

Preparing Viewers and Views: Distribution, Promotion, and Exhibition

*It's not an accident that all the movies of the summer are rides. Adrenaline!
Our rhythms are radically different. We're constantly accelerating the visual to
keep the viewer in his seat.*

—Barry Levinson, director of *Diner* (1982) and *Liberty Heights* (1999)

KEY OBJECTIVES

What draws us to a film and accounts for our enjoyment or lack of enjoyment of it? This chapter examines how movies attract us both emotionally and intellectually and how film culture prepares viewers for different ways of seeing a film, even before we actually see it. The chapter also argues that where and when we see a movie can alter our experience of it, and, in turn, our enjoyment and understanding of the movie. We will look carefully at

- how our experience of movies and our taste for certain films have both personal and public dimensions
- how the mechanisms of film distribution determine what we see
- how film promotion attempts to predispose us to see films in certain ways
- how film exhibition, whether in cineplexes or on television, can structure our response to films in particular ways

From virtually all places and all times in cinema history, films have focused on moviegoers, their passions, and their often unpredictable activities. In Buster Keaton's *Sherlock Jr.* (1924), a bumbling projectionist walks into the movie he is watching, transformed into a Sherlock Holmes–like detective investigating the world of the film. In Chantal Akerman's *Meetings with Anna* (1978), a young woman filmmaker's search for an audience for her recent film becomes a complex and tangled voyage into herself and her society. Most recently, in Spike Lee's bitter comedy *Bamboozled* (2000), racist stereotypes of the past return to make audiences, bizarrely and disturbingly, still laugh today. In each of these instances and in so many others, viewers and their views become the heart of the drama that is the film experience.

Preceding this drama is, of course, film production, a large and complex process in which industry and art, technology and imagination, entwine. **Film production** describes those industrial stages—from the financing

Figure 1.1 (continued) *Meeting with Anna* (1978). A taste for war films.

Figure 1.4 *Meeting with Anna* (1978). Encouraging with acceptance.

and scripting of a film to its final edit—that contribute to the construction of a finished movie, a process overseen by a **producer** who usually steers and monitors each step of the process. Film production and producers are not, however, usually part of most of our experiences of the movies, except as their accomplishments appear in the completed film before us. After the bankers, writers, technicians, stars, and directors have all finished the work to produce a film, in short, the producer invariably must release and subject that film to the emotions, evaluations, and ideas of audiences who will like or dislike it, be mesmerized or bored by it, understand or misunderstand it. Indeed, in Robert Altman's dark parody of one Hollywood executive in *The Player* (1992), the art of contemporary film production degenerates entirely into the ruthless (and dangerous) business of trying to identify, capture, and manipulate sometimes resistant viewers.

In the drama of views and viewers, movies are always both a private and public affair. Since the beginning of film history, the power of movies has derived in part from our personal and sometimes idiosyncratic responses to

a movie and in part from the social and cultural contexts that surround our experience of that film. One individual may react enthusiastically, on a personal level, to Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), breathlessly absorbed in the balletic fights and intrigued by the feminist implications of the powerful female warriors in the film [Figure 1.1]. Another viewer might dislike the same film intensely because, unlike the first viewer, he has long been a fan of Hong Kong martial arts films



Figure 1.1 *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000). Feminist fighters or Americanized clichés?

and finds this a watered-down, Americanized version of those films. These individual reactions to films invariably have, in turn, public and social dimensions to them. When *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* first appeared, many viewers were quickly predisposed to appreciate it because of reviews and word-of-mouth praise that followed the film's appearances at the Cannes and New York film festivals and, later, its Academy Award nominations and wins for cinematography and score. Even the social context in which this film was first seen may have shaped and influenced how it was perceived. Watched on a large screen, where the spectacular visual effects were especially powerful and where a cheering audience added to the energy of the film, *Crouching Tiger* became, for some, a sporting event in which viewers fed off the enthusiasm of the entire audience and the larger social situation.

At the intersection of these personal and public experiences, each of us has developed different **tastes**—cultural, emotional, intellectual, and social preferences or interests that create expectations and lead us to like or dislike particular movies or parts of movies. Some tastes vary little from person to person—most people preferring good individuals to bad ones and justice served to justice foiled. Yet many tastes are unique products of our individual experiences, determined by experiential circumstances or experiential histories. Our experiential circumstances are the material conditions that define our identity at a certain time and in a certain place, such as our age, our gender, our race, and the part of the country or world in which we live. Our experiential histories are the personal and social encounters through which we have developed our identities over time, such as our education, our relationships, our travels, and even the other films we have seen. A young



Figure 1.2 *Shrek* (1999). A film that appeals to the young, the hip, and the ironic.



Figure 1.3 *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). A taste for war films.

American woman might naturally be drawn to Hollywood films and, because of her age, especially those that feature ironic humor and hip soundtracks, such as *Repo Man* (1984) and *Shrek* (1999) [Figure 1.2]. In contrast, because of his experiential history, a World War II veteran might have a particular interest in and taste for films about that war, such as *Mrs. Miniver* (1942), *The Longest Day* (1962), and *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) [Figure 1.3].

At the movies, our tastes and responses relate indirectly to two complementary viewing activities that continually interact when we watch a film: identification and cognition. Clearly, the movies we like are not only the ones we can identify with personally or fully understand, but the simultaneous activities of identification and cognition do provide a framework that often shapes our tastes. Commonly associated with our emotional responses, **identification** at the movies suggests a complex process by which we empathize with, project onto, or participate in a place, an action, or a character—either separately or as these elements interact. Viewers who have lived through adolescence will respond empathetically to the portrayal of the social electricity and physical awkwardness of teenage sexuality in *American Graffiti* (1973) [Figure 1.4] or *The Breakfast Club* (1985). Each of us may identify with different characters or with parts of various characters (such as the nerd Brian and the prom queen Claire in *The Breakfast Club*), but the success of a film often depends on eliciting specific identification with one or two of the main characters (such as Curt and Steve, the two boys about to leave for college in *American Graffiti*). Similarly, while watching *An American in Paris* (1951), one viewer may instantly participate in the carefree excitement of the opening scenes by identifying with the artistic Montmartre neighborhood and street life, where she had experienced so



Figure 1.4 *American Graffiti* (1973). Empathizing with adolescence.



Figure 1.5 *An American in Paris* (1951). At home in foreign neighborhoods.

many memorable days as a college student in Paris [Figure 1.5]; another viewer, who has never been to Paris, participates vicariously in that romantic setting because the film so effectively re-creates an atmosphere with which he can identify.

Notions of identification at the movies often describe an emotional dimension to our experience, suggesting how the fun of film, like dreams, relates to our basic urges, desires, and memories. The pleasures of the movies, though, are also part of more rational reactions learned through our experiences in life and at the movies. These learned responses can be described as forms of comprehension or **cognition**, the intellectual and social processes by which we develop the ability to understand, interpret, and reflect on different dimensions of the movies. Watching a movie, in short, is not only an emotional experience that involves the identifying processes of participa-

tion and empathy, but also a cognitive process that involves the intellectual activities of comparison and comprehension. We bring assumptions about a location or setting to most films, we expect events to change or progress in a certain way, and we measure characters against similar characters encountered elsewhere. Along with our emotional identification with the terrors or triumphs of certain characters, therefore, *Gladiator* (2000) also engages us through numerous cognitive responses. We recognize and distinguish this Rome through particular visual cues—the Coliseum and other Roman monuments—known perhaps from pictures and other movies. During battles and fights, we put into play certain learned expectations about how those fights will proceed and who will likely win, although these actions in *Gladiator* may surprise us with the extremity of their graphic violence. [Figure 1.6]. Because of other experiences, we arrive at the film with specific assumptions about Roman tyrants and heroes, and we appreciate and understand characters like the emperor Commodus or the gladiator Maximus, more or less, as they successfully balance our expectations with innovations.

What we like or dislike at the movies can, in this way, often be connected to what we understand as part of the evolving processes of identification and cognition. Even as we are drawn to and bond with places, actions, and characters in films, we must sometimes reconsider how those

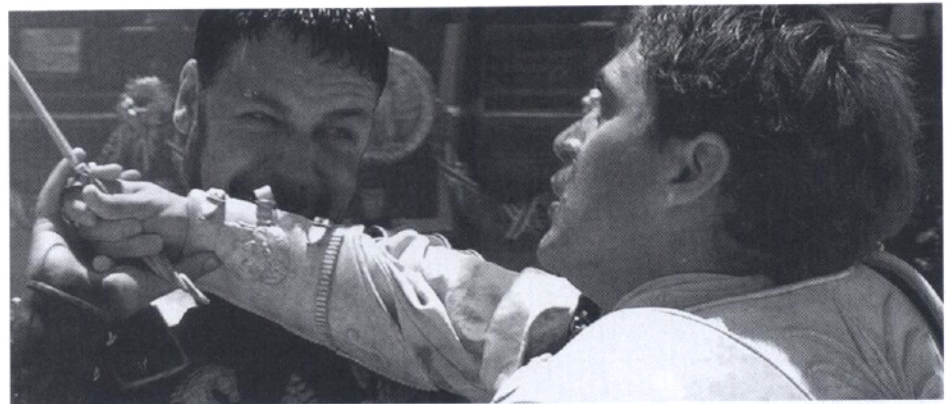


Figure 1.6 *Gladiator* (2000). Expectations and surprises about gladiators.

ways of identifying have (or could be) developed and changed by our intellectual development. Indeed, this process of cognitive realignment and reconsideration, which occurs with most films, determines to a large degree our reaction to a movie. In *The Bridges of Madison County* (1995), for example, Clint Eastwood, known for playing physically tough and intimidating characters, plays a reflective and sensitive lover, Robert Kincaid [Figure 1.7]. In this case, viewers familiar with Eastwood's other roles must rethink the expectations that had attracted them to that star and his usual character-roles (perhaps even identifying with them). Now those viewers must assess how those expectations have been complicated to challenge their understanding of *The Bridges of Madison County*. Does this shift suggest that the film is about a human depth discovered within older masculinity or about the maturing of that masculinity through the encounter with an equally strong woman (Meryl Streep as Francesca Johnson)? Whether we are able to engage in that process or whether we find the realignment convincing will frequently lay the foundation for our response to the movie.



Figure 1.7 *The Bridges of Madison County* (1995). Clint Eastwood, in a role with a different sort of masculinity.



VIEWING CUES: Your Knowledge of Film

- Before you watch the next film in your class, examine your tastes in movies by jotting down information about them (perhaps as a long journal entry). What kind of films do you enjoy? Why? What specifically about this film initially attracts you to it or discourages you from seeing it?
- Try to account for your tastes in movies. How do your personal circumstances in life (such as your age or your gender) shape your tastes in movies? Describe how your tastes have changed over the years and what you believe accounts for those changes.
- Most moviegoers today have more expertise and knowledge about films than they usually recognize. In a few paragraphs, describe yours. What are the strengths of your understanding of films? Certain genres? Visual techniques? Music? Characters?
- Before you see your next film, write down your expectations of it. What are you anticipating? After you see the movie, consider how your expectations were met or changed through the experience of the film.
- After seeing that movie, describe how you identified with certain places, actions, or characters.
- Consider how your understanding of places, actions, and characters come into play in this film. Does the movie rely on easily understood actions and characters, and if so, what makes them so easily comprehensible? Or does the film make those features sometimes difficult to understand? How so? And how do you then make sense of them?

Distribution: What We Can See

If the film experience usually becomes both an act of identification and an act of cognition, central to those experiences is how movie culture prepares us for those activities even before we sit down in front of a theater screen or video monitor. Whether we recognize it or not, our tastes, avenues of identification, and cues for understanding a film frequently come in advance. Although our decisions about which films to see can seem and often are whimsical or casual, our choices and attitudes can also be influenced, directed, and (to some extent) controlled by central parts of movie culture and the movie industry. What we see, how we see it, and even what we are unable to see (since many films never find a distributor) are not innocent activities. Preparing movies is not just about selecting actors or finding locations before filming begins. It is also about preparing viewers for their experience of watching the films. With an emphasis on the U.S. distribution system, which often controls even foreign theaters, we will begin by detailing how we can be predisposed to identify and understand a film even before we see it: how viewers for and views of movies are prepared by the social and economic machinery that directs and shapes those personal views through distribution and, as we will see later, promotion and exhibition.

At the beginning of cinema history, from about 1895 to 1910, audiences flocked to machines like the Vitascope (bought and marketed by Thomas Edison) to see virtually any images move, whether the image depicted a couple kissing or a crowd walking across the Brooklyn Bridge. There they found and enjoyed a constant supply of short films, such as historical reenactments found in movies like the gruesome *Execution of Czolgosz* (1901) and the fantasies and fairy tales of films like *The "Teddy" Bears* (1907). Today, we flock to movies made available through different paths of distribution, such as theaters, video stores, and television listings. For most of us, our tastes for and knowledge of films begin with and rely first on these avenues of distribution.

Distributing Different Views

Distribution is the practice and means through which certain movies are sent to and placed in theaters and in video stores or on television and cable networks. A **distributor** is a company that acquires the rights to a movie from the filmmakers or producers (sometimes by contributing to the costs of producing that film) and that then makes that movie available to audiences by renting or selling it to theaters or other exhibition outlets. The availability of a film is, in part, the result of which films are produced by movie makers, but the inversion of that logic is central to the economics of mainstream movie culture: Hollywood and many other film cultures produce movies that they assume can be successfully distributed. Film history has accordingly been marked with regular battles and compromises between filmmakers and distributors (either in the shape of studios or more modern institutions for distribution) about what audiences are willing to watch and which films can be successfully distributed. Indeed, a more negative situation is also true: viewers never see many good films that are produced but not distributed.

Consider the following examples of how the prospects for distributing and exhibiting a film can influence and often determine the content and form of a movie, including decisions about its length. From around 1911 to 1915, D. W. Griffith and other filmmakers struggled to convince movie studios to

allow them to expand the length of a movie from roughly fifteen minutes to ninety minutes. Although longer films gradually began to appear, most producers felt that it would be impossible to distribute longer movies because they believed audiences would not sit still for more than twenty minutes. Griffith persisted and continued to stretch the length of his films, insisting that new distribution and exhibition patterns would create and attract new audiences—those willing to accept more complex stories and to pay more for them. The commercial and financial success of his *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) [Figure 1.8], a three-hour epic distributed as a major cultural event comparable to a theatrical or operatic experience, thus became a landmark event and major force in overturning one distribution formula, which offered a program of numerous short films, and establishing a new one, which concentrated on a single **feature film**, a longer movie that is the primary attraction for audiences (see p. 24). After 1915, most films would be distributed with 90- to 120-minute running times, rather than in their previous 10- to 20-minute lengths.



Figure 1.8 *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). An epic change in film distribution.

Since 1915, this pattern for distribution has proved quite durable. In 1924, Erich von Stroheim handed his studio a nine-hour adaptation of Frank Norris's *McTeague*, retitled as *Greed*. Appalled by the length, studio executives re-cut the film to about two hours, emaciating the story but allowing them to distribute it for a profit. In 1980, United Artists decided to reduce the length of Michael Cimino's massive epic *Heaven's Gate* (1980) [Figure 1.9] from over four hours to 149 minutes in order to come closer to the standard film length. After the catastrophic failure of its first release to movie theaters, much of the original version was eventually restored, because it could now be distributed through the more flexible viewing conditions of home video.

Our experience of what a movie looks like—its length, its choice of stars, its subject matter, and even its title—is partly determined by decisions made about distribution even before the film is made available to us. Because most movies are produced to be distributed in certain ways and to certain kinds of audiences, distribution patterns can, in an important sense, make or shape a movie and our expectations about it. Whether a movie is available everywhere for everyone at the same time, released during the Christmas holidays, or available only in specialty video stores, each brings expectations attached to these distribution patterns that a particular film fulfills or frustrates.



Figure 1.9 *Heaven's Gate* (1980). Re-cut, re-released, and eventually restored for successful distribution.

As one of its primary functions, distribution determines how many copies of a film are available and the number of locations at which the movie can be seen. A movie can thus be distributed for special **exclusive release**, premiering in only one or two locations initially. A particularly dramatic example of this strategy is the restored version of Abel Gance's classic *Napoléon* (1927), an epic tale of the life of the French emperor that periodically presents the action simultaneously on three screens. The original film premiered in April 1927 (although the film was not shown in its entirety until a month later to a private audience and was subsequently distributed in the United States as a single-screen presentation). In 1981, the exclusive release of the restored film was accompanied by an orchestra and it appeared in only one theater at a time. In this most recent incarnation, *Napoléon* toured the country showing in only a very selective group of cities and theaters so that seeing it became a privileged event. Although each film will use an exclusive release in its own way, we generally approach these films expecting an unusual or singular experience created by a daring subject matter (such as the history of a nation) or a remarkable technological or formal achievement (such as a three- or four-hour running time).

A film with a mass circulation of premieres, sometimes referred to as **saturation booking** or a **saturated release**, is screened in as many locations in the United States—and sometimes abroad—as possible. For a potential blockbuster such as Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* (1993) [Figure 1.10], the distributors immediately release the movie in a maximum number of

locations and theaters to attract the largest possible audience before its novelty wears off. In these cases, distribution usually promises audiences a film that appeals to most tastes (offering perhaps breathtaking special effects rather than controversial topics) and is easy to understand (featuring uncomplicated plots and characters). A **wide release** may premiere at as many as two thousand screens, whereas a **limited release** may initially be distributed only to major cities—such as Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), which first appeared in only seventy-five theaters—and then expand its distribution, depending on the film's success. The expectations for films

following a limited release pattern are generally less fixed: they will usually be recognized in terms of the previous work of the director or an actor but will offer a certain novelty or experimentation (such as a controversial subject or a strange plot twist) that will presumably be better appreciated the more the film is publicly debated and understood through the reviews and discussions that follow its initial release.

As part of these more general practices, the history of distribution has developed other strategies that can shape or respond to the interests and tastes of intended audiences. **Platforming** releases a film in gradually widening markets and theaters so that it slowly builds its reputation and momentum through reviews and word of mouth. With **block booking**, a common practice until 1948 and still practiced in some ways today, a studio/distributor pressures a movie theater to accept and show smaller, less expensive films in order to gain the opportunity to show more popular movies as well. For instance, a cineplex might need to book a film like *True Romance* (1993) for a number of weeks in order to show *Jurassic Park* during the same time period. Although block booking allows us to see films other than blockbusters, it also establishes a hierarchy of quality by which distributors identify for us—whether we are aware of it or not—which movies are considered the most important films to see.

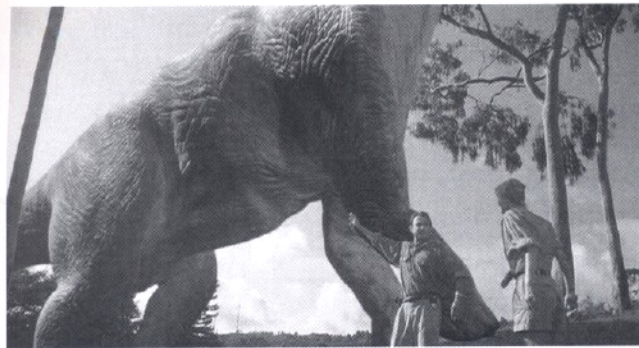


Figure 1.10 *Jurassic Park* (1993). Saturation booking and breathtaking effects.

Since the latter part of the twentieth century, movies have also been distributed with an eye toward reaching specific **target audiences**, viewers who producers feel are most likely to want to see a particular film. Producers and distributors aimed *Shaft* (1971), an action film with a black hero, at the African American audience by distributing it primarily in large urban areas. With *Trainspotting* (1995), a hip tale of young heroin users in Edinburgh, distributors positioned the film to draw the art-film and younger audiences in cities, some suburbs, and college and university towns. The *Nightmare on Elm Street* movies (1984–1989), a violent slasher series about the horrific Freddy Krueger, were aimed primarily at the male teenage audience found in the cineplexes and, later, through video stores.

The various distribution strategies all imply important issues about how movies should be viewed and understood. First, by controlling the scope of distribution, these strategies determine the quality and importance of an audience's interactions with a film. As a saturated release, *Godzilla* (1998) aimed for the swift gratification of an exciting one-time event with a focus on special effects and shocks. Platformed gradually through expanding audiences, *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989) benefited from growing conversations and more careful reflections on the relationship between an older white woman and her black chauffeur [Figure 1.11]. No distribution pattern produces a single set of expectations, nor does the distribution method determine the meaning of a film. Yet distribution methods can lead viewers, overtly or subtly, to look at a film in certain ways. We come to a saturated release perhaps prepared to focus on the performance of a star, on the relationship to a best-selling novel, or on the new use of computer technology. With a platformed release, ideas and opinions about the film are already in the air and any controversy or innovation associated with it is often part of our initial viewing.

Second, in targeting audiences, distribution can identify primary, intended responses to the film as well as secondary, deviant (or unexpected) responses to it. *Scream* (1996) [Figure 1.12] and *Scream 2* (1997) would probably offend or confuse most elderly audiences unfamiliar with teenage horror films, but the targeted teenage audiences come prepared knowing the formulas and clichés associated with this kind of movie and are likely to see these films as spoofs and parodies of contemporary slashers. One set of responses is not necessarily better or more correct than another, but recognizing the part played by distribution targeting does allow a viewer to think



Figure 1.11 *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989). Platforming a film through more careful responses.

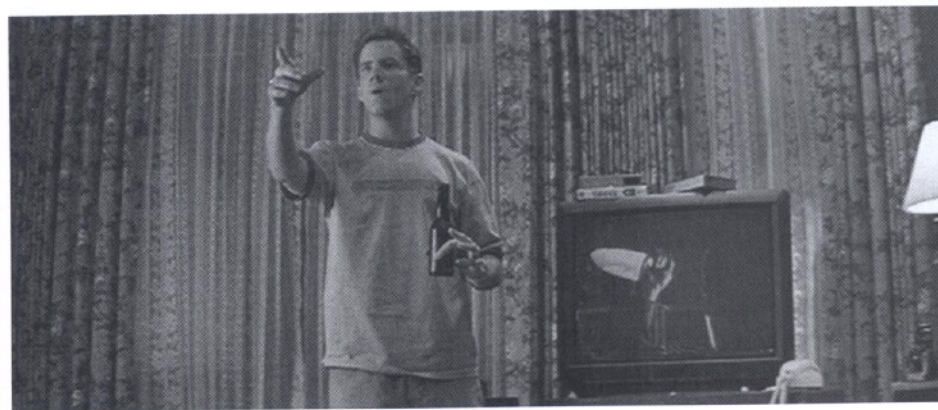


Figure 1.12 *Scream* (1996). Targeting the audience for slasher films.

more precisely and productively about the many social and cultural dynamics of responding to a movie. At the very least, this awareness indicates how our identification with and comprehension of films are as much a product of our social and cultural place as they are a product of the film's matter and form.

Video and Television Distribution

In recent years, movie distribution has increasingly taken advantage of television and video as avenues for distribution. From cable channels to VCRs (and eventually to direct computer access), more and more movies are presented through **television distribution**—the selection and programming, at carefully determined times, of movies made both for theaters and exclusively for television. Normally, there is a lag time between a theatrical release in a cinema and a video or cable release, but some movies are distributed directly to video or cable, such as the two sequels to the film *From Dusk till Dawn* (1996). Whether a movie is released later for television or is made expressly for video and television, this type of distribution aims to reach the largest possible audience and to raise revenues. Part of the motive in these cases may also be to add to the profits of a former hit or to reach more people with its message, such as when *Schindler's List* (1993) was featured as a prime-time television movie years after its original theater release. The promise of television revenues can reduce the financial risk for producers and filmmakers and thus, in some situations, allow more experimentation. This was certainly the case with the BBC's daring production of Dennis Potter and Jon Amiel's eight-hour *The Singing Detective* (1986), an extraordinary cinematic/television combination of musical and mystery genres that twists tales of World War II, childhood trauma, and the skin disease of a detective writer [Figure 1.13].

Television distribution has both positive and negative implications. In some cases, films on television must adjust their style and content to suit the formats of time and space: scenes might be cut to fit a time slot or, as with *Schindler's List*, the film may be shown on two different nights, thus potentially breaking the flow and temporal impact of a movie. The size of the image might also be changed so that a widescreen film image will fit the shape of the television monitor. In other cases, television and video distribution may expand the ways a movie can communicate with its audience and experiment with different visual forms. *The Singing Detective* uses the long length of a television series watched within the home as the appropriate format to explore and think about the passage of time, the difficulty of memory, and the many levels of reality and consciousness that get woven into our daily lives. Indeed, this question can be asked of virtually any film: What about it seems best suited for distribution in movie theaters or distribution on television? What about it seems least suited?

As with cinema and television distribution, **video distribution** and **DVD distribution** determine the availability of films on videotape or digital video discs (DVDs) for rental or purchase in stores. Since the selection in video rental stores is based on a market perspective on local audiences as well as the tastes of the individual proprietors, movies on video and DVD wind up being distributed to certain cities or neighborhoods and excluded from other locations. Asian American neighborhoods are likely to have more Asian films in their local video store than are other



Figure 1.13 *The Singing Detective* (1986). A movie made for television.

hoods and excluded from other locations. Asian American neighborhoods are likely to have more Asian films in their local video store than are other

neighborhoods. Chain stores such as Blockbuster Video are likely to concentrate on suburban neighborhoods and offer numerous copies of popular mainstream movies and to exclude some with daring subject matter. Some independent video stores specialize in art films or old movie classics.

For viewers, there are two clear consequences to these patterns of video distribution. First, video distribution can control—perhaps more so than theatrical distribution—local responses, tastes, and expectations: as part of a community anchored by that video store, we see and learn to expect only certain kinds of movies when the store makes five or six copies of one blockbuster film available but only one or none of a less popular film. In fact, the control of video outlets extends even to altering or censoring a film when, as is done at the Blockbuster outlets, they edit out scenes or lines of a movie they consider offensive to the local community. The second consequence highlights the sociological and cultural formations of film distribution. As a community outlet, distribution through video stores becomes part of the social fabric of a neighborhood: the movies made available in rental stores tend to reflect the community, and the community tends to see itself in the kinds of movies it regularly watches. Viewers are consumers, and video stores can become forums in which the interests of a community of viewers—in children’s film, Latino cinema, or less violent movies, for instance—can determine which films are distributed [Figure 1.14].



Figure 1.14 Local video store. Catering to a community of film viewers.

Distribution Timing

Distribution timing—when a movie is released for public viewing in certain locations—is another prominent feature of distribution (and, as we will see later in the chapter, of exhibition). Adding significantly to our experience of movies, timing can take advantage of the social atmosphere, cultural connotations, or critical scrutiny associated with particular seasons and calendar periods. The summer season and the December holidays are the most important in the United States because audiences usually have more free time. Offering a temporary escape from hot weather, a summer release like *Speed* (1994) also matches the thrills of the film with rides at an amusement park [Figure 1.15]. Christmas movies like *Miracle on 34th Street* (1947) promise a



Figure 1.15 *Speed* (1994). Movies as summer amusements.



Figure 1.16 *Miracle on 34th Street* (1947). Seasonal goodwill.

celebration of goodwill and community [Figure 1.16]. The Memorial Day release of *Pearl Harbor* (2001) immediately attracts the sentiments and memories of Americans remembering World War II and other global conflicts.

Mistiming a film's release can prove to be a major problem, as was the case with *A Little Princess* (1995), whose release unfortunately coincided with the more aggressively distributed *Pocahontas* (1995). Both films aimed for the same target audience of families with children, but *Pocahontas* was able to take advantage of Disney's large distribution system and was put in so many theaters that *A Little Princess* was virtually lost to audiences. As one would expect, avoiding unwanted competition with a film can be a key part of a distributor's timing: distributors accelerated

the timing of the opening of *The Matrix* (1999) [Figure 1.17] precisely to avoid competition with *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* (1999).

Of the several other variations on the tactics of timing, movies sometimes follow a **first release** or first "run" with a **second release** or second "run"; the first describes a movie's original premiere, while the second refers to the redistribution of that film months or years later. After its first release in 1982, for example, *Blade Runner* made a notable reappearance in 1992 as a longer "director's cut." While the first release had only modest success, the second (supported by a surprisingly large audience discovered in the video rental market) appealed to an audience newly attuned to the visual and narrative complexity of the movie. Audiences wanted to see, think about, and see again oblique and obscure details in order to decide, for instance, whether Deckard was a replicant or a human [Figure 1.18]. With second releases, financial reward is no doubt a primary goal, and the trend to "reissue" films like *Return of the Jedi* in 1997 testifies to the success of this formula: reappearing in 2,111 theaters, *Return of the Jedi's* reissue earned another \$46 million. Re-releases of either classic or popular films can also create new points of view, predisposing viewers to certain kinds of responses. They can initiate an emotional nostalgia for past experiences associated with an old film or, in some instances, provoke a specific curiosity about fresh material added to the re-release or about new information a viewer has acquired about a feature of the film.

With a film that may have been unavailable to viewers during its first release or that simply may not have been popular, a re-release can lend it

Figure 1.17 *The Matrix* (1999). Timing a release to avoid competition.



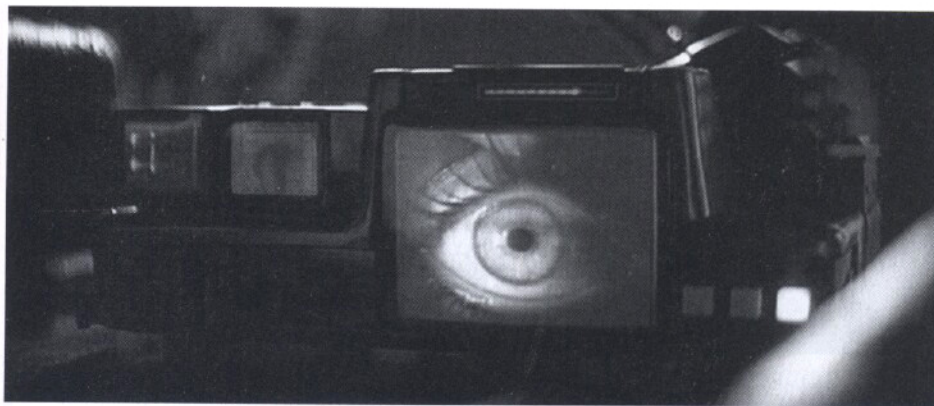


Figure 1.18 *Blade Runner* (1982, 1994). A second release as an invitation to re-see a film.

new life and reclaim viewers with new perspectives who approach the film through a process of rediscovery. When a small movie achieves unexpected popular or critical success, for example, it can then be redistributed with a much wider distribution circuit and to a more eager, sympathetic audience that is already prepared to like the movie. The initial distribution of Werner Herzog's *The Mystery of Kaspar Hauser* (1975) in Germany proved unsuccessful; after it garnered film festival prizes and was acclaimed overseas, the film was successfully redistributed in Germany. Similarly, television distribution can re-time the release of a movie to promote certain attitudes toward it. *It's a Wonderful Life* did not generate much of an audience when it was first released in 1946. Gradually (and especially after its copyright expired in 1975), network and cable television began to run the film regularly, and the film became a Christmas classic shown often and everywhere during that season [Figure 1.19]. In 1997, however, the television network NBC reclaimed the exclusive rights to the film in order to limit its television distribution to one showing each year and to try to make audiences see the movie as a special event.



Figure 1.19 *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946). Rediscovered through re-release.

The Repeat Viewer

As viewers, we are inevitably part of the distribution path of a film in ways that position us before that movie in different ways. Distributing a movie through one or more releases thus anticipates and capitalizes on an increasingly common variation in contemporary movie culture: the **repeat viewer** who returns during a first release to see the same movie more than one time. *Love Story* (1970), a tale of tragically doomed young love, was among the first modern movies to draw viewers back to the theater for multiple viewings, but films from Rudolph Valentino's *The Sheik* (1921) and *Gone with the Wind* (1939) to *Toy Story* (1995) and *The Sixth Sense* (1999) have each exploited this viewing pattern somewhat differently. Women return with women friends to share their adoration of Valentino; adults return with children to *Toy Story*, more interested in the inside jokes than the story; and fans of *The Sixth Sense* return to spot early clues that anticipate the surprise

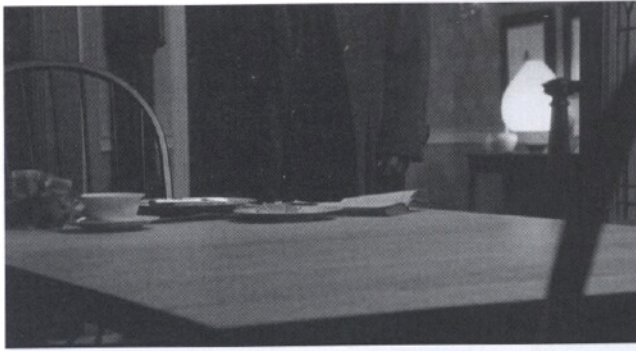


Figure 1.20 *The Sixth Sense* (1999). Repeat viewing and new clues.

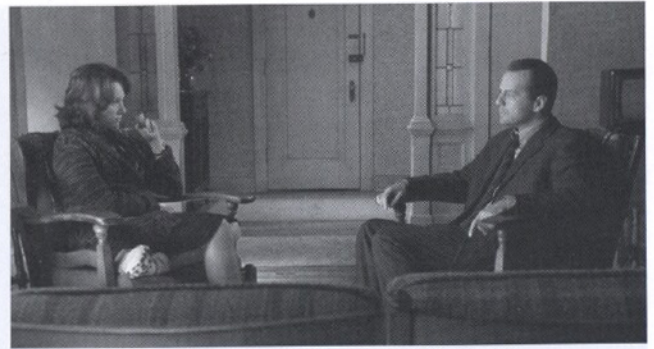


Figure 1.21 *The Sixth Sense* (1999). Seen again, the scene is not the same.

ending [Figures 1.20 and 1.21]. With repeat viewers like these, timing becomes more a function of the viewers' choices, not the distributor's. However, it also demonstrates the changing variety of experiences at the movies for the same individual: how a different time and place, different companions, and more knowledge about a movie can alter or enrich how a viewer comes prepared to see a film with different expectations and assumptions.

Whether as viewers of an exclusive Christmas release or as repeat viewers of an experimental film classic, the distribution path implicitly identifies us as a certain kind of audience (in terms of our age, gender, and other characteristics), as a viewer watching the movie in a certain place (in a theater or at home on a television), and as a moviegoer with certain habits (a midnight movie fan who regularly looks for the unusual film or the family that goes out during the holidays for inoffensive Hollywood fare). Thinking about a movie means considering carefully how it attempts to position us in a particular place and time because these positions can significantly influence much of how we understand movies.



VIEWING CUES: Distribution

- Speculate—or do some research—on how the film you will watch next in class was originally distributed. What would this distribution strategy say about the kinds of responses the film was intended to elicit? Does knowing this strategy help you understand the film's aims better?
- How might the distribution of this film have been timed to emphasize certain responses? Would it have had a seasonal release? Why or why not?
- Try to identify the target audience of this film. How does that knowledge highlight certain themes of the movie? Is your group part of the target audience? Does the group's membership (or lack of it) affect its response?
- How might this movie have been distributed for video rental? In what kind of neighborhoods or stores? Why?
- Consider if and when this movie would have been shown on television. Why? How might its distribution on television have significantly changed the look or feel of the film?
- Would this movie have attracted repeat viewers? What elements or dimensions of this film suggest that the filmmakers would or would not have expected repeat viewings?

Distributing *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994)

Critically acclaimed and financially successful, *Four Weddings and a Funeral* achieved popularity as much because of its precisely developed distribution strategy as because of its clever plot and witty characters. Starring Hugh Grant, the film tells a relatively simple and witty tale: while he watches friends marry and start new lives together, this handsome young man seems incapable of maintaining a romantic relationship with a woman [Figure 1.22]. Eventually, of course, he discovers the right woman at one of those weddings. With little intrigue or shock to attract viewers, a film like this needs to court audiences carefully, providing them with information about the story and characters and drawing them slowly to its charms. For *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, distribution strategies would pave the way to those larger, informed, and more varied audiences.

To distribute this small and low-key British film, the U.S. distributor, Gramercy, chose to platform it through expanding markets. The film first opened in Los Angeles and New York, where the distributors felt confident about finding a cosmopolitan audience for a film that had the look and feel of an art film. Building on the preliminary success in those markets, the film next opened in single theaters in Chicago, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and numerous other large U.S. cities. In the third phase of this platformed release, Gramercy expanded its market nationally, circulating twelve hundred prints of the movie around the country. With each new stage of distribution, reviews and advertisements created a chain reaction of interest: good news from New York piqued the curiosity of viewers in Atlanta; praise from Pittsburgh about the understated humor drew crowds in Austin to a film that offered a look at relationships built not on special effects but on thought and affection. By the time the film reached this final phase of distribution, its reputation as an unusual but accessible movie had already prepared potentially suspicious viewers to see and enjoy it.

Like most smaller, independent films, *Four Weddings and a Funeral* intentionally avoided distribution during the summer and holiday seasons, when it would have had to compete with the release of blockbusters. Instead, it followed a successful premiere at the Sundance Film Festival with a release to just five theaters in early March. Over the next six weeks, its timing followed its successful platform release pattern, gradually increasing its appearance to nine hundred screens. In this case, distribution timing was less about creating a seasonal event defined by a specific release date (say, a Valentine's Day premiere) than about sustaining interest over a long period of time. Like the protagonist's own search for romance, the film's distribution aimed to

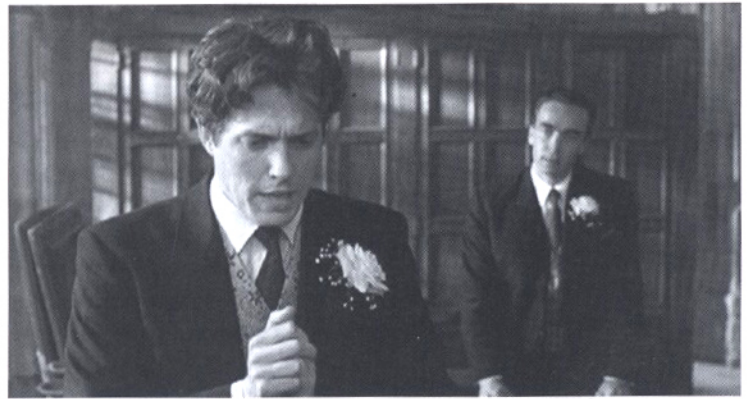


Figure 1.22 *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994). Distributing romance.

develop the quality of the relationship over time rather than create a spectacular one-night stand [Figure 1.23].

The characters and story alone suggest the general target audience for the film: eighteen- to forty-year-olds. In fact, the marketing team was even more specific in assuming the film would attract—at least at first—young single

people and primarily women who would respond to the wry British humor and to a romantic comedy about single life. Slightly older or married individuals would later be drawn to the film as, in the words of the distributor, “a non-Shakespearean *Much Ado About Nothing*.” Beyond the theaters, the distribution of the film found, predictably, outlets on television and in video stores. Titillating but inoffensive, the episodic structure of *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, as it follows the main character through the five events of the title, already anticipates the commercial breaks of the U.S. television format that would equally accommodate its frothy humor. Nominated for Academy Awards for best picture and best original

screenplay, it was distributed to video chains and specialty stores where it easily bridged the categories of European independent film and mainstream comedy.

Many kinds of audiences have seen and enjoyed *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. Viewers who saw the movie's premiere at the Sundance Film Festival no doubt had a different take on it than an audience who watched it months later in Minneapolis. Repeat viewers, who returned to see favorite scenes,

would experience and respond to the film in ways unlike those who saw its premiere. Indeed, an awareness of these distribution contexts suggests a variety of critical points about the film and how those distribution strategies can identify and draw out different responses to the movie. Younger viewers in Los Angeles who attend its first release may see it as a tongue-in-cheek fantasy about young love and the triumph of romance [Figure 1.24]. Older audiences who follow the critical responses to its different platforms might be more attuned to its slightly dark and serious themes about isolation and loss or to its specifically British dimensions, such as the witty and sophisticated play of

dialogue. While the particular film always remains the same, distribution clearly inflects and directs our expectations by identifying viewers according to certain tastes, interests, and knowledge, and so prepares that audience to approach the film in certain ways. As *Four Weddings and a Funeral* demonstrates, the distribution of any film chooses its audiences and, in making those choices, distribution aims implicitly to identify viewers' knowledge, attitudes, and tastes. Grounded in that knowledge and those attitudes, viewers anticipate a movie: they come already prepared to identify with and understand a film in certain ways even before the first images move.



Figure 1.23 *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994). Developing the quality of the relationship.



Figure 1.24 *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994). Addressing different audiences.

Marketing and Promotion: What We Want to See

Why and how we are attracted to the movies we see at particular places and times is a slightly different but equally important matter. Just as a film can be distributed in various ways, a movie can be marketed and promoted in different ways to shape and direct our interests in it. A film might be advertised in newspapers as the work of a great director, for example, or it might be described as a steamy love story and illustrated by way of a poster. Although these preliminary encounters with a film might seem marginally relevant to how we experience a film, promotional strategies, like distribution strategies, prepare us in important ways for how we will see and understand a film.

Promoting Our Interest

Marketing and promotion aim to generate and direct interest in a movie. Film **marketing** involves identifying an audience in order to bring a product (the movie) to the attention of buyers (viewers), so that they will come to consume (to watch) that product. Film **promotion** refers to the specific ways a movie can be made an object that an audience will want to see. No doubt the most common and potent component of the marketing and promotion of movies around the world is the **star system** (see pp. 54–55 and 461–63), which advertises a movie as the vehicle of one or more well-known actors (currently popular at that time and in that culture). Like other marketing and promotional practices, the star system aims to create, in advance, specific expectations that will draw an audience to a film. Quite often, these marketing and promotional expectations—that the film stars Whoopi Goldberg or is directed by British filmmaker Peter Greenaway, say—subsequently become the viewfinders through which an audience sees a movie.

A part of film culture since its early years, the mechanisms of marketing and promotion involve everything from newspaper and billboard advertisements to the previews shown before the main feature. The public appearances of stars on radio and television as well as the early screenings for newspaper critics, whose reviews coincide with the release of a film, are also forms of promotion. In addition, while movies have long been promoted through prizes and gifts [Figure 1.25], modern distributors are especially adept at marketing films through **tie-ins**: ancillary products such as tee-shirts, CD soundtracks, toys, and other gimmicks made available at stores and restaurants that advertise and promote a movie. *The Little Mermaid* (1989), for example, was anticipated with the replica toys of Ariel and the frequently performed song “Under the Sea.”

A similar marketing blitz accompanied *Independence Day*. Given its carefully timed release on July 3, 1996, following weeks of advertisements in newspapers and on television, it would be difficult to analyze viewers’ feelings about this film without taking into account the influence of these promotions. Defining the film as a science fiction thriller, the advertisements and reviews drew attention to its status as the film event of the summer, its suitability for children, and its technological wizardry.



Figure 1.25 Movie marquee. Promoting movies through prizes and gifts.



Figure 1.26 *Independence Day* (1996). Promoting racial harmony.



Figure 1.27 *Innocents of Paris* (1929). Marquee promoting the novelty of sound and song.

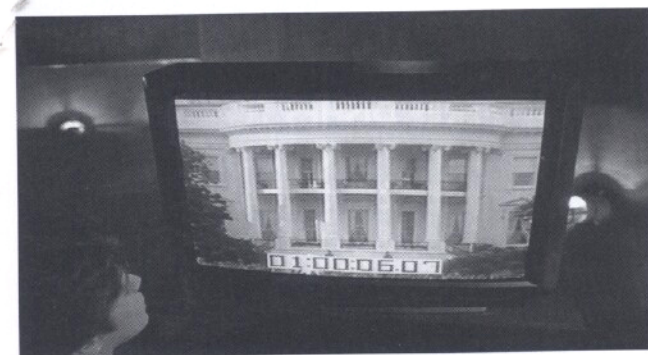


Figure 1.28 *Wag the Dog* (1997). White House scandals as a movie advertisement.

Promoted and released to coincide with the Fourth of July holiday, *Independence Day* ads emphasized its patriotic American themes. In that light, many posters, advertisements, and publicity stills presented actors Will Smith together with Bill Pullman or Jeff Goldblum, not only to promote those stars but also perhaps to draw attention to the racial harmony of the film and its appeal to African American and white audiences [Figure 1.26]. During the first month of its release, when U.S. scientists discovered a meteorite with fossils that suggested early life on Mars, promotion for the movie responded immediately with revised ads: “Last week, scientists found evidence of life on another planet. We’re not going to say we told you so. . . .”

Typical of Hollywood, promotions and advertisements often emphasize the “**greater realism**” of movies, a strategy that promises audiences more accurate or more expansive reflections of the world and human experience. For *Dark Victory* (1939), a Bette Davis film about a socialite dying of a brain tumor, advertisements and press kits drew viewers’ attention to the disturbing truth of a terminal illness, a reality that promotions claimed had never before been presented in movies. A related marketing strategy is to claim “**textual novelty**” in the film, drawing attention to new features such as technical innovations, a rising star, or the acclaimed book on which the film is based. With early sound films like *The Jazz Singer* (1927), *The Gold Diggers of Broadway* (1929), and *Innocents of Paris* (1929) [Figure 1.27], marketing advertisements directed audiences toward the abundance and quality of the singing and talking that added a dramatic new dimension to cinematic realism. Today, promotions and advertisements can exploit new digital technologies, as when *Mask* (1994) touted everywhere the remarkable digital transformations of Jim Carrey’s face and body, or they can take advantage of a timely political coincidence, as when *Wag the Dog* (1997) advertised its uncanny resemblance to a current sexual scandal in the Clinton White House [Figure 1.28].

Older films in current release and art films have less access to the mechanisms of promotion than do current mainstream films, and their promotion is not usually in the hands of film companies seeking huge financial profits. Even so, audiences for these films are led to some extent by what we will call **cultural promotion**, academic or artistic accounts that discuss and frequently value films as especially important in movie history or as aesthetic objects. A discussion of a movie in a film history book or even in a university film course could thus be seen

as an act of “marketing,” which makes clear that promotion is not just about urging viewers to see a film but is also about urging them to see it with a particular point of view. Although these more muted kinds of promotion are usually underpinned by intellectual rather than financial motives, they also deserve our consideration and analysis because they too shape our understanding of films. How does a specific film history text, for instance, prepare you to see a film such as *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967)? Some books promote it as a modern gangster film [Figure 1.29]. Others pitch it as an incisive reflection of the social history of the turbulent 1960s. Still other texts and essays may urge readers to see it because of its place in the opus of a major U.S. director, Arthur Penn. Even independent and classical movies require publicity: by promoting the artistic power and individuality of the director; by associating them with big-name film festivals in Venice, Toronto, and Cannes; or by calling attention, through advertising, to what distinguishes them from mainstream Hollywood films. In short, we do not experience any film with innocent eyes; consciously or not, we come prepared to see it in a certain way.



Figure 1.29 *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967). Gangster film or social commentary?

Advertising and Ratings

Advertising is a central form of promotion that uses television, billboards, film trailers or previews, print ads, and other forms of display to bring a film to the attention of a potential audience. Advertising can use the facts in and issues surrounding a movie in various ways. Advertising often emphasizes connections and differences with related or similar films or highlights the presence of a particularly popular actor or director: the poster for Charles Chaplin’s *The Kid* (1921) [Figure 1.30] emphasizes the famous Chaplin, but unlike his well-known slapstick comedies, his serious demeanor in the poster suggests the serious themes of his first feature film, “a great Film he has been working on for a whole year.” For different markets, *G.I. Jane* (1997) was promoted as a star vehicle for Demi Moore or as the latest film from Ridley Scott, the director of *Blade Runner*, *Alien* (1979), and *Thelma & Louise* (1991). It is conceivable that these two promotional tactics created different sets of expectations about the movie—one more attuned to tough female sexuality, the other to lavish sets and technological landscapes. As this example reveals, promotion tends not only to draw us to a movie but also to suggest what we will concentrate on as a way of understanding its achievement.

One of the most carefully crafted forms of promotional advertising is the **theatrical trailer**, which previews a few scenes from a film in theaters before the main feature film or, more commonly today, in



Figure 1.30 *The Kid* (1921). Poster advertising a new Chaplin.



Figure 1.31 *Eyes Wide Shut* (2000). Erotic trailer.

a television commercial. In just a few minutes, these trailers provide a compact series of reasons why a viewer *should* see that movie. A trailer for Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* (2000) is indicative: typical of this kind of promotion, it moves quickly to separate large bold titles announcing the names of Tom Cruise, Nicole Kidman, and Kubrick, foregrounding the collaboration of a star marriage and a celebrated director of daring films. Then, against the refrain from Chris Isaak's soundtrack song "Baby Did a Bad Thing," a series of images condenses the progress of the film, including shots of Kidman undressing [Figure 1.31], Cruise as Dr. Harford sauntering with two beautiful women, a passionate kiss shared by the two stars, two ominous-looking men at the gate of an estate (where the orgy would take place), and Cruise being enticed by a prostitute. Besides the provocative match of two star sex symbols

with a controversial director, the trailer underlines the dark erotic mysteries of the film within an opulently decadent setting. It introduces intensely sexual characters and the alternately seedy and glamorous atmosphere of the film in a manner meant to draw fans of Cruise, Kidman, Kubrick, and dark erotic intrigue. That this promotion fails to communicate the stinging irony in the movie's eroticism may, interestingly, account for some of the disappointed reactions that followed its eager initial reception.

Trailers, posters, and newspaper advertisements select not only their images carefully but also their terminology in order to guide our perspective on a film even before we see it. Parodied brilliantly in *The Player* (1992), modern Hollywood can often promote a film with the language of **high concept**, a short phrase that attempts to sell the main marketing features of a movie through its stars, its genre, or some other easily identifiable connection [Figure 1.32]: in *The Player*, one film is described as "kind of a psychic political thriller with a heart"; other high-concept movies might be advertised as "Stanley Kubrick's exploration of pornography" or "In *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001), superstar Angelina Jolie brings the CD-ROM game to life." The rhetoric of movie advertising frequently descends into such silly clichés

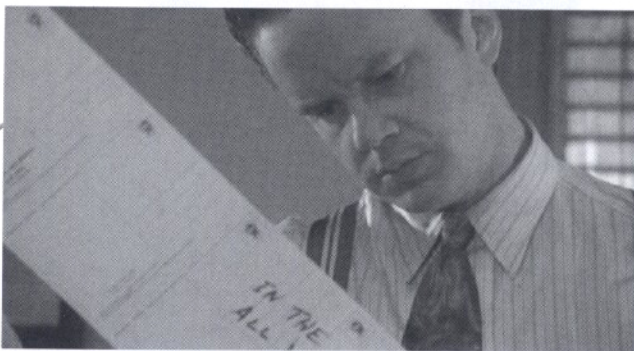


Figure 1.32 *The Player* (1992). Producing high-concept films.

as "two thumbs up" or "action-packed, fun-filled adventure," yet promotional and marketing terms also use succinct descriptive terms to position a movie for particular expectations and responses. For example, the term *feature film*, originating in 1912 but becoming a key promotional strategy in the 1930s, describes a movie that is of a certain length (over seventy minutes), that is promoted as the main attraction or an **A picture** in a theater, and that promises high-quality stars and stories. Conversely, a **B picture** is a less expensive, less important movie that plays before the main attraction and indicates less visual and narrative sophistication. Just as today the term **blockbuster** prepares us for action, stars, and special effects, and **art film** sug-

gests a slower, perhaps more visually and intellectually subtle movie, the terminology used to define and promote a movie can become a potent force in framing our expectations.

Rating systems, which provide viewers with guidelines for movies (usually based on violent or sexual content), are a similarly important form of advertising that can be used in marketing and promotion. Whether they are wanted or unwanted by viewers, ratings are fundamentally about trying to control the kind of audience that sees a film and, to a certain extent, about advertising the content of that film. In the United States, the current ratings system classifies movies as G (general audiences), PG (parental guidance suggested), PG-13 (parental guidance suggested and not recommended for audiences under thirteen years old), R (persons under age seventeen must be accompanied by an adult), and NC-17 (persons under age seventeen are not admitted). Most countries, as well as some religious organizations, have their own systems for rating films. Great Britain, for instance, uses these categories: U (universal), A (parental discretion), AA (persons under age fourteen are not admitted), and X (persons under age eighteen are not admitted). Interestingly, the age limit for X-rated films varies from country to country, the lowest being age fifteen in Sweden.

A movie like *Free Willy* (1993), a tale of a child and a captured whale, depends on its G rating to draw large family audiences, whereas sexually explicit films like *Show Girls* (1995), rated NC-17, and Nagisa Oshima's *In the Realm of the Senses* (1976), not rated and confiscated when it first came to many countries, can use the notoriety of their ratings to attract curious adult viewers. When promotion casually or aggressively uses ratings, our way of looking at and thinking about the movie already begins to anticipate the film. For example, with an R rating, we might be made to anticipate a movie featuring a degree of sex and violence. A rating of G might promise happy endings and happy families. Recent movies, such as *Men in Black* (1997) [Figure 1.33], have eagerly sought a PG-13 rating because that, ironically perhaps, attracts a younger audience of eight-, nine-, and ten-year-olds, who want movies with a touch of adult language and action.



Figure 1.33 *Men in Black* (1997). Seeking a PG-13 rating.

Word of Mouth

Our experience at the movies is anticipated and directed in advance of our viewing of the film in less evident and less predictable ways as well. **Word of mouth**, the conversational exchange of opinions and information sometimes referred to as the “buzz” around a movie, may seem a somewhat insignificant or at least hazy area of promotion, yet it is an important social arena in which our likes and dislikes are formed and given direction by the social groups we move in. We know our friends like certain kinds of films, and we all tend to promote movies according to a “**sociology of taste**” whereby we judge and approve of movies according to the values of our particular age group, cultural background, or other social determinant. When marketing experts direct a movie at a target audience, they intend to promote that film through word of mouth, knowing viewers talk to each other and recommend films to people who share their values. Examine, for instance, how a group of friends might promote *Titanic* (1997) among themselves. Do they recommend it to one another because of the strength or attractiveness of the female character Rose, the breathtaking special effects



Figure 1.34 *Titanic* (1997). Promotion: word of mouth and a taste for the spectacular.



Figure 1.35 *Titanic* (1997). Promotion: a taste for class politics.

[**Figure 1.34**], or the confrontation between the rich and the poor [**Figure 1.35**]? What would each of these word-of-mouth promotions indicate about the social or personal values of the person promoting the movie and how he or she acts out of a sociology of taste?

Fan magazines have always extended word of mouth as a form of movie promotion and a sociology of taste. Popular since the 1920s, and sometimes called “fanzines,” in recent years fan magazines have evolved into Internet discussion groups and **promotional Web sites**. Web sites, often set up by a film’s distributor, have, in fact, become the most powerful contemporary form of the fanzine, allowing information about and enthusiasm for a movie to be efficiently exchanged and spread among potential viewers. Most famously, *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) Web site was established in advance of the film’s release and used fake documents and clues to help generate word of mouth; the success of this strategy transformed this simple, low-budget horror film (\$35,000) into a huge box-office hit (\$15 million). In the spring of 2001, Steven Spielberg’s *A.I.* and the new *Planet of the Apes* targeted e-mail accounts and set up Web-based games (in the case of *Planet of the Apes*, a global scavenger hunt called Project A.P.E.) that spread through chat rooms even before the films were released [**Figure 1.36**]. To encourage and develop individual interest in films, these fanzines and Web sites gather together readers and viewers who wish to read or chat about their ongoing interest in movies like the *Star Trek* films (1979–1994) or cult favorites like *Casablanca* (1942). Here, tastes about which movies to



Figure 1.36 *Planet of the Apes* (2001). Spreading the word on the Web.

like and dislike and about how to see them are both supported and promoted on a far more concrete social and commercial level. Information is offered or exchanged about specific movies, arguments are waged, and sometimes games or fictions are developed around the film. Magazines may provide information about the signature song of *Casablanca*, “As Time Goes By,” and the actor who sings it, Dooley Wilson. Chat room participants may query each other about Mr. Spock’s Vulcan history or fantasize about his personal life. Even before the release of *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), the filmmakers engaged fans of the Tolkien novel through e-mails and Web sites, trading information about the production for feedback on casting decisions and scene cuts. Here, the Internet promotes word



VIEWING CUES: Promotion

- Look at the advertisements that promote a particular film (perhaps the film you will watch next in class). What do the billboards, trailers, and newspaper advertisements communicate to you about this film? What do they emphasize? What new realities or innovations in film technique do they advertise? Has the film been packaged with high-concept or other terminology that pigeonholes the movie in a certain way?
- What other strategies for promoting this movie have been used to shape and direct our understanding of it? Have you read something about this movie (in a book or magazine) that makes you think it is important in some cultural or historical way? Have you seen any Web sites for this movie? How do they highlight particular themes and reactions to the film?
- Think about this film in terms of the rating assigned to it. Does its rating color your assumptions about the film, making you suspicious or curious in certain ways?
- Has word-of-mouth promotion been an important vehicle for this film? How would you summarize the “buzz” that anticipated or surrounded the film? Can you analyze how it has prepared viewers with certain expectations?
- After seeing the film, which of these promotional strategies seem most accurate? Most misleading? What about the film has been ignored or underplayed in any of these promotional strategies? For what possible reasons?

Promoting *The Crying Game* (1992)

Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* is an ingenious example of various promotional maneuvers. A story about the sexual identity crisis of Fergus, a member of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), the film begins with the capture of Jody, a black British soldier. After witnessing Jody's violent, accidental death, Fergus flees to England, where he seeks out and falls in love with Dil, Jody's former lover [Figure 1.37]. Complicating this plot, Fergus does not realize, during the first part of their courtship, that Dil is a transvestite.

For both British and American audiences, the film was first promoted on the basis of its artistic novelty and integrity, which was associated primarily with Jordan's cultural reputation as a serious director of inventive British films, including *Mona Lisa* (1986). That *The Crying Game* was only moderately successful when first released in England can be attributed, in part, to the social context of its release: renewed IRA activity in England at the time may have made it difficult for British audiences to look past the subplot and concentrate on Jordan's artistic inventiveness or on the intriguing relationship between Fergus and Dil. The U.S. distributor, Miramax, also recognizing difficulties in distributing and promoting the film, was concerned about three traditional marketing taboos: race, political violence, and homosexuality. However, removed from the British-Irish political context, Miramax decided it could repackage the movie to promote it by drawing attention away from its political intrigue and focusing on the romantic and sexual "secret" of Dil's masculinity. The film broke box-office records in the United States for a British production. The promotional schemes in Britain and the United States resulted in significantly different ways of seeing and understanding the same movie.

At the center of its promotional history, *The Crying Game* required two different advertising approaches, one for the British release and another for



Figure 1.37 *The Crying Game* (1992). The IRA and sexual identity.

the U.S. release. The differences between these campaigns crystallize in the advertising posters used for the two promotions. In the British poster [Figure 1.38], a large facial portrait of Stephen Rea as Fergus holding a smoking gun centers the image, surrounded by smaller images of the faces of Jaye Davidson as Dil and Miranda Richardson as the femme fatale Jude. Numerous lines of print promote the film as “From the Director of *Mona Lisa*,” “Neil Jordan’s Best Work to Date,” and “More Surprises Than any Film Since *Psycho*.” The American poster features only the image of Miranda Richardson, with a smoking gun, set against a black backdrop [Figure 1.39]. The print is equally spare: “Sex. Murder. Betrayal.” and, under the film’s title, “play it at your own risk.” The British poster advertises the cinematic heritage of Jordan, while highlighting the masculine and political violence associated with Fergus’s large image. The American poster conversely creates the dark atmosphere of sexual intrigue, notably offering audiences a participatory game rather than a serious political reality.

In the wake of the film’s promotion and box-office success in the United States, the Internet continued to promote the film’s initial participatory lure. Typically, dozens of Web sites about *The Crying Game* appeared in numerous languages. Some sites, such as *The Crying Game* Fan Page, feature photos, Boy George’s rendition of the title song, and links to movie reviews. Others are devoted to a single star, such as Forest Whitaker or Jaye Davidson.

Ratings and, especially, word of mouth created specific expectations and interests in *The Crying Game*. It received an R rating in the United States (no doubt for its frontal male nudity), where such a rating would more likely suggest sexual content than violence. But, especially in the United States, word of mouth functioned as the most powerful strategy in the promotion of *The Crying Game*. Viewers, including movie reviewers, were urged to keep the secret of Dil’s sexuality as a way of baiting new audiences to see the film. A widely announced word-of-mouth promotion—“Don’t tell the secret!”—drew a continuous stream of audiences wanting to participate in this game of secrets. Word of mouth became part of a strategy to entice American audiences who, anticipating a sexual drama of surprises and reversals, would in most instances overlook the political tensions that complicated the film for British audiences.



Figure 1.38 *The Crying Game* (1992). British poster promoting political violence.



Figure 1.39 *The Crying Game* (1992). American poster promoting sexual games.

of mouth about a film by offering potential audiences the possibility of some participation in the making of the film, an approach that is more and more common today.

As they proliferate, promotional avenues like these deserve attention and analysis in terms of deciding how they add to or confuse our understanding of a film. Here, too, our different experiences of the movies take place within a complex cultural terrain where our personal interest in certain films intersects with specific historical and social forces to shape the meaning and value of those experiences. Here, too, the film experience extends well beyond the screen.

Movie Exhibition: The Where, When, and How of Movie Experiences

Distribution and promotion are called “extra-filmic dimensions” of the movie experience because they describe events that precede, surround, or follow the actual images we watch on a screen or television monitor. The final extra-filmic dimension of the movie experience is **exhibition**, the places where and the times when we can see films. Like distribution and promotion, we tend to take exhibition for granted as describing the normal cultural range of places and times for seeing movies: sometimes we watch films in theaters, sometimes on video monitors, or sometimes even on computer screens. However, the many ways that movies are exhibited mean much more than we realize to our feelings about a film and our interpretation of it.

The Changing Contexts of Film Exhibition

Film distribution, promotion, and exhibition are, not surprisingly, closely related in how they anticipate and condition our responses to movies. If distribution and promotion already work to anticipate, shape, and direct our tastes, exhibition practices can support or alter the intended aims and meanings of a movie. These exhibition practices include:

- the physical environment in which we view a movie
- the temporal frameworks describing when and the length of time we watch a movie
- the technological format through which we see the movie

Seeing the same movie at a cineplex or in a college classroom, watching it uninterrupted for two hours on a big screen or in thirty-minute segments over four days on a VCR can elicit very different kinds of experiences of that movie. A viewer may be completely bored by a film shown on an airplane, but, seen later in a theater, that film may appear full of visual surprises and interesting plot twists.

Movies have been distributed, exhibited, and seen in many different historical exhibition contexts. At the beginning of the twentieth century, movies rarely lasted more than twenty minutes and were often viewed in small, noisy **nickelodeon theaters**, storefront spaces where short films were shown continuously to audiences passing in and out, or in carnival settings that assumed movies were a passing amusement comparable to other carnival attractions [Figure 1.40]. By the 1920s, as movies grew

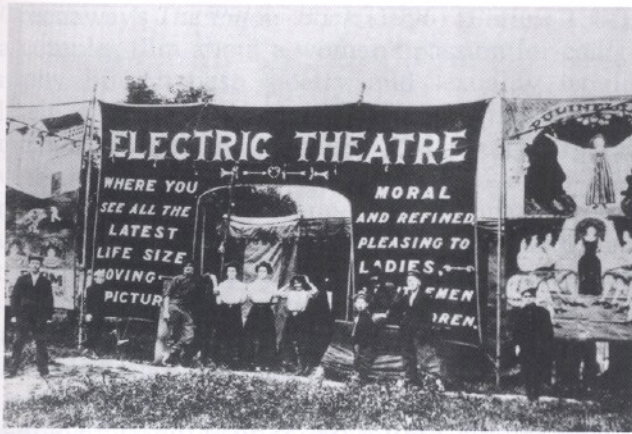


Figure 1.40 The carnival exhibition of early movies.

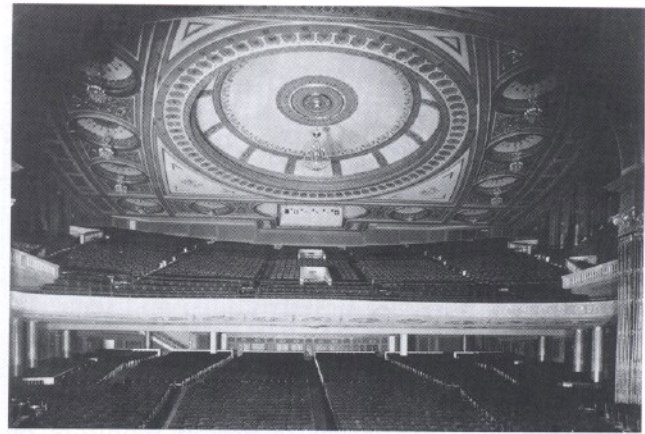


Figure 1.41 The lavish environment of movie palaces.

artistically, financially, and culturally, the exhibition of films moved to lavish **movie palaces**, like Radio City Music Hall, with sumptuous seating and ornate architecture [Figure 1.41]. By the 1950s, city centers gave way to suburban sprawl; as the theaters lost their crowds of patrons, widescreen and 3-D processes were introduced to distinguish the possibilities of film exhibition from its new rival, television at home. Today we commonly see movies at home, on a VCR or DVD player, where we can watch a movie in the normal 90- to 120-minute period or extend our viewing over many nights in a series of episodes. In recent years, as movies continue to compete with home video, film exhibitors have countered with so-called megaplexes, theaters with twenty or more screens, more than six thousand seats, and over a hundred show times per day. These new entertainment complexes sometimes feature not just movies but also miniature golf courses, roller rinks, restaurants, and coffee bars.

These changing exhibition formats parallel many other changes in the ways in which we watch and respond to movies. Informing all of them is a “**sociology of exhibition space**”; how and where we watch a movie reflects or becomes part of specific social activities that surround and define moviegoing:

- Exhibition highlights a social dimension of watching movies because it gathers and organizes individuals as a specific social group.
- Our shared participation in that social environment directs our attention and shapes our responses in ways that influence how we enjoy and understand a film.

A movie such as *My Dog Skip* (2000) [Figure 1.42] will be shown and often be seen as a Saturday matinee in suburban theaters to attract families with children to its nostalgic story, set in the 1940s, of a southern boy and his dog. The time and place of the showing obviously coordinate with a period when middle-class families can usually share experiences together as recreation and amusement, making them more inclined perhaps to appreciate this lighthearted tale of family love and affection. Conversely, Peter



Figure 1.42 *My Dog Skip* (2000). A boy and his dog for Saturday matinees in the suburbs.

Watching Film and Television

When most of us see movies today, we watch them on television, which is not the way most films are first exhibited and seen. Although this way of viewing films is, for most of us, more common and natural than going out to a theater, it significantly alters the movie we see. With VCRs plugged into larger television monitors or home projection systems, the differences between television and film technology may seem less and less visible. However, important technological distinctions must be considered when comparing and contrasting the exhibition of films in a theater and the watching of movies on a television monitor.

The quality of the sound and image has always indicated a technological gap that impacts movies exhibited on television. Most accounts emphasize the loss of image and sound quality when moving from film projection to a television or videotape presentation [Figure 1.43]. Whether using 16mm film or the larger 35mm or 70mm film, movies offer between 3,500 and 4,000 lines of resolution. As an electronic transmission of pixels (dots containing information about color and brightness), television can offer a maximum of only 525 lines of resolution (although most home televisions can display between 300 and 400 lines). Both HDTV (high-definition television) and DVD (digital video disc) promise to improve the quality of the video image appreciably by creating higher resolutions of digital reproduction: HDTV offers 1,080 lines of resolution and DVD offers 480 lines. The popularity of elaborate stereo sound systems for the home may also offer high-quality sound to

match the Dolby systems found in theaters, but in most cases film sound suffers significant deterioration when projects are transferred to television.

The size and format of the image has also distinguished film from television. Over the last four decades, movie theaters and television have developed changing aspect ratios (the ratio of the width of the frame to the height). Television monitors normally follow the “academy” ratio of 1.33:1, used traditionally in film projection. Modern movies commonly use widescreen ratios of 1.85:1 or 2.35:1. As a consequence, movies converted for television viewing are frequently subjected to a **pan-and-scan process** to allow the film image to fit the television format: with this process, a computer-controlled scanner determines the most important action in the image and then crops peripheral action and space so that the central action is reproduced as one image or perhaps re-edited to two images. Imitating the widescreen formats found in theaters, letterbox formats for videotapes and DVDs, and so the problems and solutions associated with the differences between film and television technology have become more complex and variable. Still, the questions remain: Because of these transformations and changes in the technology of exhibition, can we determine what an authentic or authorized experience of a film should be? Do contemporary exhibition and viewing practices suggest that most movies must be “amphibious”—that is, able to function and communicate through both theatrical and video exhibitions?

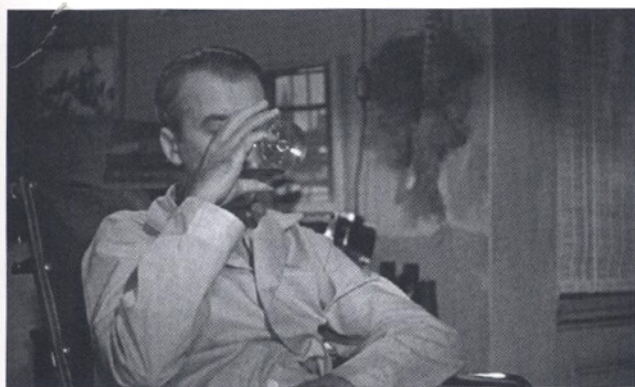


Figure 1.43 *Rear Window* (1954). The video image (left) is darker and has less contrast than the brighter, higher-contrast film image (right).

Greenaway's *The Pillow Book* (1996) [Figure 1.44], a complex film about a woman's passion for calligraphy, human flesh, poetry, and sexuality, would likely appear in a small downtown theater frequented by single individuals and young couples who also spend time in the theater's coffee bar. This movie would probably appeal to an urban crowd with more experimental tastes in movies and time to gather over coffee to talk before or after films. Reversing the exhibition contexts of these two films should indicate how those contexts could generate wildly different reactions.

Our movie watching also includes the **technological conditions of exhibition**, the industrial and mechanical vehicles showing a movie. In a large theater, a movie can be shown with a 35mm or even 70mm movie projector that shows large and vibrantly detailed images. We might see another movie in a cineplex theater at a mall with a relatively small screen and a smorgasbord of other movies in the screening rooms surrounding it. We may watch a third movie on a VCR that uses tape rather than film and that we can stop, reverse, or fast forward. In the past, popular exhibition practices included inserting a short movie within a vaudeville performance or offering double features in drive-in theaters full of teenagers in cars. Today's movies are already beginning to be exhibited on a computer screen, where they share the monitor with other kinds of activities.

Different technological features of exhibition are sometimes carefully calculated to add to both our enjoyment and understanding of a movie. Cecil B. DeMille's epic film *The Ten Commandments* (1923) premiered in a movie palace, where the plush and grandiose surroundings, the biblical magnitude of the images, and the orchestral accompaniment supported the grand spiritual themes of the film. In most cases, the idea is to match, as here, the exhibition with the themes of the film so that the conditions for watching it parallel the ideas or formal practices in the movie. With a movie that uses special projection techniques for exhibition, such as 3-D glasses [Figure 1.45] for *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954), the form and technology of exhibition in which we are meant to watch the film can often relate to its subject matter. Here, the shocking appearance of the creature becomes even more shocking with more visual dimensions. Though a mostly nostalgic form of exhibition today, 3-D glasses and images create a perceptual illusion of three-dimensional space that places the audience more dramatically into the visual dynamics of *Creature from the Black Lagoon's* suspense, involving those viewers more fully in the illusory danger of certain scenes (and so distinguishing this movie experience from that available on small-screen televisions, a major competitor at the time of its release).

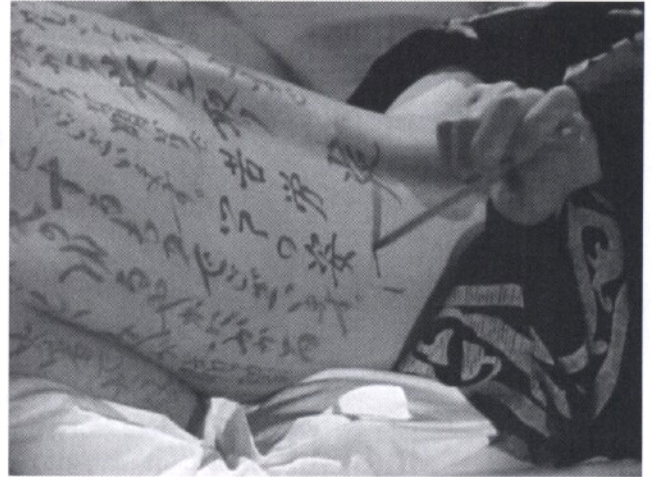


Figure 1.44 *The Pillow Book* (1996). Body calligraphy and art-house exhibition.



Figure 1.45 3-D exhibition.

Exhibiting *Citizen Kane* (1941)

The tale of a man obsessed with power and possessions, *Citizen Kane* is often considered one of the greatest films ever made. It is usually hailed for Orson Welles's portrayal of Charles Foster Kane and his direction of the puzzle-like story, and for the film's complex visual compositions. It is also a movie that ran into trouble even before its release because of its thinly disguised and critical portrayal of U.S. media mogul William Randolph Hearst. Less often is the film seen and understood according to its dramatic exhibition history, one that has colored or even decided the changing meanings of the film.

As the first film of a director already hailed as a "boy genius" for his work as a theater actor and director, *Citizen Kane* was scheduled to open with appropriate fanfare at the spectacular Radio City Music Hall in New York City. Besides the glamorous and palatial architecture of this building, exhibiting the film in New York first would take advantage of the fact that Welles's career and reputation had been made there. The physical and social context for this opening exhibition would combine the epic grandeur of the Radio City building and a New York cultural space attuned to Welles's artistic experimentation. Already offended by rumors about the film, however, Hearst secretly moved to block the opening at Radio City Music Hall. After many difficulties and delays, the film's producer and distributor, RKO, eventually premiered the film simultaneously at an independent theater in Los Angeles and at a refurbished vaudeville house in New York City [Figure 1.46]. As a final twist, when major theaters such as the Fox and Paramount chains were legally forced to exhibit the film, they sometimes booked *Citizen Kane* but did not screen it for fear of vindictive repercussions from Hearst. Where it was shown in Warner Bros. theaters, its short and tortured exhibition history overshadowed the film itself, making it appear for many audiences strange and unnecessarily confrontational. Clearly the intended opening exhibition would have generated a response quite different from the one that occurred. Would its association with a movie palace like Radio City Music

Hall have highlighted the more traditional features of the film, like its comedy and star performances, and made its complex story less of an obstruction? Or might the scandal of the movie's exhibition problems have added to its notoriety and celebrity?

Changing sociological and geographical contexts for exhibition have continued to follow *Citizen Kane* as its reputation has grown through the years. After its tumultuous first exhibition in the United States, the film was rediscovered in the 1950s by the art-house cinemas of France. There, it became less a provocative commentary on an American mogul and his power politics than a brilliantly creative expression of film language. Today, most individuals who see *Citizen Kane* watch it in a classroom—say, in a college course on American cinema. In the classroom, we look at movies as students or scholars, and we are prepared to study



Figure 1.46 *Citizen Kane* (1941). A delayed premiere.

them. In this context, viewers may feel urged to think more about the film as an art object than as entertainment or thinly disguised biography. In the classroom, we may focus more on the importance of the serious tragedies in the film (such as Kane's real and visual alienation from his best friends) and less on the comic interludes (such as the vaudevillian dance number). This is not to say that someone watching *Citizen Kane* in an academic situation cannot see and think about it in other ways. It's clear, however, that exhibition context can, very importantly, suggest certain social attitudes through which we watch a movie.

The exhibition history of *Citizen Kane* likewise describes significant differences in how the film is experienced through different technologies. Its original exhibition used a 35mm projection providing the rich textures and sharp images needed to bring out the imagistic details and stunning deep focus that made the film famous. The visual magnitude of scenes such as Susan Alexander's operatic premiere and Kane's safari picnic at Xanadu or the spatial vibrancy and richness of Kane, and Susan's conversation in one of Xanadu's vast halls arguably require the size and texture of a large theatrical image. Since its first theatrical exhibition, the film has been seen on 16mm film and later on videotape, and recently has been remastered as a DVD. The content of the film remains the same, but the different technologies often mute the visual power of such images and scenes because the lower quality or smaller size of the images redirect our understanding from the visual dramatics of single images to the events of the story.

The shift in the exhibition context from the theater to the television obviously affects other subtle and not-so-subtle changes in how we see and understand the movie. On television, the image becomes a different size and quality and our level of concentration changes, perhaps from intense concentration to distracted attention. A viewing experience on television or video, moreover, may be broken up because of commercials or because we can start and stop the movie. In the case of *Citizen Kane*, as with many other films that move between theaters and television, the basic action of the movie may appear the same, but how we engage that material can change in ways that determine the meaning of the film experience. Whereas the large images in the theater may direct the viewer more easily to the play of light and dark as commentaries on the different characters, a video player might not allow those observations but might instead allow the viewer to replay dialogue in order to note levels of intonation or wordplay. The DVD of *Citizen Kane* gives viewers the added opportunity to supplement the film with rare photos, documents on the advertising campaign, commentaries by filmmaker Peter Bogdanovich and critic Roger Ebert, and a documentary, *The Battle over Citizen Kane* (1996), that describes the history of its script and its exhibition difficulties [Figure 1.47]. To whatever degree these supplemental materials come into play, it is clear that a DVD exhibition of *Citizen Kane* offers possibilities for significantly enriching an audience's experience of the film. Viewers taking advantage of these materials would conceivably watch *Citizen Kane* prepared and equipped with certain points of view: more attuned perhaps to Welles's creative innovation and influence on later filmmakers like Bogdanovich or more interested in how the film re-creates the connections between Hearst and Kane detailed in the documentary supplement. That the DVD provides material on "alternative ad campaigns" for the original release of the film even allows viewers to investigate the way different promotional strategies can direct their attention to certain themes and scenes.



Figure 1.47 *Citizen Kane* (1941). The supplementary material of DVD distribution and exhibition: Orson Welles and the script.

The Timing of Exhibition

Overlapping with distribution timing, the **timing of exhibition** is a more flexible but equally influential part of our movie experience. That is, when and for how long we see a film can shape our experience as much as where we see that film. Although most people see movies in the early evening, before or after dinner, audiences watch movies according to numerous rituals and in various time slots. Afternoon matinees, midnight movies, or the in-flight movie on a long plane ride give some indication of how the timing of a movie experience can vary and how that can influence other considerations about the movie. In each of these situations, our experience of the movies includes a commitment to spend time in a certain way. Instead of time spent reading, in conversation, sleeping, or working on a business project, we watch a movie. That time spent with a movie accordingly becomes an activity associated with relaxing, socializing, or even working in a different way. On any particular occasion, reflect on the period of time you choose to watch a film. How else might that time be spent, and what is your rationale for using this time to watch a film? Does the choice of that specific day and time to see a film have any bearing on the film you choose to see? More importantly, how accurate are the conventional assumptions about the time spent watching films as a time to escape the so-called real world?

Traditionally, movie culture has emphasized **film exhibition as leisure time**, a time that is assumed to be less productive (at least compared to the time spent working a job) and that enforces assumptions about movies as the kind of enjoyment associated with play and pleasure. To some extent, leisure time is a relatively recent historical development. Since the nineteenth century, when motion pictures first appeared, modern society has aimed to organize experience so that work and leisure could be separated and defined in relation to each other. We generally identify leisure time as “an escape,” “the relaxation of our mind and body,” or “the acting out of a different self.” Since the early twentieth century, movie exhibition has been associated with leisure time in these ways. Seeing a comedy on a Friday night promises relaxation at the end of a busy week. Playing a concert film on a VCR while eating dinner may relieve mental fatigue. Watching a romantic film on television late at night may offer the passion missing from one’s real life.

Besides leisure time, however, we can and should consider **film exhibition as productive time**, meaning time used to gain information, material advantage, or knowledge. From the early years of the cinema, movies have been used to illustrate lectures or introduce audiences to Shakespearean performances. More strictly educational films, such as those shown in health classes or driver education programs, are less glamorous versions of this use of film. Although less widely acknowledged as part of film exhibition, productive time continues to shape certain kinds of film exhibition. For a movie reviewer or film producer, an early morning screening may be about “financial value” because this use of time to evaluate a movie will presumably result in certain economic rewards. For another person, a week of films at an art museum represents “intellectual value,” as it helps explain ideas about a different society or historical period. For a young American, an evening watching *Schindler’s List* can be about “human value” because that film aims to make viewers more knowledgeable about the Holocaust and more sensitive about the suffering of other human beings.

Film exhibitions usually try to provide a variety of time periods to accommodate many different temporal values, and different viewers can certainly find different values in the same exhibition. Still, the timings of exhibitions do tend to frame and emphasize the film experience according



Figure 1.48 *Moulin Rouge!* (2001). Premiering glamour in the glamour of Cannes.

to certain values. The Cannes International Film Festival introduces a wide range of films and functions both as a business venue for buying and selling film and as a glamorous showcase for stars and parties. The May timing of this festival and its Riviera location assure that the movie experience will be about pleasure and the business of leisure time. In contrast, the New York International Film Festival, featuring some of the same films, has a more intellectual or academic aura. That it occurs in New York City during September and October, at the beginning of the academic year, associates this experience of the movies more with artistic value and productive time. The premiere of *Moulin Rouge!* (2001) at Cannes exploited both the high-profile glamour of that festival's party atmosphere and a French context that would certainly draw the kind of attention it would not receive at the New York event [Figure 1.48].



VIEWING CUES: Exhibition

- Whether the next film you see in class is an older movie or a more recent one, consider—or better yet research—how the film was first exhibited. Would it have been shown in a nickelodeon? A movie palace? A cineplex? How would that exhibition context have been appropriate for the movie?
- How could the “sociology of exhibition” be more or less suited to this film? What would be the ideal audience for the film? Why? What kind of exhibition would most likely draw that audience?
- Imagine seeing this film at different times of the year or in the week. How would the timing of the exhibition affect your expectations about the movie? What would be the best time to exhibit the film? Why?
- Imagine watching this movie as two different uses of time, as a “leisure time activity” and as a “productive time activity.” How would exhibiting the movie in those different kinds of time slots draw a viewer to different ways of looking at it? How might you view this film differently, for instance, if you saw it in a classroom versus if you saw it during a long airplane flight? What, if any, specific actions or themes would you recognize in one and not the other?
- Consider how different kinds of exhibition technologies might affect your response to this movie. How would a large-screen format versus a videotape change your experience of the film? If there is a DVD of this film, does it enhance or shape your understanding of the film in specific ways? If so, how?

Classroom, library, and museum exhibitions tend to emphasize understanding and learning as much as enjoyment. When students watch films in these kinds of situations, they are asked to attend to them somewhat differently from the way they may view films on a Friday night at the movies. They watch more carefully, perhaps; they may consider the films as part of historical or artistic traditions; they may even take notes as a logical part of this kind of exhibition. These conditions of film exhibition do not necessarily change the essential meaning of a movie, but in directing how we look at a film, they can certainly shade and even alter how we understand that film. Like other changes in viewing conditions, exhibition asks us to engage and think about the film not as an isolated object but as part of the expectations established by the conditions in which we watch it.

CRITICAL VOICES: DOUGLAS GOMERY ON EXHIBITION

Especially popular from 1905 to 1910, nickelodeons were the first viable form of commercial exhibition of the movies, showing a program of films lasting from a few minutes to perhaps twenty minutes each. In this excerpt, Douglas Gomery, a historian of film culture, examines the economic and social roots of movie culture and explains how promotion and exhibition almost inevitably intertwine. In this selection from *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (1992), he demonstrates that critics can often learn as much about a movie by looking offscreen as by focusing on the images on the screen.

The nickelodeon functioned as a small and uncomfortable makeshift theatre, usually a converted cigar store, pawnshop, restaurant, or skating rink made over to look like a vaudeville theatre. In front, large, hand-painted posters announced the movies for the day. Inside, the screening of news, documentary, comedy, fantasy and shorts lasted about an hour. The show usually began with a song, a hit from the day illustrated with hand-painted, color magic lantern slides displaying the images and words of the song. Most entertainment, though, came from motion pictures. The front of the typical nickelodeon represented its most important and costly feature. Nickel theatres sold their wares to a public walking by, and so soon they developed a myriad of lights with a prominent ticket booth, usually accompanied by a barker, to hawk their latest entertainment. Theatre owners attempted, for as little cost as possible, to emulate legitimate theatre but in the end had to settle for a simple selling window in the manner of an arcade or dime museum. Huge paintings might cost the operator hundreds of dollars. Wood gave way to pressed metal as the nickelodeon owners prospered. . . .

With nickelodeon prices so much lower than a big-time vaudeville show, it is not surprising to learn that early devotees came from the poorer sections of the cities. This gave rise to the expression "democracy's theatre." But . . . a policy of catering to the poorer and lower-middle-class (. . .) patrons was not embraced by the theatre owners themselves. They could look down the street and see the monies being made by vaudeville entrepreneurs who sought out middle-class audiences. Movie entrepreneurs, once they felt safe with the nickelodeon formula, abandoned their original poorer patrons for a more selective audience, catering to a middle-class with more discretionary income and more time to spend in a movie house. . . .

By the mid-1910s the matrix of nearly twenty thousand theatres was in place, supplemented by traveling rural operations. Yet the evidence from the day indicates that as early as 1907 there were just "too many" theatres chasing too many nickels. *Moving Picture World* penned an editorial arguing that "the craze is on the wane" and ran it in June 1907: "Today there is

a cutthroat competition between the little nickelodeon owners, and they are beginning to compete each other out of existence." Although it would be two years before everyone agreed that the nickelodeon era was to be short-lived, the signs by 1907 were remarkably accurate.

The original ticket price soon gave way to admissions prices of ten cents and then more. Entrepreneurs seized the opportunity to increase their original prices. And with this new ten-cent price, still much less than the big-time vaudeville show, it is not surprising to learn that early devotees of the nickelodeon were keen to escape from average working days of ten hours or more, six days a week.

To lure the ideal family trade, the nickelodeon owner looked to the "New American woman" and her children. On a shopping break or after school, the theater owner set up special "tea hour" screenings; if women and children came, the owner had a stamp of respectability that could (and did) lead to more money and a more favorable image of the community. Thus women and children saw half-price afternoon specials. Stories in the movies catered to them. Filmmakers began to draw on respected authors such as Emile Zola, Edgar Allan Poe, Victor Hugo, Mark Twain, and even William Shakespeare for copyright-free inspiration for ten-minute capsulated versions of the classics. Owners of nickel shows saw [that] the popularity of such stories signaled the respectability that aspiring social climbers in the community sought.

By 1911 the nickelodeon was often misnamed. Moreover, newer theatres, designed as theatres and not made-over clothing stores, were rising. In the years preceding the second decade of the twentieth century, the trend was toward the movie show as a middle-class entertainment, held in a spacious theatre and costing as much as twenty-five cents.

THE NEXT LEVEL: ADDITIONAL SOURCES

Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken, 1969. This is an early and seminal essay on how the activity of viewing movies differs from the way we engage the traditional arts. Written originally in 1935, it remains a source of debates about how spectators perceive and think about movies.

Gomery, Douglas. *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992. A history of the many changes in film exhibition from 1895 to 1990. Well researched and discriminating, this study provides a wealth of detail about the evolution of distribution in U.S. movies.

Lukk, Tiiu. *Movie Marketing: Opening the Picture and Giving It Legs*. Los Angeles: Silman-St. James, 1997. Less a scholarly work than a series of case studies, this book concentrates on a variety of contemporary movies—from *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (examined in this chapter) to *Mrs. Doubtfire*—and describes the different marketing and promotion strategies used today.

Mayne, Judith. *Cinema and Spectatorship*. New York: Routledge, 1993. This excellent book rethinks models of identification at the movies to develop more varied and dynamic descriptions that account for racial and sexual differences in viewers.

Williams, Linda, ed. *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995. A varied collection of essays on spectatorship at the movies, with critical discussions ranging from the accounts of viewers of early cinema to the theoretical dynamics of postmodern spectators.