Movies for Fun & Profit, Art & Communication

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Every time I go to a movie, it's magic, no matter what the movie's about.

—Steven Spielberg

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

- Discuss why studying film is important and what it can contribute to an individual's life.
- Evaluate what makes a film "good" and understand how the role of film criticism is changing.
- Define what it means to be media literate.
- Explain the history of where audiences have seen films and the many different options contemporary audiences have for watching film as well as how those options affect the way they see the film.
- Explain how a film's budget and scale of production affects content and expectations.

1.1 Movies and Their Roles in Our Lives

All of us have ample opportunity to see, on an almost daily basis, how much movies mean to people. In a world in which almost every form of entertainment is increasingly available at our fingertips, often from the comfort of our living rooms, and even when the cost of movie tickets soars as the economy struggles, people keep coming to the movies. But why?

It's fun sometimes to watch people as they watch a movie. They're sucked in. It's a cliché to say that "they laugh, they cry," but there's always truth behind clichés—audiences do laugh and cry, and they have a variety of other emotions as they sit and watch. Audiences are moved by films in ways that they rarely are by other forms of art.

Why are movies so important to us? There are many answers to this question, some of which we will explore in this text. We'll also look at how writers, directors, and actors put movies together to create the desired effect upon an audience.

But more than that, we'll discover why studying film matters, and why and how it's possible to get even more enjoyment out of watching movies when we understand the process of making them. Examining movies more fully will help us understand why we care so much about them. And it will also help us understand something about ourselves. To fully evaluate a movie requires the use of tools—critical thinking, discernment, judgment, and perspective chief among them—that serve us well not only in deciding whether a movie is good but in all aspects of our lives. Movies are not, and are not meant to be, blueprints for how to live our lives. This is to say that most of us cannot live our lives like James Bond. If we drive fast, we likely crash. If someone throws us from a building, we likely die. Admirable as we may find Bond's skills and resilience, those talents do not translate to our everyday lives.

Films and their deeper meanings can be, however, reflective of our lives. We may not have license to kill, as Bond does, but we can appreciate the willingness to go it alone in the face of adversity, and even the necessity of doing so in the face of a slow-moving bureaucracy. We may also admire our hero's personal sense of justice, his perseverance in trying to defeat what he knows is evil, and his efforts to do his best for the betterment of others, even if he must disregard official rules and protocol to do so. The careful consideration of a film, then, applying to it the skills that we all have available to us, is an enjoyable, useful addition to a full life, as it is with any art form. Where film is different is in its active assault on our senses, making it a good starting point for any critical evaluation of art.

Studying film is a part of **media literacy**, or the understanding of how media affects our lives. We're bombarded with a constant stream of messages daily through advertising, art, and entertainment. It is useful to recognize how a movie manipulates our reactions and, by extension, the ways we respond (even if subconsciously). Media literacy can help us see how what we perceive on the surface as simple entertainment may actually be telling us numerous things about its creators, the culture, and the time it was created. And through this, we may learn more about ourselves, the world around us, and the timeless universality of human nature itself.

Armed with this knowledge, the reader will become a more sophisticated filmgoer, which will lead to not only a more sophisticated analysis of the elements behind what we see on screen, but also a richer enjoyment of a movie when he or she sits down in the theater, with popcorn in hand, as the lights go down and the magic begins.

1.2 Film: Looking for Meaning

Movies are how we see the world. But how do we see movies? We see them as escape, we see them as meaningful, we see them as windows into our lives and the lives of others. Perhaps we see a comedy to boost our spirits, to put us in a better mood. Maybe we choose a drama in hopes of a deeper feeling, or a science-fiction film to escape. Sometimes that's enough, and sometimes we seek a deeper meaning, a deeper satisfaction. We watch them for simple entertainment, we see them as cues for our behavior and tastes, and we find they are convenient topics of discussion with friends and complete strangers. Film is a uniquely popular **medium**, or form of communication, that captures both the imagination and the money of millions of people every weekend. A trip to the movies is a traditional first date, a great way to while away a couple of hours, and the only way to stay in the pop-culture loop when a blockbuster such as *The Avengers* or the latest *Iron Man* or *Star Trek* sequel is released.

Courtesy Everett Collection

▲ In the midst of the Great Depression, audiences found much to laugh about in *It Happened One Night*, a classic "screwball comedy" starring Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert.

How We See Movies

Since the beginnings of film technology in the 1890s, and even more so with the rise of feature-length films in the 1910s, audiences have been fascinated, both by the films themselves and by the people who make them. That love affair has not diminished; if anything, it has increased. Some years ago now, in *Movie Crazy: Fans, Stars and the Cult of Celebrity*, Samantha Barbas wrote:

> After nearly 100 years of motion pictures, Americans are still fascinated by the cinema. Although most of us feel quite sure about the way the movies work—that the camera depicts a distorted, constructed version of reality—we still engage in acts of verification. Although most of us accept that we cannot take part directly in the filmmaking process, we still want to feel a part of the movies by learning about the inner workings of film studios and the

> details of stars' lives. As long as we go to the movies, we will probably always be fascinated by questions of authenticity and involvement. And as twenty-first century technology provides us with more—and more lifelike—forms of entertainment, the more urgent these issues may become. (Barbas, 2001)

Samantha Barbas points out some important aspects of how audiences feel about movies—namely, that we understand that what we see on the screen is an imaginary world, yet we still become wrapped up in the fictional stories as if they are real. Because we feel so affected by what we know is fantasy, we often try to learn more about the people and processes that are able to involve us on such an emotional level.

Film is also, of course, a huge industry. While that will not be the focus here, it is still an unavoidable and important fact that colors every aspect of making movies—so we must pay attention to it. Box-office forecasts and scorekeeping have become a business unto themselves, and not just for professionals. Despite dire economic circumstances, in 2013 theater audiences spent more than $10 billion on tickets to the 669 movies whose grosses were tracked by Boxofficemojo.com, nearly $2 billion of that just on the year's five most popular releases, a staggering total for such tough times.

Yet this desire to go to movies, even in a tough economic climate, is understandable. More than most other art forms, movies allow us the ability to escape the world we're living in and enter another, at least for a short while. Although good books can do the same thing, they require a more active participation and imagination on the part of the reader. A movie allows viewers to sit back and relax while they see and hear the movie world unfold on the screen before them. As the audience immerses itself in the pre-Civil War fabric of *Django Unchained* or the room-to-room search for Osama bin Laden at the climax of *Zero Dark Thirty*—vastly different experiences, indeed—day-to-day concerns temporarily fade. Depending on the film, we really may laugh, we may cry, we may be frightened or exhilarated, and we often find ourselves in a world completely different from our own.

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▲ An action-adventure film like *Django Unchained*, even though grounded in reality, may be an escape for many viewers from their own personal realities.

Certainly there is something to be said for letting entertainment wash over you without thinking much about it. Laughing until you cry while watching *The Hangover* (2009), *What's Up, Doc?* (1972), or *Hail the Conquering Hero* (1944) can be rewarding in its own way. But the more discriminating film fan looks for deeper meaning and, by doing so, can find greater satisfaction. It is, simply, ultimately more enjoyable. No one wants to go to the movies with a checklist of suggested behaviors. But armed with the right tools, specifically the knowledge of the different elements that go into creating a film and how they affect its outcome, you can better enjoy the experience.

As you will learn in this text, the finished product we see on screen is the result of the collaboration of hundreds if not thousands of people. It is a true team effort, as anyone who has ever sat through the lengthy closing credits of a movie can attest. Yet the best films are almost

always the product of a singular vision, whether it be that of the writer of the screenplay or the director or the producer (sometimes the same person performs two or more of a film's major creative tasks and may even appear on screen as one of the characters). Ask anyone involved in the making of a movie, and they will tell you that, with all of the obstacles involved, it's amazing a film ever gets made at all. But a good film? That's almost a small miracle.

The Players, in Front of and Behind the Camera

Many people contribute to the creation of a film. Throughout the course of this text, we will discuss who they are and what they do. For now, it will be helpful to understand what role each person plays and how they all come together to create a movie before we go further. See Table 1.1 for additional jobs in filmmaking.

a. You: The audience and the critic. These are the end users, the people for whom the film is made, and the people who judge its merits, both by buying tickets and by spreading their opinions by word of mouth.

b. The screenwriter: The man or woman who creates the story on which the film is based. The story can be original or adapted from another medium, such as a book or play.

c. The actor: The face of the film and its best-known participant. (Note: The term "actor" will refer to men and women in this text.)

d. The cinematographer: In simple terms, the person who "shoots," or photographs, the film. He or she is responsible for the visual representation of the story.

e. The editor: The man or woman who puts the pieces of the puzzle together, that is, who takes individual shots and scenes and pieces them together in coherent form.

f. The director: The person with the ultimate responsibility for the overall film. The finished film is a reflection of his or her personal vision, no matter how many collaborators are involved.

g. The producer: The person who brings together all the people and financing necessary to get the film made and oversees the production from development to release, often with varying degrees of creative input.

▲ Meryl Streep has played remarkably diverse roles—a Polish refugee in *Sophie's Choice* (pictured here), Julia Child in *Julie and Julia*, a free-spirited single mother in the musical *Mamma Mia!*, and Linda in *The Deer Hunter*, a searing Vietnam War film by Michael Cimino.

▲ Scene from the movie *Bonnie and Clyde*. Arthur Penn, who died in September 2010, is among America's greatest directors. His most celebrated film, *Bonnie and Clyde*, marked a turning point in American film culture. It paved the way for the "New American Cinema" of the 1970s—films like *Taxi Driver* and *The Godfather*.

Table 1.1 Filmmaking jobs

Preproduction or planning stage	**Producer**	Arranges for film to be made, finds investors, hires people to make it, oversees production, makes sure it gets done on budget.
	Screenwriter	Writes script, whether original or adapted from another source.
	Production designer	Or, on a smaller film, the art director. Oversees the "look" of a film; responsible for keeping the sets, props, and costumes appropriate to the story and characters, and historically accurate if necessary.
Production or shooting stage	**Director**	Interprets script into personal vision and decides overall "look" with the production designer and cinematographer; directs actors and the action while shooting.
	Cinematographer	Directs camera placement, lens, and lighting choices; sometimes operates camera but usually has a camera crew.
	Gaffer	Head electrician; rigs and places lights according to cinematographer's instructions.
	Boom operator	Holds microphone just off camera to get clearest recording of dialogue. On a small-scale production, may also be the mixer, responsible for recording the sound.
	Grip	Moves props as necessary; dolly grip pushes camera dolly.
	Script supervisor	Makes detailed notes of every take so that actors and props can be repositioned for later retakes and maintain continuity.
Postproduction or assembly stage	**Editor**	Arranges the best footage that has been shot into a coherent, effective order.
	Sound editor	Mixes separate recordings of dialogue, sound effects, and music into final audio track.

What Makes a Film "Good"?

In some respects, as with any art form, quality is in the eye of the beholder. One cannot impose a strict set of standards, as if checking items off of a laundry list, when it comes to evaluating a movie (or a painting, a song, a television show, or any other form of art for that matter). The role of **film criticism** is to examine a film on various levels, interpret meanings that the filmmakers are conveying, and evaluate their effectiveness before arriving at a conclusion as to whether others will find it worthwhile. A simple film reviewer, on the other hand, rather than analyzing a film to any depth, will more likely rely on personal impressions, opinions, and superficial observations to declare whether a film is "good" or "bad" or somewhere in between.

When critiquing a film, we can establish a loose system of **benchmarks**, or criteria, that go beyond its ability to keep the audience in their seats for two hours. We will work toward identifying that system as we move forward, but its basic components are these: The film must be true to itself and reveal a greater truth about us. This is achieved in many ways: Are the film's messages relatable, not just in terms of the specific story it is telling, but as part of larger themes as well? For instance, in *Do the Right Thing*, director Spike Lee examines racism in a way that is both entertaining and moving. He uses the racial struggles of one block in one neighborhood to comment on the greater struggles of all people who deal with prejudice. Another aspect to consider is

if the emotions that a film portrays are genuine. That is, does the film earn its emotional impact? With the incredible array of tools at his or her disposal, any reasonably competent director can make an audience cry. But the truly moving film makes us feel the emotions we are watching more deeply so that we are not just observing but truly feeling. (*Do the Right Thing* is again a good example of this experience.)

Throughout this text, we will refer to this measure as the **truth test** (see Table 1.2). This test may sound as if it limits good movies to overtly serious fare, such as *The Seventh Seal* or *There Will Be Blood*, but it does not. Both are, indeed, great films; however, nothing could be further from the truth. Movies as varied as *Animal House*, *This Is Spinal Tap*, *Halloween*, *The Godfather* films (at least the first two), *Toy Story*, and *Argo* are also great if you measure them with this test. No subject matter, no form, no genre (type) of film disqualifies it from satisfying the truth test. It all lies in the creation and execution of the film, no matter what it is about or how it is presented. Before you use the truth test when you see a movie, ask yourself three simple questions adapted from late 18th/early 19th-century poet and playwright Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's autobiography, which form the basis of virtually all critical reaction to theater, film, literature, or creative art:

- What is the film trying to say?
- How well does the film say it?
- Was it worth saying?

(Adapted from Goethe, 1811/1897)

Then, once you have answered those questions, implement the truth test:

- Was the film true to itself?
- Did the film reveal a greater truth about us as human beings?

Courtesy Everett Collection

▲ Elia Kazan's *On the Waterfront* is a complex film. It asks viewers to make their own "truth test." It's an explicit call for workers to stand up to corrupt unions—to tell the truth—yet it's also a political allegory and a representative film from an "auteur" director's career, as we'll see in later chapters.

Table 1.2 Quick criteria for evaluating a film (or any work of art)

Truth test	Is the film true to itself?	Does the film explore some deep truth about human nature?	
Goethe's questions	What is the filmmaker trying to say?	How well was it said?	Was it worth saying?

It is important to be able to evaluate, now more than ever, what makes a film good. As we will see later, due to easy access to movie-making technology and the ability to share movies online, more people are making more films in more ways than ever before. That doesn't exactly improve the ratio of good to bad films, but it does at least offer more opportunity and variety, both for those who make films and for those who watch and love them. With the onslaught of new *product* (as movies are referred to in the industry), it is important to remember to focus not only on the method of delivery—how one sees a film, whether it be at a **multiplex** (a building housing several individual theaters), in a living room, in a home theater, or on a computer or iPhone—but on the

film itself. It's not necessarily *how* we're seeing something that is crucial, in other words, but *what* we're seeing. This text will help you first know what to look for when you are watching a movie; then, you can apply the truth test to determine for yourself what movies are good.

You Try It: The Truth Test

1. Think of your favorite movie, either current or all-time. Then think about why you like it, and jot down some ideas:
   - Is it funny? Is it scary? Did it make you happy to watch it? Could you relate to the characters?
   - Now think about *why* it made you feel those things, and *how*. What caused you to laugh, or to shriek in terror?
   - Did you react primarily to the action in the plot, to issues the story treats, to the characters, to performances of specific actors, to the technical style of the filmmaking, or to some combination of these?
2. Using the same favorite film, apply Goethe's three questions and finally the truth test. Jot down your responses to each of the questions.
   - What is the film trying to say?
   - How well does the film say it?
   - Was it worth saying?
   - Was the film true to itself? Is it consistent in how it delivers its message, whatever that message may be? (It need not be a "serious" message.)
   - Does the film reveal a bigger truth about us, about the people watching it? Again, this need not be limited to serious dramas; comedies often use humor to reveal deeper truths about us.

1.3 What Did We Just See? Beginning to Evaluate Films

How do we experience movies? We watch them, is the shortest, simplest answer. We watch a series of moving images put together in a way that is designed to entertain us. The first films were such miracles of then-modern technology that they tried to do little else. Audiences who saw *The Kiss* in 1896—a 47-second movie of a man and woman kissing, as the title promises, in a reenactment of a brief scene from a popular stage comedy called *The Widow Jones*—were stunned. Why? Because they were seeing something they had never seen before, images moving in a lifelike fashion.

Yet even then, some looked for deeper meaning. One person wrote of *The Kiss*: "The spectacle of the prolonged pasturing on each other's lips was beastly enough in life size on the stage, but magnified to gargantuan proportions and repeated three times over it is absolutely disgusting" (Hollingshead, 2010). And thus, a film critic was born.

Thinking It Through: Watching on a Deeper Level

Many people simply watch a movie. We work hard, we have pressure in our lives, we seek outlets to help us relax. Certain movies are perfect for this. Turn off your brain as a comedy like *Bridesmaids* or *Ted* begins, and you can relax and let life's pressures slip away. While this experience may be

enjoyable, it's also the cinematic equivalent of junk food. It's fun every now and then, but a steady diet of it isn't satisfying. What *is* more satisfying is seeking deeper meaning in the movies we see.

The good news is that finding deeper meaning like this doesn't take an advanced degree, or years of study on the part of a moviegoer. One doesn't pass an entrance exam to join the ranks of film critic. However, it does require effort, effort that is made easier when one knows more about how films are made, what films have influenced today's directors, and, more importantly, how to look for what the movies are trying to say. The best films not only hold up to such increased scrutiny; they are even more enjoyable in light of it. The first and foremost requirement on the part of the people watching is a love of film and a willingness to think about what they are seeing.

"Film criticism requires nothing but an interesting sensibility," John Podhoretz writes in *The Weekly Standard* in his essay "Thinking on Film." Podhoretz continues:

> The more self-consciously educated one is in the field—by which I mean the more obscure the storehouse of cinematic knowledge a critic has—the less likely it is that one will have anything interesting to say to an ordinary person who isn't all that interested in the condition of Finnish cinema. (2009)

Indeed, all that thoughtful consideration of a movie requires, in truth, is the willingness to pay a little bit more attention to what the film is trying to say, the ways it is saying it, and the recognition that film is a unique art form. This is not to say that it is any better or any worse than other expressions of art. It is merely different. And it does require a viewer's devoted attention, or key elements may be missed. To begin evaluating a film you've seen, recall Goethe's three simple questions you should ask yourself about any art, and our truth test for movies.

Books vs. Movies: And the Winner Is . . .

We often hear the complaint, when a well-loved book is made into a movie, that the book was much better. Often this is indeed the case. However, in classic films like *The Godfather* or *Jaws*, skilled filmmakers like Francis Ford Coppola and Steven Spielberg took lesser novels and turned them into brilliant movies.

In Peter Benchley's novel *Jaws*, for instance, subplots involving many of the characters distract from what is the heart of the story: the search for the shark. Spielberg eliminated many of these subplots (and allowed a character who dies in the novel to survive in the film), streamlining the action without sacrificing character development, which he establishes in other ways, such as the bonding scene in the boat when the three men drink and tell stories. Most critics consider the film to be much more successful than the novel.

©Warner Brothers/Courtesy Everett Collection

▲ Scene from the movie *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. An over-the top stylist like Tim Burton brings movie magic to the Willy Wonka story in his adaptation of Roald Dahl's children's book of the same name.

In reality, however, the comparison between books and the movies made from them doesn't matter. It's the proverbial comparison between apples and oranges. A movie

is not a book. Nor is it music, even if it is a documentary about music like *Woodstock* or Martin Scorsese's classic *The Last Waltz*. It is its own form of art, with its own set of values, rewards, and challenges. It must stand on its own and should be evaluated as a unique entity.

There is something about experiencing a thing visually that makes the impression lasting. This is not to say that a great scene in a novel isn't memorable—it is. But film is a visual medium, unlike a book. With a film we actually see the story presented to us, unfolding in what appears to be real time. And seeing it with an audience gives an added dimension missing from the solitary experience of reading (or watching a movie alone on video). As writer Bret Stalcup observes:

> Here we have one of the powerful potentials of film, the ability to stimulate prolonged and varied emotional responses. . . . I may move from humor to fear to poignancy to outrage to sadness within the limits of the duration of the film, and in some cases I may still feel emotional after-effects once the film is through. Studies show that sharing experiences that involve mutual emotional responses can result in an increased sense of bonding—perhaps this is why movies are a staple of traditional dating rituals, by creating effects that would otherwise be had over a much longer span of time. (Stalcup, 2010)

Elements of a Film: More Than Story Content

Indeed, more than any other medium, movies require a combination of many different forms of art to produce a successful whole. The screenwriter provides the story, the director shapes it to his or her own vision, the actors put their imprints on it, the cinematographer captures the work on film (or, increasingly, some digital medium), the composer punctuates what we see on screen with music. Behind the scenes, hundreds more specialists offer their contributions. If any one fails, the film cannot succeed as a whole.

▲ Still from the set of *Shutter Island*. Scorsese's insistence on working within the confines of Medfield State Hospital in *Shutter Island* inspired Leonardo DiCaprio's memorable performance.

But when they do succeed, they offer a combination of elements that provide a shared satisfaction that no other medium can offer. Often the different pieces work together so seamlessly that we don't even think of them as separate ingredients; this happens in the best films, where we see only the whole and forget the parts.

It's fine and sometimes instructive to know the technical names of all of the things that go into a movie, but it's not essential. On some level, you can enjoy a great performance like that of Sam Rockwell in *Moon* without knowing how the director managed to put both of the characters he plays in the same scenes together (though it's hard not to wonder). You can marvel at the beauty and sweep of a movie like *Shutter Island* without knowing how meticulously director Martin Scorsese arranged the lights on the set, or placed the actors just so, to achieve his desired result—giving the film a creepy look that still manages to be gorgeous, albeit in a consistently threatening way. And no one really has to know what it is that the key grip does.

However, when we do become aware of and consider these things—these elements of how a film is made and what the director and cast are trying to impart to us—our enjoyment will grow even richer. The point isn't to define terms so much as it is to simply look at what's going on in a movie—everything that's going on. It's something like tasting a good meal and trying to identify all of the combinations of flavors that make it delicious—or, in the case of a bad meal (or a bad film), why they don't quite add up. True film lovers don't just watch a movie; they try to really see it.

And seeing is the advantage film enjoys over other forms of art—seeing the images and characters move, interact, fight, sing, dance. Film is not a static form. Movement is key (it's why they're called "movies")—*seeing* that movement is what transfixes us.

The Future of Film Critics

One final aspect of the current film landscape may shape the media literacy surrounding the film medium while offering more opportunity to increase the discussion of it. Thanks to a troubled economy, newspapers and magazines around the country have made cutbacks that include laying off dozens of film critics. Why should a local newspaper, if it is part of a national chain, spend money paying a local critic if it can use the services of a **wire-service critic**, a critic who reviews the latest blockbuster and whose review runs in every newspaper that is part of the same ownership?

In his blog, the late Roger Ebert, who was perhaps the most famous film critic in the United States, explains:

> Why do we need critics? A good friend of mine in a very big city was once told by his editor that the critic should "reflect the taste of the readers." My friend said, "Does that mean the food critic should love McDonald's?" The editor: "Absolutely." I don't believe readers buy a newspaper to read variations on the Ed McMahon line, "You are correct, sir!" A newspaper film critic should encourage critical thinking, introduce new developments, consider the local scene, look beyond the weekend fanboy specials, be a weatherman on social trends, bring in a larger context, teach, inform, amuse, inspire, be heartened, be outraged. (Ebert, 2008)

In other words, the local critic should be part of a community discussion. Think of a review—a professional critic's, yours, your mother's, or your best friend's—not as the final word on the matter, but merely a starting point. Few pursuits are more enjoyable, after all, than arguing the relative merits of the latest release. A review should be what kicks off that conversation.

If there is a positive side to the thinning of the ranks of film critics, it is this: That conversation is now open to more people than ever, thanks to the Internet. Anyone can create a blog, literally in a matter of seconds, and post their thoughts on a movie (or anything else) for all the world to see. Moderated Web forums and unmoderated "usenet" groups provide ongoing online discussions about film and other topics. In a *Weekly Standard* essay, Podhoretz looks on what he sees as the bright side of this changing critic landscape:

> There aren't fewer voices, but many, many more. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of working critics on the Web in all fields. There are book bloggers and film bloggers and dance bloggers and music bloggers. The only difference between them and the professionals is that they don't get paid, except for a few dollars a week from Google ads.

That, he argues, might be a good thing:

> This deprofessionalization is probably the best thing that could have happened to the field. . . . Amateurism in the best sense will lead to some very interesting work by people whose primary motivation is simply to express themselves in relation to the work they're seeing—a purer critical impulse than the one that comes with collecting a paycheck along the way. (Podhoretz, 2009)

Podhoretz does not take into account that professional critics must submit their work to editors, that they must adhere to a set of standards, whereas bloggers have more of a free rein. Bloggers, meanwhile, argue that they do have editors—everyone who reads their posts, and comments on them, making their writing more interactive and part of a more authentic back-and-forth conversation. Whether that is true is open to debate. What's not debatable is that the conversation continues to change due to a combination of factors, including a troubled economy that affects traditional media outlets such as newspapers and better, more accessible technology.

The well-informed movie fan can be a big part of this conversation. That is what we will accomplish here—helping you discover the language of film, increase your knowledge, and evaluate what makes a film good—so that you not only enjoy the experience of going to the movies more, but also are able to share that knowledge and enthusiasm. Perhaps you'll even become a film critic, whether professionally or just by blogging.

1.4 Going to the Movies: From Theaters to Netflix to iPhones

Movies are made to be watched, obviously. But they are also usually intended to be watched in certain ways, and seeing a movie in a way other than what it was designed for can greatly affect dramatic impact, enjoyment, and even the understanding of it. Major factors such as uninterrupted presentation vs. serialized viewing (e.g., two parts with an intermission, planned frequent commercial interruptions, or multiple episodes spread over days or weeks), the size of the screen and image resolution (with visibility of fine details or only basic shapes), and the presence or lack of a large audience (with expected group reactions or merely individual responses) are all taken into consideration by filmmakers when planning the story structure, camera techniques, and editing styles (all of which we'll be examining in future chapters).

The Theater Experience

For generations, audiences saw movies in one place: the theater. More than just a place to watch films, the local movie house was also a place for communal gathering, where a group of people could share the experience of what they saw on the screen, talk about it, enjoy it, and debate it. In addition, audiences were able to enjoy concessions as they watched—popcorn, candy, and soft drinks, which would prove so popular with audiences that they would eventually become the biggest source of revenue for theater owners.

Imagine for a moment the startling cultural shift this new movie house created in people's lives when it first appeared in the early years of the 20th century. At five cents per ticket, movie houses quickly became known as "nickelodeons." Live theater existed, of course, on Broadway and in smaller regional venues, but costs for production and touring required ticket prices beyond what average working people could afford. Films, however, just had to be produced once, and copies could be sent anywhere, so as movie theaters opened across the country, there was an affordable form of social entertainment that one didn't have to live in New York to enjoy. The movie theater

became a destination point that provided not only a sense of community but also a form of entertainment that almost seemed magical when it first arrived. A trip to the movies is something we take for granted today, but when motion pictures first arrived, they instigated a seismic shift in the cultural landscape.

Lewis Wickes Hine/courtesy Everett Collection

▲ Early silent films played to large audiences of immigrants. Escaping from crowded tenements, they could enjoy the stories for a nickel, even if some couldn't read the intertitles.

Simply put, movies were a technological advancement that changed lives. This advancement would hardly be the last in the entertainment industry. The death knell has been sounded many times for the live theater, which survived despite films, and then for films in theaters as well as live theatrical productions. In the late 1920s, competition from radio helped hasten the use of sound technology for films, and in the early 1950s television was a major blow against the film industry when it became widely available in homes. Why leave the house for entertainment when it was being beamed into your living room—for free? Indeed, television had some effect on box-office numbers, but film again survived, after introducing new technological enhancements like wide screen, stereo sound, more frequent use of color, and more adult-oriented stories not available on television. The first of several periodic crazes for 3-D (which seems to revive briefly about every 30 years, although the latest trend has survived longer than previous spurts of 3-D movies) was an attempt to draw viewers away from their TV sets and into the theaters for something they could not get at home. The introduction of color TV, uncensored cable, widescreen stereo HDTV, and lately even 3-D televisions has neutralized those aspects as strictly theatrical attractions, however.

Methods of distribution have changed over the history of filmmaking, as we'll discuss soon (see Table 1.3 for current distribution and viewing options). Ease of access to movies at home, too, would threaten the popularity of going to a theater to see movies. Yet despite the fact that a simple click on a computer keyboard will deliver a movie to your laptop instantaneously—and the fact that home-theater systems can rival and sometimes outclass what's available at the local multiplex—people still go to movies. Going to the movies always has been and still is an act of sharing a moment that simply can't be replicated anywhere else.

Table 1.3 Movie distribution and viewing options

Movie theater (traditional 35mm film and HD digital cinema)	Most desirable by filmmakers for dramatic impact of presentation but often least convenient for some viewers.
Cable and satellite/broadcast TV	Broadcast and some cable showings. Interrupted by advertisements and/or edited for time or content.
Home video (DVD and Blu-ray)	Home theater systems can now rival many multiplex theaters.
Internet/computer monitor	Quick and easy video rentals, sometimes streaming direct to TV sets.
Phone and portable media	Most convenient for some, but least desired by filmmakers.

The Home Video Revolution

By the late 1940s and 1950s, television allowed people to see events live as they were happening as well as to watch movies from the comfort of their own homes, albeit on very small screens with a low-resolution image. Movies survived the advent of television, as we noted above. Next came videocassette recorders, what Vincent Canby of the *New York Times* called the "VCR revolution." When the **VCR** (short for videocassette recorder, a once-popular machine for recording or watching films at home using reels of magnetic tape inside plastic cassettes) appeared in the late 1970s and 1980s, it became a device that would change the game in two important ways. First, it allowed film fans to stay at home and watch the film of their choice whenever they wanted (assuming the title was available). Second, audiences were no longer limited to *current releases*, or the films playing in theaters at the moment. Instead, the only limits were availability and your memory. Remember how much you liked *Bonnie and Clyde* but hadn't seen it since it came out? No problem. A quick trip to the video store and you could be watching Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway robbing banks before dinner. In 1985, Canby likened the popularity of VCRs to the arrival of television decades prior. He notes that this jump in cinematic technology "eventually swept away the huge, grandly ornate movie palaces of the 1920s and left in their place small, utterly functional, faceless theaters" (Canby, 1985).

Canby predicted a dire future not only for movie theaters but also for the film industry itself, envisioning and encouraging a VCR-inspired rethinking of the way movies are made. "There must follow not only an alteration in the kinds of movies produced but…an alteration in the way we perceive them…In reality, these alterations are well along—the VCR revolution is simply accelerating the process" (Canby, 1985).

Canby was wrong about VCRs ruining the movie theater industry (they ultimately helped revive and broaden it), but his call to action is still relevant today. Even though VCRs and, later, DVD players, online streaming services, and on-demand cable choices have affected the film business, it clearly remains a thriving industry. If multiplexes are no longer springing up like weeds in every city and town, few are closing their doors. Videotapes, DVDs, and Blu-rays often supplement trips to the theater, instead of replace them, and at the same time increase demand for more movies.

DVDs

Theaters long ago stopped being the only place to go to watch a movie. It's been a long time since anyone thought watching a film at home was anything approaching revolutionary; it is, in fact, a preferred way for many people. This has been especially true since the advanced features, greater convenience, and higher quality of **DVD**s (digital versatile discs) made VHS tapes obsolete by the early 2000s. Indeed, theatrical releases might even be considered high-profile advance advertising for the studios' home video releases. More recent developments, however, may become somewhat more game changing.

Typically there is lag time between when a film is released in theaters and when it appears for purchase and rental on DVD or **Blu-ray** (which uses a narrower blue laser beam to read data instead of the wider red laser of DVDs, thus allowing more data to be stored in a smaller space). With hugely profitable films, the time between can stretch to months or sometimes years. (By the same token, some cheaply made films, or films that are expected to perform poorly at the box office, are released directly to video, if at all.)

There have been experiments with eliminating the gap in time between when a film is released in theaters and when it is released on video altogether. In 2006, Oscar-winning director Steven

Soderbergh released *Bubble*, a 73-minute film, in a few theaters, on cable television, and, four days later, on DVD. However, the box-office returns on *Bubble* were poor, as were DVD sales. While studios continue to discuss the possibilities of shortening the time between a movie's theatrical release and its appearance in home video formats, the concept remains very much a work in progress, with no major studios repeating the experiment. One explanation for this is that a theatrical release always gives a certain legitimacy to any video release; it tends to increase sales and rentals over titles that go directly to video, so major studios have been justifiably wary.

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▲ Scene from the movie *Bubble*. Steven Soderbergh is an artist whose first hit, *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*, was a distinctly low-budget personal film. Even as he has gone on to make blockbusters such as the *Ocean's* series, he continues to experiment with low-budget idiosyncratic films such as *Bubble*.

Bringing It All Back Home: How Netflix, iTunes, and Mobile Devices Affect Movies

There are other changes, however, that have taken hold more quickly. At the beginning of the 21st century, technology has improved to the point that it is now possible to watch a blockbuster film on a hand-held electronic device—*Transformers* on an iPod, for example. (Ironically, this trend toward individual viewing of smaller images harkens back to Thomas Edison's Kinetoscopes of 1894, before the days of movie projectors, when people stuck a penny into an arcade machine that let them watch a movie through a peephole magnifying glass focused on the film itself.)

Through its iTunes platform, Apple offers movies for sale and rent. Internet Movie Database (IMDb), the popular Internet site that lists casts, release dates, and more for movies, also makes movies available for rental. Netflix, which allows customers to rent films by mail, thus avoiding trips to the video store, has moved increasingly toward its streaming service, which makes films and television series available for rental online. Like Netflix, Hulu also offers a streaming service; many episodes of television shows are available the day after they air, making the need to watch them when they are shown (as well as the need to record them) obsolete. Amazon rents movies online and sometimes includes free instant access to a streaming copy for customers who don't want to wait until the higher-quality DVD or Blu-ray they've purchased arrives.

Increasingly, producers and directors are taking distribution matters into their own hands. At the 2010 Sundance Film Festival, Michael Mohan, who wrote and directed the independent film *One Too Many Mornings*, made his movie available for download for $10 before he'd sold the rights; for $35, he included a poster and a piece of the couch used in the film. He also offered the rights to the film on his website for $100,000. "Forget a bidding war," he told the *New York Times*. "Whoever gets to their laptop the fastest gets it." Mohan believed that having the film available online wouldn't kill its chances to be seen in theaters. "There's no reason it can't go to theaters after it's already available online," he told the *Times*. "I know a lot of theater owners aren't into it, but maybe somebody out there is that progressive."

What Mohan discusses is an intriguing possibility, but one that so far has not been put into practice in any meaningful way for audiences.

An interesting question in the filmmaking industry today is whether the availability of films on smaller and smaller screens will affect the way mainstream movies are made. In a theatrical release, a great part of the enjoyment is in the attention to detail on the screen. Skilled directors make use not only of the central images in each frame, but of the surrounding elements as well. When a screen is the size of a matchbox, many of the smaller details are lost. Does this loss of detail decrease the enjoyment of the person watching it? Does the smaller image viewed in an uncontrolled environment increase the potential for distraction by outside sources, thus making the content harder to follow? Some filmmakers, like director David Lynch, whose credits include *Eraserhead* and *Blue Velvet*, believe so. In one of the DVD bonus features for his film *Inland Empire*, Lynch explains:

> If you're playing the movie on a telephone you will never in a trillion years experience the film. You'll think you have experienced it. But you'll be cheated. It's such a sadness, that you think you've seen a film on your . . . telephone. Get real. (Lynch, 2006)

But other filmmakers embrace the technique and the possibility of expanding their audience to less traditional platforms. Some television producers for popular shows such as *The Office* create "webisodes," or episodes of the show that appear online only. Web sites like FunnyOrDie.com create original short films that can be seen only online (and often include big-name actors as well).

Full-length movies created solely for the Internet are more difficult to come by, but it seems inevitable that they, too, will follow. Making full-length movies available online could be a good thing because it is another creative outlet. If these movies are to be effective, though, not just commercially but artistically, the people making them will have to accommodate the smaller screen size and different viewing experiences of the audience that is downloading to mobile devices with small screens. This will be important in the same way that it was important for filmmakers when planning the structure, camera composition, and pacing of movies made for television instead of for theatrical exhibition.

Trends Toward Home Theater Systems and Larger Theater Screens

Just as new technology has allowed people to watch movies piecemeal and at their leisure on hand-held devices such as telephones, iPads, and laptop computers, it has also more or less leveled the playing field between commercial theaters and affordable home theater displays. Television has always had a smaller, lower-quality image than film projected in a theater. High-definition television narrowed that difference in the early 2000s, and the conversion of most American theaters to digital projectors in 2013 meant that owners of medium to high-end home video monitors or projectors could now experience nearly identical picture quality to what their local multiplexes were able to provide. More and more average consumers are installing larger and better home video and audio systems (including high-definition 3-D displays and multi-channel stereo surround sound) in dedicated home theater rooms. This removes presentation quality as a major reason for seeing a movie in a commercial theater, especially when high-quality Blu-ray editions are released for sale within several months of a film's theatrical premiere at roughly the price of a couple of theater tickets. Not only that, but at home the movie can be paused for bathroom or snack breaks, and scenes played over again to clarify confusing sections before continuing, perhaps with optional subtitles turned on to make clear what the actors really said.

Theaters still offer the socialization and large group experience that adds so much to the impact of comedies and action-adventure films, but that may not be enough for all viewers. To draw audiences away from their homes, just as in the 1950s with the competition from television, some

theaters are installing ever-larger screens and providing special-format presentations such as the extra-large IMAX film, whose image is about eight to sixteen times sharper than standard 35mm film or the best digital projection systems.

Viewers have more options than ever to see movies. Yet it is essential to remember that, no matter the format in which we watch a movie, the most important thing is the content. However cool it might be to watch *Up in the Air* on an iPod while actually flying in an airplane, the experience would mean nothing after five minutes if the film wasn't any good, as verified by our truth test.

1.5 The Current Film Landscape

Almost since films have been made, there have been big-budget blockbusters as well as independently made low-budget films. But the majority of films come from a middle ground as far as cost goes. The development of cheaper equipment, coupled with a discovery of non-mainstream niche audiences and self-distribution, has combined to put even more emphasis on the distinction between very expensive movies and those with tiny budgets. Meanwhile, improved technology has given audiences more places to see the films, both large and small.

Blockbuster vs. Do-It-Yourself

©Fox Searchlight/courtesy of Everett Collection

▲ *Little Miss Sunshine* was made for a modest $8 million. This was a first film for the directors Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris. The film was nominated for four Academy Awards and won for Best Original Screenplay and Best Supporting Actor.

With the improvement of technology, which has put better equipment in the hands of more people, it has never been easier to physically make a movie than it is today. *Distributing* the movie—that is, getting a studio to buy it so that it can be put into theaters—on the other hand, is often more difficult. Financial difficulties have forced the closing of smaller studios that had been the best option for filmmakers with a lot of ideas but little money. This does not mean that smaller films aren't still being made. Woody Allen, for example, continues to make a film each year, but he keeps his production costs low enough that limited releases can satisfy his small niche of devoted fans and still gross enough after foreign and video sales that he can make another film. As a film like *(500) Days of Summer* proves, by both critical acclaim and a decent showing at the **box office** (the place where tickets are sold), it is still possible for low-budget films to make an impact.

It does mean, however, that it's harder for worthy movies to be distributed, even at what is known as an **art house**, a theater that shows low-budget and challenging films (the ones that aren't advertised in commercials during football games). Many studios are simply not spending the money to buy as many films, and this leaves all of us the poorer. Even theater managers must often fight to obtain copies of small-scale limited-release films they would like to play, including critically lauded films such as Jeff Nichols's *Mud*, Dustin Hoffman's *Quartet*, and Joss Whedon's 2013 version of *Much Ado About Nothing*. Most of these independent films may never be shown

outside of major cities and must find their audiences in their video releases after gaining recognition by submission to film festivals and accumulating some reviews in print or online. Some independently made films, such as Clay Eide's noir thriller *Dead Dogs* (1999), shot on 35mm film in black and white, may achieve acclaim at a variety of film festivals yet never get either theatrical or video distribution. Others, like Caspian Tredwell-Owen's police thriller *Profile of a Killer* (2012) and Sam Fischer's multi-generational war drama *Memorial Day* (2011), were shot on HD video and intended to be straight-to-video productions, yet a single successful theatrical screening of each led to additional self-distributed city-by-city playdates that grew into unexpected theatrical runs the year after each was made (even if extremely limited by Hollywood standards), before their ultimate video releases. Ramaa Mosley's comic parable *The Brass Teapot* premiered at a festival in 2012, had additional festival showings and a very limited theatrical release in April of 2013, and by June of 2013 had come out on video, where it would likely receive its greatest audience.

At the same time that small studios are cutting back, the larger studios spend hundreds of millions in the hopes of coming up with a **blockbuster** (a film that makes a lot of money at the box office). It's a form of high-stakes gambling: The studios risk a lot of money in movies they believe will be blockbusters, in the hopes of getting a lot back in return. (See Table 1.4 for approximate budgets of different types of movies.) There is nothing new about this; in the 1910s D. W. Griffith, one of the most important early film directors, made films whose budgets were huge at the time. Yet they often made that money back and then some, the controversial *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) being the foremost example.

The Birth of a Nation was the first truly influential **event film**, a film promoted as something outside of the ordinary, often shown at higher ticket prices, and a movie that people went out of their way to see so they could discuss the experience with all their friends. This practice continues today, with movies like *Avatar* and *Titanic*. Studios now bet hundreds of millions of dollars that a film will be so popular, and make so much money, that it will earn a fortune, despite the cost of making it.

Table 1.4 Scales of feature-length movie productions and approximate budget ranges*

"Do-it-yourself"	Independent	Small studio	Major studio	"Blockbuster"
$100–$100,000	**$100,000–$15,000,000**	**$15,000,000–$50,000,000**	**$50,000,000–$100,000,000**	**$100,000,000–$300,000,000**
Midget Zombie Takeover ($2,000)	*Spring Breakers* ($5 million) *Don Jon* ($6 million) *Jobs* ($12 million) *Nebraska* ($12 million) *The Place Beyond the Pines* ($15 million)	*The Evil Dead* ($17 million) *Kick-Ass 2* ($28 million) *Lee Daniels' The Butler* ($30 million) *We're the Millers* ($37 million) *Grudge Match* ($40 million)	*Captain Phillips* ($55 million) *Despicable Me 2* ($76 million) *Grownups 2* ($80 million) *A Good Day to Die Hard* ($92 million) *Gravity* ($100 million)	*The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* ($130 million) *Star Trek Into Darkness* ($190 million) *Iron Man 3* ($200 million) *Oz the Great and Powerful* ($215 million) *Man of Steel* ($225 million)

*Examples of 2013 releases, figures from Boxofficemojo.com

Big-Budget Films: *Avatar* and *Titanic*

A recent example of a big-budget film is *Avatar*. James Cameron wrote and directed the movie, which is set in a future where humans have gone to the planet Pandora, in hopes of mining a rare mineral that will help solve an energy crisis on Earth. Jake Sully, played by the actor Sam Worthington, is a Marine who has lost the use of his legs. Like others on the planet, with technology he is able to inhabit the bodies, or avatars, of creatures made from the DNA of humans and the native population of Pandora, the Na'vi.

During the course of the movie, Jake falls in love with the Na'vi way of life, as well as with a Na'vi woman. He turns his back on the humans, eventually becoming a Na'vi himself. Although the plot was criticized for not being particularly original—films such as *The New World* and especially *Dances With Wolves* have told a similar story (and various elements of these are "borrowed" from numerous other films of the past)—the look of the film was remarkable, and *Avatar* was promoted as an event film that many expected would revolutionize the industry. Cameron created new technology to merge live-action footage with scenes created on computers; seen in 3-D, the effect was especially impressive. Critics swooned, and audiences flocked to theaters to see it, again and again, paying ticket surcharges to see it in 3-D.

Avatar cost somewhere between $250 million and $500 million to make, yet weeks after its release, it had already grossed more than $1 billion worldwide for the Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation (Gray, 2010). While the risk to create such an expensive movie was indeed huge, the risk was also not taken without consideration of the outcome. Cameron had a proven track record; before *Avatar* was *Titanic*, the highest-grossing film of all time. Cameron clearly knew how to make popular movies, so the studio felt confident that *Avatar* would be a blockbuster.

And, as with *Titanic*, Cameron spent years developing new technology for *Avatar*, creating special effects that had never been seen in films before. This gave Twentieth Century-Fox more confidence that Cameron could produce a moneymaking film, no matter how much it cost up front. Yet even then, it took a complex series of negotiations to get such an expensive film made.

▲ A big-budget film like *Titanic* requires hundreds of technicians and years of work. For this film, a complete studio was built from the ground up in Baja California. The entire film was shot there.

Small-Budget Films: *Paranormal Activity*

At the other end of the financial spectrum are do-it-yourself projects, such as *Paranormal Activity*. A horror film with a budget of only $15,000—truly an absurdly small amount in modern terms, when much more than that is spent on feeding the cast and crew of larger movies—it became a phenomenon more profitable than *Avatar*, and with success much more surprising.

Paranormal Activity is set in a San Diego home where a young couple lives. Katie, played by Katie Featherston, has been bothered at various times in her life by what seem to be unhappy spirits.

Her boyfriend, Micah (Micah Sloat), buys a video camera in an attempt to document the disturbances, which have grown more frequent. Micah taunts both Katie and whatever presence is at work in the home.

The incidents grow increasingly frequent and violent and are captured by Micah's camera. He sets it up in their bedroom, and during the night Katie is seen getting up and standing by the bed for hours, staring at Micah. In the morning, she has no recollection of doing so.

Eventually the camera will capture the tragic end of the story, without comment from the characters. It gives the already scary story an even more frightening conclusion.

▲ Scene from the movie *Paranormal Activity 4*. *Paranormal Activity* is an example of a film that was successful due to a Web-based viral campaign. Electronic word-of-mouth brought in audiences eager to see what all the buzz was about. The film spawned three sequels, including *Paranormal Activity 4*, shown here.

In the case of *Paranormal Activity*, writer and director Oren Peli used his lack of a budget to his advantage. The entire story takes place inside and outside the house in which Micah and Katie live—which was in fact Peli's real home. Instead of giving the movie a cheap feel, it instead makes it claustrophobic, adding to the tension the characters, and the audience, feel. The inclusion of few other characters has the same effect; we feel as if we are stuck in the situation with Micah and Katie.

Peli builds the film completely from the "footage" Micah captures on his camera. Thus, Peli doesn't have to use more expensive cameras; the homemade look of what the audience sees fits perfectly with the story. Indeed, Peli constructs the story as if it were footage found by the San Diego police. He even includes a card on screen at the end of the film detailing what happened to Micah and Katie (and goes so far as to thank their "parents" for allowing them use of the footage).

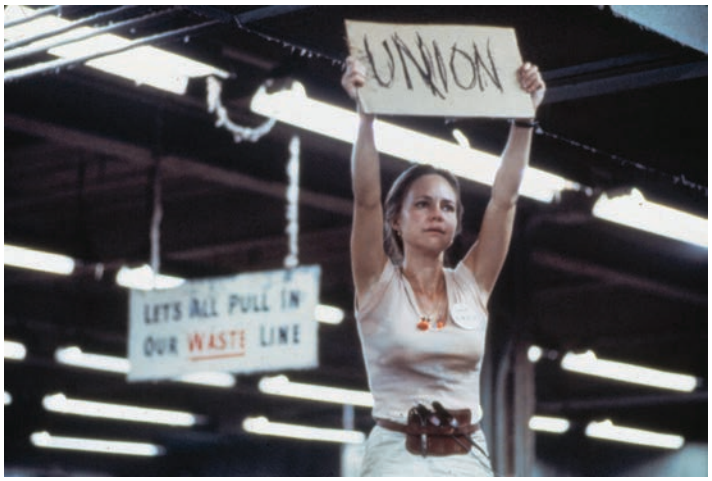
Despite the film's tiny budget, it grossed more than $107 million at the box office, making it the most profitable movie in history. *The Blair Witch Project*, *Open Water*, *28 Days Later*, and other small-scale movies have become popular hits despite being shot on consumer video equipment.

Avatar and *Paranormal Activity* were both released in the same year, 2009, serving as examples of both the blockbuster film and the do-it-yourself movie surviving, and even thriving, at the same time.

Making Money vs. Making a Statement

Blockbuster movies are designed from the outset to make large profits to justify their large budgets, but every commercial movie is put into production with the intent of making money, so its producers can afford to make more movies. As a result, producers, studios, and investors with the greatest financial risk may force filmmakers to make compromises in order to appeal to the largest number of people and avoid offending target audiences or other influential groups. When budgets are kept low enough, however, filmmakers can try riskier material and still hope to earn back their investments with smaller target audiences. Sometimes directors, cast, and crew

will accept lower salaries when they feel strongly about the social issues tackled by a potentially controversial screenplay, just so the film can be made. And in the case of the personally financed "no-budget" independent movies that today's digital technology has made possible (with out-of-pocket expenses equivalent to perhaps a few weeks' vacation), filmmakers can treat any subjects they want in any ways they want. Such filmmakers neither need nor expect to make large profits, and they consider themselves successful merely to break even. They may even post their movies online for free viewing, hoping more people will see them that way. While this sort of movie may be on a smaller scale with less polish and rougher edges than Hollywood or more ambitious independent productions, it can afford an out-of-the-mainstream approach in both content and style that larger budgets tend to inhibit. The lower the budget of a film, the more honest a personal statement its story may be by the filmmaker, and the smaller the niche audience needs to be to cover the costs of production. As we'll see in upcoming chapters, however, larger-budgeted and studio-financed movies can also be made with an intent to influence or comment on society, even while simultaneously attempting to appeal to large audiences.



▲ Scene from the movie *Norma Rae*. Films about union struggles are rare. *Norma Rae*, starring Sally Field, is a fictional account of a struggle for workers' rights in a textile mill.

Summary and Resources

Chapter Summary

Movies have been a popular medium since their invention well over a century ago. They remain so today, with audiences spending more money than ever before on tickets. At the same time, film is also a unique art form that demands a specific set of skills for the viewer to fully appreciate its impact.

It is possible simply to watch a film and enjoy it, but the more satisfying experience is to watch it for meaning. One way to judge the quality of a movie is to apply the truth test, which asks whether a movie is true to itself and whether it tells a greater truth about us. Not all films pass this test, but the ones that do are typically the best.

As we begin to think about films in these terms, we enjoy them more. One need not be a professional critic to seek deeper meaning. One needs only to see movies with an open and inquisitive mind, looking for what the players involved in creating a film are trying to impart to us.

Although the story may be what captures our interest, today's multiple options for viewing films can also affect how well we are able to notice everything the filmmakers are trying to show us. As film has evolved, so have the formats in which we can enjoy this medium. Once a cultural center of a community, the commercial movie theater is now just one option for viewing a movie. Affordable technology has permitted home theater setups that rival or surpass the quality of many theaters. The Internet has made viewing films on personal devices possible. It has also made the evaluation and criticism of them more democratic and widespread.

Technology has also made it easier to make a movie on a minimal budget, allowing more films to be made on a wider variety of subjects, with a wide range of technical resources and competence, designed for a wide range of viewing situations. This in turn requires that we take a film's ambitions and limitations into consideration when deciding how successfully we think it achieved its goals. We must understand that big-budget films can succeed in ways that small-budget films simply cannot compete with, but that small-budget films may succeed in areas that large-budget films often overlook or intentionally avoid.

Questions to Ask Yourself

- Do you more frequently watch films straight through from beginning to end, or do you take pauses from time to time? How does this affect your ability to follow the story and become involved in the characters?
- How often do you watch movies in a theatrical setting, compared with TV, Internet, or portable devices? How does experiencing the same film in a theater, on TV (or computer), or on a small portable device affect how you enjoy it?
- How does the presence of big-name stars and expensive special effects in a film determine your decision to watch it, and your enjoyment of it, compared with a smaller budget film with no major stars or elaborate digital effects?

You Try It

1. Several movies are available for free on online services such as Hulu.com and Movieclips.com. Visit one of these sites and watch at least part of a film that you have also seen in the theater. If you saw Avatar in theaters, you could watch the following brief scene from the film by going to www.movieclips.com and searching "Avatar":

   "When You Are Ready"

   Compare the experience of watching the movie on a computer or laptop with watching it in a theater. Which method of viewing do you find more satisfying? Which one is less satisfying? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each method of viewing?
2. Visit boxofficemojo.com and search the titles for a film that you have seen that cost more than $100 million to make (a film's budget is often listed with the other information available about it). Then find a film that you've seen that cost less than $20 million to make. Compare the two movies, not on the basis of plot, direction, or acting, but in terms of the production values—basically, how elaborate the sets are, how professional the film looks. Which film did you enjoy more? Why? Was the more expensive film or the cheaper one more satisfying?
3. See a film with a friend. Or think about a film you and a friend have seen recently. Email each other with a list of five things you liked about the movie and five things that you didn't like. Compare your lists and see which elements you agree on and which you disagree on. What were your differences? Why?

Key Terms

art house A movie theater that shows "art" films, including independents, foreign films, revivals of classics, and non-mainstream movies. Art house movies are typically made on small budgets and tend to be serious, thoughtful fare.

benchmarks Certain standards and elements that are criteria for measuring something.

blockbuster Sometimes used to describe a film that costs a lot to make; more often it describes a film that makes a lot of money at the box office.

Blu-ray A more advanced technological improvement of the DVD, using a narrower blue laser beam to read data instead of the wider red laser, thus allowing more data to be stored in a smaller space. Blu-ray discs are almost exclusively associated with a high-definition picture that is about six times sharper than standard DVDs and approaches the quality of 35mm film prints.

box office The booth where movie tickets are sold, or the amount of money a film makes through ticket sales, with the *gross* being the amount people spent on tickets, and the *earnings* being the share of the ticket sales paid by theaters back to the film distributor. (Typically the earnings are about half the gross by the end of a film's theatrical run.)

DVD Digital versatile disc, sometimes known as digital video disc, an optical storage medium most frequently used for storing movies. DVDs store digital information on a disc that is smaller than a videotape, yet has a higher-quality picture and allows for more flexibility in searching for scenes. They also can provide direct random access through menus, alternate audio tracks, and additional data storage.

event film A film promoted as something outside of the ordinary.

film criticism The practice of critiquing and evaluating a film's quality, usually by writing about it, though some critics use television and radio as well. Serious film criticism deals more with how effectively the filmmakers communicate their ideas (and what those ideas are), whereas a simple film review concentrates on the reviewer's personal impressions, observations, and opinions. Criticism does not just evaluate the film as a stand-alone work but also places it into the larger context of film as a whole, and of society.

media literacy The study and understanding of various forms of media and how they relate to our lives.

medium A form of communication (plural: media).

multiplex A large theater with several screens, allowing many different movies to be shown at the same time with only one staff of employees and the reduced operating costs of a single building.

truth test A way of measuring a film's effectiveness, asking whether it is true to itself and reveals larger truths about us.

VCR Short for videocassette recorder, a once-popular machine for recording or watching films at home using reels of magnetic tape inside plastic cassettes. Sometimes misleadingly simplified to "video," the most popular format was VHS, with Beta, U-matic, and several others also gaining some significant use.

wire-service critic A critic who reviews films for a service such as the Associated Press, which then distributes the review to its member newspapers, radio stations, websites, or other media outlets.