



Film: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) and *Shang-Chi and The Legend of The Ten Rings* (2021)

Overview

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs funded the emergence of Disney as a successful animated feature film producer at a time when the American film industry was dominated by the classic Hollywood studio system of the 1930s.

Shang-Chi and The Legend of The Ten Rings illustrates the importance of franchises to blockbuster film-making aimed at global audiences. These films act as prestige content for multi-media conglomerates such as The Walt Disney Company who will use exclusivity to drive subscribers to streaming services.

This factsheet uses these two films as a case study to illustrate the changes and continuities between Hollywood film-making in the 1930s and the present day, looking at the role of ownership and funding, processes of production, distribution and exhibition (circulation), strategies to maintain audiences, and the influence of media contexts.



Key terms

Production, distribution and circulation: in film, production covers the making of a film; distribution covers the marketing and physical distribution of a film; circulation covers cinema and other forms of exhibition.

Vertical integration: in film, ownership and control of production, distribution and exhibition.

Convergence: in film, how the content is increasingly produced for exhibition on digital, especially streaming, platforms as well as cinema.

Ownership and funding

- The significance of patterns of ownership and control, including conglomerate ownership, vertical integration and diversification
- The significance of economic factors, including commercial and not-for-profit public funding, to media industries and their products
- The effect of individual producers on media industries



Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs

The Hollywood studio system of the 1930s was a commercial enterprise, relatively untouched by government regulation. It relied on a system of vertical integration, by which the big five Hollywood studios – Paramount Pictures, Metro Goldwyn Mayer, Warner Brothers Pictures, 20th Century Fox and RKO – formed an oligopoly that controlled the market in the USA and much of the world (following the collapse of European competitors during the First World War). These studios owned and controlled every element of the film process from production and distribution to exhibition. The big ‘first-run’ cinemas were mostly owned by the big five studios. Studios that did not own cinema chains – such as Universal, Columbia, and United Artists – relied on the big five to distribute their films. Walt Disney productions were distributed by RKO.

Those US cinemas that were not owned by the studios relied on them for content, which they controlled through the system of block booking – for access to prestige films they would have to buy packages of content. Disney originally established a niche within this system by producing animated shorts that would play as part of these packages of content – a mix of A films, B films, newsreels, comic shorts, cartoons – that were designed for all-round mass entertainment. This system of studio ownership of cinemas broke down in the late 1940s and 1950s due to anti-trust lawsuits and the competition from television.

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs was made possible by the success of Walt Disney Productions within the mix of

content on offer in 1930s cinema – its Mickey Mouse and Silly Symphony cartoons – but represented a huge leap in ambition. Walt Disney as an individual had an unusually important role in the success of the film, unusual even in the context of the famed role of Hollywood studio ‘moguls’ of the time. Though not the first ever feature-length animation, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* was a tremendous gamble. Walt Disney thought it could be made for ten times the budget of an average Silly Symphony short. Estimates vary, but it ended up costing between 6 and 10 times as much as the original budget at about \$1.5m, which was a huge sum in 1937. Widely referred to as ‘Disney’s folly’ in the wider industry, the film cost \$200 a foot to make, as compared to \$50-\$75 per foot for Disney’s previous animations, largely due to Walt Disney’s perfectionism.

Later workers in the Disney studio under Walt have written of his very autocratic management style in which he made all key decisions. His films tended to reflect his Midwestern roots, portraying an all-American innocence and wholesomeness. On the other hand, Walt’s interest in German expressionist cinema and its influence on Hollywood horror films lie behind the darker elements in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Disney’s ‘genius’ was partly aesthetic but also commercial. He took the originally anarchic art form of animation and commercialised it with conventional melodramatic narrative, quality production values, humour, romance and musical numbers.





Shang-Chi and The Legend of The Ten Rings

The 21st century Walt Disney Company, in contrast to the Walt Disney Productions of 1937, is an international conglomerate that makes films as a small, though significant, part of its overall operations. Film still retains some of the status of an art form, so represents prestige content for the company. This means that films and their spin-offs remain important to the Disney brand. However, by revenue, the company primarily sells television (cable and broadcasting), parks, cruises, holiday resorts, and merchandising. In the last pre-pandemic accounts (2019) these accounted for \$51 billion of the company's overall revenues of \$70 billion. The film segment of the business made just over \$11 billion in revenues in the same year. 'Media Networks' and 'Parks, Experiences and Products' made the vast majority of the company's overall income. This is a good example of diversification – The Walt Disney Company has diversified considerably from its film roots into more profitable areas.

Disney's television businesses include the ABC broadcast network and cable television networks such as the Disney Channel, ESPN, Freeform, FX, and National Geographic. Its streaming services, such as Disney+ and Hulu, are rapidly growing in revenue but were still making a substantial loss in 2020. Disney's films are key to establishing brand awareness of their streaming services, where growth of audience share is a higher priority than profitability. Exclusive rights to blockbuster films such as *Shang-Chi* can promote the service, which can then extend the brand of the franchise by making television spin-offs, as is planned for *Shang-Chi*. The very strong competition between emerging streaming platforms means that control of prestige 'content' is vital. Disney has cut all licensing deals with streaming companies such as Netflix

in order to ensure exclusivity for Disney+. The company is gambling on expanding its subscriber base sufficiently to become a major streaming player, and eventually achieve profitability (the model that Netflix pioneered). Other studios are following suit – Paramount has removed its Star Trek franchise from Netflix to boost its Paramount+ streaming service, for example.

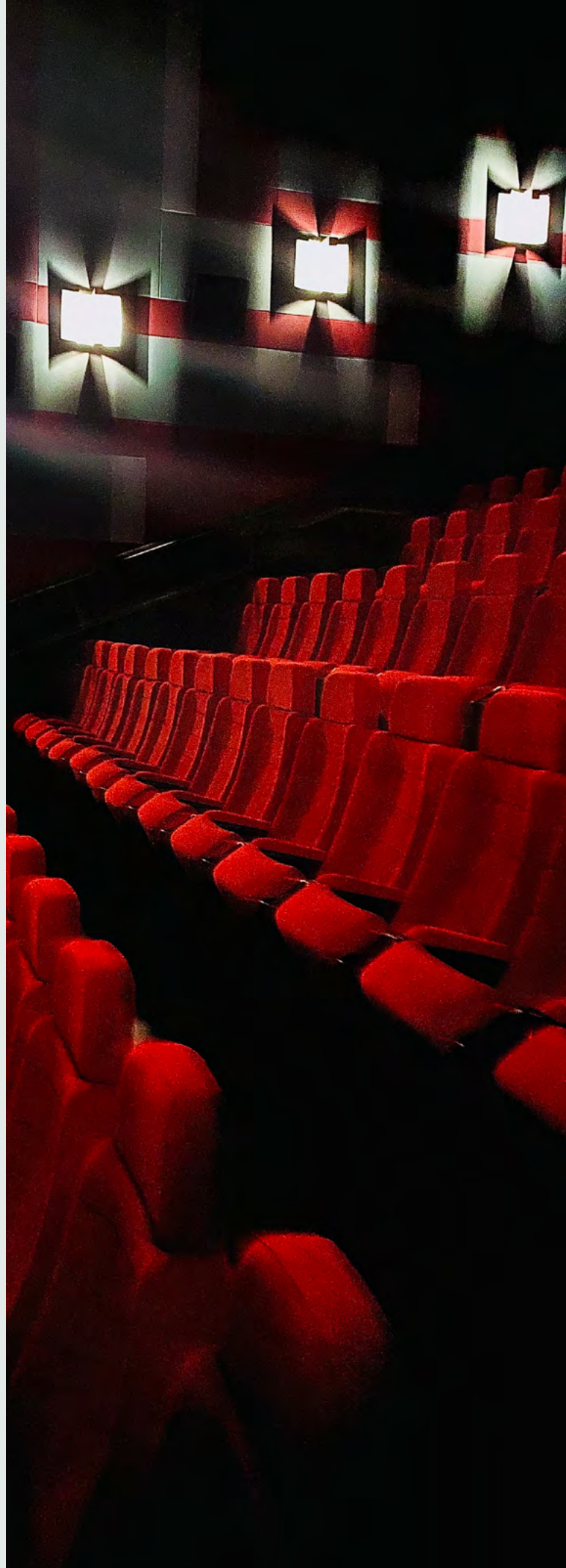
Shang-Chi was produced by Marvel Studios – a subsidiary of The Walt Disney Company's 'Studio Entertainment' division, which was bought for \$4 billion in 2009. Marvel Studios built a valuable brand by working with a number of different Hollywood studios to create the series of films based on its comic book characters that became branded as the 'Marvel Cinematic Universe' – a brand so well-established that it is commonly recognised just by its initials. While it is unlikely that such massive corporate projects as Hollywood blockbuster films will strongly reflect the influence of individual producers, the comic book artist Stan Lee created many of the most famous characters within the MCU and the style and content of the MCU films does reflect, in part, his work, though some of his representations needed 'modernising', particularly for *Shang-Chi*.

Disney's ownership of Marvel Studios and Disney+ represents a partial return to vertical integration. The Walt Disney Company own the producers of *Shang-Chi*, their distribution arm distributed the film, and Disney have restricted streaming of the film to Disney+. However, they do not own or control the cinema chains that provide the theatrical release. Theatrical release remains important to film's credibility as an 'art' medium – so Netflix released potential Oscar-winning films such as *Roma* and

The Irishman in cinemas, for example – but simultaneous release in cinemas and on studio-controlled streaming platforms is becoming common, especially for lower budget films that might struggle to be seen in mainstream cinemas.

Whereas the Disney films of the 1930s very much reflect the tastes and style of Walt Disney as an individual, the huge and varied output of The Walt Disney Company today reflects the various strands of its corporate make-up. They own Walt Disney Pictures, Walt Disney Animation Studios, Pixar, Marvel Studios, Lucasfilm, 20th Century Studios, 20th Century Animation, and Searchlight Pictures. The latter, formerly the art film division of 20th Century Fox (the whole studio was acquired by Disney in 2019), produces films, such as *Nightmare Alley* and *Fresh*, that are far removed from the family-friendly fare of its flagship brands. However, within Marvel it should be noted that Kevin Feige, the President of Marvel Studios, is a key figure within the MCU films due to the need for continuity within this long series of films.

MCU films, such as *Shang-Chi*, meet key commercial imperatives in the unpredictable world of film production and distribution, where many films lose money. The MCU is an expandable franchise – it can include sequels, but, unlike many other franchises, it doesn't rely on them. This enables any film within the 'universe' to benefit from the brand recognition that a franchise brings without the risk of brand fatigue brought about by repetitive sequels of diminishing quality and lowered audience expectations. This 'marketability' creates greater predictability for the producers and distributors, allowing larger production and marketing budgets and more ambitious saturation release, which all increase the prospect of commercial success, so long as the film generates good 'word of mouth'. The strong element of fandom the MCU franchise has generated may help to generate positive word of mouth, so long as the film is tailored to fulfil the pleasures already established in the franchise, giving the film extra 'playability'.



Production and distribution

- Processes of production, distribution and circulation by organisations, groups and individuals in a global context
- The specialised and institutionalised nature of media production, distribution and circulation
- The relationship of recent technological change and media production, distribution and circulation
- How processes of production, distribution and circulation shape media products

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs

Film production and distribution in 1937 were very different to those processes in 2021. The 1930s studio system typically saw production and distribution in the hands of the studio – scripted by studio-contracted scriptwriters, directed by studio-contracted directors within the studio's lots and sound stages (except for location action scenes and landmarks for establishing shots), cast from the studio's stable of actors, shot by the studio's cinematographers, and so on. Studios relied on the star system to sell A movies. Stars were developed and promoted by the studio with strict control of their public personae. This production line of films had a guaranteed release. This could be in the studio's cinemas or in independent cinemas, who had to accept block bookings of films, often just on the basis of their titles, stars and plot synopses. This mass production of films fed the appetite of a public for whom cinema was the only available audio-visual mass media entertainment. If production then was much quicker than now, distribution was a much slower process, with celluloid films physically travelling from cinema to cinema, starting in the big cities and trickling down slowly to less prestigious venues over time, by which point film reels may have lost much of their picture and sound quality.

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs was not produced by a major studio, though it was distributed by one, RKO, but Walt Disney's control over the production did reflect the standard Hollywood model of centralised control by studio heads, where directors were seen more as technicians carrying out the producer's wishes. For example, Disney acted out the entire story of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* to his staff as part of development of the film in 1934. Disney did have 'stars' in the form of Mickey Mouse and co, but not stars that could attract audiences to *Snow White*, so Walt Disney became the brand – the film poster proclaims the film as 'Walt Disney's Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, his first full-length feature production'.

The poster also highlights the technology controlled by Disney: 'The Marvellous Multiplane Technicolor'. Disney had secured exclusive rights to use Technicolor for animation in the 1930s. Technicolor was the most widely used colour process in Hollywood at this time and was often touted as a mark of quality in film promotion for its rich saturated colours at a time when most films were black and white. The multiplane was a complex and expensive camera invented by Disney staff that allowed more camera effects in animation and a 'soft focus' effect on backgrounds. The film itself was a breakthrough – it was the first full-length cel animation – but both Technicolor and the multiplane had been used previously on shorter films. Moreover, some very old practices were used, such as hand colouring for Snow White's face and rotoscoping (photographing real movement to act as a model for the animation or to be directly traced).



[BoxOfficeMojo.com](https://www.boxofficemojo.com) estimates that *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* is the tenth most successful Hollywood film of all time, judging by lifetime adjusted gross box office. This takes inflation in ticket prices into account. At the time of its release, it was the most successful sound film of all time.

The film premiered in Los Angeles in late December 1937, and was shown in two cinemas in New York and Miami in January 1938. At this point, RKO decided on a general release in February 1938 due to good box office in its limited release, successful promotional strategies, and

positive critical response. The film was a huge success both in the US and overseas. In one London cinema the film ran for well over half a year. These long runs reflect the much slower pace of distribution in the 1930s. Big city cinemas could attract audiences from further afield who didn't want to wait months or even years for a successful film to reach their local cinema, so could show the film on their one screen for long periods until demand dropped off. Films also had longer 'legs', despite the larger number of films available to cinemagoers, because of the lack of competition from other media, meaning that total cinema attendances were far higher in the 1930s than today.



Shang-Chi and The Legend of The Ten Rings

Film industry practices are very different in modern Hollywood, which produces and distributes far fewer films to an audience with a vast choice of entertainment media. Since the 1970s, Hollywood has been dominated by blockbusters: large budget films with accessible pleasures designed to appeal to mass global audiences, which flood the market with saturation distribution and huge marketing efforts selling the opening of the film as a cultural event. Films in which the distributors have great confidence will open on key weekends, such as important holidays or the height of the peak season in the summer or before Christmas. Production companies may be short-lived entities that bring together a script, cast, producers, directors and other key staff as a package to promote to distributors – often a Hollywood studio which provides much of the financing – who are the key players in the system. Stars are still important in the 'marketability' of a film but are no longer 'owned' by studios, making their agents more powerful.

We have seen above how this system may be evolving with the partial move to vertical integration driven by the need for content for streaming services (convergence), as in the case of *Shang-Chi*. In this era, films may be distributed simultaneously to cinemas and on the studio's streaming service, which uses this exclusivity to attract subscriptions. *Shang-Chi* was given an exclusive release in cinemas, but this decision may have been due to uncertainty created by the Covid pandemic. Moreover, Marvel is a long-standing production company that is so strong a brand in its own right that it was bought by Disney.

The decision to produce an Asian-focused film within the MCU will have been aided by the critical and financial success of *Black Panther*, the MCU film from 2018 with a Black director, starring a largely Black cast, and set in a fictional Africa, which showed the ability of the franchise to explore different representations, plus the success of *Crazy Rich Asians* for Warners. Kevin Feige produced, as usual for an MCU film, alongside Jonathon Schwartz, who was known for producing independent films and may have brought a more art house ethos to the production. The Chinese-American Dave Callaghan, who had worked on mainstream films such as *The Expendables* and the MCU film *Ant Man*, was engaged to write the screenplay. The Japanese-American Destin Daniel Cretin was hired to direct, despite the fact that he had never worked on a big budget film but had directed character-driven films and television series. He is quoted as being attracted to the project as a chance for Asians to self-represent. Given this attention to Asian representation, it is ironic that the film was never released in China and did not perform especially strongly in the Asian market. The cast did include some stars such as Ben Kingsley and Michelle Yeoh, and Awkwafina (a comedian, rapper and actor), but the lead was relatively unknown. Marvel has a history of making stars of up and coming actors. This is perhaps made possible because the MCU brand is so strong that it does not rely on big names to sell films. The tone of the film may owe much to the mix in cast and crew of straight and comic acting and mainstream and art house film-making.

The budget for the film is estimated at \$150-\$200 million. The film was shot in Australia; the local state and national governments gave \$24million in funding. Blockbuster budgets like these require the producers to minimise risk, as it is so easy to lose a lot of money. Much of the budget is spent on spectacle, including elaborate CGI, to offer accessible pleasures to global audiences. Complex fight scenes are intended to attract the young audiences that are most likely to attend cinemas. Plot is kept simple and archetypal – the standard MCU origins plot – but the audience also requires difference, in this case through different settings and characters and a slightly different tone to previous MCU films. The film achieved a PG-13 rating in the US, thus maximising a teenage audience. The film made \$432 million in box office, so it should have covered its costs (after promotional costs and the cinemas' takes). However, its after-life on Disney+ adds extra value, so Disney considered it enough of a success to produce a sequel.

Promotion for the film included: the project being unveiled at 2019 Comic-Con, an early teaser trailer

(April 2021), a full trailer premiered on Disney's ESPN in a pre-basketball match programme, a soundtrack album, and promotional tie-ins such as a limited edition lychee flavour drink produced by Sanzo beverages, and events run by promotional partners such as Microsoft and BMW.

Shang-Chi was premiered in August 2021 then released in the US on 'Labor Day' weekend (3-6 September 2021), which is a public holiday. This release was put back several times because of the Covid pandemic.

Simultaneous release in 4,300 cinemas is a classic saturation release (as a point of comparison, *Avengers: Endgame*, the most successful recent blockbuster in terms of box office, opened in about 4,700 US cinemas). The box office dropped 67% after the first week, which is typical for a film with a big opening weekend – \$75m in this case. The film was shown in many different cinema formats (400 IMAX screens, over 850 in premium large format, 1,500 3D, and 275 in speciality D-Box, 4DX, and ScreenX). It performed particularly well on the West and East coasts and among Asian-American audiences.



The US release shows a typical large opening and steady drop-off:

Weeks 1 and 2	4,300 cinemas
Week 3	4,070
Week 4	3,952
Week 5	3,455
Week 6	2,800
Week 7	2,300
Week 8	1,600
Week 9	1,115
Week 10	440
Week 11	335
Week 12	120/65
Week 13	65

The film did not enter the Chinese market, which is strictly controlled, so its international sales were not as high as, for example, *Avengers: Endgame*, which earned over two thirds of its box office outside the USA and over 30% in China. About half its box office earnings came from non-US cinemas, with the UK its biggest overseas market:

UK	\$29m
S Korea	\$15m
France	\$13m
Australia	\$12m
Germany	\$9m
Russia	\$9m
Japan	\$9m
Hong Kong	\$8m
Mexico	\$8m
Brazil	\$7m
Spain	\$7m
Taiwan	\$5m
Singapore	\$5m

Maintaining audiences

- How media organisations maintain, including through marketing, varieties of audiences nationally and globally

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs

Word of mouth had a large role in marketing films to audiences in the 1930s, as films would take a long time to reach most of them, but 'marketability' – the ability to create a big opening – was still crucial to film promotion. Actors dressed as the characters in *Snow White* welcomed audiences to the premiere in Los Angeles, where there was a full-scale model of 'the magic land of *Snow White*' and the events were described over NBC radio. Open air concerts of music from the film were played by the Disney Recording Orchestra. The trailer for *Snow White* deals with the issue of the lack of stars within the film by foregrounding Walt Disney's 'genius' in creating a full-length animation, the technology involved, a glowing review in *Time* magazine, and the characters of Snow White and the seven dwarves. There is a long sequence where Walt Disney explains each dwarf's character using models. The emphasis is on quality and characterisation. Similarly the poster is dominated by an image of Snow White nurturing her 'family' of dwarves.

For international distribution, Disney produced seven foreign versions of the film: Spanish, French, German, Italian, Norwegian, Swedish and Dutch.

Shang-Chi and The Legend of The Ten Rings

Global distribution was much easier in 2021, given the speed and economy of digital distribution. *Shang-Chi* was distributed in two thirds of its international markets by the end of its opening weekend (remember, this was during a pandemic).

The trailers for the film reflect the power of Marvel as a brand – the producers are named while the cast are not – and they emphasise generic pleasures such as an archetypal hero narrative with family drama, spectacle, action and martial arts scenes, and a hint of relationship comedy. The trailers must appeal to both general, global audiences who might be coming to the MCU for the first time – who will require accessible blockbuster pleasures such as action and spectacle – and MCU fans. The latter wasted no time in posting online videos discussing and explaining the trailers. They would know the significance of origin stories for new MCU characters, the previous history of the Mandarin and the Ten Rings organisation in the MCU, and the need to watch out for Easter eggs in the trailers. They would also, when they finally watch the film, know to stay to the end of the credits for the two scenes that will show how Shang-Chi will reappear in other planned MCU films.





Regulation

- The regulatory framework of contemporary media in the UK
- The role of regulation in global production, distribution and circulation

The [British Board of Film Classification \(BBFC\)](#) was founded in 1912 to regulate film in the UK. It was set up by the film industry as an independent self-regulatory body to avoid the risk of government regulation. Named the British Board of Film Censorship at the time of *Snow White's* release, it either classified films as a U or an A film – the latter being more suitable for adult audiences. *Snow White* was classified an A, even after cuts were made to some of the content. By the time of its re-release in 1964 the cut version was rated as U. A BBFC case study on the classification of *Snow White* is available on their [website](#).

Shang-Chi was rated 12 by the [BBFC](#) for moderate violence, fantasy threat, bloody images, and infrequent moderate 'bad language'.

The USA is usually the largest market for any film aimed at a global audience, so meeting the requirements of American regulation is crucial for the distribution and exhibition of such films. At the time of *Snow White's* release the Hays Code regulated the American cinema and, by extension, much of cinema around the world. William Hays was head of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) which enforced self-censorship on the Hollywood studios in order to avoid the threat of state regulation. The Hays Code stated that films must not lower moral standards or ridicule the law.

'Lustful kissing', homosexuality, nudity, drug use, adultery, 'miscegenation', vulgarity, and ridiculing the clergy were all banned. *Snow White* was one of the few films of that era that were not battling against the constraints of the code, as the code rather reflected Walt Disney's 'family values'.

The Hays Code was slowly undermined by changing contexts and audience tastes, and by films which deliberately flouted the rules. It was replaced in 1965 by a new age-based system, operated since 2019 by the Motion Picture Association (MPA). This rates films as G, for general release, PG for parental guidance suggested, PG-13 for parents strongly cautioned, R for restricted (under 17s need a parent or guardian to accompany), or NC-17 for over 17s only. The NC-17 rating is usually considered fatal for the commercial viability of a film, so studios will aim for an R rating or below. *Shang-Chi* was awarded a PG-13 certificate in the US, for its use of language and sequences of violence and action, and similar ratings throughout the rest of its global release. Action films targeting younger audiences need to include sequences of violence and action to engage audiences but need to mitigate these to achieve a PG-13 rating, for example, by a strong fantasy or comic-book element, which is how MCU films are so successful at achieving a PG-13 rating.

Media contexts

- Economic contexts
- Historical contexts (*Snow White* only)

Economic contexts

Free market capitalism

Hollywood works to a commercial imperative: the pursuit of profit through selling products to audiences, selling audiences to promotional partners and/or advertisers, or selling services or intellectual property to other companies. Anti-trust laws in the US protect free markets by ensuring competition. Hollywood films in the US and UK are free of state regulation; the classification system is run by the industry itself. By contrast, The China Film Group Corporation has a state-granted monopoly on importing foreign films into China – a form of state monopoly capitalism that enables political control over what audiences can see, or not in the case of *Shang-Chi*.

The economic domination of the US film industry

Part of the 'genius' of Walt Disney was to be a small fish in the most economically powerful film industry at the time, thus finding his films globally distributed. The same is true of Hollywood today, where most Asian self-representations struggle to compete globally with Hollywood blockbuster representations such as *Shang-Chi*.

Globalisation

Both films were successful in global markets, suggesting that the film industry was an early adopter of globalisation. However, the pace of globalisation accelerated at the end of the 20th century and *Shang-Chi's* represents a typically global product: an American film shot in Australia representing a fictionalised Chinese culture shorn of the worst stereotypical excesses of the US comic original.

Historical contexts

Snow White in its very title suggests an age in which sensibilities about difference were rather blunt. The attitude to people with dwarfism is particularly patronising. The film was produced by white men in an era when mainstream Hollywood targeted a white audience. Gender representations reflect an uncritically patriarchal society.

The Hays Code that came into full force in the first half of the 1930s forbade a range of representations that would be considered normal today. Many of those provisions, such as the ban on 'miscegenation' or homosexuality would be considered outrageously racist and homophobic.

The Great Depression following the Wall Street crash in 1929 was occasionally represented in Hollywood, but cinema of that era mostly deals in escapism, as *Snow White* does.

The influence of émigré German film-makers on Hollywood following the rise of fascism may be seen indirectly in some of the darker scenes in *Snow White*, where there are touches of expressionism.



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