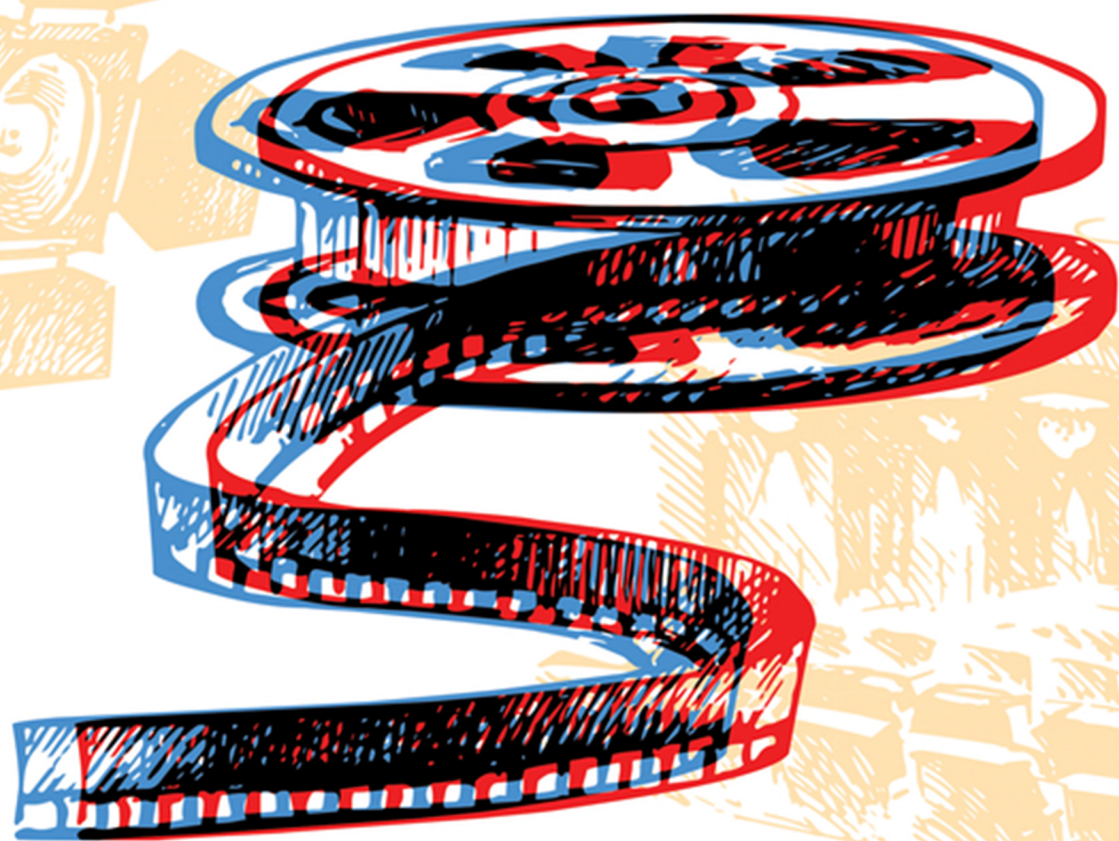


AMERICA ON FILM

REPRESENTING RACE, CLASS, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY AT THE MOVIES

Third Edition



HARRY M. BENSHOFF & SEAN GRIFFIN



WILEY Blackwell

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THIRD EDITION

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PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

Many years have gone by since the first edition of this book was published in 2004, and even more than that since we first started writing it. The second edition appeared in 2009, right after Barack Obama was elected President of the United States. At that time, we – like many other Americans – thought we were looking towards a new era of American equality. Women and people of color (as well LGBTQ people and differently-abled folks) were being increasingly accepted into mainstream American life for their ideas and abilities, and not immediately excluded from it based on their perceived differences from the white male heterosexual norm (as had so often been the case in previous eras). That said, the election of Donald Trump to the Presidency in 2016 seemed to signal a sort of backlash to those ideals, as many of Trump’s public statements were openly degrading to women, disparaging to people of color, and insensitive (to say the least) to people with disabilities. Perhaps ironically, the self-proclaimed billionaire Trump pitched his “Make America Great Again” campaign to working and lower/middle-class voters, Americans who were struggling to make ends meet under the harsh realities of twenty-first century corporate capitalism. He promised to restore their economic prosperity not by reigning in or regulating corporate capitalism – indeed his actions have so far been the exact opposite of that – but by promising to build a wall to keep out foreigners, who were within this rhetoric implicitly figured as thieves out to steal what did not belong to them: American prosperity. And while riding a wave of sexist invective against women and especially Hillary Clinton (“Lock Her up!”) and implicit racism (the “Birther” campaign questioning President Obama’s citizenship), Trump was narrowly swept into the Presidency via the Electoral College. (He lost the popular vote.)

So, what do these developments tell us about America today, versus ten years ago, or even a hundred years ago? It has always been the central thesis of this book, as a work of cultural studies, that there are different sorts of complex correlations between popular culture (in this case the movies) and the historical eras and industrial conditions in which they are produced and consumed. The first two editions of *America on Film* chronicled tremendous changes in over one hundred years of US (cinematic) history, as well as the many ways in which various diverse American identities had been portrayed on American movie screens. For most of the groups surveyed, it was a trajectory towards increasing

access to self-representation, a move away from simple-minded stereotyping, and the production of media that emphasized the basic humanity of diverse social groups. It was a trajectory demonstrating that all human beings were and are complicated and diverse, but that all of us – regardless of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, or physical ability – were deserving of fair and equal treatment under the ideals of the American Constitution. It was a hopeful story, and we hope this third edition will show that it remains one. Whether one imagines history as a pendulum, a circle, an upward spiral (hopefully not a downward one!) – theories of ideology and hegemonic negotiation suggest that history is always an ebb and flow of progress in one direction and backlash in the opposite. So, if the election of President Trump does indeed suggest a backlash to the multicultural ideals of the last few decades, it will undoubtedly not be the final word on the matter.

As the first two editions of this book demonstrated, time marches on, as do the ever-changing social meanings of identity categories like race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability. However, this edition reflects a very changed America from those first two, especially in the ways we now consume movies (and television), share ideas about them, and relate to our fellow Americans. As Chapter Two will explore in greater detail, the media landscape of 2020 is vastly different than it was when we wrote the second edition of this book, let alone the first. New technologies and opportunities for making, distributing, and watching movies – including but not limited to digital (and therefore cheaper) modes of film production, streaming distribution platforms like Netflix and Amazon (who have also entered into the world of production), and the sharing of ideas, images, clips, and entire TV shows and movies via social media – might make today’s “American movie culture” seem entirely foreign to a filmgoer from Hollywood’s classical era. Social media has also dramatically altered the way Americans relate to one another: while social media platforms like Facebook were originally designed to bring people together, they can also be used to divide, spread falsehoods, and inflame hatreds. Anonymous “trolls” in online forums have embraced a new form of socio-cultural criticism with absolutely no filters, concern for decorum, or social niceties; personal attacks on various films and celebrities now enter (and effect) the public discourse in ways that were impossible just ten or twenty years ago. Individuals from both the left and the right have used social media to barricade their positions, often not fully fact checking their assertions. As a result, positions have become polarized, keeping citizens from coming together as one country united in our diversity. (Evidence exists that various interests within the United States and from other countries have worked to stoke such division for their own benefit.)

As a result, there is a distrust of media prevalent in today’s culture that did not exist in the same way twenty years ago. Many critics of President Trump accuse him and his supporters of disseminating false statements and doctored media. On the other side, Trump and his supporters attack the free press repeatedly with cries of “Fake News!” The so-called “cultural elite” – which of course includes Hollywood – is reported to be out of touch with mainstream American values. Education is suspect, and the liberal arts faculty of colleges and universities often find themselves under attack. Given all of that, this book may invite scorn from some sectors of contemporary American culture. It is an academic, scholarly book written for university students, based on previous research, vetted by other scholars, and published by a reputable academic press. The book’s central topics – film and media and the diversity of the American experience – may also be seen as “bad objects” by those people who want to define America and its culture as being solely the purview of

white heteronormative people and institutions. To us, however, it is obvious that America means so much more than that. It is diversity that gives America its vibrancy. White, male, and heterosexual viewpoints are part of this diversity, but recognized as not the sole or “normal” viewpoints. In embracing that diversity, the American film and media industries are able to tell new stories from new perspectives, enriching the lives of all Americans. Despite the election of 2016 and the backlash it seems to represent, Hollywood has continued to give us game-changing blockbusters like *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), *Wonder Woman* (2017), and *Black Panther* (2018). It has continued to make and honor smaller and more thoughtful films on race, gender, class, and sexuality like *Moonlight* (2016), *Lady Bird* (2017), and *Get Out* (2017). While political movements and social attitudes continue to ebb and flow, the authors of this book are cautiously optimistic that the American media industries will continue to diversify, allowing new voices and perspectives to arise and challenge the inherent biases and inequities of American culture.

This new edition is dedicated to Jayne Fagnoli.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The origins of this book can be traced back to a class we both taught at Antelope Valley Community College in Lancaster, California, when we were PhD students at the University of Southern California's School of Cinema–Television. We “inherited” the class from Jaime Bihlmeyer when he took another position. Jaime had created his own set of readings for the course, because, as we quickly discovered, there were very few published texts available that covered “diversity in American film” with the historical and theoretical consistency that we desired. Thus, our colleagues and students at Antelope Valley College are the first people we wish to thank.

Sean Griffin then taught revised versions of this class at California State University at Long Beach, the University of California at Santa Cruz, and Florida Atlantic University, while Harry Benshoff developed individual courses in African American film and lesbian, gay, and queer media. Our colleagues and students throughout those years contributed to this project in myriad ways, and we especially want to thank Shelley Stamp and Michael Cowan at UCSC.

It was while we were living and working in Santa Cruz that Jayne Fagnoli, our soon-to-be editor at Blackwell, asked us what kind of textbooks were needed in film and media studies. We both immediately told her there was a need for a text like *America on Film*, and a few months later Jayne asked us if we wanted to write the book ourselves. Her support and feedback have been immeasurable, as have those of her assistant, Margot Morse. For the second edition our project manager and copy-editor, Fiona Sewell, was also extremely helpful in the final stages of the project, as was the book's production manager, Lisa Eaton.

We would like to thank our current colleagues, students, and support staff at the University of North Texas and at Southern Methodist University. Harry Benshoff's research and teaching assistants at UNT have contributed to the project in different ways. We'd also like to thank our anonymous readers and especially Alexander Doty, Peter Lehman, David Lugowski, Jacqueline Foertsch, and Travis Sutton, all of whom read various chapters and offered constructive feedback. We also wish to thank those readers who wrote or spoke to us after the first and second editions were published. Their feedback (and occasional corrections!) continues to matter to us. Much of the new material in this third edition came directly from their suggestions on how to make the book even better.

For various reasons, this third edition took a little more time to produce, but we hope we have updated its materials in a useful manner. We'd like to thank Lee Stone for her help with the research, and our editors and support staff at Wiley, especially Catriona King and Liz Wingett, and Mary Malin.

This book is dedicated to our families and friends, the people who have taught us and instilled in us the values of diversity, understanding, education, and love – in both our professional and personal lives. Such acts of sharing can lead to greater understanding and compassion across families, across communities, and across the world. We hope this book encourages people to examine and understand the biases and shaping discourses of contemporary American culture, so that the future may not just promise but also deliver the goal of equality for all Americans, regardless of race, class, gender, sexuality, or ability.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

America on Film is a textbook designed to introduce undergraduate students to issues of diversity within American film. It is the first synthetic and historical text of its kind, and provides a comprehensive overview of the industrial, sociocultural, and aesthetic factors that have shaped and continue to shape cinematic representations of race, class, gender, sexuality, and physical ability. The book aims to chronicle the cinematic history of various cultural groups, stimulate discussion of human difference, examine forces and institutions of bias, and ultimately provoke thought about the relationship between film and American national culture.

This textbook can be used in a variety of classroom settings and at a variety of educational levels. Primarily, it is suited for a class on media culture and diversity issues, although we have also used it as a supplemental text in basic “Introduction to Film Studies” and “American Film History” classes. The book could also be used for courses in twentieth-century American history, cultural and American studies, and courses devoted to specific topics surrounding race, class, gender, sexuality, and/or ability. In addition, courses in the sociology and/or psychology of human difference may also find the book useful.

The text was written with first and second year undergraduate students in mind, but would also be appropriate for advanced high school or college-prep students. The book can also be used in higher-level undergraduate or graduate student seminars, although such classes would ideally use *America on Film* in conjunction with more advanced materials and/or other primary readings. Because of its user-friendly style and general accessibility – everyone loves movies! – it may also be possible to use the text within certain types of corporate or social seminars designed to stimulate discussion of human diversity.

America on Film is divided into six parts. The first outlines the basic terms and issues of cultural theory and cinematic representation. Each of the following parts is devoted to a specific aspect of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability, and each begins with a helpful “What is ...?” introductory essay. Part II examines the cultural construction of whiteness as well as the complex historical lineages of African American, Native American, Asian American, and Latino representations. Part III explores issues of American capitalism and examines the cinematic representation of class struggle before and after the Great

Depression. Part IV explores the changing images of both femininity and masculinity within American film, and includes a chapter on how Hollywood film form itself has been critiqued as having a male bias. Part V explores how various forms of sexuality have (or have not) been figured on American movie screens. Part VI analyzes various ideas about physical ability, and how what is termed disability has been represented across American film history. The final chapter of the second edition, comprised exclusively of individual “case studies” (in-depth film analyses), emphasized the multiple and complex links between all of these various forms of identity markers. Those case studies have been moved online and can be found at www.wiley.com/go/Benshoff/Americaonfilm3e.

The book is comprised of a total of 16 chapters. While this number slightly exceeds the typical number of weeks in a semester-long course of study, the text has been designed to adapt to those parameters. Generally, each week of any given semester can be devoted to a single chapter of *America on Film* and a representative film screening, either shown in class or assigned as homework. (Many of the films suggested within the text for further screening are easily available from media libraries, streaming services, or other commercial media outlets.) Depending on the preferences of the instructor, additional readings and/or screenings can be used in conjunction with *America on Film*. Chapters may also be assigned on a more concentrated basis or even used “out of order,” although we have provided a logical and easy-to-follow structure for the issues discussed.

Each chapter of *America on Film* is organized within a broad historical framework, with specific theoretical concepts – including film genre, auteur theory, cultural studies, Orientalism, the “male gaze,” feminism, queer theory, etc. – integrated throughout. Each chapter features a concise and accessible overview of the topic at hand, a discussion of representative films, figures, and movements, a case study of a single film, and key terms highlighted in bold. Each chapter concludes with questions for discussion and a short bibliography and filmography. *America on Film* also contains a glossary of key terms, a comprehensive index, and over 120 photos and diagrams illustrating key points and figures.

ABOUT THE COMPANION WEBSITE

This book is accompanied by a companion website:

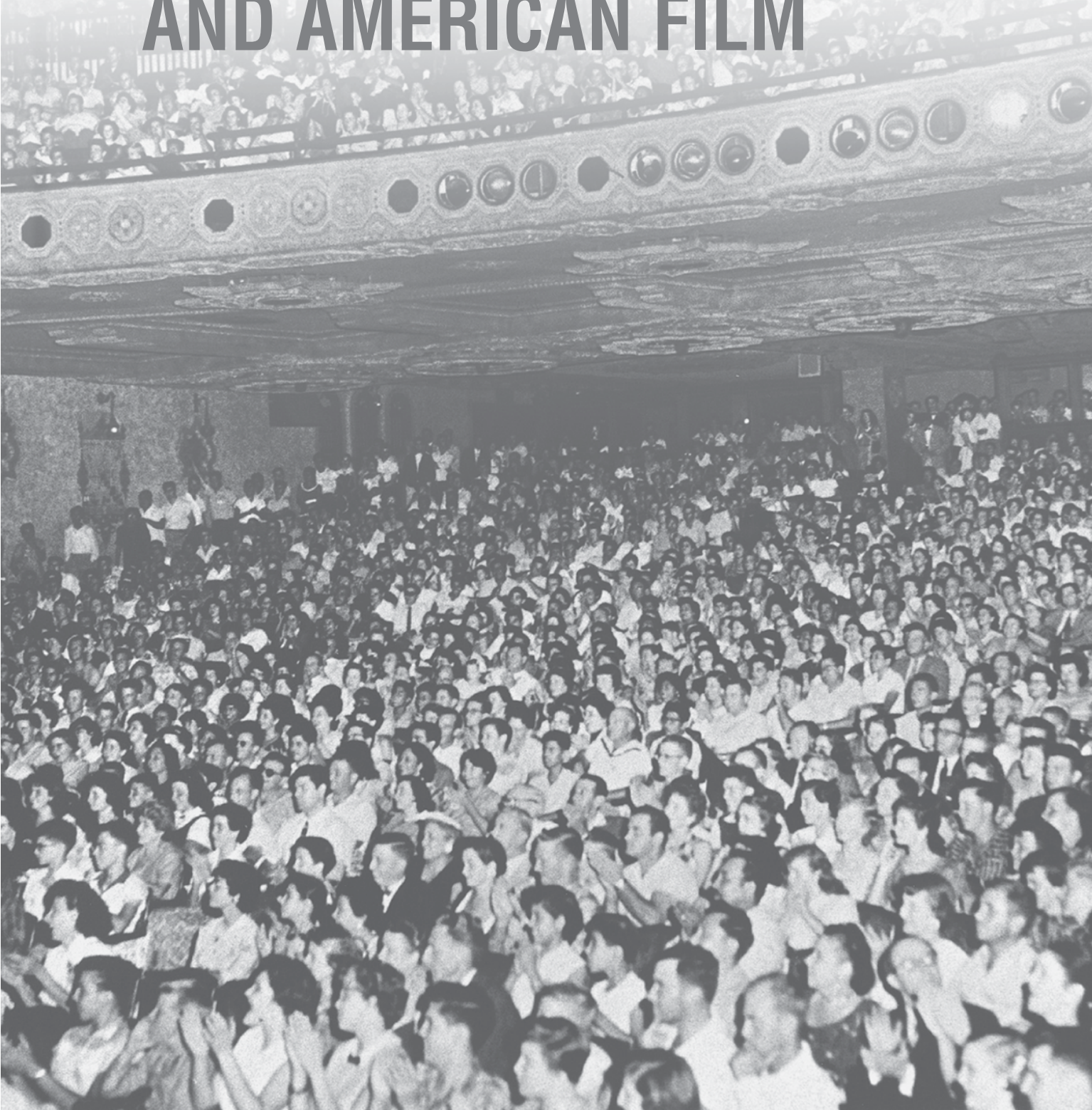
www.wiley.com/go/Benshoff/Americaonfilm3e



The website includes:

- Case studies

Part I
**CULTURE
AND AMERICAN FILM**



Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF FILM FORM AND REPRESENTATION

The purpose of this book is to analyze how American films have represented race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability throughout the twentieth century and into the early twenty-first. It is a basic principle of this work that by studying American film history, we can gain keen insights into the ways that different groups of American people have been treated (and continue to be treated). Images of people on film actively contribute to the ways in which people are understood and experienced in the “real world.” As seminal cultural theorist Richard Dyer has asserted, “Images Matter.” Furthermore, there are multiple and varied connections between film and “real life,” and we need to have agreed-upon ways of discussing those connections and their ramifications. Therefore, before examining in detail how specific groups of people have been represented within American cinema, we need to understand some preliminary concepts: how film works to represent people and things, how and why social groupings are and have been formed, and how individuals interact with the larger socio-cultural structures of the United States of America. This chapter introduces some basic ideas about film form, American history, and cultural studies.

Film Form

Film form refers to the constitutive elements that make a film uniquely a “film” and not a painting or a short story. All works of art might be said to have both form and content. **Content** is *what* a work is about, while **form** is *how* that content is expressed. Form and content are inextricably combined, and it is an old adage of art theory that “form follows content,” which means that the content of a work of art should dictate the form in which it should be expressed. For example, many different poems might have the same content – say, for example, a rose – but the content of a rose can be expressed in various forms in an infinite number of ways: in a sonnet, a ballad, an epic, a haiku, a limerick,

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and so forth. Each of these formal structures will create a different “take” on the content. For example, a limerick tends to be humorous or flippant, while a sonnet tends to be more serious and romantic. Likewise, different films with similar content can be serious, frivolous, artistic, intellectual, comedic, or frightening. Therefore, understanding how cinema communicates or creates meaning requires more than paying attention to what is specifically going on in the story (the film’s content); it also requires paying attention to how various artistic choices (the film’s form) affect the way the story is understood by the viewer.

Many entire books have been written analyzing the various formal elements of film but, for the purposes of this basic introduction, they can be broken into five main aspects: **literary design**, **visual design**, **cinematography**, **editing**, and **sound design**. The first aspect of film form, **literary design**, refers to the elements of a film that come from the script and story ideas. The literary design includes the story, the setting, the action, the characters, the characters’ names, the dialog, the film’s title, and any deeper subtexts or thematic meanings. Film is capable of many literary devices: metaphor, irony, satire, allegory, and so forth. Some films are black comedies and must be understood according to that form. Other films are dramas to be taken seriously while still others try to make us laugh by being deliberately juvenile. Yet other films try to shock or provoke us with new and unexpected ideas. Analyzing a movie’s literary design is a good place to start when analyzing a film, but one should not ignore the four other axes of film form and how they contribute to a film’s meaning.

Another broad aspect of film form has been labeled **mise-en-scène**, a French term for what goes into each individual **shot** (or uninterrupted run of film). Aspects of *mise-en-scène* include our second and third formal axes: the **visual design** of what’s being filmed (the choice of sets, costumes, makeup, lighting, color, and actors’ performance and arrangement before the camera) and the **cinematographic design** – that is, how the camera records the visual elements that have been dictated by the literary design. The cinematographic design includes things like the choice of framing, lenses, camera angle, camera movement, what is in focus and what is not. Each of these choices of *mise-en-scène* can affect the viewer’s feelings toward the story and its characters. A room that is brightly lit may seem comfortable or even festive; that same room with heavy shadows may seem threatening or scary. If everyone in a crowd scene is wearing various shades of gray and black, the viewer will tend to see them as just a crowd; if one person is wearing red, the viewer will tend to focus on that one person. Similarly, a camera shooting up from the floor at a character will create a different feeling than a camera aimed at eye-level. In yet another example, if only one couple on a dance floor are kept in focus, the viewer will pay attention to them; if the whole ballroom is kept in focus, the viewer may choose to look in a number of directions.

The fourth axis of film form is called **montage** or **editing**, and refers to how all the individual shots the camera records are put together in order to create meaning or tell a story. Most movies are made up of hundreds and hundreds of shots which are edited together to make a full-length feature film. Many choices get made at the editing stage. Not only do filmmakers usually have multiple takes of the same scene to choose from, they also choose which shots to place together with other shots. It may seem obvious to an audience, since the editing would seem to need to follow the story (A follows B follows C),

but an editor may choose to break up a shot of a group of people talking with individual close-ups of people in the group. Such a choice affects audience understanding by forcing the viewer to pay attention to just one person instead of the entire group. Audience identification with specific characters can be encouraged or discouraged in this manner. Montage also involves choosing the length of each shot. Usually, longer shot lengths are used to create quiet or contemplative moments, while action sequences or chases often are put together with short, quick shots.

The fifth and final formal axis of cinema is **sound design**. Although cinema audiences are usually referred to as viewers or spectators, audiences both watch and listen to films, and the same types of artistic choices that are made with the visual images are also made with the soundtrack. The dialog of some of the characters on the screen is easy to hear, while the dialog of others is inaudible (thus directing the audience member to pay attention to the conversation that the filmmakers want them to pay attention to). Most films have a musical score that the audience can hear but which the characters cannot. Choosing what type of music to play under a scene will greatly affect viewer comprehension – that is why the music is there in the first place – by directing the viewer toward the preferred understanding of the images. Playing a luscious ballad during a scene between a woman and her fiancé helps create a romantic sense, but playing ominous music during the same scene may make the viewer think the man is out to hurt the woman (or vice versa).

Although this only begins to introduce the subject of film form, these few examples do point out how cinema's basic aesthetic qualities help to create meaning. Discussing how various types of people are represented in American cinema, then, requires more than analyzing only the stories and the characters. For example, let's imagine a film about both a white man and a Native American man. The story alternates between the two characters, showing their daily activities: getting up, eating, interacting with their family and friends, working, and then going to sleep. There would seem to be nothing necessarily biased or prejudiced according to this description of the film's content. Yet, in this hypothetical film, all the scenes with the white man are brightly lit, with the camera placed at eye-level; the shots are of medium length, and calm, pleasant music is used for underscoring. In contrast, all the scenes of the Native American man are composed with dark shadows, with the camera constantly tilted at weird angles; the shots are quick and choppy, and dark, brooding music is used for underscoring. Such choices obviously slant how a viewer is supposed to react to these two characters. The content of the film may have seemed neutral, but when the other axes of film form are analyzed, one realizes that the white man was presented in a favorable (or neutral) light, while the Native American man was made to seem shifty or dangerous.

The above example is an imaginary one, but throughout this book actual films will be analyzed in detail in terms of both content and form, in order to examine how various American identities are represented in American films. As the next chapters will discuss in detail, the Hollywood studio system developed certain traditions in its formal choices that would vastly affect how race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability were and are treated in mainstream narrative films. But before turning to specifics, we must also examine the social and political nature of American society itself, as well as the theoretical tools that have been developed to explore the relationship between film and "real life."

American Ideologies: Discrimination and Resistance

The Constitution of the United States of America famously begins with these three words: “We the People.” Their importance highlights one of the founding principles of the nation: that the power of government is embodied not in the will of a dictator, nor in that of a religious leader or a monarch, but in the collective will of individual citizens. In conceptualizing “the power of the people,” the newly formed United States based its national identity on the principle of equality or, as Thomas Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence, that “all men are created equal.” Yet, as admirable as these sentiments were (and are), the United States of the late 1700s saw some individuals as “more equal” than others. Jefferson’s very words underline the fact that women were excluded from this equality – women were not allowed to vote or hold office, and they were severely hampered in opportunities to pursue careers outside the home. People of African descent were treated far more differently than anyone else at this time of history. The vast majority of them were brought here as slaves, or bred into slavery on American shores. The writers of the Constitution acknowledged (and thus implicitly endorsed) this institutional system of slavery against blacks, even as they valued them (for purposes of taxation and representation) as only three-fifths of a person. This devaluation of black lives is still felt in many quarters today. Native Americans were denied even this dubious honor and were considered aliens. Even being a male of European descent did not necessarily guarantee inclusion in the great experiment of American democracy, for many statesmen at the time argued that only landowners (that is, those of a certain economic standing) should have the right to vote or hold office.

Over the years, Americans have come to understand that the Constitution is a living document, one that can be and has been changed to encompass a wider meaning of equality. In America today, there is a general belief that each and every individual is unique, and should have equal access to the American Dream of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Not everyone will necessarily reach the same levels of happiness and success, but most Americans believe that the results of that quest should be based on individual effort and merit rather than preferential treatment (or, conversely, exclusionary tactics). The United States professes that these opportunities are “inalienable rights.” However, just as in the late 1700s, barriers, conflicts, biases, and misunderstandings continue to hamper these ideals. While most American citizens philosophically understand and endorse these principles of equality, many of those same people also recognize that equality has not been totally achieved in the everyday life of the nation.

Why is there such a disparity between the avowed principles of equality and many citizens’ actual lived experience? First, while ostensibly acknowledging that each person is unique, most of us also recognize that individuals are often grouped together by some shared trait. This grouping comes in many forms: by racial or ethnic heritage, by gender, by income level, by academic level, by sexual orientation, by geographic region, by age, by physical ability, and so forth. Almost invariably, such categorization of various identity types becomes a type of “shorthand” for describing people – a working-class Latino, a black deaf senior citizen, a Southern middle-class gay man. Quite often, this shorthand is accompanied by assumed traits that people belonging to a certain category supposedly have in common: that women are more emotional than rational, that gay men lisp, that

African Americans are good dancers. When such oversimplified and overgeneralized assumptions become standardized – in speech, in movies, on television – they become **stereotypes**. Stereotypes are often said to contain a “kernel of truth,” in that *some* women are more emotional than rational, *some* gay men do lisp, and *some* African Americans do excel at dance. The problems begin when people make unsupported leaps in logic and assume that everyone of a certain group is “naturally inclined” to exhibit these traits, thus reducing complex human diversity to simple-minded and judgmental assumptions.

In their oversimplification, stereotypes inevitably create erroneous perceptions about individuals. Stereotypes become even more problematic when they are used to favor certain groups over others, which unfortunately occurs quite commonly. While ostensibly living in a “free and equal” society, most Americans are aware that certain groups still have more opportunities and protection than others. In almost all of the categories listed above, there is one group that tends to have more access to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” than the others. Within race, those considered **white** or of Anglo-Saxon descent still seem to have more privilege and opportunity than do those of other races. Within gender, women are still working to achieve equity with men, while within sexual orientation, heterosexuality is more accepted and privileged than other orientations. And since notions of success and happiness are intricately tied to income level in contemporary US culture, one can see that working-class people hold less power than middle-class people (and that middle-class people in turn hold less power than do people of the upper classes). One need merely glance at the demographic makeup of Congress or the boardrooms of most major American corporations to see that wealthy heterosexual white men dominate these positions of power. American films over the past century also disproportionately focus on stories of heterosexual white men finding happiness and success.

In everyday conversation, less privileged groups are frequently referred to as **minority groups**. Such a term positions these groups as marginal to the dominant group that holds greater power. The term also implies that the disempowered groups are smaller numerically than the dominant group – an implication that may not necessarily be true. Census statistics indicate that there are more women living in the United States than men, yet men hold far more social power and privilege than do women. Current population projections are forecasting that, in many states, white citizens will be outnumbered by other racial or ethnic groups some time in the near future. Hence, the term “minority group” more often refers to types of people with less social power than to any group’s actual size.

One common method of keeping minority communities on the margins of power has been to pit their struggles for equality against one another, while the dominant group continues to lead. Another method has been to exclude members of minority groups from being considered “American” in the first place. (The “birther” controversy about Barack Obama circulated by then-Presidential candidate Donald Trump is one rather obvious example of this tactic.) The creation of a sense of national identity consistently involves social negotiations of who gets included and who gets excluded. Identity in general becomes more fixed when it is able to define *what it is not*: someone who is white is *not* black; a man is *not* a woman; a heterosexual is *not* a homosexual. America gains a greater sense of itself through such juxtapositions: it is not a British colony, it is not the various nations of Native Americans, and it is not the other countries that make up the American continents (which can also lay claim to the name “America”). Consequently, if certain population groups can be considered “alienable,” then it becomes easier to feel that they

are not entitled to those “inalienable rights” that “We the People of the United States of America” have supposedly been granted.

While women, homosexuals, and people of non-white heritage have made tremendous gains in social power during the last few decades, white heterosexual men still dominate the corridors of power in America. Many people feel that this is “how things ought to be,” that this is simply the “natural order of things.” In theoretical terms, considering white heterosexual males obviously or essentially better (stronger, more intelligent, etc.) is called an ideological assumption. **Ideology** is a term that refers to a system of beliefs that groups of people share and believe are inherently true and acceptable. Most ideological beliefs are rarely questioned by those who hold them; their beliefs are naturalized because of their constant and unquestioned usage. They are, to use a word made famous in the Declaration of Independence, “self-evident.” No one needs to explain these ideas, because supposedly everyone knows them.

When an ideology is functioning optimally within a society or civilization, individuals are often incapable of recognizing that these ideas are socially constructed opinions and not objective truths. (In fact, a Pew Research Center study released in June of 2018 found that many Americans – of all political stripes – have trouble distinguishing between facts and opinions in the news.) Cultural theorists call these prevailing opinions and assumptions **dominant ideologies**, because they tend to structure in pervasive ways how a culture thinks about itself and others, who and what it upholds as worthy, meaningful, true, and valuable. The United States was founded on and still adheres to the dominant ideology of **white patriarchal capitalism**. This does not mean that wealthy white men gather together in some sort of conspiracy to oppress everyone else in the nation, although such groups have been formed throughout American history in order to consolidate and control power. Rather, white patriarchal capitalism is an ideology that permeates the ways most Americans think about themselves and the world around them, regardless of their own race, class, gender, sexuality, or ability. It also permeates most American films.

White patriarchal capitalism entails several distinct aspects. The first – **white** – refers to the ideology that people of Western and Northern European descent are somehow better than are people whose ancestry is traced to other parts of the world. **Patriarchal** (its root words mean “rule by the father”) refers to a culture predicated on the belief that men are the most important members of society, and thus entitled to greater opportunity and access to power. As part of American patriarchy, sexuality is only condoned within heterosexual marriage, a situation that considers all other sexualities taboo and reinforces women’s role as the child-bearing and child-raising property of men. The third term – **capitalism** – is also a complex one, which multiple volumes over many years have attempted to dissect and define, both as an economic system and as a set of interlocking ideologies.

For the working purposes of this introduction, capitalism as an ideology can be defined as the belief that success and worth are measured by one’s material wealth. This fundamental aspect of capitalism has been so ingrained in the social imagination that visions of the American Dream almost always invoke financial success: a big house, big car, yacht, closets full of clothes, etc. Capitalism (both as an economic system and as an ideology) works to naturalize the concept of an **open market economy**, that the competition of various businesses and industries in the marketplace should be unhindered by governmental intrusion. (The US film industry, a strong example of capitalist enterprise, has spent much

of its history trying to prevent governmental oversight.) One of the ideological strategies for promoting capitalism within the United States has been in labeling this system a “free” market, thus equating unchecked capitalism with the philosophies of democracy. Capitalism often stands in opposition to the ideology and practice of **communism**, an economic system wherein the government controls all wealth and industry in order to redistribute that income to the population in an equitable fashion. (The history of the twentieth century showed that human greed usually turns the best communist intentions into crude dictatorships.) **Socialism**, an economic and ideological system mediating capitalism and communism, seeks to structure a society’s economic system around governmental regulation of industries and the equitable sharing of wealth for certain basic necessities, while still maintaining democratic values and a free market for most consumer goods. Since the United States was founded under capitalism, American culture has largely demonized socialism and communism as evil and unnatural, even though many US government programs can be considered socialist in both intent and practice.

The ideology of white patriarchal capitalism works not only to naturalize the idea that wealthy white men deserve greater social privilege, but to protect those privileges by naturalizing various beliefs that degrade other groups – thus making it seem obvious that those groups should not be afforded the same privileges. Some argue that capitalism can help minority groups gain power. If a group is able to move up the economic ladder through capitalist means, then that group can claim for itself as much power, access, and opportunity as do the most privileged Americans. As persuasive as this argument is (as can be seen by its widespread use), capitalism has often worked against various minority groups throughout US history. The wealthy have used their position to consolidate and insure their power over multiple generations, often at the expense of the rest of the population. Since this wealthy group has almost exclusively been comprised of white men and their families, the dissemination of racist and sexist stereotypes has helped keep people of color and women from moving ahead economically. To use an early example, arguing that individuals of African descent were not fully human allowed slavery to continue to thrive as an economic arrangement that benefited whites. Today, attitudes of racism, sexism, homophobia, and **ableism** work to create in corporate culture a **glass ceiling**, a metaphoric term that describes how everyone but white heterosexual males tend to be excluded from the highest executive levels of American industries.

In this way, one can see how the impact of social difference (race, gender, sexuality, physical ability) can have an impact upon one’s economic class status. In fact, the social differences that this book attempts to discuss – race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability – cannot be readily separated out as discrete categories. For example, people of color are men and women, rich and poor, straight and gay. Cultural theorists refer to this complexity of identity as **intersectionality**: every human being on the planet is marked by various signifiers of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability in similar-but-different ways. Being a deaf working-class white male suggests a person who has certain privileges and opportunities based upon being white and male, as well as certain disadvantages based on being deaf and working class. Being a black female means dealing with both patriarchal assumptions about male superiority *and* lingering ideas of white supremacy, while white women only have to deal with patriarchy (and possibly class). Being a lesbian of color might mean one is triply oppressed – potentially discriminated against on three separate levels of social difference. Encountering real-world prejudice on account of those

differences, non-white, non-male, non-heterosexual people, as well as those considered disabled, may have trouble finding good jobs and subsequent economic success. The point is not to find out “which group is more oppressed than some other one,” but to recognize how all of these various forms of social difference can and do interact in complex ways, producing complex identities and social groupings.

Most ideologies, being belief systems, are only relatively coherent, and may sometimes contain overlaps, contradictions, and/or gaps. The dominant ideology of any given culture is never stable and rigid. Instead, dominant ideologies and ruling assumptions are constantly in flux, a state of things referred to by cultural theorists as **hegemony** – the ongoing struggle to maintain the consent of the people to a system that governs them (and which may or may not oppress them in some ways). Hegemony is thus a complex theory that attempts to account for the confusing and often contradictory ways in which modern Western societies change and evolve. Whereas “ideology” is often used in ahistorical ways – as an unchanging or stable set of beliefs – hegemony refers to the way that social control must be won over and over again within different eras and within different cultures. For example, we should not speak of patriarchal ideology as a monolithic concept that means the same thing in different eras and in different situations. Rather, the hegemonic struggle of patriarchy to maintain power is a fluid and dynamic thing that allows for its ongoing maintenance *but also the possibility of its alteration*. For example, specific early twentieth-century patriarchal *ideologies* were challenged and changed when women won the right to vote in 1920, but that did not destroy the *hegemony* of American patriarchy.

Thus, the dominant ideology of a culture is always open to change and revision via the ebb and flow of **hegemonic negotiation**, the processes whereby various social groups exert pressure on the dominant hegemony. In another example, over the last fifty years, American civil rights groups have worked to expose and overturn the entrenched system of prejudice that has oppressed their communities for generations. Often, these fights include attempts to instill pride and self-worth in the minority groups that have been traditionally disparaged. In the process, the ideological biases of racial superiority are being challenged, but the basic assumption that individuals can be grouped according to their race is not. While these efforts attempt to disrupt one level of assumptions, a more basic ideological belief is kept intact. In this case the dominant hegemonic concept of racial difference as a valuable social marker remains untouched, even as the individual ideologies of white supremacy are challenged. (More recent cultural theorists have begun to challenge the very notion of such rigid categorizations, a topic explored more fully in future chapters. For example, the obvious fact of biracial or multiracial individuals inherently challenges the idea that race is some sort of stable category.)

Ideological struggle is therefore an ongoing political process that surrounds us constantly, bombarding individuals at every moment with messages about how the world should and could function. Such struggles can be both obvious and subtle. One obvious way of disseminating and maintaining social control is through oppressive and violent means, through institutions such as armies, wars, police forces, terrorism, and torture – institutions known as **repressive state apparatuses (RSAs)**. Violent, repressive discrimination is part of American history, as evidenced by terrorist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, political assassinations, police brutality, and the continued presence of hate crimes. More subtly, the state can also enforce ideological assumptions through legal discrimination. For example, the so-called **Jim Crow Laws** of the American South during the