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Modern Times & Modern Tastes: How Contemporary Film and its History Impacts the Development of American Consumers

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**Modern Times & Modern Tastes: How Contemporary Film and Its History Impacts
the Development of American Consumers**

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Abstract

The medium of film has a larger impact on the world than many realize. The messages they project onto audiences have a multitude of consequences. The research begins with an exploration of what makes a film a film and eventually arrives upon its agreed definition. Different genres of film often hold different sets of meaning, and the stories presented have the potential to mirror real-world sentiment in relation to massive world events, such as wars. This research dives into the implications of these films, and how the things they display can change a society. These movies demonstrate the capability of socializing audiences, teaching them learned behavior and stigmas against various groups of people, such as the sexually inexperienced, or individuals within the LGBTQ+ community. In addition to the films themselves, this research takes a look at the actors that promote and work in these movies, deducing whether or not their presence held significant economic returns, and if their influence is truly that powerful. Research found that while actors themselves did not lead to the guaranteed monetary success of a film, there was a correlation between the popularity of the actor and the paycheck they received. The paper also includes an analysis of modern films and the highly tailored fictional worlds they sell to viewers. The research concludes with a synthesis of all these topics, demonstrating the importance of an educated consumer, one that understands the capitalistic enterprise that is the modern film industry.

Keywords: films, social development, genre, modern popular movies, audience reception

Modern Times & Modern Tastes: How Contemporary Film and Its History Impacts the Development of American Consumers

Picture your favorite movie. Why do you like it? Does it look pretty? Does it create a strong emotional response? Regardless of your connection to this film, chances are that this movie is part of a broad category of movies known as a genre film. The word “genre” is a term that helps to group media into recognizable categories (Chandler, 1997, p.01). The western, horror, science fiction, murder mystery, all of these stories fall into distinct genres. Much research has been done on the genre film, from qualitative reviews of particularly popular movies to quantitative analysis of box office achievements, like James Cameron’s *Avatar*, released in 2009 (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Zoe Saldana and Sam Worthington as Na’vi Aliens in James Cameron’s Avatar (2009)



Note. Cameron, J. (Director). (2009). *Avatar* [Film]. 20th Century Studios.

Awarded as the highest-grossing film of all time, this science fiction epic demonstrated fantastical worlds, digitally generated protagonists, and compelling stories. From merchandising

to theme park attractions to digital media, these films have taken over a massive sect of our popular culture, and continuously dominate both domestic and foreign markets (Dubourg et al., 2023). Other work has detailed how emotional responses are tied to cinema. In 2012, Colleen Jankovic noted that spectators develop deeply intimate connections with the movies they watch, casting desires and dreams upon the silver screen (p. 91). Some, such as Constance Balides, even point to films as a way to socialize American citizens en masse [all together] (p. 04).

However when it comes to the larger picture, there is still little in the way of connecting these three ideas. There is a small amount, if any, work that has been put forth demonstrating the absolute juggernauts that modern films can be. The pieces have all been laid out, however no one has come along to put them together. This research aims to formulate a synthesis between the implications of the genre film, its subsequent popularity, and how these factors contribute to developing the minds of American individuals. By using research that catalogs these topics released across important periods in film history, I will be able to prove that the perfect storm of a modern blockbuster has the power to generate intense emotions within the minds of viewers, promote beliefs of patriotism, and ultimately shape the lives of people across the country.

Before we can tackle this cinematic, and sociological prospect, one must first be able to define the parameters in which film resides. What it is, and what it isn't. Filmmaker Peter Kiwitt remarks how saturated film has become within the academic sphere, and how certain misunderstandings remain, even after decades of study (2012 p. 04). To look at the larger picture of cinematic impact requires us to take a figurative step back, and recognize what makes a film, a film. Kiwitt digs deeper and takes a stab at the *Oxford English Dictionary's* (OED) definition of film. What is interesting is that the definition does nothing to distinguish film from other forms of artistic expression, the definition could just as easily fit a painting (2012 p. 05).

Semantics aside, Kiwitt's work takes him to the conclusion that film (as well as any other synonym for it) is the convergence of various mediums. Sound, light, image, and text, among other factors, come together to create "the art of the moving image" (Gessner, Robert: An Approach to the Basics in Cinema) (Kiwitt, 2012, p. 20).

Figure 2

A Harrowing Image Captured From 1915's The Birth of a Nation



Note. Griffith, D.W. (Director). (1915). The Birth of a Nation [Film]. Epoch Producing Corporation.

It can be said then, that film and modern media have taken center stage in our lives, and according to some, its impacts have always been there. Tracking back almost a century ago, author Henry James Forman penned his concern in his 1934 piece, "Social Development Through the Movies." He acknowledges that over seventy million people attend movie theaters each week and that some popular films seen potentially sway the minds of young viewers for better, or for worse (p. 396). Forman continues by listing blockbusters of the time, such as 1930's *Son of the Gods*, and 1915's *Birth of a Nation*. These films both peddle problematic, and rather racist viewpoints. According to Forman, ideas as controversial as these would have been thought to have been replicated (p. 397). One such practice seen in film is the use of orientalism. Orientalism is the false representation of the East shown in Western media, portraying them as

exotic, weak, and inferior (Said, Edward. *Orientalism*, 1978). This misunderstanding of different cultures can create a cycle of bigotry that has the potential to replicate itself within the minds of impressionable viewers. Furthermore, the negative contrast drawn between East and West is what is known as othering (Said, 1978). Western individuals treat their Eastern counterparts as an “other,” a title given to someone different, and less important.

Figure 3

An Image of a Vulcan Alien From Star Trek (1946)



Note. Abrams, J.J. (Director). (1946). *Star Trek* [Film]. Norway Corporation and Desilu Productions.

Figure 4

An Image of a Klingon Alien From Star Trek (1946)



Note. Abrams, J.J. (Director). (1946). Star Trek [Film]. Norway Corporation and Desilu Productions.

While orientalism is more visible in older films, that is not to say it's not present in our modern pop culture fascinations. Jacob Barber at the University of Edinburgh studied the more recent Star Trek franchise and how it presents a lens through which to view orientalism. Barber explains how in Star Trek, the vast majority of screen time goes towards our human characters and aliens that act extremely similar to them (2017, p. 42-43). What's more, is that the "good" aliens (the ones who help our human protagonists) are personified by their civil discourse, soft facial features, and paler complexion. Antagonistic forces in the show are characterized by their barbaric mentality, rougher facial features, and darker skin tones (Barber). This stark distinction no doubt leads to an intrinsic sense of superiority between humans, and aliens such as the Vulcan, when compared to the Klingon. The dynamic "othering" of the Klingon, among other alien factions noted in the show, represents real-world conflict. All this to say that when these

ideals are examined in television shows such as *Star Trek*, they are also placed front and center on the screens of thousands, leading to unintended influences. And in our modern world, those influences can begin to spread at an early age. Researchers Maryam Yousefi and Maryam Moghimi found that the introduction of television to children does a great deal in the formation of their character (2020, p. 26). Gender, career choice, familial orientation, and political preferences are some of the many socialized aspects that can take shape through television (2020, p. 30). Family may still be the first source of learning for children (2020, p. 29), but with the increase in media consumption in households, it cannot be denied that film and television hold sway over the choices children learn to make. With the medium of film being so diverse, one might suspect that different genres may hold different messages, and promote different behavior. One Professor Chris Boyatzits, from California State University at Fullerton, shared this notion and examined this variation through movies. He assigned a project in which students chose from a list of foreign films, of all different genres, and had them analyze the social development of certain characters (1994, p. 99-100). In addition to the characters in the films, they studied the presentation of these movies, from the unique camera movements to cinematography to the deep social and moral messages put forward by the directors (1994, p. 100). This exercise encouraged students to think about the broader implications of choices made when creating a movie, and how that impacts the decisions viewers make upon seeing them.

It goes even deeper, other professionals dive into their respective film genres and emerge with a new understanding of how audiences perceive the world once exiting the movie theater. While most filmmakers saw movies as a revolutionary way to distribute entertainment, some turned to the medium as a way of critiquing society. As the art of moviemaking began to reach the masses at the turn of the 20th century, a new genre was formed; the Sociological Film.

Known today as a problem film, these movies tackled real-world issues such as poverty, hunger, and inequality (Balides, 2017, p. 03-04). Constance Balides, a professor at Tulane University, notes that these films use topics such as prostitution, insufficient wages, poor working conditions, and rampant medical disease to convey the need for social change (p. 04).

Figure 5

A Dramatic Still From the 1915 Silent Film, Children of Eve



Note. Collins, J.H. (Director). (1915). Children of Eve [Film]. Edison Studios.

Films such as *Children of Eve* (1915), *Shoes* (1916), and *Regeneration* (1915) focus on women and children, highlighting their struggles during this tumultuous time period. Unsafe workplaces, child labor, gender discrimination, and gang activity characterize these dark and dreary movies. The release of these films mirrored that of its genre namesake, sociology, a developing field of study born by the Progressive Era and public reform (Balides, p. 03). The sociological film actively incorporated aspects of the academic field into its story, analyzing individuals, and the complex framework of society (Balides, p. 07). These films became catalysts

for change, vouching for institutional improvement. The publicity brought along by these silent motion pictures was enough to constitute real change. The annual American Public Health Organization hosted in Jacksonville, Florida cited several of these sociological films as media that bettered the understanding of issues present throughout the country (p. 13). It seems then, that even a century ago, films with deep and sympathetic messages about society resonated with the public.

Figure 6

Tom Hanks and the Company During the Opening Moments of Saving Private Ryan (1988)



Note. Spielberg, S. (Director). (1988). Saving Private Ryan [Film]. Dreamworks Pictures.

While films may have the potential to drive societal improvement, others argue the opposite. The war film remains a controversial genre, some declaring it as a violent, gratuitous endeavor that glorified the horrors of infantry combat. Others champion its attention to detail and realistic portrayal of victims on both sides. J. David Slocum, an associate dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at New York grapples with this contradiction. As the 20th century came to a close, Slocum notes a brief resurgence of the war film. Saving Private Ryan (1998), Pearl Harbor (2001), and Band of Brothers (2001) were some of the many films and television

series greenlit by Hollywood that covered the events of World War II during the early 2000s (p. 35). Slocum connects this inundation of war films with a few topics. The first was the advances in filmmaking technologies, allowing for clearer and more realistic visuals, something that had become increasingly criticized by moviegoers during the 90s (Slocum p. 36). Another factor was the elimination of the Hays Production Code (Slocum p. 36), a longstanding method of rating films, based upon a heavily biased set of constraints. Before the 1970s, the Production Code acted as a way to censor films that dealt with more mature subject matter. Based on subjective nationalist standards, movies were graded for their treatment of topics such as religion, race, and sexuality. The final reason was the willingness of producers to create movies intended for more mature audiences, as opposed to a mass appeal (Slocum p. 36). All these changes permit a more liberated and detailed depiction of war through film and television. These adjustments do not only lead to movies that look and feel more real but also dynamic experiences that reflect changing social institutions.

Even before the 2000s, themes such as social bureaucracy, political authority, and individual conflict permeated every aspect of these movies and were often promoted through stereotyped characters and obstacles (p. 56-57). In the wake of the Second World War, Hollywood began to pour money into films that focused less on combat, and the reconciliation of such brutality instead (p. 57). Classic western *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956) tells the story of cowboy Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) in the aftermath of the Civil War seeking vengeance against a Comanche tribe for the supposed death of his brother's family. Unlike other Westerns, telling tales of strapping gunslingers and heroic ranchers, *Searchers* was more interested in breaking down the American identity. It questioned if national values such as freedom and peace were as cherished as previously perceived (p. 57).

Figure 7

John Wayne and Jeffrey Hunter as Cowboys in The Searchers (1956)



Note. Ford, J. (Director). (1956). *The Searchers* [Film]. Warner Brothers.

Slocum connected this newfound scrutiny against violence to recent experiences and their historic impact on the American people (p. 57). With this context in mind, this film acted as a mirror to the real world. It was a way to catalyze emotional and intellectual connection at a time when the United States was licking its wounds from global conflict. These movies were a demonstration of America's willingness to forgive and move on from the horrors of war, bringing its society into a new age.

Films still hold this potential for social change, and in a current age where audiences are more comfortable with new perspectives, cinema now more than ever can speak to underrepresented groups of people. The topic of gender identity and sexuality has been nothing short of contentious, however, in the world of film, has begun to be explored in a way previously unseen. Researcher Marie-Aude Boislard at the Université du Québec À Montréal studied sexuality in popular North American films and compared them to the social tendencies of Sexually Inexperienced Emerging Adults (SIEA)(Boislard 2021, p. 1032). Boislard notes how

SIEA often view themselves as socially inept, compared to their sexually active counterparts, and points to film as a perpetrator of these stigmas (2021, p.1032-1033).

Figure 8

Steve Carell as Andy Stitzer in The 40-Year-Old Virgin



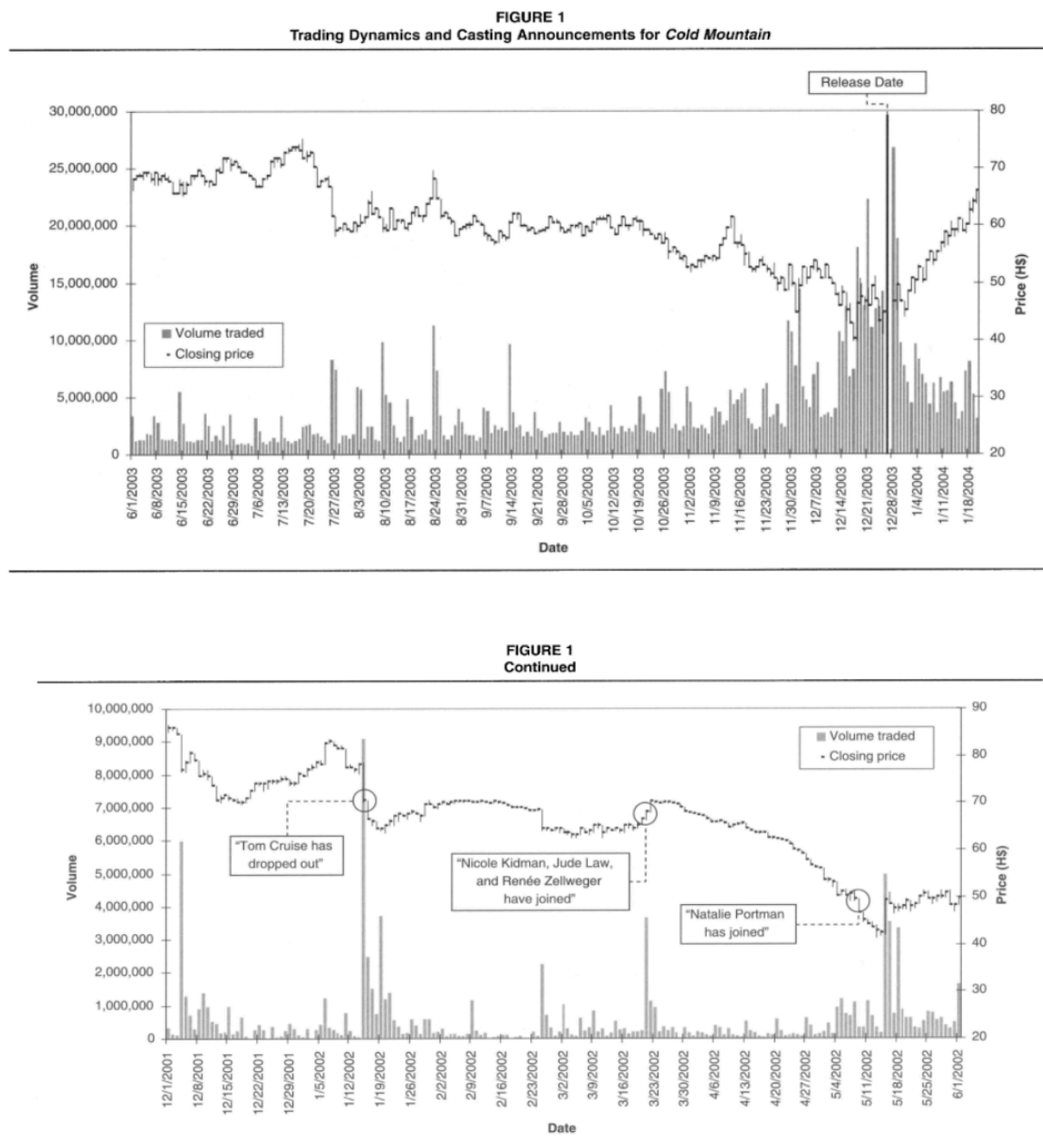
Note. Apatow, J. (Director). (2005). *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* [Film]. Universal Pictures and Apatow Productions.

Movies often treat the loss of virginity as a rite of passage, films such as *American Pie* (1999), and *Her Minor Thing* (2005) provide their protagonists with a sense of urgency when it comes to having sex (Boislard 2021, p. 1032). However, other films play on the societal expectation to lose one's virginity, subverting audience expectations, such as the 2005 comedy, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, starring Steve Carrell. The story centers around a man whose friends desperately attempt to conform him to toxic expectations of masculinity and “get him laid.”

Regardless, Boislard makes it evident that SIEA in film are ostracized, and as a result, replicate such feelings among audience members in similar situations (Boislard, p. 1033). In a set of 11 modern films and television series chosen for a study by Boislard, only one protagonist remained sexually inactive by the time the credits rolled (p. 1048). These productions treat this

shift away from sexual inactivity as a success and depict the characters as more developed as a result. A clear message was presented: sexual inexperience is an undesirable condition that must be remedied (p. 1048). Even more interesting were the representations of sexuality among genders. Female protagonists were shown as resisting sexual temptations, while male protagonists normalized sexual desire, and had full intention of having sex (p. 1048-1049). Women who engaged in casual sex were seen as superficial and irresponsible, and those with no sexual experience were patronized, or in the case of Anastasia in *50 Shades of Grey*, “corrected” (p. 1049). Their inexperience was labeled as a blank slate of sorts, a canvas for men to do with as they please. On the other hand, Boislard found that men with sexual inexperience dealt with their situation in two ways; either psychologically, or as a way to mask their non-heterosexual identity (p. 1049). Men in these films were all credited with not being masculine enough, while women were seen as too feminine. There has never been a time when filmmakers have had more freedom to craft stories with unique and underrepresented characters, presenting messages of inclusivity, and normality. By that same token, films such as these cannot help but recreate representations of sexual inexperience as an abnormality. This contradiction of values can exclude members of an audience, and perpetuate negative interpretations of certain groups of people.

At the heart of every film lies its story. Yet no film would truly work without the help of its actors. It is the actor who propels the words of the screenwriter and the instruction of the director onto the silver screen for all to see. And when it comes to the public eye, actors are often the first faces promoting a new film release. Marketing journalist Anita Elberse sought to understand just how much success these motion pictures can garner based on the actors associated with them.

Figure 9 and 10*Trading Dynamics and Casting Announcements for Cold Mountain*

Note. From “The Power of Stars: Do Star Actors Drive the Success of Movies?” by A. Elberse, 2007, p. 5-6. CC-BY-NC.

It seems as though large movie studios firmly believe in the leverage actors have, the author noting that film stars such as Jim Carrey, Tom Hanks, and Julia Roberts have been paid salaries upwards of \$25 million (Elberse, 2007, p. 102). Major outliers such as Tom Cruise have even reported earning a combined \$162 million for the first two *Mission Impossible* movies (p. 102). Are these sums of money worth the work and publicity put into a film? Elberse looks to the Hollywood Stock Exchange (HSX for short). The HSX is a large database simulating the movie industry market, in search of an answer. Using a unit known as Hollywood dollars, denoted in “H\$” Elberse is able to plot the projected success of a movie as particular actors join or drop out of a project. Both Figure 9 and Figure 10 plot the financial data of the moderately successful 2003 film, *Cold Mountain*, starring Nicole Kidman, Jude Law, Natalie Portman, and Renée Zellweger. The film originally set out to star Tom Cruise but due to contract negotiations, never happened. Interestingly enough, Figure 10 demonstrates a near-consistent decline, correlating with Cruise’s dropping out and the movie’s steepened projected value (p. 107). However, shares of the film increased in value as popular film stars Nicole Kidman, Jude Law, and Renée Zellweger were onboarded (p. 107). While not enough to match the significant crash in value seen with Cruise, it was barely enough to bring the project back from the grave. The film gained additional value as Natalie Portman, another popular star joined (p. 107), as she was amid her three-film contract with Lucasfilm for the *Star Wars* prequels, an extremely profitable intellectual property. This publicity was still not enough to bring the film back from its slow decline in value, and *Cold Mountain* opened to a lukewarm reception, grossing an estimated \$173 million across global and domestic earnings.

Does this mean that films directly feed off of the success of actors they hire? Well, not exactly. Elberse describes this connection between actor and studio as complex, and atypical (p.

118). The developmental process of every film is different and nearly impossible to study on a mass level. She explains how she fails to define a star's talent, how some actors are more revered and popular than others, and how these variables coincide with the success of a film. There is no direct correlation between the popularity of an actor and the profitability of a movie they're attached to. Rather, Elberse's research takes her to the conclusion that these film stars earn an excess of total revenue in their roles compared to the ordinary talent that would've filled it otherwise (Caves 2003) (Elberse 2007, p. 118). While monetary value might not have any connection to star power, that's not to say that popular actors hold a massive amount of attention in the public square. They are seen as media giants and the messages they promote are heard by people across the world.

Figure 11

Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring (2001)



Note. Jackson, P. (Director). (2001). Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring [Film]. New Line Cinema, WingNut Films, and Marzano Films.

In recent memory, many of the most popular films that resonate with modern culture hold vast and creative worlds, ones that audiences can lose themselves in. *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, and *The Avengers* are all cinematic properties with sprawling open worlds, full of fantastical

characters, creatures, and creations that hold viewers' attention long after they leave cinemas. One of the most widely recognized fictional worlds is that of Middle-Earth, from the esteemed *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001-2003). A medieval land wrought with dragons, elves, dwarves, and evil tyrants, it was an instant win for audiences across the world, as noted by a combined \$3 billion in box office revenue from the three films directed by Peter Jackson. In a recovered letter from J.R.R. Tolkien, author of the novels which inspired the films, to British Colonel Laurence Worskett, Tolkien writes how viewers feel rewarded when visiting far-off lands, full of unique architecture, and a myriad of stories to uncover (letter to Colonel Worskett, 20 September 1963). These worlds hold what Dubourg calls, "a superstimulus of explorable environments" (p. 02), which over the course of a movie, are revealed to the audience.

As Dubourg continues his scientific research, he reveals that data patterns show that those who enjoy these fictional worlds within films are more likely to be younger, more open to differences, and curiously, male (p. 10). He also links the rising success of these types of films with a change in human exploratory preferences (p. 11). Dubourg posits that the more affluent a society becomes, the more curious it tends to be, giving the perfect opportunity for stories and worlds such as these to gain a following (p. 11). During the 19th and 20th centuries, it was the United Kingdom in which these fictional stories first became popularized (p. 11). Novels such as Jules Verne's *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (1864) and *The Mysterious Island* (1870) were some of the first of its kind to be translated into Chinese (p. 11). These worlds are fueled by the curiosity and ever-changing palates of the public eye, and as long as audiences remain captivated by these massive lands, they will continue to find their way into movie theaters for years to come.

Film has, and will always be a way for messages to be presented to audiences, regardless of who and where they are across the world. In this research paper, we analyzed trends displayed by older films, in which hegemonic and problematic ideals abound. We studied the correlation between different movie genres and their representations of American people during the time of release. We also were able to connect films to relevant social topics such as race, gender, and sexuality, as well as clear up particular myths about the role film stars have in the movies they are a part of. The research concluded with the breakdown of modern popular films, why they are made to be the way they are, and how it bodes for the future of cinema.

What does this all mean for the average audience member, the person stopping by the cinema on a Friday afternoon to catch the matinee deal? Well, like any other industry, making movies is a business. In reality, it's a miracle that any movies get made today. The risk bore by every aspect of a filmmaking crew, from the directors to writers, to cameramen and actors, is an incredibly massive one. Audience tastes, production costs, and time all work against the wishes of these studios. Popular films do everything they can to maintain the bottom line, including playing upon the naivety of the consumer. Repetitive messages? Those can be seen in genre films. Social topics and inclusivity? Often a way of promoting their films to new audiences and sources of revenue. Actors with star power? Recognizable figures that can sell the release of a movie. It is imperative that moviegoers are aware of these trends, to be just a little smarter when going to see new films, or when rewatching their favorite ones. And just like the world of film, this discussion continues to grow, shift, and change. Every time a new film is released, there is an emerging opportunity to break down these social barriers, or conversely, to reinforce them. The next time you go to the movies, scan your virtual ticket, take a long whiff of that buttery popcorn, relax in those oversized theater seats, be sure to keep these thoughts in the back of your mind, and above all else, enjoy the show.

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