Dating back to the late 1800s, American films have had a substantial social and cultural impact on society. Blockbuster movies such as Star Wars, E.T., Jurassic Park, Titanic, Lord of the Rings, and Spider-Man represent what Hollywood has become—America’s storyteller.

At their best, they tell communal stories that evoke and symbolize our most enduring values and our secret desires. The most popular films often make the world seem clearer, more manageable, and more understandable.

The Top 10 Box-Office Champions, 2007

Over and above their immense economic impact (see Table 7.1), movies have always worked on several social and cultural levels. While they distract us from our daily struggles, at the same time they encourage us to take part in rethinking contemporary ideas. We continue to be attracted to the stories that movies tell.
Early Technology and the Evolution of Movies

- **The Development of Film**
  - Solving the puzzle of making a picture move depended both on advances in photography and on the development of a flexible film stock to replace the heavy metal-and-glass plates used to make individual pictures in the 1800s. In 1889, an American minister, Hannibal Goodwin, developed a transparent and pliable film—called **celluloid**—that could hold a coating, or film, of chemicals sensitive to light.

"kinetoscope": an early film projection system that served as a kind of peep show in which viewers looked through a hole and saw images moving on a tiny plate.

"vitascope": a large-screen movie projection system developed by Thomas Edison.

The Power of Stories in the Silent Era

- The shift from early development to the mass medium stage came with the introduction of narrative films: movies that tell stories. Once audiences understood the illusion of moving images, they quickly tired of waves breaking on beaches or vaudeville acts recorded by immobile cameras. To become a mass medium, the early silent films had to offer what books achieved: the suspension of disbelief. They had to create narrative worlds that engaged an audience’s imagination.

The Arrival of Nickelodeons

- According to media historian Douglas Gomery, these small and uncomfortable makeshift theaters were often converted cigar stores, pawnshops, or restaurants redecorated to mimic vaudeville theaters: “In front, large, hand-painted posters announced the movies for the day.

- Inside, the screening of news, documentary, comedy, fantasy, and dramatic shorts lasted about one hour.” Because they showed silent narrative film shorts that usually transcended language barriers, nickelodeons flourished during the great European immigration at the turn of the twentieth century.
The Power of the Studio System

Among the first to try his hand at dominating the movie business, Thomas Edison had been observing the growing popularity of film. In 1908 he formed the Motion Picture Patents Company, a cartel of major U.S. and French film producers. Known as the Trust, Edison’s company pooled patents in an effort to control film’s major technology and, by default, the production of most movies. Trust’s monopoly efforts failed, entrepreneurs like Zukor developed other tactics for controlling the industry. The new strategies, many of which are still used today, were more ambitious than just monopolizing patents and technology. They aimed at dominating the movie business at all three essential levels—production, distribution, and exhibition—in a vertical integration of power and control. The new tactics ultimately spawned a system that turned the film industry into an oligopoly, in which a few firms controlled the bulk of the business.

Controlling Production

By the beginning of the 1920s, film production had evolved into the studio system. Pioneered by director Thomas Ince and his Hollywood company, Triangle, this system constituted a sort of assembly-line process for moviemaking. It organized a staff of the best technicians and directors schooled in the latest film techniques. According to the system, not only stars but also directors, editors, writers, and others worked under exclusive contracts for the major studios.

Controlling Distribution

One of the early forms of movie distribution, film exchanges appeared around 1904 as movie companies provided vaudeville theaters with films and projectors. In exchange for their short films, shown between live acts, movie producers received a small percentage of the vaudeville ticket-gate receipts. block booking: an early tactic of movie studios to control exhibition involving pressuring theater operators to accept marginal films with no stars in order to get access to films with the most popular stars.
Controlling Exhibition

### Movie Palaces
Entrepreneurs ultimately realized that drawing the middle and upper-middle classes to movies required something more attractive than a sheet hung in an abandoned pawnshop. To provide a more hospitable moviegoing environment, exhibitors converted vaudeville theaters into full-time single-screen movie theaters. In 1914, the 3,000-seat Strand Theatre, the first movie palace, opened in New York. With elaborate architecture, movie palaces lured spectators who enjoyed entertainment amid the elegant décor usually reserved for high-society opera, ballet, symphony, and live theater.

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### Mid-City Theaters
Another major innovation in exhibition was the development of mid-city movie theaters. The first wave of middle-class people moved from urban centers to city outskirts in the 1920s, and mass-transit systems emerged to shuttle these suburbanites to and from work.

**multiplexes**: contemporary movie theaters that exhibit many movies at the same time on multiple screens.

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By the late 1920s, the major studios had clearly established vertical integration in the industry. What had once been a fairly easy and cheap business to enter was now complex and capital-intensive. What had been many small competitive firms in the early 1900s now became a few powerful studios, including the Big Five—Paramount, MGM, Warner Brothers, Twentieth Century Fox, and RKO—and the Little Three (which did not own theaters)—Columbia, Universal, and United Artists.
The Triumph of Hollywood Storytelling

- Talkies: movies with sound, beginning in 1927.
- "Wait a minute, wait a minute, you ain't heard nothin' yet." – First words spoken by Al Jolson in The Jazz Singer, 1927

In April 1927, five months before The Jazz Singer opened, the Fox studio premiered sound-film newsreels. Fox's Movietone company captured the first film footage, with sound, of the takeoff and return of Charles Lindbergh, who piloted the first solo, nonstop flight across the Atlantic Ocean on May 20, 1927. Fox's Movietone system actually photographed sound directly onto the film, running it on a narrow filmstrip that ran alongside the larger, image portion of the film. Superior to the sound-on-record system, the Movietone method eventually became film's standard sound system.

Classic Hollywood Cinema

- By the time sound came to movies, Hollywood dictated both the business and the style of most moviemaking worldwide. That style, or model, for storytelling developed with the studio system and continues to dominate American filmmaking today.

The model serves up three ingredients that give Hollywood movies their distinctive flavor: the narrative, the genre, and the author (or director). The right blend of these ingredients—combined with timing, marketing, and luck—have led to blockbuster movie hits, from Gone with the Wind to Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End. Major studios have historically relied on blockbusters to underwrite the 80 to 90 percent of films that fail at the box office.

Hollywood Genres

- In general, Hollywood narratives fit a pattern or category in which conventions regarding similar characters, scenes, structures, and themes recur in combination. Grouping films by category enables the industry to achieve two related economic goals: product standardization and product differentiation. By making films that fall into popular genres, the movie industry provides familiar models that can be imitated. It is much easier for a studio to promote a film that already fits into a preexisting category with which viewers are familiar.
### Drama
- *The Godfather* (1972)
- *Hannibal* (2001)
- *Pulp Fiction* (1994)

### Romance
- *Titanic* (1997)
- *The Graduate* (1967)
- *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002)
- *Casablanca* (1943)
- *It Happened One Night* (1934)
- *Roman Holiday* (1953)
- *The Sixth Sense* (1999)

### Comedy
- *Annie Hall* (1977)
- *Horse Feathers* (1932)
- *The Gold Rush* (1925)
- *The Great Escape* (1963)

### Action/Adventure
- *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006)
- *The Exorcist* (1973)
- *The Birds* (1963)
- *The Ring* (2002)

### Mystery/Suspense
- *Disturbia* (2007)
- *Silence of the Lambs* (1991)
- *The Lady Vanishes* (1938)
- *The Sixth Sense* (1999)
- *North by Northwest* (1959)
- *The Sixth Sense* (1999)

### Westerns
- *3:10 to Yuma* (2007)
- *Little Big Man* (1970)
- *Maverick* (1994)
- *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969)
- *The Searchers* (1956)
- *Stagecoach* (1939)
- *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976)
- *Cimarron* (1931)

### Science Fiction/Fantasy
- *Star Wars* (1977)
- *The Exorcist* (1973)
- *The Birds* (1963)
- *The Ring* (2002)

### Horror
- *Scarface* (1983)
- *The Godfather* (1972)
- *Donnie Brasco* (1997)
- *Boyz N the Hood* (1991)

### Gangster
- *Public Enemy* (1931)
- *Public Enemy* (1931)
- *Gangster* (1931)
- *Gangster* (1931)
- *Gangster* (1931)
- *Gangster* (1931)
- *Gangster* (1931)
- *Gangster* (1931)

### Drama/Adventure
- *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938)
- *The Merry Widow* (1934)
- *The Great Gatsby* (1934)
- *The Great Gatsby* (1934)
- *The Great Gatsby* (1934)
- *The Great Gatsby* (1934)
- *The Great Gatsby* (1934)
- *The Great Gatsby* (1934)

### Mystery
- *Mystery* (1971)
- *Mystery* (1971)
- *Mystery* (1971)
- *Mystery* (1971)
- *Mystery* (1971)
- *Mystery* (1971)
- *Mystery* (1971)
- *Mystery* (1971)
### Outside the Hollywood System

#### Foreign Films

* Postwar prosperity and a rising globalization in the 1950s and 1960s stimulated a renaissance of foreign-language films by such prominent directors as Sweden’s Ingmar Bergman (*Wild Strawberries*, 1957), Italy’s Federico Fellini (*La Dolce Vita*, 1960), France’s François Truffaut (*Jules and Jim*, 1961), Japan’s Akira Kurosawa (*Seven Samurai*, 1954), and India’s Satyajit Ray (*Apu Trilogy*, 1955–59).

* In the 1950s, the gradual breakup of the studios’ hold over theater exhibition stimulated the rise of art-house theaters, many specializing in foreign titles. Catering to academic audiences, art houses made a statement against Hollywood commercialism as they sought alternative movies.

* New multiplex theater owners also rejected the smaller profit margins of most foreign titles, which lacked the promotional hype of U.S. films. In addition, many viewers complained that English subtitles distracted them from devoting their attention to the visual images. As a result, between 1966 and 1990, the number of foreign films released annually in the United States dropped by two-thirds, from nearly three hundred to about one hundred titles per year.

### The Documentary Tradition

* Over time, the documentary developed an identity apart from its commercial presentation. As an educational, noncommercial form, the documentary usually required the backing of industry, government, or philanthropy to cover costs.

* By the late 1950s and early 1960s, the development of portable cameras had led to cinema verité (a French term for “truth film”). This documentary style allowed filmmakers to go where cameras could not go before and record fragments of everyday life more unobtrusively. Directly opposed to packaged, high-gloss Hollywood features, verité aimed to track reality, employing a rough, grainy look and shaky, handheld camera work.
The Rise of Independent Films

- The success of documentary films like Super Size Me and Fahrenheit 9/11 dovetails with the rise of indies, or independently produced films. As opposed to directors working in the Hollywood system, independent filmmakers typically operate on a shoestring budget and show their movies in thousands of campus auditoriums and at hundreds of small film festivals.
- “After the success of The Blair Witch Project ... it seemed that anyone with a dream, a camera and an Internet account could get a film made—or, at least, market it cheaply once it was made.” —Abby Ellin, New York Times, 2000
- In 2004, Mel Gibson’s The Passion of the Christ became, by far, the most successful independent film to date.

Moving to the Suburbs

- The combination of social and economic changes meant there were significantly fewer couples dating at the movies. The suburban move altered spending patterns and had a far more profound impact on movie attendance than did television in the early 1950s.
- In terms of income, there was little left over for movies after mortgage and car payments. When television exploded in the late 1950s, there was even less discretionary income—and less reason to go to the movies.

Television Changes Hollywood

- By the mid-1950s, television had displaced both radio and movies as the medium of national entertainment. With growing legions of people gathering around their living-room TV sets, movie content slowly shifted toward more serious subjects.
- The shift in content began with the rise of film noir in the 1940s but continued into the 1950s as commercial movies, for the first time, explored larger social problems such as alcoholism (The Lost Weekend, 1945), anti-Semitism (Gentleman’s Agreement, 1947), mental illness (The Snake Pit, 1948), racism (Pinky, 1949), adult–teen relationships (Rebel without a Cause, 1955), and drug abuse (The Man with the Golden Arm, 1955).
In terms of technology, Hollywood tried a number of approaches in an effort to appeal to the new TV generation. Technicolor, invented by an MIT scientist in 1917, had gradually improved, and it offered images that far surpassed those on a fuzzy black-and-white TV.

Just as radio in the 1950s worked to improve sound to maintain an advantage over television, the film industry introduced a host of gimmicks to draw attention to the superiority of movie narratives. In the early to mid-1950s, Cinerama, CinemaScope, and VistaVision all arrived in movie theaters, featuring striking wide-screen images, multiple synchronized projectors, and stereophonic sound. But like other experiments, 3-D (three-dimensional) movies appeared, including Warner Brothers’ horror film House of Wax, wildly popular in its first few weeks in theaters. But, like other experiments, 3-D required a large investment in new projection technology, plus special glasses distributed to all moviegoers. In addition, 3-D suffered from out-of-focus images; it wore off quickly as a novelty. Panavision, which used special Eastman color film and camera lenses that decreased the fuzziness of images, finally became the wide-screen standard throughout the industry.

Hollywood Adapts to Home Entertainment

Just as nickelodeons, movie palaces, and drive-ins transformed movie exhibition in earlier times, the videocassette transformed contemporary movie exhibition. Despite the scope of Technicolor and wide-screen cinema, and despite theaters experimenting with five-story IMAX mega-screens and surround sound, most people still prefer the convenience of watching movies at home. In fact, more than 50 percent of domestic revenue for Hollywood studios comes from the video/DVD rental and sales markets. Aside from videocassettes, pay-per-view and premium cable have also stolen parts of the theather-going crowd, leaving box-office receipts accounting for just 20 percent of total film revenue.

Popular Movies and Implications for Democracy

At the cultural level, commercial U.S. films function as consensus narratives, a term that describes cultural products that become popular and command wide attention. For all their limitations, classic Hollywood movies, as consensus narratives, provide shared cultural experiences, operating across different times and cultures.

At the international level, countries continue to struggle with questions about the influence of American films on local customs and culture. With the rise of international media conglomerates, it has become more difficult to awaken public debate over issues of movie diversity and America’s domination of the film business.