977 and

Box 1.2 Contemporary Hollywood's audience

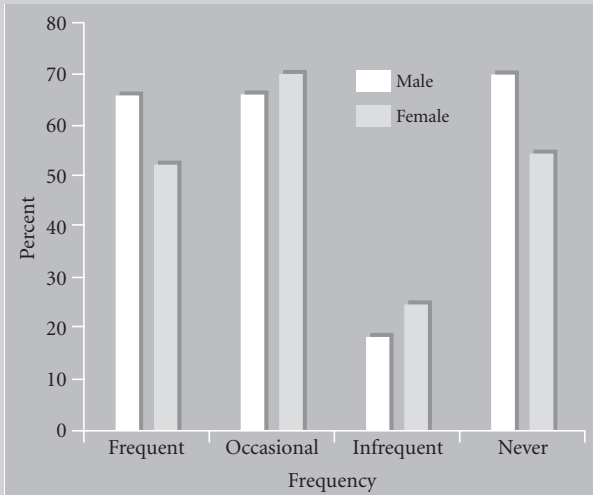
As the baby boom generation has aged, the audience attending American movie theaters has changed its age profile. In 1990, the over-40s made up 24 percent of the audience, but by 2000, this had risen to 32 percent. Teenagers, however, remained the most frequent attenders. Half the 12–17 age group went to the movies once a month, while only 5 percent never went. The most frequent adult attenders were parents with teenage children. Males were more likely than females to be frequent attenders, but also more likely never to go to the movies.



American movie theater attendance by age, 1990–2000



Frequency of movie theater attendance by age, 2000



Frequency of movie theater attendance by sex, 2000

Total admissions rose by nearly 25 percent during the 1990s, and the average American went to the movies five times in 2000.⁶²

(*Note:* these figures contain no information on the attendance of children under 12, since the MPAA does not include them in their survey data, despite the importance of this demographic group.)

1995, who represented a demographic bulge almost as large and arguably as socially important as their baby boom parents' generation. By 1995, children 18 years of age or younger comprised 28 percent of the overall US population, a cohort roughly equal to baby-boomers aged 31–40. Exploiting the potential of the video rental and “sell-through” markets in the late 1980s, the industry began to produce a new variant on the family movie, targeted at the diverse array of relationships among baby-boomers and their “echo boom” children which comprise the postmodern family. As film historian Robert Allen describes it, the postmodern family movie, archetypally represented by *Home Alone* (1990), identified “a set of narrative, representational, and institutional practices designed to maximize marketability” by stimulating tie-ins, licensing, and “synergistic brand extension.” The target consumer for these movies, and even more clearly for what Allen calls “the movie on the lunchbox” – the raft of toys, clothes, home furnishings, and other merchandising tie-ins that accompanied them – was the pre-adolescent “echo boom” child.⁶³

The economic motivations for this strategy are clear enough. In the 1990s, “family” movies, rated PG or PG-13, were three times more likely than an R-rated picture to take over \$100 million at the box-office. With most video purchases being made by parents for their children, family movies also dominated video sales.



"Gosh, I'm eating junk and watching rubbish. You'd better come out and stop me!" Kevin (Macaulay Culkin), Hollywood's target audience for "non-drop-off" movies in the 1990s, *Home Alone* (1990).

Produced by John Hughes; distributed by Twentieth Century-Fox.

The need for not only the movie but also its ancillary product range to appeal to this audience group shaped Hollywood's increasing use of animation and digital effects technology, by requiring family movies to have a distinctive and reproducible iconography that its producers could copyright and license. In the 1990s the Disney company was reborn as the market leader in this economy, in which movies coexist with franchises, tie-ins, and licensing as elements in a diversified product range, existing as toys and Happy Meals in advance of theatrical release, and surviving on video and as computer games long after the movies have left the shopping-mall multiplexes.

Hollywood's World

Contemporary Hollywood does not, of course, only make movies for echo-boomers; it does not have only a single demographic understanding of its audience, any more than Classical Hollywood did. Hollywood has always understood its audience through the perceptions of marketing and the evolving methodologies of market research, and at the same time the industry's notion of its audience has had to remain very generalized, because of the size of a movie's market. Hollywood movies have always been made for an international audience, and since the early 1920s, between a third and half of Hollywood's earnings have come from audiences outside the United States. Much of the cultural power of Hollywood and other artefacts of American mass culture has lain in the fact that they were

designed “for universal exhibition.”⁶⁴ Several times in this book I describe Hollywood’s values as Utopian. As the description of its immaterial geography suggests, Hollywood itself is a Utopia, a nowhere that has also been America to most of the rest of the world since the early twentieth century. To the citizens of Manchester, Melbourne, and Mombasa, America’s most recognizable landscapes are those of the Western and the inner city neighborhood of the crime movie. Hollywood has exported an image of the United States that has become so much a part of everyday life in even distant and scarcely westernized areas as to seem, paradoxically, less an *American* product and more a part of an international mass culture in which we all share. At the center of this empire, Americans can become too possessive of their cultural capital. In his history of the American musical, Rick Altman claims that however much non-American critics may understand “the context and meaning” of a movie such as *Singin’ in the Rain*, they will inevitably lack the familiarity with American culture that equips them to translate the movie’s “raw thematic material into . . . the culture’s master themes.”⁶⁵ Altman argues that:

The culture’s master themes are not actually *in* the text, yet the text is produced in such a way as to evoke them for a particular interpretive community. Perception of the relationship is a more important cultural phenomenon than any actual relationship that might exist. It is through the spectator’s knowledge and perception that culture and cinema interact in a reciprocal relationship.⁶⁶

While not questioning Altman’s general proposition about the relationship between cinema and culture, it is worth pointing out that because Hollywood movies have never been made only for an American audience, they have also been part of the other cultures they have visited. An Austrian audience watching *The Sound of Music* (1965) or an Australian audience watching *The Sundowners* (1960) saw their national histories Americanized. In movies like these, audiences outside the United States have viewed their own cultural pasts through a filter in which their domestic environment has been represented as exotic, while the “domestic market” addressed by the movie has not been theirs but that of North America. In such circumstances, it is hardly surprising that Hollywood should have become an imaginative home to many of its foreign audiences. In a 1989 article about the effect of new communications technologies on cultural identity, David Morley and Kevin Robins suggested that “American culture repositions frontiers – social, cultural, psychic, linguistic, geographical. America is now within.”⁶⁷ But for much of the world, American popular culture had become part of their cultural identity before 1926, when a State Department official observed that “If it were not for the barrier we have established, there is no doubt that the American movies would be bringing us a flood of the immigrants. As it is, in vast instances, the desire to come to this country is thwarted, and the longing to emigrate is changed into a desire to imitate.”⁶⁸ Two years later, a film industry representative declared that motion pictures “color the minds of those who see them,” and were “demonstrably the greatest single factors in the Americanization of the world.”⁶⁹ Less enthusiastically, the *Daily Express* complained that British cinemagoers “talk America, think America, and dream America. We have several million people,

mostly women, who to all intent and purpose are temporary American citizens.”⁷⁰ They were, of course, not American citizens at all, but citizens of Hollywood’s imagined Utopian community. For many people who visit the familiar foreign territory of Hollywood in the movies and in their imagination, however, Hollywood is what they imagine America to be.

Summary

- “Hollywood” is not so much a physical place as it is a conception, a state of mind, or a place in our communal imaginations.
- This book makes a distinction between “film” (the physical material used to record images and sound) and “movie” (the stream of images and sounds experienced as a narrative or spectacle).
- This book presents a study of cinema as a capitalist cultural institution rather than a study of film as art. The symbiotic relationship between “art” and “business” in Hollywood is central to understanding its commercial aesthetic, which is essentially opportunist in its economic motivation. The commercial and aesthetic success of *Titanic*, for example, relied on the diversity of its attractions, which allow different audiences access to different pleasures, rather than on the movie’s underlying aesthetic unity or coherence.
- There are at least three different kinds of histories of Hollywood: the history of production, the history of reception and the audience, and the history of critical response to Hollywood. Each of these histories competes with Hollywood’s history of itself. The period of Hollywood’s history from the early 1920s to the late 1950s is referred to in this book as “Classical Hollywood.”
- Beyond its technological, organizational, or stylistic changes, Hollywood’s essential business has remained the same: to entertain its audience and make a profit. Hollywood argues that it gives its audiences what they want, implicitly claiming to be benevolent. The Production Code used in Classical Hollywood claimed to ensure that Hollywood provided only entertainment that would not harm any of its viewers. The rating system that replaced it in 1968 makes similar claims.
- Audiences go to the movies to consume their own emotions. Movies have to be organized so that viewers will produce their emotions in a sequence and pattern that they find satisfying.
- Although Hollywood promoted the idea of an undifferentiated audience, it has always classified its audiences. In Classical Hollywood, women were understood to make up the majority of the audience. Since the 1960s, however, Hollywood has identified teenage males as its primary target audience.
- Hollywood has always produced movies for international audiences as well as for its domestic market. In doing so, it has often Americanized the national histories of other countries, while the American product seems to be part of an international mass culture.

Further Reading

Hollywoodland

Hollywood has been a rich source for journalism, popular sociology, and fiction, and some of this material is well worth reading for information on the production process. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Last Tycoon* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), gives a more accurate account of the operation of the studio system than many critical works and popular histories, while a fictional account of contemporary Hollywood can be found in Michael Tolkin, *The Player* (London: Faber, 1989). Two sociological studies, Leo Rosten, *Hollywood: The Movie Colony, the Movie Makers* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1941), and Hortense Powdermaker, *Hollywood the Dream Factory: An Anthropologist Looks at the Movie-Makers* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1950), are extremely informative. Among the more illuminating contemporary “insider” accounts are William Goldman’s books *Adventures in the Screen Trade: A Personal View of Hollywood and Screenwriting* (New York: Warner Books, 1983) and *Which Lie Did I Tell?: More Adventures in the Screen Trade* (New York: Pantheon, 2000). There is a history of the Hollywood sign at www.hollywoodsign.org/index3.htm.

Heaven’s Gate, Titanic, and the cinema of astonishment

Tom Gunning presents his description of early cinema in “An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)credulous Spectator,” *Art and Text* 34 (Spring 1989), pp. 31–45, and discusses its implications for other forms of cinema in “The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, its Spectator and the Avant-Garde,” in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (London: British Film Institute, 1990).

Steven Bach, *Final Cut: Dreams and Disaster in the Making of Heaven’s Gate* (London: Faber, 1986), provides a detailed account of the movie’s production. Not everyone regards *Heaven’s Gate* as an aesthetic failure: Robin Wood, “Heaven’s Gate Reopened,” *MOVIE* 31/2 (1986), argues that it is “one of the few authentically innovative Hollywood films.”

For essays on *Titanic*, see Peter Krämer, “Women First: *Titanic* (1997), Action-Adventure Films and Hollywood’s Female Audience,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 18:4 (1998), pp. 599–618, and Kevin S. Sandler and Gaylyn Studlar, eds, *Titanic: Anatomy of a Blockbuster* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999).

Classical Hollywood histories

Part One of David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985) provides an analysis of the formal properties of classical Hollywood style. Thomas Cripps, *Hollywood’s High Noon: Moviemaking and Society before Television* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), provides a social history of Classical Hollywood. No one has yet written a history of Hollywood’s reception, but *Moviegoing in America*, ed. Gregory Waller (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), contains several accounts of the place of cinema in everyday American life, drawn from the trade and popular magazine press. Janet Staiger outlines a theoretical basis for such a history and provides some case studies in *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

A series of books under the general title *The History of the American Cinema* is being published by Charles Scribner’s Sons and the University of California Press. When complete, this is intended to be a standard reference history. Eight of a proposed ten volumes have been published at the time of writing: Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (1990); Eileen Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema: 1907–1915* (1990); Richard Koszarski, *An Evening’s Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915–1928* (1990); Donald Crafton, *The Talkies: American Cinema’s Transition to Sound, 1926–1931* (1997); Tino Balio, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930–1939* (1993); Thomas Schatz, *Boom and Bust: American Cinema in the 1940s* (1997); David A. Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the*

Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970–1979 (2000); and Stephen Prince, *A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood under the Electronic Rainbow, 1980–1989* (2000).

Hollywood and its audiences

Margaret Thorp, *America at the Movies* (London: Faber, 1946), is a classic study of Hollywood's relationship with its audience. Bruce A. Austin, *Immediate Seating: A Look at Movie Audiences* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1989), provides a more recent analysis, while essays on Hollywood's historical audiences can be found in *American Movie Audiences: From the Turn of the Century to the Early Sound Era* and *Identifying Hollywood's Audiences: Cultural Identity and the Movies*, both eds Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby (London: British Film Institute, 1999).

Ratings

The MPAA's description of its ratings categories is reproduced in appendices 2 and 3. Its account of the rating system can be found at its website, www.mpa.org, while Jon Lewis provides a more critical view in *Hollywood vs Hardcore: How the Struggle over Censorship Saved the Modern Film Industry* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), in which he argues that the principal func-

tion of the rating system, like that of the Production Code, is to manage entry into the exhibition marketplace, in the interests of the major companies who are members of the MPAA. These ideas are discussed further in chapters 6 and 7. The recent history of ratings is discussed in Kevin Sandler, "The Naked Truth: *Showgirls* and the Fate of the X/NC-17Rating," *Cinema Journal* 40:3 (Spring 2001), pp. 69–93.

Hollywood and the world

Kristin Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market, 1907–1934* (London: British Film Institute, 1985), and Ruth Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood, 1918–1939* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997), explain Classical Hollywood's economic and political relationship with its foreign market. Other accounts can be found in Andrew Higson and Richard Maltby, eds, "*Film Europe*" and "*Film America*": *Cinema, Commerce and Cultural Exchange, 1925–1939* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999), and Geoffrey Nowell Smith and Stephen Ricci, eds, *Hollywood and Europe: Economics, Culture, National Identity, 1945–95* (London: British Film Institute, 1998). Toby Miller, Nitin Govil, John McMurria, and Richard Maxwell, *Global Hollywood* (London: British Film Institute, 2001), examines the contemporary industry's global market.