Screen Ages

*Screen Ages* is a valuable guide for students exploring the complex and vibrant history of US cinema and how this film culture has grown, changed, and developed.

Covering key periods from across American cinema history, John Alberti explores the social, technological, and political forces that have shaped cinematic output and the varied impacts of cinema on US society.

Each chapter has a series of illuminating key features, including:

- “Now playing,” focusing on films as cinematic events, from *The Birth of a Nation* to *Gone with the Wind* to *Titanic*, to place the reader in the social context of those viewing the films for the first time.
- “In development,” exploring changing genres, from the melodrama to contemporary superhero movies.
- “The names above and below the title,” portraying the impact and legacy of central figures, including Florence Lawrence, Orson Welles, and Wes Anderson.
- Case studies, analyzing key elements of films and film culture in more depth.
- Glossary terms featured throughout the text, to aid non-specialist students and expand the reader’s understanding of changing screen cultures.

*Screen Ages* illustrates how the history of US cinema has always been and continues to be one of multiple screens, audiences, venues, and markets. It is an essential text for all those wanting to understand the power of American cinema throughout history and the challenges for its future.

The book is also supported by a companion website (www.routledge.com/cw/alberti), featuring additional case studies, an interactive blog, a quiz bank for each chapter, and an online chapter, “Screen ages today,” that will be updated to discuss the latest developments in American cinema.

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Screen Ages

A Survey of American Cinema

John Alberti
To my mother, Eleanor Alberti, who gave me the gift of her own love and joy for the movies.
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Introduction: Hollywood in the screen ages

Now playing

Movies in the twenty-first century
What does “going to the movies” mean in the twenty-first century? Consider the following three examples, each involving an Academy Award Best Picture nominee from 2009:

• In early 2010, a couple of hundred people – families, groups of teenagers, couples on dates, college students – all gather in a multiplex theater to watch Avatar (James Cameron) in IMAX 3D. The venue features “stadium-style” seating, meaning the theater has a steep rise and patrons climb stairs to reach their seats. Every seat rocks gently and comes with a full backrest and cup holder. As people enter, a series of commercials and movie previews are playing (in 2D) on the massive 72 by 52.8 foot screen. As the previews of coming attractions begin, the audience is instructed to put on their large 3D glasses. As the movie begins, the soundtrack thunders from speakers located behind the screen and along the sides of the theater. As James Cameron’s massively constructed 3D computer-generated images seem to immerse the viewers in the visual world of the movie, the audience may feel as if they are on an amusement park ride. Indeed, many amusement parks not only feature rides based on popular movies, such as the “Harry Potter and the Forbidden Journey” ride at Universal Studios Orlando or the upcoming Avatar ride being built just down the road at Disney World, but many of these rides use much of the same technology – computer-generated images, large screens, digital surround sound, even the actors from the movies – to create similar immersive experiences. Such experiences, whether at the IMAX 3D movie

![Avatar](image)

Fig 0.1 Zoë Saldana as the Nā’vi warrior Neytiri, a mixture of live action and computer-generated imagery, in James Cameron’s blockbuster Avatar.
or on the theme park ride, do not come cheap, however. The moviegoers in that suburban multiplex may have paid $15 or more for their tickets. Add to that the price of movie concessions, and a person could spend well over $20 for this screen experience.

• Later that year but just a few miles away, a couple of friends – recent college graduates with a love of the movies – settle down on an apartment sofa in front of a modest nineteen-inch flat screen TV to watch *Precious: Based on the Novel by Sapphire* (Lee Daniels). Unlike *Avatar*, which features an allegorical fantasy involving a conflict between humans and intelligent, blue, cat-like creatures, called the Na’vi, on the imaginary planet of Pandora, *Precious* is a gritty melodrama set in a poor Harlem neighborhood that tells the story of a lonely, abused African American teenager with the ironic nickname of “Precious.” The movie is not in 3D, and it inspired no amusement park rides, although it did spark much critical discussion, ranging from praise that a low budget drama about a poor black girl created so much viewer interest to concerns that the movie might also reinforce stereotyped images about black urban life. In any case, these two friends are not watching the movie in a large theater, nor are they playing a DVD. Instead, they are streaming the movie via Netflix through a home video game system. Their screen experience involved no advance planning or even a trip outside, and the monthly Netflix subscription costs less than a night at the IMAX movie. Using their game controller, they scrolled through the movies available for instant viewing and settled on *Precious*. Within less than a minute, they were watching the movie, although on a screen some fifty times smaller and considerably closer than in the IMAX theater. The sound is provided by two small speakers in the flat screen unit, and the friends periodically pause the movie to take phone calls, get snacks, or take bathroom breaks. Unlike the dark of the movie theater, they sit in a lighted room, and the flat screen is just one visible feature of the cluttered apartment.

• A vacationing family speeds down an Interstate in a minivan. The four children, aged four to eleven, ride in the back, but even after an hour on the road they are still sitting quietly. That’s because they are all absorbed in watching a Blu-ray copy of the computer-animated feature *Up* (Pete Docter and Bob Peterson) playing on a seven-inch screen attached to the ceiling just behind the front seats. To give their parents a break, the children listen to the movie via headphones. *Up* has become a family favorite; the children have seen the movie many times.
times, but on many different screens. They first saw the movie in 3D on a large multiplex screen not unlike the *Avatar* viewers above. When the movie became available on disc, it entered the regular rotation on the family’s Blu-ray player, screening on a flat screen television larger than the one the two friends above are using to watch *Precious*. And sometimes the eleven-year-old watches *Up* on a laptop computer while lying in bed. Not only have they watched the movie several times, but they also enjoy the “extra” features included on the disc, including two animated shorts, one telling the back story of Dug, the talking (by way of a special electronic collar) dog who befriends the main characters, and a mini-documentary on a research trip the moviemakers took to Venezuela to help create the visual look of the movie.

What do these three different kinds of contemporary movie experience tell us? For one, that the single term “movie” really encompasses a broad and diverse range of viewing experiences. Just consider the case of screen size. In the examples above, the screens range from the dramatic fifty-foot-high screen of the IMAX multiplex, creating the literally “larger than life” images we have long associated with the movies, to the decidedly “smaller than life” minivan ceiling screen. And even these two examples do not define the limits of screen size. We can watch movies on small screens embedded in the backs of airline seats, on iPods, and on smart phones, or we can watch movies projected on the side of a downtown building as part of a summer festival.

Sometimes, as in the *Avatar* example, we watch movies in the dark, surrounded by dozens of others, the soundtrack of the movie the loudest noise in the room (depending on the chattiness of the people sitting next to you). Sometimes we watch movies by ourselves or with only one or two other people in our living rooms, which may or may not be darkened, with all the sounds of the household and the outside world mixing in. The two friends watching *Precious* above very likely chatted with each other about the movie as they watched. Sometimes we watch movies on the move, in a car or on a plane, being jostled by turbulence or bumps in the road, facing the distractions of the scenery going by, or the flight attendant bringing us a snack. And many college students follow the pattern of the 11-year-old *Up* fan and watch movies on their personal computers, relaxing in bed after a long day of studies and work.
Given how different these viewing experiences are, we can see that talking about the movies, even talking about a single movie, is more complex – and more interesting – than we might first suppose. After all, watching Avatar in 3D on a giant screen is a very different experience from watching a 2D version on an iPad. We might still say that we are watching the “same” movie in both cases, but just think about the different reactions you might expect from a viewer who has only seen Avatar on the IMAX screen and another who has only seen it via DVD on a small, picture tube television set inherited from a grandparent. And if you have seen Avatar on multiple screens, consider the differences in your own screen experiences. Were you overwhelmed by the scope and visual density of the big screen experience? When the main character Jake’s avatar goes flying on the dragon-like Toruk creature, did you even become a bit dizzy as the camera swooped and turned in mid-air? On the other hand, though, while you still might be impressed by the visual imagination of the movie and the excitement of the Toruk sequences on a much smaller screen, you probably weren’t as viscerally affected. In fact, the small screen experience may have given you more of a chance to focus on the dialogue and the interpersonal relationships among the characters, causing you to think more carefully about the ethics of Jake’s actions in the movie.

The screen ages: The myth of Hollywood’s “Golden Age”

Given the variety of possible screen experiences today, which one represents the “best” way to see a movie? It’s easy to think that this diversity of movie experiences must be unique to the present day. After all, just consider all the recent historical and technological developments that have changed the ways we experience movies:

- the rise of the Internet in the 1990s creating competition (and new screening venues) for the movies
- the invention of the first VCRs, and now DVD, Blu-ray, and digital streaming, greatly expanding the number of movies we can access and giving us the ability to watch movies when we want as many times as we want
- the expansion of digital technologies that not only allows us to watch movies on our portable electronic devices but even to make them ourselves.

At the same time, you are probably familiar with people expressing nostalgia for the “good old days” when “going to the movies” seemed simpler and less complicated. Accompanying this nostalgia is a desire to define the “true” movie experience, the way watching movies is “supposed” to be. The past always has a way of seeming more stable and understandable than the chaotic, unpredictable present. The writing of history (including this textbook) turns the past into stories, narratives with protagonists and antagonists, main conflicts and (seemingly) inevitable conclusions. In our present lives, however, we not only never know what is going to happen next, we are not sure if we are even paying attention to the right developments.

If you happened to be born after 1990, you have probably heard some version of this nostalgia: “Back when I was young, everything was simpler. We didn’t have computers or the Internet, we didn’t have cable television. If we wanted to watch a movie, we went to the local movie theater.” If (like me), you were born (well) before 1990, you may well have offered such an opinion yourself. These historical observations are often accompanied by moral and aesthetic judgments as well:
“People today have a shortened attention span and need constant stimulation”;
“Movies were better in the past.” Even though people have been saying that “things
were better in the old days” for as long as there have been people, the idea persists
that the past was, if not better, than at least more understandable than the present.

The study of American movie history has been particularly susceptible to the
idea of a “Golden Age,” a mythical time in the long ago past when movies were
supposedly at their height, in terms of artistic quality, cultural importance, and
financial health. Along with this idea of a Golden Age comes a kind of golden ideal
of what a “real” movie is. As we will see throughout Screen Ages, however, just
what this ideal is has actually differed quite dramatically over the one hundred plus
years of American moviemaking, but the idea of an ideal continues to influence the
way many of us think about the movies. And whatever that ideal might be, many
of us are sure that the way we watch movies nowadays isn’t it, as expressed in
this comment from New York Times movie critic Manohla Dargis: “I try to resist
whining about the good old days – though here I do need to point out that film as
film is on the verge of extinction even if cinema is not – but the mainstream media
pay even less mind to serious cinema than it did.”1

The most common candidate for the Golden Age of American movies, and the
one most prominently featured in most textbooks and histories, is what is called
the “Studio System,” the period in the 1930s and 1940s when a group of five major
studios – operating under a mass production factory model – dominated movie
production in the United States. The point of adopting a factory model had been
to provide stability, uniformity, and predictability to a notoriously volatile, hyper-
competitive industry. In our collective imagination, we often think of this as the era
of “classic” Hollywood, a time of glamorous movie stars, lavish productions, and
spectacular movie palaces. As a result, it’s tempting to think of the history of American
movies as one of rise and fall (a recurring cultural trope for thinking about historical
narratives), a building up from the first experiments with capturing movement on
film to the heights of 1940s Hollywood, followed by a gradual disintegration into
the confusing world of the present. As contemporary students of American cinema,
we latecomers to the party can feel that we missed out on the most thrilling and
fascinating era of moviemaking and have to settle for the mostly mediocre, but
occasionally interesting, creations of a movie culture whose best days are behind it.

But we can just as easily look at the apparent stability of the Studios Era as an
anomaly, an exception to the more chaotic norm of American movie history. After
all, the time period we will study in Chapter 4, “The studios era: Dominance and
diversity in the Golden Age of Hollywood, 1929–1948,” lasted barely twenty years,
accounting for less than 20 percent of the history of American movies. And just how
“stable” was this Golden Age after all? Born out of the combination of the advent
of the sound era and the economic catastrophe of the Great Depression, the Studios
Era witnessed a constant struggle among the major studios to maintain market
dominance against each other as well as the proliferation of smaller studios, all the
while dealing with the continuing threat of government censorship and the shifting
economic climate of the Depression and the global crisis of World War II. Creative
artists such as writers, directors, and actors rankled against having to sign exclusive
studio contracts that limited their personal and professional options and forced them
to work on projects assigned by studio executives. Movie industry workers of all
kinds, from stage crews to camera operators to writers, struggled to establish unions
and guilds that would protect their economic rights and interests.
For the movie fans in the Studios Era, the over 17,000 movie theaters in operation during the 1940s represented their own diversity of screen experiences, ranging from the 6,000 plus seats at New York’s Radio City Music Hall to small town theaters with a capacity of only a couple of hundred or so. The movies these fans had access to varied greatly as well: while a cinematic extravaganza like Gone With the Wind might have officially premiered in December of 1939, most Americans had to wait a year or more for the movie to make its way through the movie distribution system to their own home town theaters on screens much smaller than the big city movie palaces. What is more, these viewers were experiencing the movie only after it had already become part of a larger national conversation. In fact, for most movie fans living outside large metropolitan areas, still a sizable percentage of the American public in the 1940s, they were more likely to hear a radio version of a new movie (often with the stars of the movie reprising their roles) before they could actually see it.

So which model best represents the mainstream of American movie history? The three examples of watching movies in the twenty-first century that open this chapter, or the myth of the Golden Age of Hollywood? Writers, scholars, and teachers of American cinema have long wrestled with questions like this as they try to come up with a coherent story of the history of movies in the United States, one unified enough to provide clarity and understanding yet open enough to recognize the complexity and diversity of that history. In short, how do you define a “mainstream” Hollywood tradition while also taking into account the immense and vibrant variety of movie culture in America?

It is this question that both motivates Screen Ages: A Survey of American Cinema and explains its title. Screen Ages is a chronological survey of American movie history that takes contemporary movie culture – the culture in which we all live and which first nurtured in us a love for the movies – as a baseline for exploring how that culture has evolved and developed from the late nineteenth century to the present. The title Screen Ages: A Survey of American Cinema refers to the defining reality of movies today: that our experience of the movies takes place on multiple screens in multiple venues involving multiple audiences, from the large screens in a suburban multiplex to television screens to the small screens of personal computers and smart phones. Rather than seeing this multiplicity and diversity as something wholly new or as a radical departure from previous eras in American movie history, the focus on the idea of screens signals the defining principle of this book: that the history of American movies – from its beginnings in vaudeville theaters, tent shows, and Kinetoscope parlors through the movie palaces, small town theaters and church basements of the 1940s to the Imax screens, Blu-ray discs, and streaming videos of the 2010s – has always been one of diversity and variety, of multiple screens, audiences, venues, and markets.

The same movie on different screens: The event-centered approach to movie history

As our three opening examples of the diversity of contemporary movie watching suggest, our ability to watch the “same” movie on such different screens in such different contexts raises the question of whether we are really watching the “same” movie after all in these cases. On the one hand, whether we watch Up in 3D or “2”D, in a multiplex or on an iPhone, the balloons still float off with the house every time we watch it, Dug the dog remains obsessed with squirrels, and the opening
prologue to the movie (a beautiful tribute to the art of silent filmmaking) probably still makes you cry.

On the other hand, we will just as often recommend a specific kind of viewing experience as the “right” way to watch a particular movie: “You’ve got to see Avatar in 3D!” or “Watch Inception on DVD so you can go back over the confusing parts.” Similarly, we all know that different types of movies work differently depending on the viewing situations. Comedies, for example, are often funnier when we watch them with a responsive audience around us than if we are all alone. At other times, a restless audience can distract us from really getting into a quiet, slow-moving movie. And as any teacher or student can tell you, watching a movie as a class requirement is a different experience from choosing a film on your own.

The fact that no two viewing experiences are ever the same (no more than any two reading experiences of a novel or two listening experiences of a song) speaks to the pleasure, excitement, intellectual stimulation, even frustration and exasperation that make the arts such an indispensible part of what it means to be human. It’s why we can watch a favorite movie over and over again, each new viewing a unique mixture of the familiar and new. The formal structures of the movie may remain the same, but our screening technology, the places and situations in which we view the movie, and, most important, our very selves constantly change and develop. In Screen Ages, we will explore the constantly evolving nature of American movie culture and American movie viewing experiences.

We can call this focus on the experience of watching movies an event-centered approach, a way of looking at movies that brings with it several important benefits for the introductory study of American cinema history:

• It helps us recognize and take into account the diversity of movie audiences and moviemakers and their equal diversity of responses, attitudes, and opinions.
• It reminds us that history is always about change, uncertainty, conflict, including our efforts to study and make sense of history.
• Maybe most important, it helps us connect the present to the past, to use our own experiences as contemporary movie fans to explore the experiences of earlier generations of movie goers.

Contemporary arguments over whether the glory days of the movies have passed or whether the best is yet to come, whether movies represent the best or the worst in American culture, even whether movies have long to survive, have all been a part of American movie culture from the beginning. In Chapter 3, for example, we will focus on the troubled and notorious history of D. W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation, a movie that was both enormously popular and enormously hated, one that divided audiences from the moment it premiered in 1915 at Clune’s Auditorium in Los Angeles. In using enormous craft and skill to tell a story that justified and even celebrated the racism and violence of the Ku Klux Klan, Griffith’s movie forced its viewers to confront fundamental questions of how we understand the relationship between art and morality, the significance of American slavery and racism, even the question of whether a movie can be dangerous or harmful to watch. The history of A Birth of a Nation is both a story of the choices made by moviemakers in constructing their cinematic text as well as the history of how specific viewers and groups of viewers experienced and reacted to that text. However we individually judge Griffith’s movie, it has become an inescapable part of American movie history,
one that can’t be avoided and one that continues to demand our ethical judgment and engagement.

As we consider both important individual movies as well as the larger overall patterns of development in American movie history, we will be guided by a series of questions you may be familiar with as the “Five Ws (and One H)” from your writing or journalism class:

- **Who?**
- **What?**
- **Where?**
- **When?**
- **Why?**
- **How?**

Journalists view these questions as a guide to gathering complete information. In *Screen Ages*, we will use these questions as a guide to thinking about movies as events, as specific moments and experiences in the lives of individual moviegoers and in the cultural history of America. For any movie event, we can ask:

- **Who** is watching?
- **What** are they watching?
- **Where** are they watching?
- **When** are they watching?
- **Why** are they watching?
- **How** are they watching?

As an example of just how useful these questions can be, consider this case history about a difficult situation involving Steven Spielberg’s 1994 dramatic movie about the Holocaust, *Schindler’s List*.

**Case Study 0.1: Schindler’s List and Castlemont High School**

How important is it to consider the specific context and details of a screen experience? In 1994, the controversy and media furor following the expulsion of a class of 69 Oakland, California high-school students from a theater screening of Steven Spielberg’s Academy-award winning movie about the Holocaust – *Schindler’s List* – illustrates how our
understanding and reaction to any movie varies tremendously based on all the factors involved in the screening experience, from our expectations about what we are going to see, our familiarity with the subject matter, whom we are with, even the mood we are in on a given day.

In this case, some high-school students in an Oakland movie theater were heard laughing at events on the screen such as the shooting of a Jewish woman by a Nazi soldier. This behavior so shocked the theater manager – who couldn’t imagine how anyone could laugh at such a serious film about one of the most tragic episodes in human history – that he expelled all of the students. The story quickly made the national and even international news media, and the shock and outrage spread. The controversy became even more heated – and even more complicated – by the fact that the students, who were mainly African American and Latino and attended an economically deprived high school, had been taken to Schindler’s List as part of a holiday field trip commemorating Martin Luther King, Jr. Day.

Why had some of these students laughed? How could any decent person think a movie about the Holocaust was funny? As the story made its way through the media life cycle – including a visit to the school by Steven Spielberg, who felt the students had gotten a bad rap – these questions persisted. Conversations with the students involved as well as a more careful discussion and debate of the situation among educators and scholars began to tease out how important the issue of the screen context was, how this controversy said more about how complex the movie-watching experience can be than about whether these young people lacked compassion or courtesy. Some students, for example, were almost completely unfamiliar with the Holocaust and World War II and whether the movie was fiction or not. Others were excited about a day away from school with their friends (and anticipating a trip to a roller rink after the movie), not the prime situation for viewing such a serious movie. And while some students laughed, others were undoubtedly interested in the movie.

How do all these multiple variables of the movie-watching experience – the demographic background of the students; the context for a trip to the movies; familiarity with the history of the Holocaust; the ambiguous status of Schindler’s List as education and/or entertainment – influence our understanding and reaction to what happened in that Oakland movie theater in 1994? What other factors might we take into consideration as well? If you are interested, you might do your own further research to explore how the questions of Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How can help us appreciate how many factors are at play in any screen experience.

The structure of Screen Ages

Every chapter of Screen Ages will follow the same general format:

- **Now playing:** A collection of three case studies featuring movies that evoke the diversity of that age’s screen experiences. For example, Chapter 5, “Theaters, drive-ins, and living rooms: Changing screens, changing movies, 1949–1966,” starts by looking at the gala premiere of the epic blockbuster The Ten Commandments (Cecil B. DeMille 1956) at New York city’s 1,700-seat Criterion Theatre, an old-fashioned, big city movie palace; a showing of the low budget teen musical Beach Party (William Asher 1963) at a suburban drive-in theater; and a (very) small screen television episode of Alfred Hitchcock Presents produced
by that most famous of Hollywood directors. These dramatically different screen experiences illustrate the increasing diversity of what “going to the movies” meant in the 1950s, preparing us for the next section of the chapter, where we will consider some of the most influential stories of why these developments occurred.

**Screen ages:** An introduction to some of the most influential historical narratives about the key people and developments – technological, economic, social, and artistic – that shaped the movie-going experience of that era. The emphasis on screen ages reminds us that no one story can capture the variety and complexity of any historical period. As in our discussion of the “myth of Hollywood’s ‘Golden Age’” above, “The screen ages” section will consider the significance of these different historical narratives – both those seen as “mainstream” and as “alternative” – and what they tell us about how our understanding of Hollywood’s history affects the ways we understand our contemporary screen age.

**In development:** Focusing on the history of the formal dimension of movies, “In development” introduces the concept of movie “genres” – types and categories of movies such as the romantic comedy, the action movie, or the musical – and traces how some of the most significant movie genres have evolved over time. Just as different types of movies rely on different types of characters, we will also look at genres of movie identities and how they have changed over time as well in relation to larger social developments, whether in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, social class, or sexuality. For example, just as the role of women has changed dramatically in the United States from the late nineteenth century to now, the types and genres of male and female characters in the movies have changed as well, in ways that reflect the hopes, anxieties, and debates that marked those social changes. From the dashing swashbucklers played by Douglas Fairbanks and the “America’s Sweetheart” image embodied by Mary Pickford in the silent age, to the hard-boiled heroes and the dangerous femme fatales of 1940s film noir, to the nerdy losers and tough-as-nails female action heroes of today, American movies have created and played with different “genres” of what it means to be a man or a woman, male or female, sometimes reinforcing old stereotypes, sometimes breaking traditional boundaries.

**The names above and below the title:** Every chapter of Screen Ages ends with another set of case studies – “The names above and below the title” – highlighting significant individuals who made a mark during that period of American movie history. From legendary filmmakers such as Orson Welles and the groundbreaking female director Dorothy Arzner in the 1930s and 1940s, to contemporary innovators such as Kathryn Bigelow and Quentin Tarantino, “The names above and below the title” reminds us both that American movie history is the result of the actions and ambitions of specific people in specific places and times and that who gets to make movies has always been a story of inclusion and exclusion, of those who want to maintain the status quo and those who want to widen the possibility of who can shape the history of American movies.

This case study approach to the study of screen ages also provides room for you to take part in the writing of that history. Throughout the print text and on the Screen Ages website, there will be opportunities for you to practice researching and writing about more case histories, more examples of the diversity of stories that make up the story of the different screen experiences that have always defined movie going in
America. Just as every new viewing experience of a movie represents a new version of that movie, so too every new student of movie history represents a new revision of that history, a new way of understanding and relating to the stories of how our own diverse experiences of the movies came to be. Rather than an ending, whether happy or sad, Screen Ages is meant to be a beginning, an opening scene for the story of your own exploration of American movie history, a history we can shape as much as it shapes us.

Note
