Film and Its Impact on Society

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Still from Good Night, and Good Luck *(2005). ©Warner Independent Pictures/courtesy Everett Collection*

I believe it's through film that our culture and values are passed along. Who's the good guy, who's the bad guy, what's right, what's wrong.

—Peter Lalonde

Learning Objectives

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

- Explain how films incorporate meanings, attitudes, and information beyond the obvious actions and events in their stories.
- Describe the impact of social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, on film today.
- Discuss how certain films actively address current sociopolitical topics while others provide audiences an escape from them, and how many that appear to be escapist often incorporate deeper issues and content reflecting contemporary concerns.
- Explain the influence of regulation and censorship, including the Motion Picture Production Code of 1930, the MPAA ratings system, the Hollywood blacklist, and the ways films are edited for TV.
- Discuss how film can affect society and how society may affect film.

2.1 Film: Beyond Entertainment

Since their inception, movies have provided inexpensive mass entertainment; cinema is an incredibly popular medium. As we have already seen, audiences spent more than $10 billion on movie tickets in 2013. People obviously enjoy going to the movies. It is clear that movies have had a profound impact on society. And not only are audiences influenced by what they see at the movies; audiences influence what is shown in theaters as well.

Whether it is in appearance, fashion, or behavior, films romanticize a certain lifestyle that is eagerly imitated by audiences. Fashion magazines promise that we can "Get Angelina's Look" if we follow the tips inside. Celebrity gossip publications keep readers up to date on the comings and goings of seemingly everyone who has appeared in a movie. The Internet and social media are practically choked with chatter about film—box-office results, reviews, gossip, and more. Beyond these shallower aspects, film can influence how we live, our morality, and our behavior. What is open to discussion, however, is the direction of the influence—do films influence culture or do they reflect it? Or is it both?

Courtesy Everett Collection

▲ Howard Beale's mad rant in *Network* was given new currency in the 2010 electoral campaign: "I'm as mad as hell and I'm not going to take this anymore."

Yes, we go to the movies to be entertained; as Steven J. Ross says in *Movies and American Society*, we go

> to laugh, cry, boo, cheer, be scared, thrilled, or simply to be amused for a few hours. But movies are something more than just an evening's entertainment. They are also historical documents that help us see—and perhaps more fully understand—the world in which they were made. (Ross, 2002)

Movies, in other words, have something to say, often beyond their literal meaning. Even bad movies, silly movies, pornographic movies, when taken as a whole, serve as a sort of pop-culture barometer that often measures more than just the fleeting. It takes longer to produce a feature-length movie,

after all, than it does an episode of a television show (the other most popular visual medium). Filmmakers who have something to say about society, then, are better off with subjects that have lasting impact, rather than trying to capture flavor-of-the-month subjects that quickly become dated and soon seem silly.

For example, George Clooney could write, direct, and act in the film *Good Night, and Good Luck* in 2005 and expect that its subject matter—CBS television reporter Edward R. Murrow's dismantling of U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy in the mid-1950s—would be relevant to contemporary audiences. It was a modern recreation and interpretation of an era more than a half century in the past and will likely live on as an effective historical drama. On the other hand, *Breakin' 2: Electric Boogaloo*, a 1984 film that attempted to cash in on the then-current craze of break dancing, was dated practically the day it was released. Such a film may have little relevance or appeal to audiences of later generations, yet it can serve as a valuable time capsule documenting a popular cultural element and attitude of the period in which it was created. Not every film can be timeless; most are not even designed to be. Some blockbusters exist as profit machines for studios, as we have discussed. But the better, more challenging films speak to audiences of their times and long afterward.

Courtesy Everett Collection

▲ Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* has become an enduring classic. As robotic intelligence becomes a reality and astronomers discover planets in distant galaxies, the themes of this film and the questions it raises are more relevant than ever.

Certainly, movies are not made and released in a vacuum. The government and special-interest groups have tried to police and censor film at seemingly every turn. Experts debate the effect that films have on the behavior of society—for example, whether violent films encourage violence in the members of their audiences, and whether promiscuous sexual behavior on the screen results in audience imitation. Movies are a constant and easy source of debate because of their ubiquity and their popularity. There are movies made about almost everything, so naturally opposing sides have no trouble finding a film that represents their side of the argument on culture wars, often taking their examples out of the context in which the films were made and intended.

In this chapter, we will discuss this impact—how movies at least attempt to shape society and how society shapes movies. Both topics are fluid, as the ever-growing Internet and social media become increasingly powerful elements in discussion of films and what's in them.

2.2 Social Media

In seemingly no time, online services that at first appeared to be nothing more than niche products for young people have become essential tools for marketing and journalism. In particular, **Facebook**, which has more than 1 billion users, and **Twitter**, which has more than 550 million users, are an increasingly important part of everyday life. Personal Web logs, or **blogs**, are another popular form of self-expression and social interaction, as are numerous Internet discussion forums, some devoted exclusively to online discussions and others that are part of informational sites such as IMDb or Blu-ray.com. Even though their missions are different, they can all

be lumped under the category of **social media**. How long they will remain popular is anyone's guess, but the major services have shown no sign of decline.

Social media has plenty to do with movies. As the number of professional film critics dwindles, thanks in part to the poor outlook for traditional newspapers and magazines, many movie fans take to social media to register their feelings about a film instantly. Some comments and critiques are silly or promotional in nature; however, the sheer volume of responses to a movie (or television show, CD, book, or any other form of entertainment media) means that they cannot be ignored. It's almost like an instant poll, conducted in real time, by average people. Or, perhaps, like the world's largest bar, with patrons all over the country, sometimes all over the world, commenting on what they see as they watch it, and commenting on other people's comments.

However, the true effect of social media on the popularity and profitability of a movie remains a hotly debated topic. In 2009, the movie *Bruno*, starring Sacha Baron Cohen, enjoyed a profitable opening day on Friday, the traditional opening day for films. But by Saturday attendance had dropped steeply—36% in a single day. Why? Immediately, the media began pointing to the "Twitter effect." Millions of people, it seems, tweeted (the verb used for posting an update on Twitter) negative responses to the film. While they, like everyone else, were limited to 140 characters per post, there's no limit to how many posts a user can make. Soon, carried along by an excitable media eager to report on anything related to social media, the Twitter effect was a full-on social phenomenon.

Until, one day, people decided it wasn't. In a widely circulated story in July 2010, Daniel Frankel wrote in *The Wrap*, an online publication, that the effect of Twitter was in fact overstated when it came to *Bruno* and other films that suffered sharp, fast drop-offs in business in 2009: "One year later, the social media trend that was going to revolutionize word-of-mouth hasn't demonstrably done so. There are few movies this summer where you can point to Twitter causing a huge box office bump, or drop" (2010). However, there is no question that—as Facebook and Twitter users can attest—movie studios are fully immersed in the world of social media, seeing it as a marketing opportunity, a way to spread good word of mouth more quickly than almost any other method of delivery. And what about the bad word of mouth? Well, some things can't be prevented. As consultant Gordon Paddison told *The Wrap*, "People say Twitter causes a movie to bomb. I say a bad film causes people to trash it on Twitter" (Frankel, 2010).

Whatever the case, social media shows no sign of going away anytime soon, and its importance can also be evidenced by the increasing number of filmmakers and stars who use it. Studios have their own elaborate websites for individual film releases, but they also create YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter accounts for their films, hoping people will follow them for information and updates (and, of course, recommendations to see the film). Twitter users, however, may decide to follow a **hashtag** movie title rather than the studio's movie title account, thus seeing every tweet in the world that mentions that film, favorable, neutral, or unfavorable. Often—perhaps always, really—there are promotional considerations. But there is still value. Ron Howard, for instance, for months before the release of his Formula One racing film *Rush*, tweeted pictures from the set and the editing room, giving us a peek behind the scenes of the making of a hotly anticipated film from an Oscar-winning director, while at the same time allowing Howard to build anticipation for the movie's release. In early 2013, director Robert Rodriguez even solicited online fan participation in a short movie project called *Two Scoops* that he created especially for the Internet.

Following Twitter and Facebook accounts or hashtag topics can be an easy way to keep up to date on a favorite film, filmmaker, or star. It can indicate what topics are trending at any given moment. But this can also distract from the topic in which one is originally interested. The most

heavily discussed topics show up on the side of a Twitter feed as "trending," and people can instantly see the changing interests of those using the service regionally or worldwide, whether trivial entertainment, natural weather disasters, or serious newsworthy activities. In mid-2013, trending topics included the ongoing protests and revolution in Egypt, several days before it was reported in the traditional Western news media outlets. Thus, social networks like Twitter can both distract their users from real-world issues and draw their attention to those issues while they are unfolding.

2.3 Movies and Escapism

There is little debate that Americans have endured tough times in the first decade of the 21st century. The national dialogue has revolved around a lingering, increasingly unpopular military intervention in the Middle East; partisan politics that seemed to divide the country; and an economic crisis the like of which has not been seen since the Great Depression. A national discontent developed that threatened at times to turn to panic. During all of this, what movies were people going to? The answer might really surprise you. Then again, it may not.

The year 2012 was the most lucrative year at the box office in the history of the movies, and the top five movies were *The Avengers*, *The Dark Knight Rises*, *The Hunger Games*, *Skyfall*, and *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*. Briefly, we have a film with a group of superheroes, a movie about a superhero, a futuristic killing game, a James Bond thriller, and an adaptation of a novel about an imaginary creature. Meanwhile, *Argo*, a fictionalized retelling of the escape of six Americans during the Iran hostage crisis, won the Academy Award for Best Picture but was only the 22nd most popular film of the year, according to box-office returns. The most seen films of 2013 were *Iron Man 3*, *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire*, *Despicable Me 2*, *Man of Steel*, and *Frozen*.

In previous years as well, similar movies came out on top. In 2009, the top grossers were *Avatar*, *Up*, and sequels in the *Transformers*, *Harry Potter*, and *Twilight* franchises, while in 2008 they were *The Dark Knight*, *Iron Man*, *Indiana Jones and the Crystal Skull*, *Hancock*, and *WALL-E*—all of which were fare for **escapism**, or using entertainment to escape the realities of daily life. Although many of these films do have strong social or political subtexts, that is not often the main focus of audiences. In 2007, the most popular movies were *Spider-Man 3*, *Shrek the Third*, *Transformers*, *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End*, and *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. Do you notice anything in common among these films as well? It appears as though despite, or perhaps because of, the troubles in their lives, audiences have chosen to escape them by spending two hours in a movie theater. A similar phenomenon occurred during the Great Depression and during World War II, when audiences flocked to light comedies and musicals that often depicted enormously wealthy characters far removed from viewers' everyday reality. Mark Waters, the director of the fantasy film *The Spiderwick Chronicles*, summed up the situation in 2007, observing that social and economic crises created among the American population a general feeling of powerlessness to improve the state of things.

▲ Scene from the movie *The Hangover Part III*. Some of the harshest critics of Hollywood suggest that there are too many films that may be nothing more than a profitable exercise in mindless entertainment.

However, as Waters observed, "[w]hen you reflect that back to the movie . . . it allows people to have hopefulness and excitement and the possibility of ultimate victory" (Goodykoontz, 2007).

Jon Favreau, the director of the first two *Iron Man* movies, argues that we have needed escapism more than ever since the terrorist attacks of 9/11. For Favreau, it is unsurprising that a period of "good-vs.-evil escapist fantasies, with very simple, operatic paradigms of good and evil playing it out in some alternate worlds, allowed us to feel very simple emotions" (Goodykoontz, 2007).

Bear in mind, however, that box-office numbers reflect the audience's point of view, taking into account what they wanted to see. This does not mean that filmmakers have avoided the troubles of contemporary life. In addition to *The Hurt Locker*, an intense film about a bomb-disposal unit in Iraq that won Best Picture in 2010 but barely earned back more than its modest $15 million production budget, *In the Valley of Elah* (2007) was a critically acclaimed film dealing with the effects of war in Iraq on the father of a soldier killed there. Yet *In the Valley of Elah* couldn't find an audience and made less than $7 million at the box office. *Brothers*, about a woman who believed her husband was killed in Afghanistan but who returns, fared better, taking in more than $28 million, but it still barely cracked the top 100 of the most popular movies of 2009.

In many ways, this trend can be traced back well into the past. Hollywood chose to release few films about the Vietnam War during that conflict, for instance, because it seemed that war hit too close to home, with its daily television presence of violence and death beamed into our living rooms. John Wayne's *Green Berets* (1968) was one such attempt to buck the trend, but its disastrous reception by both critics and audiences discouraged any further attempts. Interestingly, however, a few years after the war ended, films such as *Coming Home* (1978), *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), and *Platoon* (1986) showed that audiences, with the passage of time, were ready to explore what happened during the war. Note that a healthy box-office showing does not make a movie good or important. We use it here simply as the easiest measure of a movie's popularity among audiences; we are strictly going by the numbers.

Audiences may or may not be receptive to films whose directors have made them primarily to explore social issues. Mexican director Guillermo Del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) and *The Devil's Backbone* (2001) both dealt with the terrors of the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s by incorporating escapism and telling a fairy tale-like story through the eyes of children, with a fantasy creature in the former and a ghost in the latter. While both films were critically acclaimed, *Pan's Labyrinth* found favorable audience numbers at the box office, but *The Devil's Backbone* (arguably the better film) was not a financial success, especially in the United States, where it got little distribution. David Cronenberg's *Cosmopolis* (2012) dealt heavily with modern social-economic concerns in an unusual, stylized way, eliciting mixed, though generally positive, critical responses but a disastrous reception from general audiences.

People like to be entertained and may prefer mindless escapism to thought-provoking drama about current social problems or past political conflicts. As we've seen already, and will see from another perspective in Chapter 4, it is not impossible for films to fulfill audience expectations at the same time they're expressing underlying societal concerns, questioning or reinforcing established values, or reflecting contemporary issues. Highly successful films such as *The Dark Knight* and *Iron Man* managed to deal with issues of personal conscience and social responsibility while also allowing the audience to escape. The former explored themes of vigilantism in the face of pervasive urban crime and the latter looked explicitly at the war in Afghanistan and its relationship to greedy corporations supplying military arms to both sides. But at the same time, both had appealing heroes whom audiences could enjoy watching triumph over evil. Even a family-oriented

animated sci-fi fantasy like *WALL-E* could depict a bleak future world devastated by past wars and pollution, while the survivors became dependent upon machines to survive. The hero was himself a machine, but too cute to be threatening to viewers.

▲ Animated films are often dismissed as children's entertainment. *Coraline* is a film that deftly captures both childhood anxiety and adult uncertainty. A world where the border between reality and virtual experience is porous may be too much like our own for comfort.

These films may appear to be escapist fun on the surface, yet all have a depth that's able to express ideas the filmmakers want to get across. Generations from now, they will be valuable documents of the early 21st century, reflecting both what people enjoyed watching and what issues they were thinking about in their daily lives. Fortunately, movies are a big enough cultural phenomenon that there is room enough for both what audiences want to see and what societal issues need to be explored. Indeed, movies became so popular so quickly after the invention of the medium that many people worried about what audiences were seeing and what they should be allowed to see.

2.4 Censorship and Hollywood

As far back as ancient Greece, philosophers such as Plato argued that art forms such as poetry and theater could be dangerous influences on the public and should be used only to provide inspirational or uplifting experiences. In fact, he called for the banning of works that did otherwise. Others such as Aristotle argued that depicting tragedy and realistic events could be cathartic for audiences, allowing them to purge pent-up emotions safely at the theater and go on with their normal lives. Virtually identical debates continue about movies, with some believing movies should be positive experiences and others insisting that movies should accurately reflect what has been happening in our culture, positive or not.

Modern audiences likely feel, with some justification, that almost anything can be shown in a mainstream movie. There is graphic violence in any number of horror films. Explicit sex is shown in Oscar-winning director Ang Lee's *Lust, Caution*. A young girl kills several people in a brutal fashion while swearing profusely in *Kick-Ass*. It is tempting to suggest that these films reflect changing attitudes of society, that again filmmakers are giving audiences what they demand—or at least what they are comfortable with. And there is some truth to that notion, but whether or not it equates to a coarsening of the culture is an open question.

The History of Film Censorship and the Motion Picture Production Code

During the 1910s, filmmakers enjoyed a fair amount of freedom in what they could show on screen. Not the freedom that today's directors have, of course, but they were under no obligation to produce morally righteous films. Directors didn't have this freedom for long. From the 1930s to the late 1960s, Hollywood films were required to follow a strict set of guidelines (though clever writers and directors often found ways around them). A series of Hollywood scandals in the 1920s involving rape, drugs, and murder led to the Hollywood studios hiring former U.S.

Postmaster Will Hays to supervise a system of self-regulation that was intended to appease calls for state or national censorship. Looser moral standards showing up on movie screens by the late 1920s created public outcry and led to the formation of the **Motion Picture Production Code**, which was adopted by major studios in 1930. For a few years, the studios largely ignored, or at least glossed over, the dictates of the code. Many films gleefully stretched and outright flouted the regulations to the point that Hollywood productions from the 1930–1934 period are sometimes referred to as **pre-code** films. By 1934, increasing pressure, including that brought to bear by the Catholic Church and National Legion of Decency, resulted in much stricter enforcement, and in July of that year there was a requirement that no studio picture could be released without a certificate of approval from the Production Code Administration, headed by the staunchly religious Joseph Breen.

The Motion Picture Production Code, sometimes erroneously known as the Hays Code, was lengthy and detailed. Essentially, it established specific restrictions about numerous issues and potential plot elements that applied to three general principles that can be summarized as follows:

1. No picture shall be produced that will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence, the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil, or sin.
2. Correct standards of life, subject only to the requirements of drama and entertainment, shall be presented.
3. Law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation.

Courtesy Everett Collection

▲ Films like *Baby Face* (1933), which are full of sexual innuendo, led to the enforcement of the Motion Picture Production Code in 1934.

Specific applications of the Code prohibited such things as nudity, obscenity, vulgar language, ridicule of any religious faith, ridicule of laws or the legal system, graphic violence, the condoning of revenge murders, depiction of criminal methods that might be seen as instructional demonstrations for those so inclined, drug abuse or any suggestion of drug traffic, prostitution, comic treatment of adultery, any sexually stimulating material, obvious suggestions or condoning of illicit sexual activity, sexual perversion, miscegenation, and more. Note that while under certain conditions some violence and sexuality could be permitted (though nothing explicit or graphic), the overall tone of the finished film was required to take the side of law and order, stressing that crime doesn't pay and so on. In theory, this would seem limiting, allowing for only certain types of films to be made. In actual fact, Hollywood would enjoy a "golden age" of filmmaking under the Code, with the best directors, writers, and producers finding clever ways to tell their stories even with the limitations.

The MPAA Ratings System

The Code would remain officially in place until 1968, although after World War II and especially after the rise of competition from television in the 1950s, it would gradually lose its

effectiveness. The 1939 blockbuster *Gone With the Wind* was actually fined $5,000 for using the banned word "damn" in Rhett Butler's famous farewell to Scarlett O'Hara. Occasionally, films like Otto Preminger's light sex comedy *The Moon Is Blue* (1953) and his dramatic look at drug addiction, *The Man With the Golden Arm* (1955), would be released without Code approval. By the early 1960s, a number of films (Hitchcock's *Psycho*, for example) were advertised with disclaimers warning that they were intended for mature audiences, until finally in 1968 the **Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA)** announced its new rating system: G for general audiences, M for mature audiences, R for restricted audiences, and X for films to which children under 17 would not be admitted. The M was changed to GP in 1970, and to PG in 1972. Ironically, Hitchcock's *Psycho* was given an M or PG rating for reissues in 1968 through the 1970s, but despite Hitchcock's use of editing to imply a brutal stabbing without ever showing the knife touch the body, the MPAA re-rated it R for its violence in 1984. That same year, in response to violence in newer PG-rated films such as *Gremlins* and *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, a PG-13 rating was added, but *Psycho* remained rated R. The X rating was changed to NC-17 (no child 17 or under admitted) in 1990. The MPAA explains the system as follows:

> Movie ratings provide parents with advance information about the content of movies to help them determine what's appropriate for their children. After all, parents know best their children's individual sensitivities and sensibilities. Ratings are assigned by a board of parents who consider factors such as violence, sex, language and drug use and then assign a rating they believe the majority of American parents would give a movie. (MPAA, 2014. Reprinted with permission from the Motion Picture Association of America, Inc.)

Unlike the old Motion Picture Production Code, the MPAA does not provide a code of acceptable conduct for filmmakers to follow in their films—something former MPAA Chairman Jack Valenti, who came up with the idea for the ratings system, specifically wished to avoid, saying, "There was about this stern, forbidding catalogue of do's and don'ts the odious smell of censorship" (MPAA, 2010). Though the system sounds ideal, it doesn't tell filmmakers what will or won't be allowed in the films they are shooting. There is ample anecdotal evidence of directors being told to trim a specific amount of time from sex scenes or to limit the number of times a curse word is used to retain the rating being sought, but exactly what is allowed and what isn't is something of a moving target. Sometimes a filmmaker will refuse to make the changes that would fit a film into a certain ratings category. The MPAA told Darren Aronofsky to trim lurid sex scenes, which were used to illustrate the degrading lengths to which junkies will go to pay for their drugs, toward the end of his film *Requiem for a Dream*. Believing that the scenes were crucial to the film, the studio released the film without a rating. This can prove troublesome in the lucrative DVD market; some large retail chains will not stock DVDs with NC-17 or no ratings. An edited, R-rated version of the film was released on DVD.

Mary Evans/Ronald Grant/Everett Collection

▲ *Midnight Cowboy* was a groundbreaking film that captured both the grittiness of New York and the decadence of its underground art world.

Thus, the MPAA ratings system can have a big financial impact, because, with movies rated R and NC-17, younger audience members are automatically excluded (though with the R rating, those under 17 can attend with a parent

or guardian). In the days in which the X rating was used, mainstream media typically refused advertising for movies with the rating. This was obviously detrimental in terms of the money that a film could make, even though not all films that got the rating were pornographic. One X-rated film, *Midnight Cowboy*, released in 1969, won the Oscar for Best Picture (though it would hardly be rated X today, and in fact even at the time the Catholic Legion of Decency rated it as acceptable for mature adults). The NC-17 rating was meant to remove the pornographic stigma, but filmmakers typically still work to avoid the rating, trimming scenes of violence and, especially, sex.

Independent features are more often released unrated, but for a major studio film, the financial risks are generally considered too great. The MPAA system is in fact often criticized by filmmakers for inequity among the films that it rates. Kirby Dick, the director of *This Film Is Not Yet Rated*, a documentary that explored the MPAA ratings system and its effects on society (and sought to identify its members and the members of its appeals board, who are not publicly identified), concluded that the system is inequitable in its treatment of studio and independent films, being tougher with independents. Dick said in an interview that the system has an impact on how people choose their movies, and that it treats sex and violence differently.

> So many people have commented that many sex scenes look similar in American films. And I think the ratings board is in large part responsible for that, because filmmakers are shooting for that R rating . . . and as a result, everything starts looking the same . . . . [V]iolent films, which are made by the studios, get through without restrictive ratings, whereas sexuality—oftentimes very mature, thoughtful examinations of sexuality—gets more restrictive ratings. . . . [T]here shouldn't be a corporation profiting from violent films at the expense of films that examine sexuality. (Schager, 2009)

Hopper Stone/©Universal Pictures/Courtesy Everett Collection

▲ Scene from the movie *American Reunion*. Some critics point to films as evidence reflecting a coarsening of our public culture, that is, people growing less sensitive to material considered vulgar, crude, offensive, or generally in poor taste. Others suggest that in fact films are responsible for creating a less civil society. It nevertheless seems clear that there is a strong correlation between grossness and high grosses. *The American Pie* franchise, a series of R-rated sex comedies (*American Reunion*, the fourth installment, pictured here), grossed $409,241,234 in the United States alone.

Special-interest groups have lobbied the MPAA to include other elements in their decisions, illustrating the impact films are perceived to have on society. For example, the American Medical Association Alliance asked that any film including "gratuitous smoking" should automatically receive an R rating. "Research has shown that one-third to one-half of all young smokers in the United States can be attributed to smoking these youth see in movies," said Dr. Jonathan Fielding, head of the Los Angeles County Public Health Department, to CNN (as cited in Duke, 2009).

Ironically, some directors and studios seek the more-restrictive R rating, believing that it tells the audience that their films will be more adult and mature in content and treatment. The R-rated comedy, for instance, a staple of the 1970s and 1980s with films such as *Animal House*, *Porky's*, and *Caddyshack*, with copious amounts of nudity and cursing, as well as drug and alcohol use, had gone out of favor in the 1990s. But films like 2003's

Old School and 2005's *Wedding Crashers*, along with the films of Judd Apatow, which include *Knocked Up* and *Superbad*, created a new interest in raunchier fare. By 2009, *The Hangover*, about a bachelor-party trip to Las Vegas, would become the highest-grossing R-rated comedy of all time, spawning two successful sequels. Films such as Seth MacFarlane's *Ted* (2012) and Evan Goldberg and Seth Rogen's *This Is the End* (2013) continued the R-rated comedy trend.

Television and Censorship

Many people still see theatrical movies for the first time on television. However, the versions that they see on the small screen do not always accurately reflect what was originally on the big one. This is understandable for the most part; pay-cable networks such as HBO and Showtime play movies uncut and uninterrupted by commercials, but that is not the case on broadcast networks. On network television, films are cut in order to make room for at least three commercial breaks an hour, if not more. But the more noticeable differences in the television version are the cuts made to fall within broadcast standards. Obviously, nudity and gory violence are forbidden on broadcast networks (though shows such as *NYPD Blue* have at times managed to get bare backsides on the air). Acceptability of such material varies by network and time of broadcast.

Language is also restricted on broadcast television. Although a 1999 episode of *Chicago Hope*, a CBS drama, included the word "shit" (a handful of shows would follow suit), in general profanity beyond "hell" and "damn" is rarely used. Rather than allow strong profanity, film producers sometimes also shoot a "clean" version of a scene for later rebroadcast. Other films simply "bleep" out the offending word (playing a beeping sound over it so that it can't be identified). And in some cases, another non-profane word is dubbed, often with comical results for those who have seen the original. In the movie *Die Hard 2*, for instance, the signature line delivered by Bruce Willis's character—"Yippee kay yay, motherfucker"—is replaced with "Yippee kay yay, Mr. Falcon." When *Snakes on a Plane* was aired on television, the famous line uttered by Samuel L. Jackson's character (which was inspired by an Internet campaign)—"I have had it with these motherfucking snakes on this motherfucking plane"—is changed to "I have had it with these monkey-fighting snakes on this Monday-to-Friday plane."

While this is a fairly common occurrence that typically generates more laughs than controversy, there have been times when editing films for television has created a stir. In 2004, after the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) fined CBS $550,000 when Janet Jackson's breast was briefly shown during the Super Bowl halftime show, 65 ABC affiliates across the United States declined to show *Saving Private Ryan*—which director Steven Spielberg insisted be shown as shot, complete with profanity and violence—for fear that the FCC would rule it indecent. However, no complaints were made to the FCC.

The debate about ratings will continue, of course, as long as such systems are in place. From the start, the best filmmakers have found ways around restrictions to tell the stories that they want to tell, and this remains the case today.

Courtesy Everett Collection

▲ Scene from the movie *Saving Private Ryan*. Traditionally, films have been edited for television because of sexual content. It came as a surprise to many that in response to FCC regulations the acclaimed film *Saving Private Ryan* was in danger of being edited for language. Instead, some stations refused to air it.

The Hollywood Blacklist

One can debate the genuine influence on society that one film might have, or whether films in general influence society or vice versa; however, one episode in American history shows the level of importance assigned to the impact that art, especially film, can have on culture. The **Hollywood blacklist** was created by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) to bar those in the film industry (and other forms of entertainment) believed to have ties to the Communist Party from working. Its impact was felt from the late 1940s through the 1960s, when more than 300 artists were listed.

Courtesy Everett Collection

▲ A scene from the movie *On The Waterfront*. The nomination of director Elia Kazan for a special Academy Award was met by protests from many Academy members. They recalled his "naming names"—identifying alleged communists—when he testified before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Kazan directed *On the Waterfront* as a justification for his cooperation with HUAC. In the film, Terry Malloy "blows the whistle" to the Crime Commission, naming the "evil-doers" responsible for union corruption.

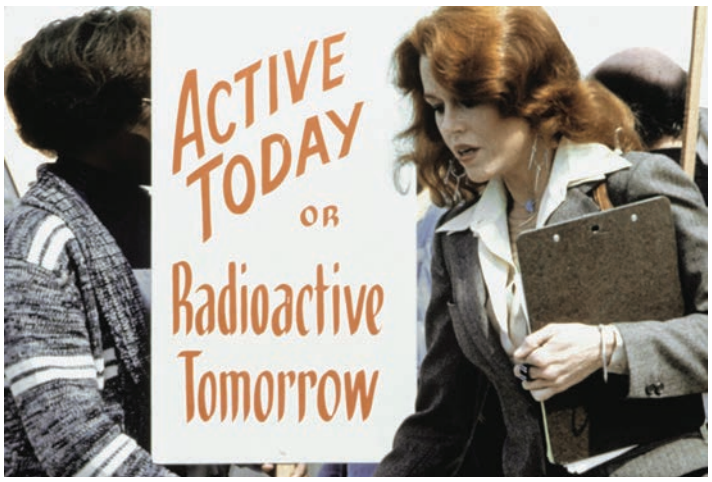
Some of the more infamous chapters in the Committee's history involved asking artists to "name names," or to reveal which of their friends and co-workers had communist ties. Some actors, directors, and producers refused to do so, landing them on the list. In total, 11 individuals refused to cooperate and were cited for contempt and jailed; one fled the country, while the others imprisoned became known as the Hollywood Ten. Others did name names, including famed director Elia Kazan, whose films included *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951) and *On the Waterfront* (1954). Kazan's *On the Waterfront* was ostensibly an exposé drawn from recent headlines of labor union corruption and harassment of union members, and a study of people following their own conscience against overwhelming outside pressure. Many, however, saw the film as a political metaphor—as Kazan's defense of his own testimony before the HUAC. Other films from that same era, notably the westerns *High Noon* (1952) and *Johnny Guitar* (1954), were also made as not-too-thinly-disguised allegories whose real topic was the blacklist investigation, yet these films remained subtle enough to be seen merely as entertainment by those unfamiliar with the political allusions.

One film, *The Salt of the Earth* (1954), was considered so subversive in its content dealing with feminist and labor issues that it was denounced by Congress, investigated by the FBI, and widely blacklisted in the United States. By contrast, while all this was going on, a number of unashamedly anti-communist filmmakers created movies such as *The Red Menace* (1949) and *My Son John* (1952). These were intended to dramatize the threat of communist activity to American security, individual personal freedom, and family relationships, although critics and viewers tended to dismiss them as obvious and heavy-handed propaganda. People on the blacklist would be banned from working in the film industry, though some screenwriters worked under pseudonyms—most notably Dalton Trumbo, who was also the first blacklisted writer to resume getting on-screen credit for his scripts.

As the Committee lost power and prestige, so did its impact and legacy. It became associated with such "Red Scare" investigations as Sen. Joseph McCarthy's hunt for communists in the 1940s and 1950s and lost credibility. The Hollywood blacklist shows just how influential movies can be on society, and vice versa. Even years after the active blacklist, Hollywood has dealt with the blacklist era explicitly in films such as George Clooney's *Good Night, and Good Luck* (2005), Frank Darabont's *The Majestic* (2001), and Martin Ritt's *The Front* (1976). It is clearly an era that had a tremendous impact on film, especially on the actors and writers who refused to name names.

2.5 Pushing the Envelope: Case Studies

There have been films throughout history that have had a great social impact because they went beyond the limits of what previously had been standard in the film industry. Many of these films that pushed the envelope also made a large impact on audiences. How much impact a film has on its audience when it comes to behavior will always be a source of controversy, hotly debated in part because it is almost impossible to prove with assurance how strongly a movie's impact is felt—or whether it is felt at all. This is true, in fact, of all forms of popular media. Much of the evidence of a short-term impact of films is anecdotal. For instance, it's widely regarded as fact that after the film *Jaws* premiered in 1975, attendance at beaches plummeted, though one is hard pressed to find actual evidence of this, other than story after story simply saying it's true. Other claims, such as that of the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids that smoking in movies increases youth smoking, are disputed, both by special-interest groups and others. Still other films seem to inspire copycat behavior. At least three young men were killed after being struck by a car while lying in the middle of the road, apparently mimicking the actions of players in the film *The Program* (1993). (These scenes were later deleted from the film.)



▲ *The China Syndrome* built on the fears caused by the partial meltdown at Three Mile Island nuclear power plant. For more than 30 years, no new nuclear facility has been constructed in the United States.

However, the impact of these movies is mostly unintentional, more a matter of catching the attention of the public for one reason or another than actually setting out to deal with societal issues. Yet some films have had a great impact on society at large—not always intentionally but with a lasting effect. Table 2.1 is by no means a complete list, but it points to a few movies that went beyond the status quo and whose cultural impact has been notable on issues of race, sexuality, politics, and religion. Whether each movie actually caused a societal shift on these issues or merely reflected an existing, ongoing societal shift is up to you to decide.

Table 2.1 A few movies that made a social impact

The Birth of a Nation **(1915)**	Created large movie audience across economic classes; set precedent for films causing widespread public debate; inspired revival of Ku Klux Klan and provided rallying point to strengthen newly formed NAACP; set precedent for extra-long films; and created demand for lavish and large-capacity "movie palaces." Interpreted by many as blatantly racist (both then and now), its controversial content has made showings rare for the past half-century, outside an academic context.
The Jazz Singer **(1927)**	Created demand for talking pictures, which would rapidly replace silent films; established template for musical film drama. As with *Birth of a Nation*, its content—the main character's career is rooted in the now-obsolete blackface tradition—makes it difficult for modern audiences to watch without understanding its historical context.
Psycho **(1960)**	Set precedent for popular mainstream horror films that depicted previously avoided material, sympathizing with the villain and killing off protagonists before the film is half over.
To Kill a Mockingbird **(1962)**	Reached a wide audience, first theatrically and thereafter in numerous classrooms, with the message that racial bigotry is wrong.
Easy Rider **(1969)**	Set precedent that independent, youth-oriented films dealing with contemporary issues of drugs and sex could reach a wide audience and make a profit.
The Godfather **(1972)**	Legitimized organized crime families in the minds of movie viewers as typical human beings trying to make a living, even if they were outside the law, creating a new wave of gangster films with a new approach to their characters.
Jaws **(1975)**	Created a demand for "wide releases" of summer blockbuster films that would open everywhere at once, rather than travel from city to city over the course of a year, as had been the prevailing practice.
Do the Right Thing **(1989)**	Created heated debate as to its ultimate meaning—whether racial violence can be justifiable or is a tragic extreme to be avoided—in any case forcing its viewers to think about its issues.
Schindler's List **(1993)**	Created a wider public awareness of the Holocaust; demonstrated that a film shot in black and white, with a heavy topic, could still find a wide audience.
Philadelphia **(1993)**	Created widespread public sympathy for an openly homosexual character, partly by casting a popular star against type as its protagonist.
Fahrenheit 9/11 **(2004)**	Proved that an overtly political propaganda film could find a wide audience far beyond its perceived limited demographics, despite and perhaps because of the debate it generated about its assertions and motives.
The Passion of the Christ **(2004)**	Proved that a film dealing with religious faith, with graphically depicted violence, and a foreign-language soundtrack could both generate widespread public debate about those factors and find a wide viewing audience.
Brokeback Mountain **(2005)**	Helped propagate sympathetic public awareness that suppressed homosexual tendencies may be more widespread than a stereotyped "gay community."

To Kill a Mockingbird (1962) and *Do the Right Thing* (1989)

Americans began the 20th century living as a segregated society; it is not therefore unusual that films would reflect that reality of racial relations as well as society's changing attitudes toward it. Race remains a sensitive but shifting issue, with gains and losses throughout the years. It is one subject that often remains a taboo topic; it makes many people uncomfortable no matter what their feelings about it. Film, however, has been a place where racial issues do appear, even when they do not in polite conversation. In American society, many of the depictions of racial struggles in film involved African Americans.

Over time, the representation of African Americans in film has in fact changed. We have noted in Table 2.1 and in Chapter 1 the impact of D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, both in film and in culture, as well as that of *The Jazz Singer*, in which star Al Jolson appeared at times during the film in *blackface* (theatrical makeup to make him appear black). These films were controversial even when they debuted for their demeaning depiction of blacks, especially *The Birth of a Nation*, but today even pitching such a film would be unthinkable. That these films would not be released today is a form of social progress and shows society's changing attitudes about race. Nevertheless, no one would dispute that there is still a long way to go in this particular social struggle.

Courtesy Everett Collection

▲ *To Kill a Mockingbird* is routinely read and screened by middle school students across the country. It's much less likely that they will encounter images of black pride and the assertiveness of a film like Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*.

Indeed, people of color still struggle to gain equality in the film industry. There have been films that have advanced the cause of equality without shying away from the problems that minorities face: namely, racism. Yet, as these examples show, even great movies with noble goals can sometimes themselves be problematic in the way they approach racial issues.

To Kill a Mockingbird, the 1962 film directed by Robert Mulligan based on Harper Lee's well-loved, Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, is almost universally praised. Gregory Peck won an Academy Award for Best Actor for his portrayal of Atticus Finch, a lawyer in the small southern town of Maycomb, Alabama, in the 1930s. Finch, the single father of two young children, is appointed to defend Tom Robinson (Brock Peters), a black man accused of assaulting a white woman. Because of this, his children, in particular his daughter, Scout (played by Mary Badham, who was also nominated for an Academy Award), are exposed to the town's innate racism. Finch is threatened by the townspeople, and despite his brilliant defense of the defendant (in particular his closing statements), the all-white jury finds Robinson guilty. Still, Finch is treated as a hero by the black residents of Maycomb, while Robinson is shot to death under dubious circumstances.

Peck's portrayal is at once understated and powerful; his Finch attacks racism through quiet decency. The lesson of the film—that racism and bigotry are wrong and dangerously so—is certainly well meaning. And yet, for all the movie's good intentions, it exists firmly in the tradition of the white hero coming to the rescue of the wronged black man (and in this case, despite a noble

effort, even he can't defeat the bigotry of his fellow townspeople). This is not to say it isn't a great movie. But is it a great commentary on racism? Film critic Roger Ebert argues that it is not:

> *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a time capsule, preserving hopes and sentiments from a kinder, gentler, more naive America. It was released in December 1962, the last month of the last year of the complacency of the postwar years. The following November, John F. Kennedy would be assassinated. Nothing would ever be the same again—not after the deaths of Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy, Malcolm X, Medgar Evers, not after the war in Vietnam, certainly not after September 11, 2001. The most hopeful development during that period for America was the civil rights movement, which dealt a series of legal and moral blows to racism. But *To Kill a Mockingbird*, set in Maycomb, Alabama, in 1932, uses the realities of its time only as a backdrop for the portrait of a brave white liberal. (Ebert, 2001)

Fast-forward to 1989, the year Spike Lee's film *Do the Right Thing* was released. (We'll discuss this film later in terms of Lee's directorial vision, of his control over the content and tone of the film, which is complete—he also wrote, co-produced, and starred in the movie). It is the story of a blisteringly hot day in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn. A sprawling film, it incorporates elements of drama and comedy while depicting the fragile truce with which people of various races co-exist within the community. Lee's film is filled with a kind of in-your-face beauty and masterful technique, entertaining yet unflinching in its honesty. Unlike *Mockingbird*, this is a film that could have been made only by someone with personal experience with racial relations. The story is told not just through the prism of race but through Lee's singular point of view. He is a gifted filmmaker, offering us striking images and funny scenes throughout. But he is also furious, and that comes through without fail. From the first frames, in which Public Enemy's song "Fight the Power" plays, race is central to all things. As the lyrics say, "People, people we are the same/No we're not the same/'Cause we don't know the game/What we need is awareness, we can't get careless" (Sadler, Ridenhour, Boxley, J. , and Boxley, K., n.d.) Lee never lets up.

Courtesy Everett Collection

▲ *Do the Right Thing* is an intensely thought-provoking examination of racial tension and personal responsibility. The film's final meaning has been debated, but its ultimate purpose in getting viewers to *think* is an undeniable success.

"I sort of read it back then, and now, as a black nationalist manifesto," said Natalie Hopkinson, an associate editor for *The Root*, to National Public Radio as part of a celebration of the 20th anniversary of the film's release. "[*Do The Right Thing* portrayed] a purging of elements out of the community that did not respect black people and the black presence in Bed[ford]-Stuy[vesant]" (Martin, 2009).

Whether it is a better movie than *To Kill a Mockingbird* is open to debate, but it is unquestionably a story about the dangers of bigotry and racism told from the point of view of a director who understood the intricacies of race and didn't shy away from tough topics—as Robert Mulligan, following Harper Lee's novel and Horton Foote's script, arguably did at times. Part of *Do the Right Thing*'s power lies in an uncomfortable sense of ambiguity that caused some to denounce it as promoting racial violence, whereas others lauded it as a powerful condemnation of racial violence. In either case, it forced audiences to think about race in a way that they perhaps had not done in the past.

Philadelphia (1993) and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005)

There is no shortage of examples of stereotypical portrayals of gay men and women; for decades, disparaging portrayals, usually comic, were accepted almost as the norm. Although there were some rare exceptions, *Philadelphia*, which was released in 1993, was one of the first mainstream Hollywood films to feature an openly gay man as its protagonist. While this was in itself noteworthy, what also made news was the level of top-flight talent involved in the film. Jonathan Demme, who had won an Oscar for *Silence of the Lambs* two years earlier, directed the film. Actors included Denzel Washington, Jason Robards, and Antonio Banderas. But the casting that attracted the most attention was Tom Hanks as Andrew Beckett, the lead character in the film. Beckett is diagnosed with AIDS and is fired from his law firm; he sues, claiming discrimination. Hanks, up until this point, had appeared mostly in comedies and light romances, so the role was a shift for him.

Tom Hanks's role in *Philadelphia* marked the first time an A-list Hollywood actor accepted a role as an openly gay lead character. Hanks, with his boyish good looks and standing within the industry as an all-around good-natured nice guy, was perhaps the perfect actor for what at the time was considered a legitimately controversial choice. What's more, his Oscar-winning portrayal—sensitive, intelligent, yet also never backing away from the character's sexuality (though nothing explicit is shown in the film)—was praised by both critics and peers and was widely accepted by the moviegoing public, inspiring thought and discussion on both AIDS and sexuality.

By the time *Brokeback Mountain* was released in theaters in 2005, the idea of mainstream actors playing gay characters was not considered as controversial a topic as it had once been (though it still provoked anger and prejudice among some). Director Ang Lee cast Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal as two cowboys who meet in 1963 when they are hired as ranch hands and slowly realize—even they aren't sure what is happening at first—that they are in love. Given the time in which the film is set, the characters cannot live together or have a romantic relationship openly. Instead, they both marry and father children, but meet each other occasionally through the years. While their relationship is not explicitly shown, there are scenes of romance—passionate kissing, embraces, and the like—that Lee directs with great sensitivity (he won the Academy Award for his direction).

©Focus Films/Everett Collection

▲ *Brokeback Mountain* not only challenged stereotypes of gay men; it also challenged and revised the conventions of the classic western.

The film was widely praised and became a box-office success. Jack Foley, the head of distribution at the studio that produced the film, said, "We no longer have to worry about breaking down the homophobic barriers, and [the film is] now breaking into the more mainstream boomer market" (Gray, 2006). However, the film was controversial as well. For example, Larry H. Miller, owner of the Utah Jazz professional basketball team as well as the Jordan Commons entertainment complex in a suburb of Salt Lake City, pulled the film from his theater. Despite the controversies both films attracted, *Philadelphia* and *Brokeback Mountain* are considered milestones in their depiction of gay life because gay characters are not

shown as **stereotypes** as had been common in past films; they are portrayed as normal people living their lives.

Fahrenheit 9/11 (2004) and *The Passion of the Christ* (2004)

These two movies, both released in 2004, couldn't have been made by more dissimilar directors, nor could their subjects be more different. Yet each showed remarkable power, both at the box office and in terms of driving discussion of political and religious issues upon their release. Michael Moore is an avowed liberal, Oscar-winning documentarian who delights in taking shots at conservatives with admittedly one-sided films that are both informative and entertaining. Mel Gibson, meanwhile, is an actor and Oscar-winning director with well-known conservative Christian religious beliefs. Moore's film *Fahrenheit 9/11* is a hugely critical look at George W. Bush, as well as the war in Iraq and the media that covered it. Gibson's film, meanwhile, is a depiction of the last hours of the life of Jesus Christ. Despite their differences, both films serve as examples of the way that movies can capture the imagination—and sometimes incur the wrath—of audiences, and become part of the national discussion.

©Lions Gate/courtesy Everett Collection

▲ A scene from the movie *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Both *Fahrenheit 9/11* and *The Passion of the Christ* are the products of strongly felt—passionate—beliefs. Michael Moore was convinced that his film could make a difference in the electoral battle between George W. Bush and John Kerry.

Because *Fahrenheit 9/11* criticizes George W. Bush, his presidency, and more, Moore had trouble securing financing, obtaining distribution, and finding companies that would put the film in theaters. The subject matter was considered simply too controversial by some. Released a little more than four months before the 2004 presidential election, in which Bush was running for reelection, the film also generated plenty of discussion. Conservative commentators disputed Moore's facts and credibility, while he fought back with documentation of his assertions. Christopher Hitchens was particularly brutal in his critique: "*Fahrenheit 9/11* is a sinister exercise in moral frivolity, crudely disguised as an exercise in seriousness. It is also a spectacle of abject political cowardice masking itself as a demonstration of 'dissenting' bravery" (Hitchens, 2004).

Hitchens's take-down, while more forcefully rendered than most, was by no means the only criticism. But when the film was released, it was an instant hit—a blockbuster, in fact, by documentary standards. The film earned more in its opening weekend than any other documentary had during an entire theatrical run. It went on to earn more than $222 million worldwide, by far the most money ever made by a documentary. This status at the box office, of course, doesn't mean that Moore was correct in all his accusations. However, it does at least point to an interest in politics among audiences that proved strong enough to get people of any political stripe into the theater. The question now is, did the film really have an impact on voters? Bush was reelected to a second term in office despite the film's scathing criticism of him; however, whether or not the film had an impact on the number of votes for each candidate is anyone's guess.

Meanwhile, Gibson's film was certainly not the first strongly religious film. Movies such as *Ben-Hur* and *The Ten Commandments* were popular, while director Martin Scorsese's *The Last*

Temptation of Christ and to some extent Cecil B. DeMille's *King of Kings* generated controversy. But Gibson's movie is different. All of the film's dialogue is in Aramaic, Latin, or Hebrew, to add authenticity. The depiction of Jesus's torture and crucifixion is unusually graphic and violent—again, Gibson said, in order to portray violence as realistically as possible. He told ABC's Diane Sawyer, "I wanted it to be shocking; and I wanted it to be extreme . . . so that they see the enormity—the enormity of that sacrifice" (Sawyer, 2004). The film predictably proved polarizing among audiences and critics. Some argued that the blood and gore, as Gibson argues, were necessary to give the film the desired impact. To soften it, the theory goes, would sanitize the message, would take Jesus's death out of the realm of physical pain and suffering—would make it more theoretical than actual. Others maintained that the level of violence was unnecessary, that it actually distracted from Gibson's message. Of course, some of these arguments were also thinly veiled discussions of faith, a subject that is inherently controversial.

Like Moore, Gibson had a difficult time securing financing and distribution for his film, so he funded production of the film himself and finally arranged with a small independent distributor, Lionsgate, to get it into theaters. Churches gave away tickets, and church groups helped promote the film. Despite the controversy about the graphic violence, the film would earn more than $611 million worldwide, making it the highest-grossing R-rated movie of all time. And, like Moore's film, it led to much discussion, both about religion and about the level of violence that audiences will tolerate.

▲ A still from the set of the movie *The Passion of the Christ*. Mel Gibson served as writer, director, and producer of this self-financed $25 million film. Due to the religious subject matter and controversial approach of *The Passion of the Christ*, Gibson had difficulty finding a distributor, but once it got into theaters its unexpectedly large box-office success helped turn Lionsgate Films into a major studio.

Although some focused on the exploitational aspects of both films, it seemed that for a time, in 2004, movies drove the national discussion, again proving their power when it comes to capturing the public imagination. People were incorporating these movies into discussions of both politics and religion. Instead of movies being an escape from the controversial and often tough issues of the day, movies were central to both. This is a phenomenon that has happened often throughout American history, and it shows that movies can promote both escapism, as in films such as the *Harry Potter* or *Transformers* series, and social progress and national discourse in films such as *Do the Right Thing* and *Fahrenheit 9/11*. *SuperSize Me*, released the same year as *Fahrenheit 9/11*, and a few later documentaries, notably *An Inconvenient Truth* and *Bully*, have started to break into mainstream culture by depicting uncomfortable issues the filmmakers hope people will begin to address.

Thelma & Louise (1991) and *Winter's Bone* (2010)

Even though women have enjoyed a growing power both in front of and behind the camera, their influence is still hindered by a residual prejudice. Female directors such as Kathryn Bigelow, Amy Heckerling, and Nicole Holofcener enjoy good reputations as directors, but they don't necessarily make films geared toward female audiences. In its own way, this is a form of equality; why should

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▲ A scene from the movie *Thelma & Louise*. Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis take the battle of the sexes to a new level in the title roles of Ridley Scott's *Thelma & Louise*, a film that reversed typical male/female stereotypes and provoked much debate among viewers and critics.

they be pressured to confine themselves to a type? Men are not asked to. Some films, however, including some directed by men, have been influential in the way women are portrayed in movies and, arguably, perceived in society. With *Thelma & Louise*, a major film directed by a big-name director (Ridley Scott), that is certainly the case. With *Winter's Bone*, a smaller film with no major stars (at that time) and very little promotion, it might be.

In the simplest terms, *Thelma & Louise* (1991) stars Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis as women who, motivated by various issues in their lives, go on a road trip. It quickly turns ugly, as a man tries to rape Thelma (Davis) and Louise (Sarandon) shoots and kills him. Now they are on the lam, and the experience proves transforming for both of them, subverting the traditional idea of the male buddy movie. They are victims of violence, yet they also commit it, an unusual occurrence in a mainstream film. They are liberated by breaking out of their accepted roles in society, and the film is liberated as well. The ending has been seen as both controversial and empowering. However the viewer may feel about it, the film places women firmly at its center. Though it was directed by a man—Ridley Scott—it is the story of two women, told by a woman—screenwriter Callie Khouri won an Oscar for her screenplay—and it remains a cultural touchstone. The movie's title alone suggests a form of female empowerment.

"Although the characters may not have survived their final flight, *Thelma & Louise* lives on in unusual places," writes Bernie Cook in one of many books the movie has inspired. He continues:

> Extracinematically, *Thelma & Louise* has been used as a statement of female empowerment and self-assertion and also as a warning of the perceived dangers of female access to violence. . . . By representing women as both victims and agents of violence, *Thelma & Louise* broke radical new ground in mainstream American representation, profoundly threatening masculinist critics who objected to its breach of the norm of violence as male privilege. (Cook, 2007)

Will *Winter's Bone* be discussed in such revolutionary terms 20 years after its release? It may not, as more ground has been broken in the portrayal of women in film. However, the 2010 film is also very much a woman's story, directed by a woman—Debra Granik—and placing a female character in a nontraditional role. Jennifer Lawrence plays Ree Dolly, a 17-year-old girl living in the Ozarks and taking care of her young siblings. Her mother is mentally ill, almost nonresponsive. So when someone has to find her father, who cooks meth and has skipped out on his bail, the job falls to her. Dubbed "hillbilly noir" in some circles, the film puts not just a woman but a teenage girl in the traditional role of detective, as Ree combs the backwoods looking for her father, dealing with relatives and acquaintances (both male and female) who are at best reticent, at worst violent. Yet she plugs away, determined to find him. If it is not as blatantly obvious an example of female empowerment as *Thelma & Louise*, its take on the traditional role of the hard-boiled detective—and Ree is as hard-boiled as Humphrey Bogart in any of his roles—is so matter-of-fact

that it might be even more subversive. Time will tell if the film, highly praised but not widely distributed, will prove influential. To attentive audiences who discover it on video, it may well be. *Winter's Bone* proves that in the 21st century there is still new ground to cover in terms of the portrayal of women (and teenagers) on screen—and that it can be done in a fashion both entertaining and revealing in what it says about its characters, and what it says about us.

Summary and Resources

Chapter Summary

Movies have had an impact on society since they began. While one can debate whether films influence society or society influences films, the more likely answer is that each influences the other. The best films offer a reflection of the time in which they are made, yet they also help engender discussion and sometimes change in the community that watches them.

The rapidly rising use of social media adds greatly to this participation. While many of the online public reactions to films are merely vague personal impressions, the availability of social media gives anyone the chance to write and read serious criticism and analysis previously limited to published professional critics, as well as to do it almost instantly after a film is screened anywhere in the world. Due to their instantaneous and interactive nature, various forms of social media have also become key elements in movie marketing.

Social media parallels and even reinforces the popularity of movies as a form of escapist entertainment, yet, just like the movies, it may provide a powerful link to the realities of everyday life. Even movies intended and treated as escapism often have sociopolitical overtones reflecting issues current when they were made.

Hollywood has tried, throughout its history, to regulate and influence what kinds of movies are made and to control their content. However, many filmmakers have still been able to achieve their vision through creative means. The U.S. government at one point even felt movies were influential enough on the general public that it sought to ban anyone with communist sympathies from working in Hollywood studios.

Not every film has an impact on society, but many do, and they do so to varying degrees. By watching them, we as the audience are able to more fully form opinions on crucial issues, and even to join in on the discussion of them.

Questions to Ask Yourself About Societal Impact When Viewing a Film

- Does the movie make you feel as if you are escaping your daily life? (escapism)
- Is censorship evident in the version of the movie you are watching? (post-dubbing, cutting out scenes from the original)
- Does the movie address controversial societal or political issues?
- Can the movie be seen as an allegory for any societal or political issues? How? What evidence is present in the film and outside of the film for this assessment?

You Try It

1. Name one film you have seen recently that you believe has had at least some impact on society. How did the film achieve this? Do you think the effect was intentional? The 2010 documentary *Inside Job* delves into the financial crisis and its causes. Audiences have been outraged. Will it help usher in stricter financial reform? To view an example of what the film explores, go to www.movieclips.com and watch the following clip:

   "Lehman Brothers Goes Bankrupt"

2. Have you ever been influenced by social media when making the decision whether to see a film? If so, in what way?
3. How do films such as *Pulp Fiction*, *Blue Velvet*, or others you have seen serve as an escape from your normal routine and everyday life, and how do they remind you of aspects or issues in your own life or in current society?
4. What changes would have to be made in a film such as *Pulp Fiction*, *Blue Velvet*, or another film you have seen that has graphic violence or sexuality in order for it to have been released under the rules of the Motion Picture Production Code? Think of a few scenes from a movie you have seen and how the code would change those scenes.
5. Do you believe that movies can influence specific behaviors (such as smoking in teens or the commission of violence)? Why, or why not? Do you believe that films, in general, influence society, or does society influence what is shown in films? Cite examples of films you have seen to help illustrate your answer. As an example, the 2010 film *The Social Network* tells the story of Mark Zuckerberg, who founded Facebook. Did the popularity of Facebook—and jealousy of Zuckerberg—influence the film? Go to www.movieclips.com and search "The Social Network" to view the following clip showing Zuckerberg coming up with the precursor to the popular social-media site:

   "We're Ranking Girls"

Key Terms

blog An Internet-based personal Web site often used as a random, cathartic form of self-expression, but also often used to focus on some particular topic the writer is passionate about, such as film criticism; short for "Web log."

escapism The desire or practice of escaping from daily cares and worries, often through fantasy, entertainment, or art.

Facebook A popular Internet-based medium of communication that provides users with a personal Web site of text and photos, with controlled access and the ability for outside comments, often used as a combination online résumé, diary, bulletin board, and discussion forum.

hashtag A word or phrase prefixed with the # symbol, which a computer can recognize as metadata for easy searching and grouping of information on social network services such as Twitter, Facebook, and others.

Hollywood blacklist A list of film industry personnel, especially writers and directors, who were believed by the U.S. House of Representatives on Un-American Activities Committee (also known as the HUAC) to have dangerous communist influences on mass entertainment. People on the list were forbidden to work on Hollywood studio films for many years.

Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) A group that provides movie ratings.

Motion Picture Production Code A formal list of content restrictions adopted by Hollywood movie studios in 1930 as a form of self-regulation in order to avoid the threat of national or state censorship boards.

pre-code A term applied to many films produced between 1930 and mid-1934 that flouted the terms of the Motion Picture Production Code with risqué or violent content.

social media Forms of communication, particularly through the Internet and cell-phone texting, that promote social interaction without the need for personal contact.

stereotype An overly simplified characterization of something or someone, especially due to race, nationality, geographic region, economic status, and many other attributes.

Twitter An Internet-based medium of communication that uses short text messages of 140 characters or less.