

Star Power and Risk: A Political Economic Study of Casting Trends in Hollywood

James McMahon

To cite this article: James McMahon (2023): Star Power and Risk: A Political Economic Study of Casting Trends in Hollywood, Quarterly Review of Film and Video, DOI: [10.1080/10509208.2023.2215355](https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2023.2215355)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2023.2215355>



Published online: 27 May 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Star Power and Risk: A Political Economic Study of Casting Trends in Hollywood

James McMahon 

Introduction

This paper builds an empirical and theoretical model to analyze how the financial goal of risk reduction changed the insides of Hollywood's star system. For the moviegoer looking at Hollywood cinema from the outside, the function of the star system has remained the same since the 1920s: to have recognizable actors attract large audiences to Hollywood's biggest and most expensive productions. The composition of this system is, however, sensitive to many historical changes in the business and culture of cinema. From year to year or film to film, there is neither a stable set of movie stars, nor a timeless logic for deciding how one should cast some actors over others. So how do Hollywood insiders make these decisions?

If the evolution of Hollywood's star system is shaped by broader social factors, risk reduction would be a key factor after 1980. The financial history of Hollywood shows a systemic process of risk reduction that began in the early 1980s and continues into the present (McMahon 2013, 2019). Risk reduction was achieved by Hollywood studios making the wide-release strategy (a.k.a., saturation booking) more predictable through an aggressive implementation of the blockbuster style and the high concept standard (McMahon 2022; Wyatt 1994).

This paper uses Internet Movie Database (IMDb) casting data to analyze how the star system from 1980 to 2019 was a component in this push to reduce risk. Risk reduction shapes film casting when a star system is built on *controlled repetition*. Repetitive casting—choosing the same people to star in a series of films—is a form of control because the repetitive selection is the inequality of opportunity by another name: if an in-group is internally repetitive when alternatives exist, an out-group is repeatedly excluded.

There are two key conclusions to the analysis of the IMDb dataset. First, casting repetitiveness/inequality in the blockbuster era of Hollywood (1980–present) is low compared to Hollywood's “classical” studio system

James McMahon's research interests are in the Hollywood film business, New Hollywood cinema, social theories of mass culture, political economic theory, and the relationship between institutional power and cultural practices. His book, *The Political Economy of Hollywood: Capitalist Power and Cultural Production*, was published in 2022. He currently teaches at the University of Toronto.

(1930–1948). High repetitiveness/inequality during the first half of the twentieth century is consistent with existing research on the studio system; during the studio system, Hollywood had, among other strategies, a preference to cast people on multi-year contracts (Schatz 2010). Second, the historically low levels of repetitiveness/inequality after 1980 can be misleading if we ignore sector characteristics such as firm size and level of theatrical distribution. While it appears that there are fewer barriers to being cast in *any* American film, a long career in the upper echelons of blockbuster Hollywood is still reserved for Hollywood’s elite. Whether measured by the size of distributor or number of opening theaters in theatrical release, blockbuster cinema increasingly relies on more repetitive casting.

Some variability in casting is needed, but the targeted increase in repetitive casting appears to be a symptom of major film distributors trying to reduce volatility and increase the predictability of their biggest film projects. As this attempt at risk reduction is driven by the largest firms in Hollywood, the theoretical part of this paper will identify the role of capitalist power in the formation of a star system. Capitalist power, in this case, is defined as the ability of Hollywood to control everything from the industrial production of films to the broader social relations of cinema (Nitzan and Bichler 2009; McMahon 2015, 2019, 2022). This control is never absolute, but the role of capitalist power in the star system has a key purpose: to make sure that casting decisions are complementary to business interests. Thus, executives, managers, and high-ranking producers are tasked with preventing casting decisions in Hollywood from being random or misguided in terms of profit expectations. We can enumerate two key factors in the mode of control:

1. *People inside Hollywood (studio execs, producers, agents, directors, public relations, etc.) work to shape Hollywood’s star system according to access (who can be a star and who cannot) and population (how many stars are too many?). Vested interests in Hollywood have no desire to let stardom organically grow from fandom—even if stardom needs fandom.*
2. *Casting decisions do not always have predictable effects (revenues, favorable reviews, awards, etc.), but the repeated use of a person is a choice to elevate this person over others. Once chosen to be used repeatedly, the elevated person is building a theatrical film career, which is a step to building star power.*

Data Preparation

A dataset of film casting was produced with IMDb data, accessed through the IMDb API with Python code. This section describes some of the

decisions that shaped the preparation of the dataset for an analysis of star power.

The Category of Actor and the Analysis of Demographics

Throughout the paper, the use of “actor” as a single noun signifies any person who, regardless of gender, was cast to act in an American motion picture. Gender-based analysis of repetition/inequality with IMDb dataset is important, but it will have to be saved for future research. For any reader that is less familiar with the architecture of IMDb, the website labels performers as either “actors” or “actresses”—for example, Viola Davis’ acting roles are stored as “Actress,” while Daniel Kaluuya’s acting roles are stored as “Actor.” This type of labeling appears helpful for a gender-based analysis, yet one would also need to investigate IMDb’s data management practices more carefully. For instance, gendered labels may or may not be created by the people registered on the database, but rather by the data entries of IMDb staff. There are also questions concerning self-identity and the use of a gendered distinction like “actor”/“actress” in professional acting circles.

Analysis of IMDb casting data by race or ethnicity has different challenges. Likely for many good reasons, IMDb does not use its database architecture to label people by race or ethnicity. Researchers could create their own labels, but there are potential ethical hazards such as misidentification or painting demographics in Hollywood with broad strokes. In part, the appropriateness of this exercise is partially determined by the size of the dataset. This paper is using a dataset of cast lists for 79,423 films—a dataset far too big for one person to produce these labels appropriately.

Future research that takes the time to carefully analyze the demographics of casting repetition/inequality is needed. Visual surveys of this paper’s dataset—e.g., sampling by year or famous movie star—indicate that there are racial and gender inequalities in Hollywood casting: the majority of actors to build star power through repetitive casting are white men. Critical histories of the Hollywood film business corroborate this observation. Yuen (2016) demonstrates that actors of color trying to secure roles in Hollywood experience racial discrimination in casting in different ways, such as perceiving actors of color to be “too foreign” or not American enough in demeanor and accent, typecasting by ethnicity or skin color, and restricting acting opportunities to a narrow range of stereotyped characters. The dominance of men in this paper’s dataset is not surprising when systemic gender discrimination and the role of power in distributing roles to women might be one of Hollywood’s biggest open-secrets—especially after the testimonies of many in the #MeToo movement. Moreover, gender and

racial discrimination can combine and disadvantage Black women in their pursuits to secure creative roles in Hollywood filmmaking, including directing and screenwriting (Erigha 2019).¹

Cast Lists

To prepare the cast lists for an analysis of star power, each cast list was limited to the first 20 people listed. Before we focus on the number twenty, let us address the reason why one needs to filter cast lists to analyze star power.

IMDb cast data is a rough ordinal ranking of actors, whereby lead actors are listed before supporting actors, character actors, and uncredited appearances. Two people might disagree about the ordinal rank of a randomly sampled cast list—this is why these ordinal rankings are rough. However, the general directionality of each ordinal ranking holds, which we can see with an example in Table 1. Web searches of the poster for *Batman Begins* show us that the typical list of the film’s marquee actors is as follows: Christian Bale, Michael Caine, Liam Neeson, Katie Holmes, Gary Oldman, and Morgan Freeman. The order of the first five marquee actors and the actors in Table 1 are the same. Morgan Freeman’s place in Table 1 is 12th, which seems low for someone as famous as Morgan Freeman in 2005; but being listed 12th retains some degree of privilege when the raw cast list for *Batman Begins* lists 151 people.

Professional acting provides no objective or official demarcations between lead actors, supporting actors, and character actors. It is also open to interpretation of how supporting actors and character actors can

Table 1. Example of casting data from IMDb.

Year	Title	Title_ID	Actor	Actor_ID
2005	Batman Begins	372784	Christian Bale	288
2005	Batman Begins	372784	Michael Caine	323
2005	Batman Begins	372784	Liam Neeson	553
2005	Batman Begins	372784	Katie Holmes	5017
2005	Batman Begins	372784	Gary Oldman	198
2005	Batman Begins	372784	Cillian Murphy	614165
2005	Batman Begins	372784	Tom Wilkinson	929489
2005	Batman Begins	372784	Rutger Hauer	442
2005	Batman Begins	372784	Ken Watanabe	913822
2005	Batman Begins	372784	Mark Boone Junior	95478
2005	Batman Begins	372784	Linus Roache	730070
2005	Batman Begins	372784	Morgan Freeman	151
2005	Batman Begins	372784	Larry Holden	390227
2005	Batman Begins	372784	Gerard Murphy	614283
2005	Batman Begins	372784	Colin McFarlane	568801
2005	Batman Begins	372784	Sara Stewart	829815
2005	Batman Begins	372784	Gus Lewis	1600560
2005	Batman Begins	372784	Richard Brake	104114
2005	Batman Begins	372784	Rade Serbedzija	784884
2005	Batman Begins	372784	Emma Lockhart	1439087

accumulate their own star power. Nevertheless, a quantitative analysis, in my opinion, requires some filtering to focus on the career building of actors with opportunities to become movie stars. The IMDb data is structured such that we can conceptualize star power as a combination of *career building* and *role climbing*, which is the act of gaining and retaining leading roles in ordinal rankings. Controlling for role climbing enables us to count the repetition of actors who have already achieved some recognition through role climbing.

Figure 1 visualizes this conceptualization of star power and its two components, career building, and role climbing. If Figure 1 was a two-dimensional plane, the movie star travels diagonally—upwards with a higher median rank in cast lists, and to the right with more films. The overwhelming majority of actors in the IMDb dataset only travel horizontally or vertically—they continue to acquire small supporting roles or they have leading roles, but these roles do not fuel long careers. Panel B, for example, visualizes the differences between the careers of Tom Hanks, Michelle Pfeiffer, Wilford Brimley, and M. Emmett Walsh from 1980 to 1995. Tom Hanks does not need to role climb because his 10-film median rank is 1; the growth of his star power will come from career building. Michelle Pfeiffer and Wilford Brimley are traveling diagonally up and to the right; their star power grows because there is a positive feedback loop between getting more roles and getting more *leading* roles. By contrast, the career of M. Emmett Walsh appears to be hitting a ceiling in terms of role climbing. Of the four actors, Walsh accumulated the most roles

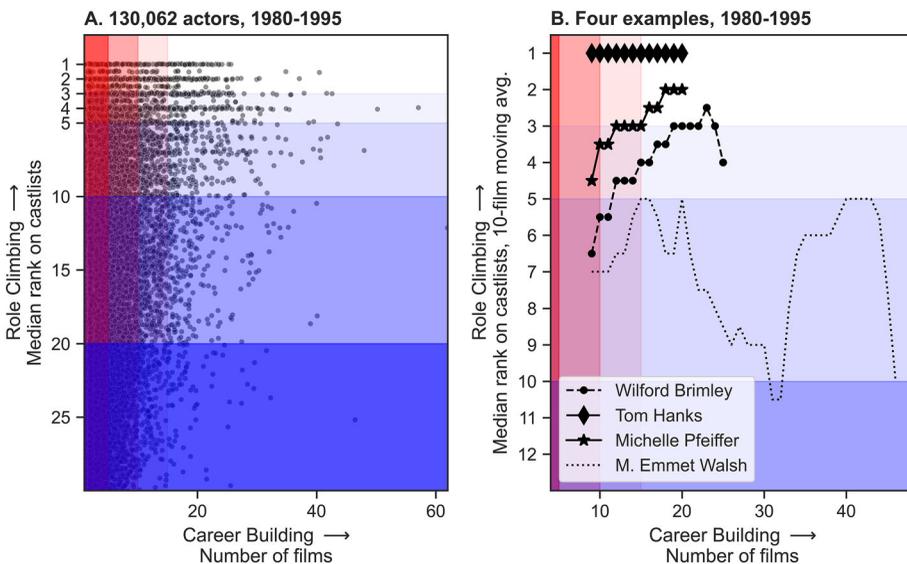


Figure 1. Role climbing and career building, 1980–1995. Source: IMDb.

between 1980 and 1995, but his 10-film median rank never went higher than 5.

So why filter each cast list to roles from 1 to 20? There will always be some arbitrariness to a decision to filter data, but the goal is focus on star power but without biasing actors on either the high end or the low end of ranked cast lists. Removing too many lower-ranked roles from the analysis will bias actors who began their film careers as leading actors—like Tom Hanks. Applying some moderate filtering to the lower end of cast lists controls for actors that accumulate more roles than Hanks, Pfeiffer, Brimley, or even Walsh, but do so with careers in background work or with a filmography few readers would recognize. The number twenty is double the number of people that are listed on IMDb’s “featured” cast and crew lists. Twenty actors also give us data to investigate if repetition in casting occurs with people who are not stars in the public’s mind but who have already done *some* role climbing in Hollywood. For instance, [Table 1](#) includes actors with smaller speaking roles in *Batman Begins*: Mark Boone Junior as Arnold Flass, Linus Roache as Thomas Wayne, Larry Holden as district attorney Carl Finch, Colin McFarlane as Gillian B. Loeb, and Emma Lockhart as Young Rachel Dawes.

Widest Releases

The website boxofficemojo.com provides variables to help us look at the evidence of casting repetitiveness/inequality. The website’s opening theater data from 1983 to 2019 is used to analyze casting trends in wide-released films. In this realm of Hollywood cinema, where budgets are big, advertising dollars are spent, and actors have lengthy promotional tours in magazines and television, career building—giving an actor a leading role in a wide-release film—is a step toward star building—giving an actor a leading role in one of the widest-released films per year.

For each year from 1983 to 2019, I filter US theatrical releases with opening-theater ranks above the 50th percentile. This approach for selecting films is slightly different than selecting films by gross revenue, but the method is related to the risk perceptions of developing film projects to be blockbuster hits (McMahon 2013). Saturation booking—the strategy to open a film in as many theaters as possible—is not applied to every film. The Hollywood film business decides, based on what it thinks will be popular, which films will follow a saturation-booking strategy. The tiered exhibition system of classical Hollywood may be no more (Waterman 2005), but some contemporary films will still only get “platform” releases, which means they will open in a small number of theaters, usually in select cities (New York, Los Angeles, etc.).

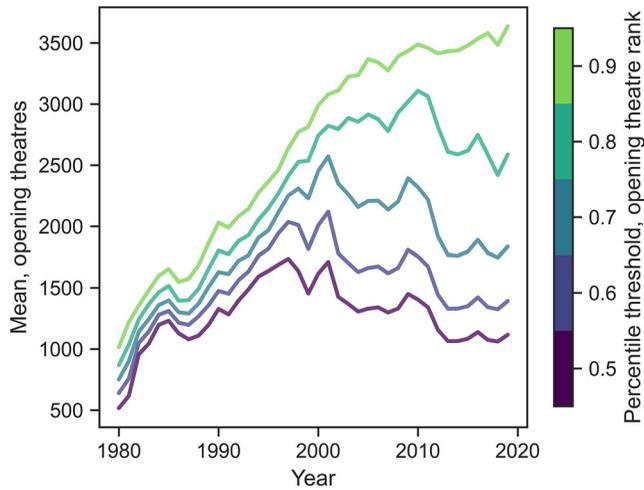


Figure 2. Opening-theater count by year, films above the 50th percentile of opening theaters, 1983–2019. Source: boxofficemojo.com.

Figure 2 plots the average number of opening theaters across various percentile thresholds. For example, at the threshold of 0.70, the figure is measuring the average number of opening theaters for films above the 70th percentile in their year of release. The figure visualizes a key historical change in the saturation booking strategy (McMahon 2019). The average number of opening theaters for films in the top decile—i.e., the major blockbusters we are all familiar with—has grown with very little slowdown. Films between the 50th and 80th percentiles have not had the same growth trajectory. Their opening-theater sizes increased in the 1990s but in the 2000s and 2010s their sizes either shrank or stagnated.

Hollywood Films, When They First Appear

The main focus of this paper is casting in Hollywood films. Creating a dataset of only Hollywood films can be done, but it requires decisions about what is included and what is not. For example, as Hollywood broadens its international reach (Hozic 2001; Miller et al. 2005), the American core of Hollywood film production is diluted with location shooting and tax incentives outside the United States (Gleich and Webb 2019; Epstein 2010). This paper took a “naive” approach in its first step to narrowing down to a set of Hollywood films. A film was removed if the United States was not listed in its IMDb information.

Hollywood, as a system of film production and distribution, is easier to define at its core than its periphery (Scott 2004). The periphery of Hollywood is populated with small firms that could still have personal or creative connections with a major studio. IMDb can blur the definition of

“Hollywood” with variances in data entry. For instance, if I wanted to count all of the “20th Century Fox” films on IMDb, a naive count would not include films that have distributors such as “20th Century Fox Argentina,” “20th Century Fox Brazil,” and “20th Century Fox India.” To narrow down from American films to Hollywood films, I developed a list of Hollywood film distributors by searching for film studios that are frequently cited in histories of Hollywood cinema (Wasko, 1982, 2003; Maltby 2003; Bordwell 2006; Balio 1993; Prince 2000). I then ran Python code to find variants of names that differ in spelling or added words. In sum, we have 183 film distributors from 1930 to 2019. All of the distributors that are included in the analysis are listed in an [Appendix](#).

There are a few cases of films being re-released between 1983 and 2019. *The Polar Express*, for instance, was originally released in 2004 and then re-released six times between 2005 and 2012. Consequently, for each film, I only take the first year of a film’s appearance. In the rare case where a film is re-released in the same year—e.g., *Dunkirk*—I take its widest release by opening theaters.

Repetitiveness/Inequality in Windows of Data

To see if the repetitiveness of casting has changed over time, a measure of repetition is built from windows of data. Ten-year or five-year windows of casting data are created first and then the film count is computed for each person. This avoids actors with long careers skewing measurements in more recent periods—e.g., the cumulative film counts of Eddie Murphy or Samuel L. Jackson would beat any newcomer to Hollywood in the 2000s.

Inequality is measured as the Gini coefficient of every window of data, where a measure of 0 represents perfect equality and 1 perfect inequality. As has been shown, the Gini coefficient is indifferent to where the inequality lies in the distribution (Clementi et al. 2019). A measure of skew will be used to help demonstrate how the shrinking of the Gini coefficient from the 1980 to 2020 window is actually misleading for part of our study of inequality.

Findings

As stated in the introduction, there are two key findings from our analysis of IMDb data. The first relates to a bigger span of time—1930–2019—while the second conclusion is focused on blockbuster cinema after 1980. It is easiest to begin with the long history of casting in Hollywood, as it gives us reasons to incorporate additional variables into our focused analysis of blockbusters from the last 40 years.

Trends in Casting from 1930 to 2019

Table 2 measures the inequality of casting in 10-year windows. For each window, the roles of every actor are tallied and grouped as one distribution. A Gini coefficient measures the inequality of each distribution, which contains a spread of 10-year “careers”—from actors with only a few roles to others with many.

Table 2 shows a historical trend of decreasing inequality. High inequality during the Hollywood studio system (~1920–1948) is consistent with the system’s use of holding desired actors to multi-picture contracts (Schatz 2010), which gave some actors the ability to accumulate dozens, even hundreds, of roles in short spans of years. Casting through agents became the new practice after the studio system was dissolved by the United States Supreme Court, in the 1948 decision of *United States v. Paramount* (Langford 2010). Casting through agents, and on a film-by-film basis, is a sector-wide change that appears to coincide with a general decrease in casting inequality.

Measuring inequality across decades shows how the modern blockbuster era from 1980 to 2019 is more equal than the previous eras of Hollywood. The Gini coefficient, however, has a key flaw in its method of measurement: it is indifferent to skew, which changes depending on where the inequality occurs in a distribution. This indifference to skew biases our interpretation of Hollywood’s transition to the contemporary era of

Table 2. Gini coefficient.

10-year Window	Gini coefficient
1930–1939	0.69
1940–1949	0.66
1950–1959	0.61
1960–1969	0.44
1970–1979	0.35
1980–1989	0.33
1990–1999	0.36
2000–2009	0.32
2010–2019	0.25

Table 3. Number of roles, by percentile.

Years	Percentile										Skew
	0.1	0.2	0.3	0.4	0.5	0.6	0.7	0.8	0.9	0.99	
1930–1939	1	1	1	1	2	3	5	11	24	70	3.85
1940–1949	1	1	1	1	2	3	6	10	20	64	4.19
1950–1959	1	1	1	1	1	2	3	5	11	35	4.30
1960–1969	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	3	5	13	4.20
1970–1979	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	3	10	3.87
1980–1989	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	3	9	3.74
1990–1999	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	3	10	4.01
2000–2009	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	3	9	4.24
2010–2019	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	7	4.89

theatrical cinema. In other words, there is more to this story than decreasing casting inequality across a very large population of actors.

The increase of skew in our measure of inequality is an effect of a large majority of actors *becoming equal in their shared poverty*. As shown in [Table 3](#) most of the working, twenty-first century actors will only secure one role in ten years. And if a twenty-first century actor successfully builds a career in the theatrical film, say, for example, by appearing in ten films in ten years, they are among Hollywood's elite few. Therefore, from 1930 to 2019, the left tails of ten-year windows of acting counts grew, yet the general *increase* in equality was in fact a *general equality of under-employment*. Elite actors of the last thirty years might not be as busy as actors in classical Hollywood, but they still maintain their privileged status in relative terms—relative to the growing group of actors with infrequent acting jobs.

Historical changes in the skew of the actor distribution effects the ability of a random actor to build a career in theatrical films. Conversely, an elite subset of actors has not disappeared with historical change—instead, it is the average size of a 10-year career that changed. Elite actors continue to successfully build their careers, and potentially their stardom, just in a different context. This context will be analyzed in this paper with opening theater data. The inclusion of opening theater data enables us to see *rising inequality* in the top levels of a theatrical film. But before we look at opening theater data, let us understand what is hidden from view in a picture of falling inequality within a general, undifferentiated population of actors. While there has been greater opportunity to be cast in *any* film after 1980, film projects are not created equal and some film distributors that welcome new actors are on the periphery of Hollywood, rather than being members of the dominant center.

An Explosion of Film Distributors

Technological developments in video and digital exhibitions have created new opportunities for film distribution. These opportunities, such as post-theatrical release and digital streaming, are exploited by everyone: “established” studios and their new competitors. This rapid influx of film distributors after 1980 can cause problems in our analysis. As shown in [Figure 3](#) the growth of film distributors (Panel A) causes the average film distributor, in both our dataset and in the entire IMDb database, to rapidly shrink in terms of how many films it distributes per year. The average film distributor in the Motion Picture Association (MPA) has decreased its annual film output in the same span of time, but the gap between its average trend and the two other series in [Figure 3B](#) has widened in the eras of video and digital distribution.

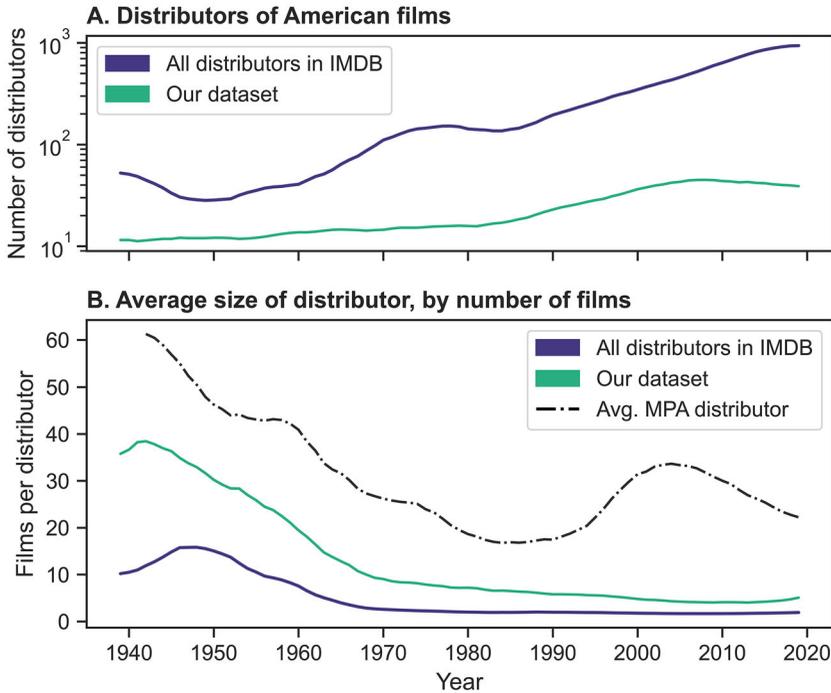


Figure 3. Number of films, absolute, and per distributor. *Note:* MPA is the most recent name of the trade association that includes Hollywood’s biggest film distributors. Previous names include Motion Picture Association of America, Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (Lewis 2002). Source: IMDb, MPA, and Finler (2003) for number of films released per year.

The inequality of casting has two relationships with the historical change in average distributor size. First, there has been considerable growth in the number of small film distributors. A small distributor can distribute a film theatrically but it likely lacks the capital to give a film blockbuster-levels of theaters on opening weekend and to promote it nation-wide.² The growing population of small film distributors affects the inequality *between* film distributors, measured by the Gini index of films released. The major distributor of the 2000s, for example, is releasing fewer films than the major distributor of the 1950s, but the gap between the major distributor of the 2000s and its average competitor has *widened*. Figure 4 demonstrates how the increase in film distributor inequality is strongly related to the decline of general casting inequality. From 1930 to 2020, general casting inequality decreased as general film distributor inequality increased.

The second relationship between casting inequality and average distributor size involves inequality *within* firms. Figure 5 demonstrates that larger distributors tend to produce higher inequality in casting than smaller distributors. The figure has split Hollywood’s history into two broad eras. The relationship between casting inequality and distributor size weakened

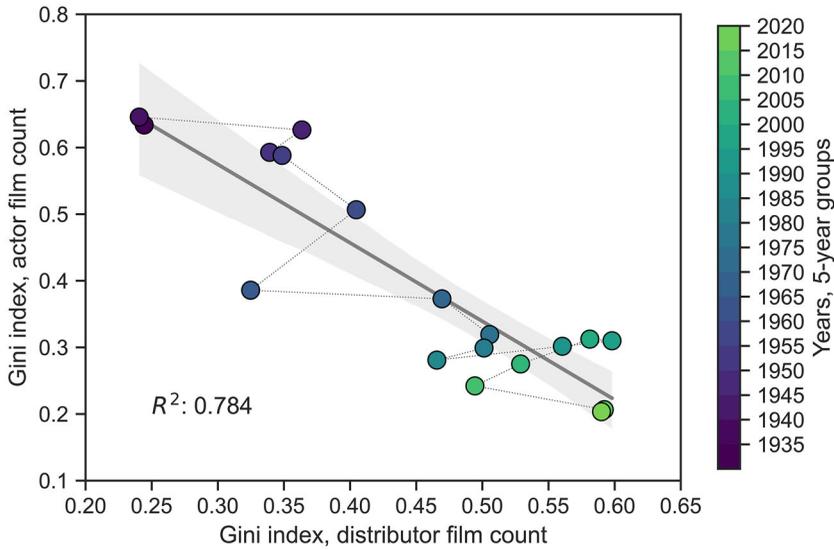


Figure 4. Inequalities within casting and film distribution. Source: IMDb.

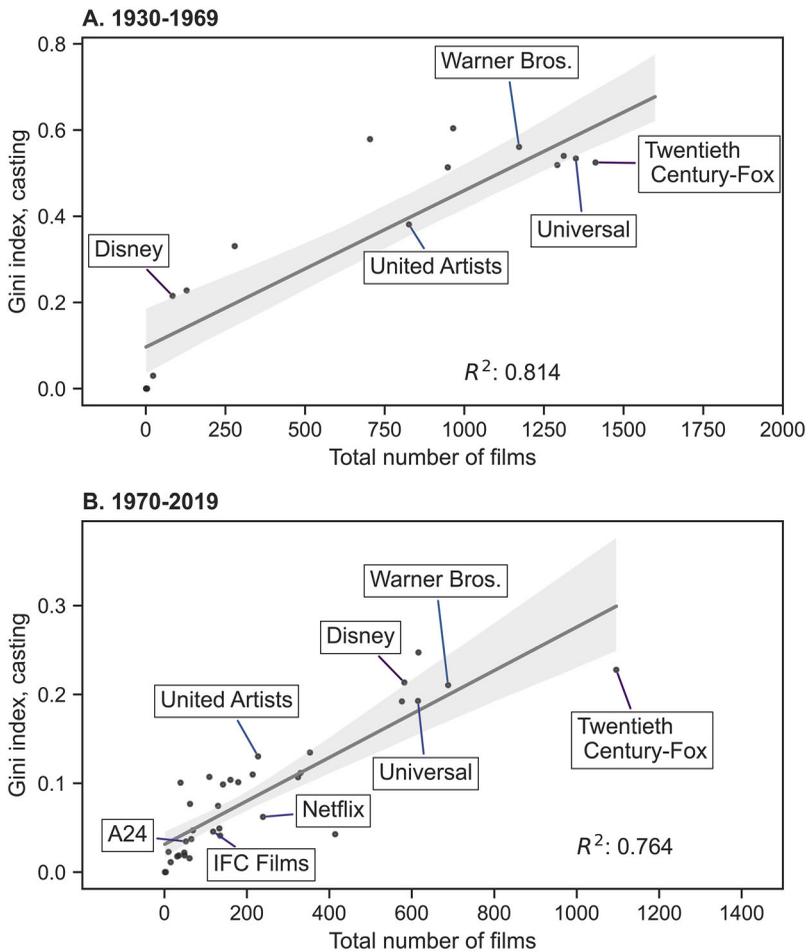


Figure 5. Casting inequality per distributor. Source: IMDb.

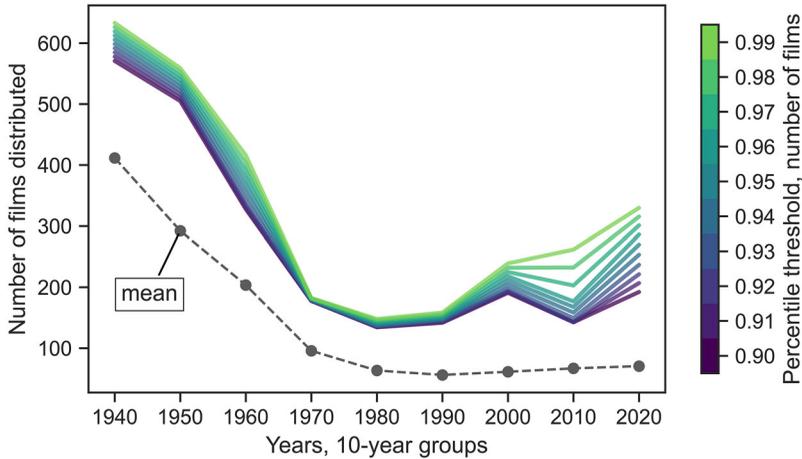


Figure 6. Number of films distributed, above the 90th percentile and the average film distributor. Source: IMDb.

slightly after 1970, but the positive relationship between film distributor size and casting inequality remained strong.

If we connect the two effects of change in average distributor size, we can hypothesize that the biggest film distributors in the contemporary era are growing *and* increasing casting inequality *within their sphere of control*. The historical decline of *general* casting inequality (shown in Table 2) is partially explained by film distributors, on average, shrinking in terms of how many films they distributed. Conversely, a large firm will still tend to produce greater casting inequality in its film projects. This tendency for a large firm to produce greater casting inequality is historically relevant because film distributors at the very top of the film-distribution pyramid have actually been *growing* in size since the early 1980s. As shown in Figure 6, the biggest film distributors and the average film distributor collectively trended downward up until the early 1980s. After 1980, the film distributors above the 90th percentile, and especially those above the 95th percentile, began to grow the number of films they distribute per year.

Casting Wide-Release Films after 1980

Data from boxofficemojo.com enable us to order films by opening theater size. Opening theaters are useful indicators of future revenue expectations (McMahon 2013, 2019). If a film is released widely, in as many theaters as possible, the film is likely distributed by a major Hollywood distributor. The distributor's studio executives also believed the film project had the qualities to cover the costs of nation-wide promotion and advertising.

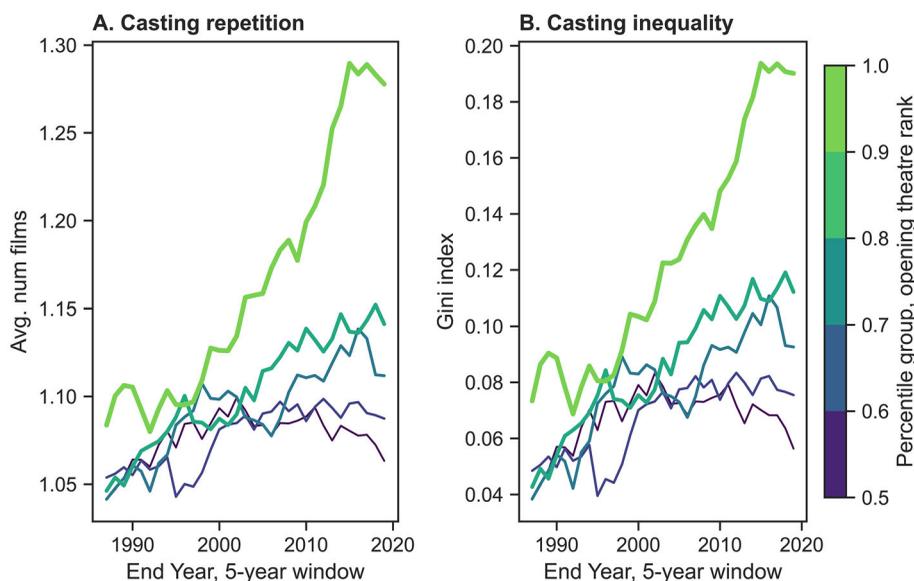


Figure 7. Repetition/inequality of casting, across percentiles of opening theaters, 1983–2019. Sources: boxoffice Mojo for opening theater sizes of individual films, 1980–2019. IMDb for casting data.

Because the general trend of declining casting inequality is actually obscuring changes to Hollywood distribution, we want to look directly at casting inequality in the widest-released films. Figure 7 shows us how, since the early 1980s, casting repetition/inequality has been rising for the top tier of films, ranked by opening theater size. The two panels also demonstrate that the repetition of casting in the biggest films is virtually the same as casting inequality. For both panels, theatrical films are filtered at selected percentile ranges of opening theater count. The 90th percentile, for instance, selects films that are above the 90th percentile of opening theaters in their respective years.

Figure 8 accounts for changes in the skew of distributions that were used to calculate the values for Figure 7. As we saw in Table 3, the low Gini values in the most recent decades obscure the levels of skew that change our perspective on the general condition of *equal underemployment* in film acting. Figure 8 repeats the process of Figure 7 but with the condition that actors need to have three or more roles in a ten-year window. In this case, a measure of rising repetition/inequality is an indication of the most elite actors making gains against actors that are elite in comparison to the general population of working actors in Hollywood.

Overall, repetition in casting decisions produced inequality within wide-released cinema because career building was a near-exclusive privilege for Hollywood's top actors. And if we recall the general trend of casting, the majority of actors in the dataset lack this privilege and can

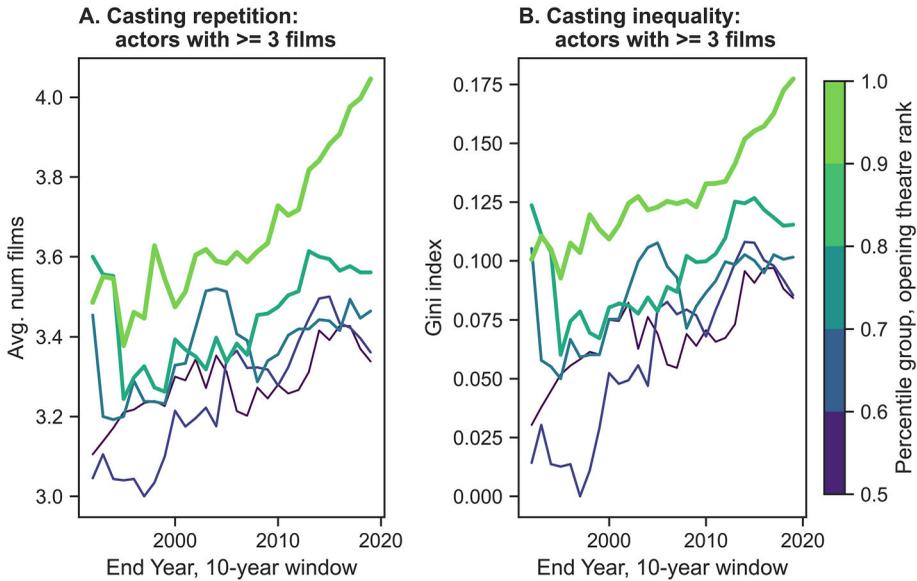


Figure 8. Repetition/inequality between actors with 3 or more roles in 10 years, 1983–2019. Sources: boxofficemojo.com for opening theater sizes of individual films, 1980–2019. IMDb for casting data.

only secure one or two roles per decade. The location of this rising inequality in the world of theatrical cinema is significant. Wide-release theatrical cinema is not just *any* subset of film distribution. It is difficult to overstate the importance that a film has lots of opening theaters to generate big revenues theatrically and to be a “tent-pole” that can lift post-theatrical sales (Christopherson 2013). In the United States, for example, the rising inequality of theatrical revenues is positively correlated with the rising inequality in the distribution of opening theaters between films (McMahon 2019). Consequently, the films given more opening theaters than others are the ones that accumulate greater annual shares of theatrical revenues.

Understanding Rising Casting Inequality

Explaining casting inequality in Hollywood depends on a larger theory about the source of star power. The belief, for example, that star power is produced by consumer demand will affect how one sees rising casting inequality. Alternative assumptions about the economics of culture will change the perspective. An approach that is critical of mainstream assumptions might replace the autonomy of individual consumers with the power of dominant firms to *create* demand from above. In this case, Hollywood firms are conceptualized as being the primary drivers of rising casting inequality.

This section argues that the capital-as-power approach, first developed by Shimshon Bichler and Jonathan Nitzan, provides a strong explanation for the evidence of casting repetition/inequality. The capital-as-power approach argues that a capitalist can accumulate faster than others through increases or decreases in the elements of capitalization, such as risk (Nitzan and Bichler 2009). The benefit of an increase or decrease depends on where a variable is located in the calculation of discounting expected earnings to present prices. Risk is in the denominator of the capitalization ritual, which means that Hollywood's push to reduce risk is also an attempt to increase its capitalization. Increasing capitalization through a reduction of risk involves, in the case of cinema, controlling the casting decisions of projects that would have the largest effect on the perceptions of Hollywood's earnings potentials, especially in relation to how dominant firms in other sectors are capitalized.

This interpretation of star power does not align with mainstream economic perspectives. A brief survey of neoclassical theories of film casting will demonstrate why the capital-as-power approach is the preferred theory for understanding star power. Neoclassical economics is undoubtedly the most popular approach for theorizing the economic value of casting decisions, but unfortunately, its analyses will produce circular arguments about the revealed preferences of a casting decision, whether on the demand side of the consumer or the supply side of the film studio.

The Neoclassical Myth of Revealed Star Power

Analyses of casting decisions in Hollywood are often influenced by neoclassical assumptions. Typically, these economic assumptions transform measurable characteristics of casting—e.g., filmography, social media followers, awards—into theoretical indicators of utility, for both the studio that hires an actor and the moviegoer that selects a film to watch. Once transformed this way, measurable characteristics typically become statistical variables in models of economic value. Modeling star power with statistical analysis, like a linear regression model, is not problematic *per se*. It is a problem when neoclassical economics needs observable variables of cinema, whether measured in prices or productive output, to be reflections of utility, which is theoretically driving economic behavior. For the variables of a linear regression to be clear reflections of utility, certain market conditions must be real. Otherwise, the model of the supply and demand of star power—or its deviation from equilibrium—falls apart from counter-factual evidence or the weight of accumulated unknowns.

In economic analyses of casting and star power, this existence of necessary market conditions is assumed more than it is empirically investigated.

We know this because most articles and studies fast-forward straight to gathering independent variables for the statistical modeling of star power's utility (Elberse 2007; Fleck and Hanssen 2016; Cattani, Ferriani, and Allison 2014). When the deeper assumptions behind statistical modeling are left unsaid, the connection between theory and evidence relies on the concept of *revealed preferences*. Coined by Paul Samuelson, revealed preferences is a neoclassical term that uses the empirical act of choosing one good from alternatives to define the utility of one's preferences. A person's preferences for buying and selling—i.e., how they subjectively define the utility of goods—cannot be measured directly; but, by assuming that utility drives behavior, an individual's choice to purchase a good will “reveal” the utility of this behavior, relative to available alternatives.

Problems with the revealed-preferences argument arise on the demand and supply sides of star power. By looking at each side in stages, we see how issues on one side will often be connected to assumptions on the other side.

Demand-Side Issues

On the demand side of consuming star power, it is difficult to determine that one is actually choosing a film because of its cast's star power. Take, as a hypothetical, a film that stars Jennifer Lawrence. If a moviegoer has personal preferences for “Jennifer Lawrence movies,” then the purchase of a ticket for our hypothetical film signals that, among alternatives in the market, this is the preferred choice. But it is also possible that moviegoers will watch the movie for entirely different reasons—e.g., “I just wanted to watch a good popcorn movie and I don't care who the lead actor is.” In this case, the moviegoer is still choosing the film from available alternatives, but it is unclear what Jennifer Lawrence's star power has to do with the choice.³

The concept of revealed preferences will come to be haunted by the mysteries of what is inside the heads and hearts of consumers. Following the logic of this economic method, we need to know the indifference curve for the demand for star power. If Jennifer Lawrence was replaced with Kristen Bell, for example, what would happen to the demand for this hypothetical film? Would demand go up or down? Or would it remain the same? Empirical data on the careers of Jennifer Lawrence and Kristen Bell could help explain the cost of substitution, *but only if it is first assumed that consumption is revealing their respective utility*. In other words, the clarity of revealed preferences depends on it being empirically true in market behavior; otherwise, there is no guarantee that each instance of consumer behavior reflects its utility.

Unfortunately for the theory of revealed preferences, its necessary conditions are absent in Hollywood cinema and in capitalism in general. Real market behavior of producing, distributing, and exhibiting cinema is not, *on all sides of the equation*, comprised of small, individual actors. Giant firms, aggressive advertising, and political ideologies are just some of the factors that make it difficult to use empirical prices on the assumption that they reveal the utility maximization of consumers in a demand-supply equilibrium.

The blind spots about the drive of consumer behavior grow because it is also possible that the length of the working day, stagnant wages, the social division of labor, and the political and environmental conditions of society cause consumers to go to watch some films instead of others or to avoid alternative hobbies altogether, like reading literature. For instance, the largest media firms benefit from what Marx discovered in 1844, namely, that the persistence of alienated labor causes us to dislike labor and treat time away from work as a sanctuary from both physical and mental effort (Marx 1988, 76).

Monopolies, aggressive advertising, and alienation—labeling these as so-called distortions of a demand-supply equilibrium will not eliminate the issue with a theory of revealed preferences. Take, for example, Barry Litman’s attempt to square the circle in *The Motion Picture Mega-Industry*. Trying hard to balance theory and historical fact, Litman seeks to recognize the existence of both consumer sovereignty and monopoly power in the history of Hollywood. On the one hand, he states:

... effective consumer demand directs supply and strong “consumer sovereignty” prevails. This is clearly the case in the motion picture marketplace where movie patrons register their dollar votes directly for the kinds of movies they prefer, and the differential box office rewards create the financial incentive for the next round of motion picture investment. (Litman 1998, 4)

This theoretical position on the sovereignty of consumers is maintained, on the other hand, with an awareness of the monopoly power that Hollywood’s major film distributors can exercise (Litman 1998, 5). To balance these two conflicting perspectives about the character of capital accumulation, Litman argues that the history of the business of Hollywood can be split into two periods: the period of organizational power and the subsequent period of the sovereign cultural consumer. For Litman, the twilight of Hollywood’s monopoly power was the late 1940s. Price fixing and “excess” profits were enjoyed up until 1948 when the United States Supreme Court decided on Hollywood’s vertical integration of film production, distribution, and exhibition in *United States v. Paramount Pictures*. After the Supreme Court’s ruling, a new day dawned:

With vertical disintegration and the end of block booking and franchising, assured access to theatres was no longer guaranteed: films would have to compete according to their intrinsic quality. This naturally opened up the market for independent producers and distributors whose products would now be judged according to merit rather than percentage. (Litman 1998, 15)

Litman's characterization of the end of the classical studio system assumes that legal regulation rinsed off anti-competitive contaminants from an economic system that is, at its core, atomistic and competitive. Similar to Olson (1982), Litman assumes that there is nothing about politics and institutional power that can change the meaning of capital; the economy, even when contaminated by external non-economic factors, is strictly defined as a rational determination of nominal prices that behave according to "real" utility. Monopolies can affect consumer demand, or they can erect arbitrarily high barriers to entry on the supply side, but their effect on the revealed preferences of consumer sovereignty does not, in this picture, change the definition of what the capitalist economy "truly" is.

In the tangled web of Hollywood's history and economic theory, Litman appears committed to the save the assumption that "consumer's choice is the decisive social phenomenon from which we should begin further analysis" (Lowenthal 1961, 12). But as Joan Robinson pointed out in her critique of neoclassical economics, the metaphysical nature of utility creates an "impregnable" circularity, *irrespective of historical condition*: the utility of a good is the quality that makes individuals want to buy it, and the fact that people buy the good shows that it has utility (Robinson 1964, 47). Thus there is no empirical method to test Litman's split of Hollywood history at the point of *United States v. Paramount*. And for a measure of star power's utility, this impregnable circularity is actually two levels deep because consumers are not directly buying star power when they purchase a movie ticket or stream a film online.

Supply-Side Issues

It is difficult to see how the cost of casting a celebrity is proportional to value added on the supply side of production. First, there is the problem of creating magnitudes of productivity, which is necessary for the inputs of acting to be compared with the same unit. The common approach is to quantify the supply side of celebrity casting with past measures of theatrical revenues or categorical variables, such as award nominations or wins. Unfortunately, this type of estimation of star-power productivity is quickly beset with problems of indirect measurement. For instance, there is the issue of assuming that past theatrical revenues are proportional to star power value—this is what needs to be explained, so it is tautological to claim that a star is anyone who has had past success. Moreover, the

inequality of theatrical distribution creates revenue differentials that, if assumed to reflect star power value, are extreme. A celebrity like Tom Cruise “generating” \$200 million in theatrical revenues is producing 250 times the value of someone generating \$800,000 in independent cinema, who herself is producing four times the value of someone producing \$20,000 per year. The theoretical implication that A-list celebrities create 1,000 times more value than an actor in a film that generated \$20,000 is not problematic simply because the multiple is large. Without a means to measure a unit of acting productivity independently of prices, we actually cannot determine whether this multiple is too big or too small. We are simply stuck assuming that the prices reflect the productivity of the inputs. Using categorical variables such as awards produces the same assumption, just in a different form.

Economic models of Hollywood’s supply-side appear able to identify and measure the contributions of star power with quantitative sophistication. For instance, Ferriani, Cattani, and Charles (2007) deconstruct film production and find that the human capital of movie stars are key determinants in the production of box-office revenues. The authors also claim that industry networks of actors and creative people also generate revenues, but this variable of Hollywood production does not have the same positive effect as movie stars on the production of artistic recognition. Elberse (2007) conceptualizes casting a blockbuster-level star as an event that can be priced. Using data from the Star Bond Index on the Hollywood Stock Exchange—a stock market simulation that treats movie stars as capital goods—Elberse observes what happens to a star’s price when news breaks of casting decisions. For example, if Disney announces that Chris Evans will reprise his role as Captain America *in reality*, and the simulated price of Chris Evans increases 5% on the HSX, we have a hypothetical model of how Evans-as-Captain-America is capitalized by Disney.

The supply-side analysis of Hollywood film production can look robust, but it too, like the demand side of the equation, is undermined by the inability to measure productivity independently of prices or other categorical representations, like Academy Award wins. Let us look at three dimensions of the issue. Each dimension orbits around the need for star power to be a “measurable unit” of human capital; otherwise, it cannot function as an input in a neoclassical production function.

First, a neoclassical model of Hollywood star power will often contain an implied state of equilibrium between supply and demand. For instance, Fleck and Hanssen (2016) produce a sweeping dataset of gender-based casting in the history of Hollywood but define gender discrimination according to market outcomes. Thus, if Hollywood is supplying star power on the free market, gender discrimination in casting is defined as an “over-supply”

of male actors—i.e., it is discrimination if one hires a male actor instead of a female actor for an “unproductive” reason.⁴ “Over-supply” is relative to an equilibrium point, but how do we know the market is in equilibrium? Neoclassical economics has theories of how prices move in and out of equilibrium in its theoretical space of demand and supply curves, but any empirical study of Hollywood casting would have nothing but an assumption of where data is positioned relative to an imagined equilibrium state. Consequently, a change in assumption about the equilibrium state changes the utility of the same actor or film—and how can we be certain we have applied the correct understanding of equilibrium?

Second, Hollywood is assumed to be a passive economic actor that, with no power at its disposal, changes its supply-side behavior in *reaction* to changes in demand—just as the individual rational consumer changes behavior in reaction to changes in supply. But if demand and supply do not maintain independence from each other, even this hypothetical dance of utility maximization stops. According to Sweezy (1939), a large firm under conditions of oligopoly can have a direct impact on the demand side of the equation. This impact is observable in how large firms “react” to decreases in demand much differently from the ways they react to increases in demand. An oligopoly creates disincentives for any large firm in the group to lower prices in periods of declining demand, as a decrease in price will not yield the expected increase in consumer demand and it will not pressure other firms to rush into downward competition.

Sweezy’s critique makes the untangling of the supply of star power from the power of Hollywood’s oligopoly impossible. Past theatrical revenues are themselves products of firms setting prices under conditions of oligopoly. Thus, consumers could actually be becoming tired of seeing the same actors again and again, but the relationship between negative changes in consumer behavior and revenue data is complicated by the ability of firms to hold to “inflated-above-utility” prices, which help produce the revenue data that is being used to estimate consumer demand in economic models. Moreover, efforts to increase marginal productivity are not obvious when the costs of an oligopoly can be spent on unproductive exercises of power over smaller firms. For example, Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) argued that corporate advertising in the age of mass culture is a process of negation. What was once about “orienting the buyer” in a competitive market is now a “blocking device” for firms that can out-spend much smaller firms.

Third, the results of a regression model, as even some of the authors acknowledge (Ferriani, Cattani, and Charles 2007), risks misrepresenting Hollywood filmmaking as a mechanical production function of inputs and outputs, whereby any one independent variable can increase or decrease as

everything else stays the same. This risk is inherent to a neoclassical production function, as it requires that the marginal product of an input like star power is defined by its own effect on the total output. Unfortunately, the method has to assume that the capitalized value of star power is somehow free from the theoretical issue of *reswitching*, which was Piero Sraffa's knockout-punch to neoclassical economics in the Cambridge controversy.⁵ Sraffa demonstrated that the simple logic of switching production process at a clear point when labor-intensive production was more profitable than capital-intensive production, or vice versa, is undermined by the possibility of re-switching—e.g., choosing the production process A instead of B, and then re-switching back to B from A. This possibility is there because, problematically, the same production process can be either more capital-intensive or labor-intensive than another process. Reswitching does not bother the capitalist who thinks only in prices and ownership (Veblen 2006a), but it does bother any theory that claims that prices of production are proportional to the productivities of its definable inputs. The productivity of capital goods, whether they be lights, cameras, or human capital—which is a common method to label creativity, ingenuity, and celebrity as capital—cannot fluctuate such that the capital intensity of a physical process is ambiguous. Without a fixed index of capital intensity, it is impossible to build a supply curve with a production function (Nitzan and Bichler 2009, 80). In our case, the measure of star power's productivity is impossible because of Sraffa's demonstration. Star power must have a fixed intensity in a neoclassical model, as the productivity of star power needs to be the *cause* of the distribution of income in Hollywood acting.

Star Power as Controlled Risk Reduction

Other writers have considered how famous movie stars, with their perceived ability to draw consumers to some movies rather than others, are employed to reduce financial risk (Elberse 2007; Hadida 2010; Ravid 1999). However, these analyses often assume that risk mitigation is a *passive* action of an individual firm, which is too small to change the circumstances of risk. In such a presentation, the star system and blockbuster cinema can only mitigate or hedge the extraneous risk of consumer unpredictability, which is seemingly a permanent fixture of the greater business environment (Pokorny and Sedgwick 2012; De Vany 2004).

Consumer unpredictability, on its own, is certainly a relevant factor to a film business. However, confusions about risk grow because neoclassical approaches, particularly the competitive branch of neoclassical economics, elevate consumer sovereignty and ignore the role of power in Hollywood's business strategies. For instance, to suggest that, in the film business,

economic actors are in a state of perfect competition and too small to change the historical circumstances of risk (De Vany 2004, 270), the sizes of the dominant firms in Hollywood have to be ignored. One also has to ignore questions about the abilities of dominant firms to affect the ideologies of its consumers. If Hollywood has ways to manipulate consumer attention, it is hardly straightforward to argue that the sovereign consumer is an unalterable arbiter, who always possesses the “economic” freedom to be fickle when the next film is released (Garvin 1981, 4).

The capital-as-power approach helps us rethink star power as risk reduction. The approach follows conventional finance and understands that risk is an important variable to discounting expected earnings; but the capital-as-power approach is also critical of our deepest assumptions of what capitalization and economic value represent in an empirical world populated, from around 1900 onwards, by trusts, trade associations, giant corporations, conglomerates, active governments, and other social institutions. On the timeline of intellectual history, the capital-as-power approach is an attempt to be a breaking point. Neoclassical economics and Marxism have, respectively, constructed large theoretical edifices to keep “real” magnitudes of productivity at the core of capital accumulation. This commitment to magnitudes of productivity, measured either as utility or socially necessary abstract labor time, must explain how prices in the historical development of capitalism are, in fact, reflections of productive values. Unfortunately, this history is infused with power processes, and the commitment to “real” value requires that economic production be analytically distinguishable from nonproductive social processes (such as distortions from politics) or fictitious capital (prices with no “real” values underneath).

Bichler and Nitzan argue that there is a fundamental reason why mainstream economics keeps stumbling to explain capital accumulation: instead of being an index of productivity, capital is an index of power. The quantities of capital are a symbolic representation of a power struggle: “a conflict between dominant capital groups, acting against opposition, to shape and restructure the course of social reproduction at large. In this struggle, what gets accumulated is not productivity as such, but the ability to subjugate creativity to power” (Nitzan and Bichler 2009, 218). Bichler and Nitzan readily acknowledge that such claims about capital cannot be made trivially. So much of our common language about capital accumulation implies that the true foundation of magnitudes of capital lies in the realm of productivity. However, Bichler and Nitzan conceptualize capital *as* power with the help of Veblen (2004, 2006b), who was deeply skeptical that the quantities of capital could ever be measures of industrial production:

If capital and capital goods were indeed the same “thing,” [Veblen] asked, how could capital move from one industry to another, while capital goods, the “abiding entity”

of capital, remained locked in their original position? Similarly, how could a business crisis diminish the value of capital when, as a material productive substance, the underlying capital goods remained unaltered? Or how could existing capital be denominated in terms of its productivity, when technological progress seemed to destroy its pecuniary value? (Nitzan and Bichler 2009, 231)

According to Bichler and Nitzan, Veblen's distinction between business and industry carries over into the quantitative dimension of capital. In other words, the *strategic sabotage* of industry by business, according to Bichler and Nitzan, is the institutional backbone of capitalization. In this sense, capitalists are looking to the overall state of society to judge how expected earnings from the control of industry will eventually translate into actual earnings, what risk premium they should factor in, and what should be considered the normal rate of return.

The capital-as-power approach is, therefore, open to the investigation of how Hollywood is seeking to reduce the risk of the film business with the power derived from owning and tightly controlling key pieces of cinema. Capitalist power may never be able to make the business of culture risk-free, but we put up barriers to our own analysis if we assume that a high level of risk in Hollywood is inherent to its economics.

In the case of star power, its risk involves the broader uncertainties that come from building pyramids of star power through repetitive casting. The evidence above has demonstrated that pyramids of casting repetition/inequality were built within wide-release film distribution, a key subset of contemporary cinema. But is this a component of a broader project of risk reduction? Hollywood's dominant firms have embraced risk reduction as an effective alternative to rises in expected earnings, which have stagnated since the early 1990s (McMahon 2015, 2019, 2022). Casting repetition/inequality is not the only effect of Hollywood's risk reduction; and star power is not simply a financial phenomenon of the last forty years. However, the historical pattern of rising star power through repetition/inequality correlates with considerable increases in the predictability of theatrical cinema.⁶ For example, [Figure 9](#) presents the relationship between theatrical predictability and casting inequality above the 90th percentile of opening theaters. To measure theatrical predictability, I take the Spearman's correlation between opening theater rank and theatrical gross rank. This correlation of ranks is a proxy of forward-looking risk, as firms must decide on the distribution of opening theaters with only *expectations* of how a stream of theatrical revenues will actualize opening day and onward (McMahon 2013). Thus, the risk of a bad prediction—i.e., a low Spearman r —is a product of the largest theatrical releases only generating low-ranking levels of revenues (McMahon 2019).

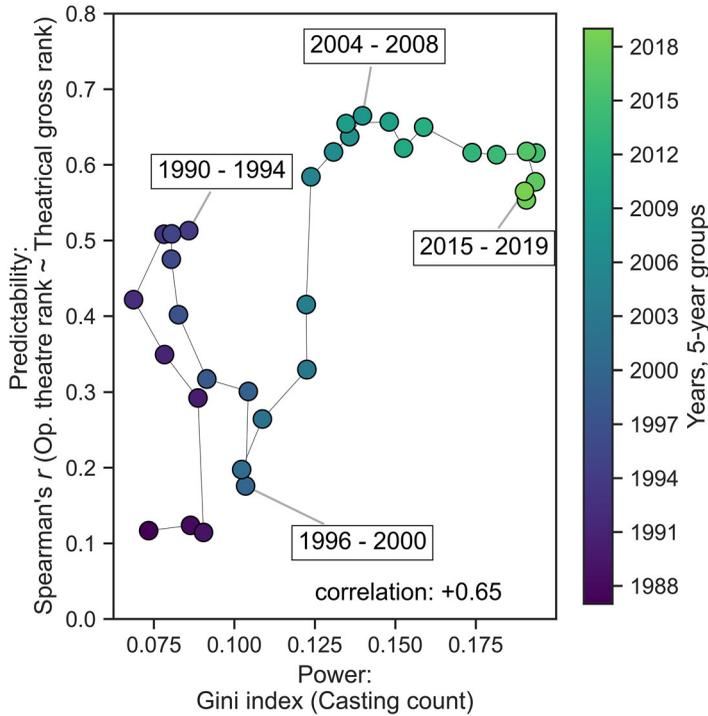


Figure 9. Theatrical predictability versus casting inequality above the 90th percentile of opening theaters, 5-year groups. Sources: boxofficemojo.com for US theatrical revenue data. IMDb for casting data.

Figure 9 tells the story of political and economic change in Hollywood. The predictability of the very largest theatrical releases in Hollywood had ups and downs from the 1980s to the early-2000s, yet the relationship between predictability and casting inequality strengthened in the twenty-first century. As casting inequality continued to rise after 2000, so did the Spearman correlation between opening theater rank and theatrical gross rank.

For the capital-as-power approach, its central measure of capital accumulation is differential. Differential accumulation, as defined by Bichler and Nitzan, is rooted in capitalization. More specifically, it is rooted in the relative differences between capitalized properties. There is an implicit differential measure between any two magnitudes of capitalization. For example, on December 2, 2020, Apple’s market capitalization (\$2.093 trillion) was 1.7 times larger than Google’s (\$1.236 trillion), and Google’s was 4.4 times larger than Disney’s (\$278.1 billion). Taken at a single point in time, these multiples are static measures of differential capitalization. Differential accumulation measures how differential capitalization changes over time. Treated as a dynamic process of redistribution, firms accumulate differentially when their capitalization rises faster than that of others, and “their distributive share” becomes “bigger and bigger” (Nitzan 2001, 230). Risk is an

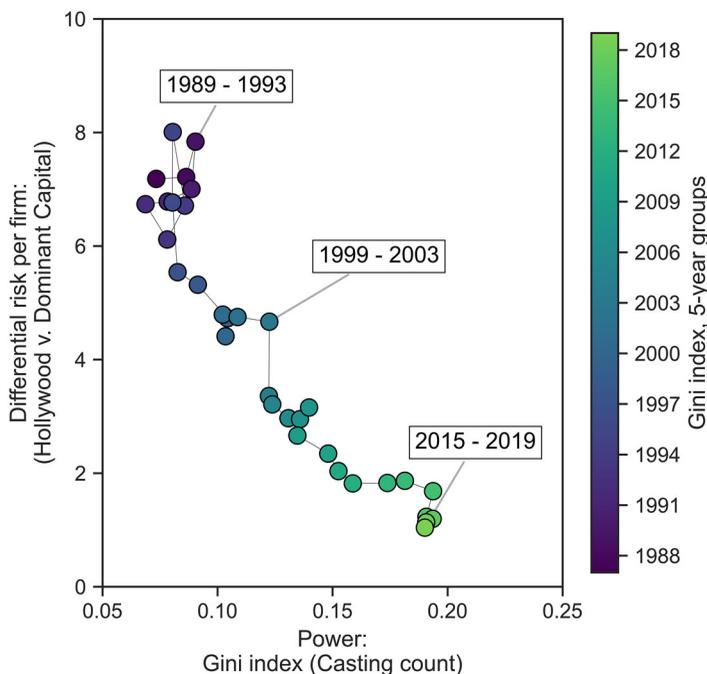


Figure 10. Theatrical predictability versus casting inequality above the 90th percentile of opening theaters, 5-year groups. *Note:* Risk is calculated as a 15-year rolling standard deviation of the annual percent change of operating income per firm. In this figure, operating income per firm was first smoothed as a 5-year rolling average. Sources: IMDb for casting data. Compustat through WRDS for firm data of Dominant Capital and for operating income of Columbia, Disney, Paramount, Twentieth Century-Fox, Universal and Warner Bros., 1950–1992. Annual reports of Disney, News Corp, Viacom, Sony, Time Warner (Management’s Discussion of Business Operations for information on their filmed entertainment interests) for operating income, 1993–2019.

element of capitalization, so it does not tell the whole story of Hollywood’s capitalist character. However, the reduction of risk, both absolutely and differentially, has been Hollywood’s key strategy since the early 1980s. In the conglomerate, blockbuster era of Hollywood, its average differential earnings have stagnated, and are insufficient to explain Hollywood’s contemporaneous rise of differential capitalization.⁷ A reduction of risk is Hollywood’s primary strategy for differentially accumulating.

Figure 10 helps us understand that increasing casting repetition/inequality is contemporaneous with a larger project of reducing differential risk. The figure compares 5-year windows of casting inequality to rolling windows of differential risk. The y-axis measures risk with a series of steps. The measure first takes the percent change of a 5-year smoothed series of operating income per firm of Hollywood’s largest film distributors (Columbia, Disney, Paramount, Twentieth Century-Fox, Universal, and Warner Bros.). A rolling 15-year window then calculates the standard deviation of the percent change. The product is a series of points that, each

year, represents the Hollywood's volatility of earnings per firm.⁸ To calculate differential risk, the risk per firm of Hollywood is divided by the risk per firm of "Dominant Capital." Dominant capital is a 500-firm proxy of the S&P 500. For each year, Dominant Capital includes the top 500 firms on the Compustat database, sorted by the market capitalization of all firms that are listed, but not necessarily incorporated, in the United States. As we can see, the increase in casting repetition/inequality within the widest-released films per year is contemporaneous with Hollywood's differential decrease in risk. In fact, controlled repetition of casting is very likely a key method for Hollywood's dominant firms to control the social creativity of cinema *from above*.

Conclusion

A successful wide-release can be a payday for many people (Leaver 2010), including the actors who, in addition to their salary, are sometimes promised a percentage of the gross revenues. Wide release cinema is also, in the present period of blockbuster cinema, one of the best places for an actor to build star power. This article gathered IMDb data to investigate how star power is rooted in capitalist power, whereby casting repetition equals the production of casting inequality in Hollywood. This investigation is useful because of how easy it is to think that the casting of movie stars is a permanent characteristic of Hollywood cinema. At a fundamental level, Hollywood has never been without its movie stars. Historically, however, the data of this paper demonstrates that casting repetition/inequality can be viewed at two different zoom levels. When zoomed out, there has been a historical decline in casting repetition/inequality. Yet this decline of inequality is partially misleading, as the equality that was gained is undesirable: an equality of underemployment in theatrical cinema. When zoomed in, we look at the subset of wide-released films, those that are released theatrically and with thousands of opening theaters. Here, in this subset of films, we see a trend of rising repetition/inequality. Elite actors are being cast repeatedly for wide-release films and this repetition is exclusionary—few gain this privilege.

This paper also theorized rising casting repetition/inequality as a means for Hollywood to reduce risk. This reduction of risk was conceptualized with the capital-as-power approach. This approach offers a critical alternative to neoclassical models of casting and Hollywood economics, more generally.

Looking to future research opportunities, a key task will be to investigate the inner-workings of Hollywood casting. So far, we have evidence of the risk-reducing effects of inequality. This was a crucial step because, as Fix

(2019, 2021) demonstrates in his research, the inequality of corporate hierarchies is a much better explanation of income distribution than productivity, assuming that the latter can be measured in the first place. Yet casting inequality also has many details within its hierarchy, as film casting comes together through the day-to-day behaviors of executives, agents, casting directors, actors, and fans. Focus on these details can complement a political-economic analysis of inequality by finding places in the Hollywood film industry that effectively reinforce acting inequality and undermine corporate or personal goals to promote diversity in cinema. For instance, the interviews of Simon (2019) with Hollywood talent agents revealed the degree to which the job of talent representation advantaged white men; many of the prominent positions in talent agencies were held by white men, and their shared beliefs that “good” masculine traits were necessary for strong job performance created exclusive networks of patrimonial mentoring, affected who was promoted to the talent agent, and enabled talent agents to openly complain about the so-called “emotional instabilities” of their female clients.

This paper also produces future research opportunities to deepen empirical research on diversity and inclusion in film casting. For example, why do we see film distributors in Figure 5 increase the actor inequalities of their films as they grow in the number of films produced? Figure 5 does not immediately appear to be about issues of diversity and representation in Hollywood, but the size of the firm might affect how women and people of color are incorporated into established practices of repetitive casting. In other words, as we see historical changes in the overall share of diversity (Hunt and Ramón 2022), different firms might, by virtue of their power in Hollywood, define success in policies of diversity and representation differently.

Overall, looking at film casting through a lens of power will support critical research, as this view of casting stands in opposition to the way Hollywood can use its “economics” to rationalize its so-called inability to widen the boundaries of its creativity. For example, Ridley Scott’s *Exodus: Gods and Kings* is a telling example of a story of power being transformed into a story of efficiency and consumer demand. In this case, the creative boundaries concern Hollywood’s tendency to reserve roles for its biggest stars, even when a big star appears unfit for the role in question. Much of the prerelease journalism on *Exodus* concerned the contentious decision to cast white Hollywood actors in the story of Moses opposing the Pharaoh and leading the Israelites out of Ancient Egypt (Child 2014; Palmer 2014; Anonymous 2014). Christian Bale, who was cast to play Moses, became a *de facto* spokesperson for the film and attempted to diffuse some of the criticism. Bale’s defense of the casting decisions inadvertently reveals how

these decisions were not made for lack of historically available alternatives: “I don’t think fingers should be pointed, but we should all look at ourselves and say, ‘Are we supporting wonderful actors in films by North African and Middle Eastern filmmakers and actors because there are some fantastic actors out there’” (Anonymous 2014). The obvious rationale for not casting fantastic North African or Middle Eastern actors instead of Bale and other white Hollywood actors is rooted in the financial goals of Hollywood—even Bale acknowledged this. However, such a rationale does not only downplay the racist element of this story, it actually obscures how Hollywood’s *modus operandi* transforms a controversial choice about casting into a so-called “rational” business decision. For instance, when Scott defended his film with the argument that he had to assemble the “best possible cast ... on a budget of this scale [\$140 million],” he admitted to Hollywood’s interest in profit but glossed over the main reason why narrow-minded casting decisions are the so-called “best” business strategies. The issue of repetitive or narrow casting in Hollywood is more institutional than it is about this or that individual; the “best possible casts” of a Hollywood blockbuster can be talented but they are also gilded through inequality; and a big effect of repeatedly casting someone like Bale is risk reduction for Hollywood’s dominant firms.

Notes

1. For a more detailed study of how Hollywood sets limits to creative decisions like casting, see (McMahon 2022).
2. For data on rising print and advertising costs in mainstream filmmaking, see Vogel (2020).
3. Although I am using my own hypothetical example, this point is inspired by Bichler and Nitzan’s example of “Mexican flowers” as their example (Nitzan and Bichler 2009, 116).
4. This argument is coupled with the idea that systemic discrimination in Hollywood casting is impossible because consumers, individually free and rationally maximizing, are deciding to pay for Hollywood films on the market. In other words, market exchange is the ultimate judge of discrimination; anything more pro-active, like political regulation, disturbs the utility of consumer preferences: “From a policy perspective, if the gender and age mix of actors is driven by consumer demand, the nature of the industry (i.e., unrestricted entry and exit) would make it difficult (or very costly) to effect a substantial change through regulation or institutional redesign—because the opportunity to capture rents by producing films the public wants to see are unlikely to go unexploited ...” (Fleck and Hanssen 2016, 47).
5. This summary of the reswitching problem draws from (Nitzan and Bichler 2009; Hunt 2002).
6. This argument about considerable increases in the predictability of theatrical cinema stands in opposition to the more common argument that the future predictions of theatrical cinema are uncertain, sometimes to the point where “Nobody knows

- anything.” For critiques of common arguments about the high risk of Hollywood cinema, see (McMahon 2013, McMahon 2019).
7. For a detailed breakdown of the data, methods and limits of comparing the differential capitalization of Hollywood to its differential earnings, see McMahon (2019).
 8. I call this group of firms “Major Filmed Entertainment” in other writings (McMahon 2013, 2015, 2019, 2022).

ORCID

James McMahon  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9513-7824>

Works Cited

- Anonymous. 2014. “Christian Bale and Ridley Scott Defend Exodus Casting at Film’s New York Premiere.” *CBC News*. <http://www.cbc.ca/1.2864090>.
- Balio, Tino. 1993. *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930–1939. History of the American Cinema 5*. New York, NY: C. Scribner.
- Bordwell, David. 2006. *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Cattani, Gino, Simone Ferriani, and Paul D. Allison. 2014. “Insiders, Outsiders, and the Struggle for Consecration in Cultural Fields: A Core-Periphery Perspective.” *American Sociological Review* 79 (2): 258–281. doi:10.1177/0003122414520960
- Child, Ben. 2014. “Christian Bale Defends Ridley Scott over Exodus ‘Whitewashing’.” *The Guardian*. <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/dec/09/christian-bale-defends-ridley-scott-exodus-whitewashing>.
- Christopherson, Susan. 2013. “Hollywood in Decline? US Film and Television Producers beyond the Era of Fiscal Crisis.” *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society* 6 (1): 141–157. doi:10.1093/cjres/rss024
- Clementi, Fabio, Mauro Gallegati, Lisa Gianmoena, Simone Landini, and Joseph E. Stiglitz. 2019. “Mis-Measurement of Inequality: A Critical Reflection and New Insights.” *Journal of Economic Interaction and Coordination* 14 (4): 891–921. doi:10.1007/s11403-019-00257-2
- De Vany, Arthur S. 2004. *Hollywood Economics: How Extreme Uncertainty Shapes the Film Industry*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Elberse, Anita. 2007. “The Power of Stars: Do Star Actors Drive the Success of Movies?” *Journal of Marketing* 71 (4): 102–120. doi:10.1509/jmkg.71.4.102
- Epstein, Edward Jay. 2010. *The Hollywood Economist: The Hidden Financial Reality behind the Movies*. Brooklyn, NY: Melville House.
- Erigha, Maryann. 2019. *The Hollywood Jim Crow: The Racial Politics of the Movie Industry*. NYU Press.
- Ferriani, Simone, Gino Cattani, and Baden-Fuller Charles. 2007. *Innovation, Industrial Dynamics and Structural Transformation: Schumpeterian Legacies*. Edited by Uwe Cantner and Franco Malerba, 209–237. Berlin; Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag.
- Finler, Joel. 2003. *The Hollywood Story*. New York, NY: Wallflower Press.
- Fix, Blair. 2019. “Personal Income and Hierarchical Power.” *Journal of Economic Issues* 53 (4): 928–945. doi:10.1080/00213624.2019.1657746
- Fix, Blair. 2021. “How the Rich Are Different: Hierarchical Power as the Basis of Income Size and Class.” *Journal of Computational Social Science* 4 (2): 403–454. doi:10.1007/s42001-020-00081-w

- Fleck, Robert K., and F. Andrew Hanssen. 2016. "Persistence and Change in Age-Specific Gender Gaps: Hollywood Actors from the Silent Era Onward." *International Review of Law and Economics* 48: 36–49. doi:10.1016/j.irle.2016.08.002
- Garvin, David A. 1981. "Blockbusters: The Economics of Mass Entertainment." *Journal of Cultural Economics* 5 (1): 1–20. doi:10.1007/BF00189203
- Gleich, Joshua, and Lawrence Webb, eds. 2019. *Hollywood on Location*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press. doi:10.36019/9780813586281
- Hadida, Allegre L. 2010. "Commercial Success and Artistic Recognition of Motion Picture Projects." *Journal of Cultural Economics* 34 (1): 45–80. doi:10.1007/s10824-009-9109-z
- Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor Adorno. 2002. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Hozic, Aida A. 2001. *Hollywood: Space, Power, and Fantasy in the American Economy*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Hunt, D., and A.-C. Ramón. 2022. *Hollywood Diversity Report 2022: A New Post-Pandemic Normal? Part 1: Film* (Technical Report). UCLA College Social Sciences.
- Hunt, E. K. 2002. *History of Economic Thought: A Critical Perspective*. 2nd ed. M. E. Sharpe.
- Langford, Barry. 2010. *Post-Classical Hollywood: Film Industry, Style and Ideology since 1945*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Leaver, Adam. 2010. "A Different Take: Hollywood's Unresolved Business Model." *Review of International Political Economy* 17 (3): 454–480. doi:10.1080/09692290903260249
- Lewis, Jon. 2002. *Hollywood v. Hard Core: How the Struggle over Censorship Saved the Modern Film Industry*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Litman, Barry Russell. 1998. *The Motion Picture Mega-Industry*. Boston, MA: Allyn; Bacon.
- Lowenthal, Leo. 1961. "Popular Culture in Perspective." In *Literature, Popular Culture, and Society*, 1–13. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- Maltby, Richard. 2003. *Hollywood Cinema*. 2nd ed. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Marx, Karl. 1988. "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844." In *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and the Communist Manifesto*, translated by Martin Milligan, 13–170. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.
- McMahon, James. 2013. "The Rise of a Confident Hollywood: Risk and the Capitalization of Cinema." *Review of Capital as Power* 1 (1): 23–40.
- McMahon, James. 2015. "Risk and Capitalist Power: Conceptual Tools to Study the Political Economy of Hollywood." *The Political Economy of Communication* 3 (2): 28–54.
- McMahon, James. 2019. "Is Hollywood a Risky Business? A Political Economic Analysis of Risk and Creativity." *New Political Economy* 24 (4): 487–509. doi:10.1080/13563467.2018.1460338
- McMahon, James. 2022. *The Political Economy of Hollywood: Capitalist Power and Cultural Production*. Routledge.
- Miller, Toby, Nitin Govil, John McMurria, Richard Maxwell, and Ting Wang. 2005. *Global Hollywood 2*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Nitzan, Jonathan. 2001. "Regimes of Differential Accumulation: Mergers, Stagflation and the Logic of Globalization." *Review of International Political Economy* 8 (2): 226–274. doi:10.1080/09692290010033385
- Nitzan, Jonathan, and Shimshon Bichler. 2009. *Capital as Power: A Study of Order and Creorder*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Olson, Mancur. 1982. *The Rise and Decline of Nations: Economic Growth, Stagflation, and Social Rigidities*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

- Palmer, Brian. 2014. “How White Were Ancient Egyptians? Not as White as Christian Bale.” *Slate*, December. http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/explainer/2014/12/ridley_scott_s_exodus_were_ancient_egyptians_white_black_or_brown.html.
- Pokorny, Michael, and John Sedgwick. 2012. “The Financial and Economic Risks of Film Production.” In *Film and Risk*, edited by Mette Hjort, 181–196. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press.
- Prince, Stephen. 2000. *A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood under the Electronic Rainbow, 1980–1989. History of the American Cinema 10*. New York, NY: C. Scribner.
- Ravid, S. Abraham. 1999. “Information, Blockbusters, and Stars: A Study of the Film Industry.” *The Journal of Business* 72 (4): 463–492. doi:10.1086/209624
- Robinson, Joan. 1964. *Economic Philosophy*. Middlesex: Penguin Books.
- Schatz, Thomas. 2010. *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Scott, Allen J. 2004. “Hollywood and the World: The Geography of Motion-Picture Distribution and Marketing.” *Review of International Political Economy* 11 (1): 33–61. doi:10.1080/0969229042000179758
- Simon, S. J. 2019. “Hollywood Power Brokers: Gender and Racial Inequality in Talent Agencies.” *Gender, Work & Organization* 26 (9): 1340–1356. doi:10.1111/gwao.12365
- Sweezy, Paul M. 1939. “Demand under Conditions of Oligopoly.” *Journal of Political Economy* 47 (4): 568–573. doi:10.1086/255420
- Veblen, Thorstein. 2004. *Absentee Ownership: Business Enterprise in Recent Times: The Case of America*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Veblen, Thorstein. 2006a. “On the Nature of Capital: I. The Productivity of Capital Goods.” In *The Place of Science in Modern Civilization: And Other Essays*, 324–351. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Veblen, Thorstein. 2006b. *The Theory of Business Enterprise*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Vogel, Harold L. 2020. *Entertainment Industry Economics: A Guide for Financial Analysis*. 10th ed. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Wasko, Janet. 1982. *Movies and Money: Financing the American Film Industry*. Norwood, NJ: ABLEX Pub Corp.
- Wasko, Janet. 2003. *How Hollywood Works*. London: SAGE.
- Waterman, David. 2005. *Hollywood’s Road to Riches*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wyatt, Justin. 1994. *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Yuen, Nancy Wang. 2016. *Reel Inequality: Hollywood Actors and Racism*. Rutgers University Press. doi:10.36019/9780813586328

Appendix

To analyze Hollywood cinema with a set of film distributors, a list of distributors was created to account for variances in spelling or alternative names. The following is an alphabetically sorted array of distributors used to filter films from IMDb, via Python:

```
[“20th Century Fox”, “20th Century Fox Argentina”, “20th Century Fox Brazil”,
“20th Century Fox Entertainment”, “20th Century Fox Home Entertainment”, “20th
Century Fox India”, “20th Century Fox International”, “20th Century Fox
```

International Classics”, “20th Century Fox Studios”, “21st Century Distribution”, “21st Century Film Corporation”, “21st Century Films”, “21st Century Pictures”, “21st Century Studios”, “A24”, “Alliance”, “Alliance Atlantis Communications”, “Alliance Atlantis Home Video”, “Alliance Atlantis Motion Picture Distribution”, “Alliance Atlantis Video”, “Allied Artists Pictures”, “Amazon”, “Amazon Instant Video”, “Amazon Prime Video”, “Amazon Studios”, “Amazon.com”, “American International Pictures (AIP)”, “Artisan Entertainment”, “Buena Vista Distribution Company”, “Buena Vista Film Distribution Company”, “Buena Vista Home Entertainment”, “Buena Vista Home Video”, “Buena Vista International”, “Buena Vista International (Australia)”, “Buena Vista International Finland”, “Buena Vista International Mexico”, “Buena Vista Pictures”, “Buena Vista Pictures Distribution”, “Cannon Film Distributors”, “Columbia Pictures”, “Columbia Pictures Corporation”, “Columbia Pictures Home Entertainment”, “Columbia Pictures Home Video”, “Columbia Pictures Mexico”, “Columbia Pictures of Canada”, “Columbia TriStar”, “Columbia TriStar Domestic Television”, “Columbia TriStar Egmont Film Distributors”, “Columbia TriStar Film”, “Columbia TriStar Film Distributors”, “Columbia TriStar Film Distributors International”, “Columbia TriStar Films”, “Columbia TriStar Films AB”, “Columbia TriStar Films Pty. Ltd.”, “Columbia TriStar Films de Argentina”, “Columbia TriStar Films de Espana”, “Columbia TriStar Home Entertainment”, “Columbia TriStar Home Video”, “Columbia TriStar Hoyts Home Video”, “Columbia TriStar Nordisk Film Distributors”, “Columbia TriStar Warner Filmes de Portugal”, “Dimension Films”, “Dimension Pictures”, “DreamWorks”, “DreamWorks Animation”, “DreamWorks Distribution”, “Dreamworks Distribution LLC”, “Embassy Pictures”, “Entertainment One”, “Focus Features”, “Focus Features International”, “Fox Film Company”, “Fox Film Corporation”, “Fox Films”, “Fox Searchlight Pictures”, “IFC Films”, “Lions Gate Entertainment”, “Lions Gate Films”, “Lions Gate Films Home Entertainment”, “Lions Gate International”, “Lions Gate Studios”, “Lionsgate”, “Lionsgate Home Entertainment”, “MGM Home Entertainment”, “MGM Networks Latin America”, “MGM-EMI”, “MGM/UA Classics”, “MGM/UA Communications Co.”, “MGM/UA Distribution Company”, “MGM/UA Entertainment Company”, “MGM/UA Home Video”, “Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer”, “Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM)”, “Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Distributing Corporation (MGM)”, “Miramax”, “Monogram Pictures”, “Netflix”, “New Line Cinema”, “Orion Pictures”, “Paramount British Pictures”, “Paramount Classics”, “Paramount Films”, “Paramount Films of India”, “Paramount Home Entertainment”, “Paramount Home Media Distribution”, “Paramount Home Video”, “Paramount Italiana”, “Paramount Network”, “Paramount Pictures”, “Paramount Pictures Corporation”, “Paramount Pictures Digital Entertainment”, “Paramount Pictures Germany”, “Paramount Pictures International”, “Paramount Television”, “Paramount Vantage”, “Paramount-Film”, “Paramount-Ufa-Metro-Verleihbetriebe GmbH (Parufamet)”, “RKO Path e Pictures”, “RKO Pictures”, “RKO Radio Pictures”, “RKO Radio Pictures S.A.”, “RKOPathe Distributing Corp.”, “Republic Pictures”, “Republic Pictures (I)”, “Republic Pictures (II)”, “Republic Pictures Corporation”, “Republic Pictures Corporation (I)”, “Samuel Goldwyn”, “Samuel Goldwyn Company”, “Samuel Goldwyn Films”, “Screen Gems”, “Roadshow Films”, “Sony”, “Sony BMG Music Entertainment”, “Sony Columbia Records”, “Sony Digital Entertainment”, “Sony Music”, “Sony Music Entertainment”, “Sony Music Media”, “Sony Pictures Classics”, “Sony Pictures Entertainment”, “Sony Pictures Entertainment (SPE)”, “Sony Pictures Filmverleih”, “Sony Pictures Home Entertainment”, “Sony Pictures Releasing”, “Sony

Pictures Television International”, “Sony Pictures Worldwide Acquisitions (SPWA)”, “The Weinstein Company”, “Touchstone Pictures”, “TriStar Pictures”, “Twentieth Century Fox”, “Twentieth Century Fox C.I.S.”, “Twentieth Century Fox Film Company”, “United Artists”, “United International Pictures (UIP)”, “Universal Pictures”, “Universal Pictures Company Inc.”, “Universal Pictures Content Group”, “Universal Pictures Corporation”, “Universal Pictures Corporation of Puerto Rico”, “Universal Pictures Home Entertainment”, “Universal Pictures Home Entertainment (UPHE)”, “Universal Pictures International (UPI)”, “Universal Sony Pictures Home Entertainment”, “Walt Disney Animation Studios”, “Walt Disney Attractions”, “Walt Disney Home Entertainment”, “Walt Disney Pictures”, “Walt Disney Productions”, “Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment”, “Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures”, “Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures Argentina”, “Warner Bros Pictures”, “Warner Bros.”, “Warner Bros. Digital Distribution”, “Warner Bros. F.E.”, “Warner Bros. Family Entertainment”, “Warner Bros. Home Entertainment”, “Warner Bros. Music”, “Warner Bros. Pictures”, “Warner Bros. Studios”, “Warner Bros. Television”, “Warner Bros./Seven Arts”]