

Book Review:

Long, Derek. *Playing the Percentages: How Film Distribution Made the Hollywood Studio System*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2024)

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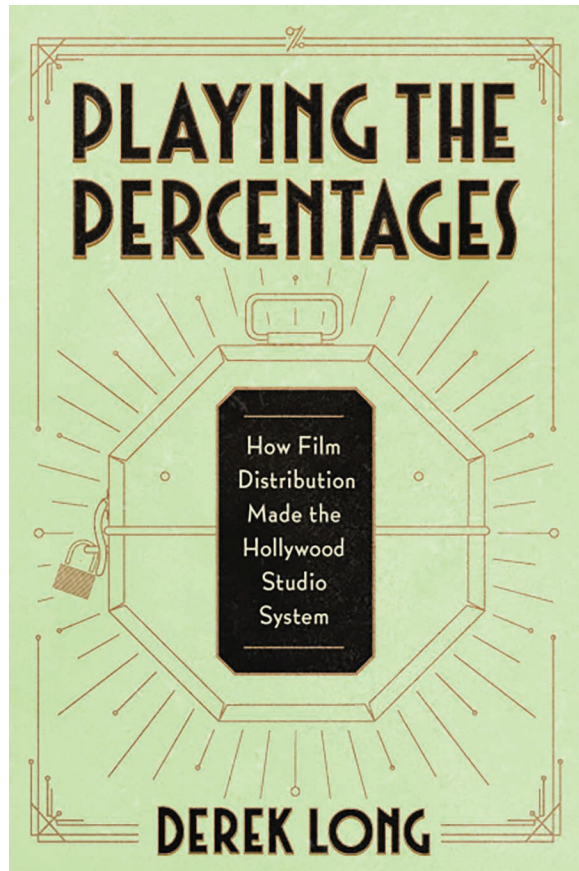
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With its focused and highly detailed analysis of film distribution in the United States in the first three decades of the 20th century, Derek Long's *Playing the Percentages* embodies and contributes well to two tendencies within media industry studies research. First, this book follows in the tradition of American film industry historical studies, including foundational works by Tino Balio and Thomas Schatz as well as more recent contributions from Miranda Banks and Erin Hill.¹ Second, *Playing the Percentages* aligns with the strand of research that analyzes the role played by distribution in the workings of a variety of media industries, which has become especially vibrant following Alisa Perren's call for more work in this area²; the recent collection by Paul McDonald, Courtney Brannon-Donoghue, and Timothy Havens is an excellent example that engages with multiple media and industries.³

Drawing on primary sources from a variety of physical and digital archives, and in steady dialog with secondary literature about early American film history, *Playing the Percentages* offers many insights and clarifications about the complex changes in film distribution during the highly transformational period before the comparatively "stable" arrangement of the classical Hollywood system. Although this book is historical, it is especially interested in identifying, defining, explaining, and analyzing multiple, concrete distribution practices in a semi-schematic, almost typological manner. These twin goals, to provide a historical account and to parse "distribution" as a set of distinct activities, shape the very organization of this book; as the author states, he "presents a mostly chronological account" that



is simultaneously “structured according to the specific marketing and sales practices that film distributors adopted” in different moments and phases.⁴ Although this structure leads to some repetition and restatement across chapters, this book is commendable for its insistent focus on the actual work processes that “distribution” entails. On the one hand, Long’s findings might appear historically specific or particular to the film industry, and indeed, this book adds much nuance and clarity to our understanding of American cinema during this period. On the other hand, *Playing the Percentages* is a model study of a *practice* endemic to many, if not all, media industries.

Indeed, the book extends beyond cinema distribution in its first chapter, which shows how specific business practices and organizational developed logics in vaudeville and legitimate theater in the 1800s offered models that film distributors would experiment with and adopt in the 1910s and 1920s. Long identifies booking, circuiting, and packaging as related but separate activities that defined the theater busi-

ness, all of which would be crucial to the film trade. Whereas “booking” entails arranging the schedule and financial terms for a performance at a venue, “circuiting” involves arranging the movement of an attraction, like a theatrical production or a film, to multiple locations. Finally, “packaging” is the process of combining multiple attractions to be booked and circuiting as a unit, such as was the case with vaudeville acts and bundles of short films played in nickelodeons. After showing how these processes developed in live theater in the 1800s, the chapter closes with an analysis of the distribution of the film *The Life of Our Savior* (1914) as a way of showing how these logics played out with a specific feature film.

The next two chapters concentrate on film “packaging” practices from 1896 to 1917 (Chapter 2) and then from 1916 to 1922 (Chapter 3). Long identifies two general modes of film packaging that distributors would experiment with during these phases (and which, in truth, would often overlap and occur simultaneously in multiple periods). First, there is what he calls “programmatic” packaging, where a company would sell and release multiple film titles as a “bundled unit,” typically “released with some regularity.”⁵ This practice was most commonly used in the distribution of the many short films that were typical of the first two decades of cinema. Long details how different companies would sell packages outright to film exchanges across the country, which would then rent them to local theaters. Long’s second type is “idiosyncratic,” where a distributor would handle a single film or distinctive bundle of films “as *singularly* marketable and worthy of specialized handling.”⁶ In the earliest days of the industry, this practice was more commonly used through the “states’ rights” system,

where a film company would sell films on a territorial basis. But Long is careful in showing how the programmatic programming of multiple short films was disrupted by and ultimately readjusted to accommodate the growth in popularity of “feature” films that were four or more reels in length. Chapter 3 follows the story to show how distributors shifted from a programmatic mode of distributing feature films to a more flexible process of “open booking,” where classifiable film bundles, such as a series that featured an individual movie star, or even single films could be selectively released on in a more individualized fashion.

The next two chapters examine how distributors contended with issues of space (Chapter 4) and time (Chapter 5). Indeed, these categories appear fundamental to media distribution, when broadly conceived as the circulation of media through space over time. But in these and other chapters, *Playing the Percentages* strives to particularize and flesh out such a generalized conceptualization. Thus, Chapter 4 illuminates not only how American film distribution expanded from myriad local and regional activities to being a more centralized, nationally scaled endeavor but also, and just as important, how *marketing* practices, as a separable but constitutive element of “distribution,” supported and enabled this change in geographic operation. Long details how, between 1914 and 1923, some distributors like Triangle Film Corporation bet on a future of more decentralized distribution and created franchise partnerships in numerous localities, while other companies, who ultimately proved to have the more dominating model, adapted mass-market merchandising strategies for cinema.

Chapter 4 closes with a case study analysis of the in-house publication of the Selznick Organization’s distribution division before moving on to Chapter 5, which examines the practice of block-booking in relation to *time*. It is fair to say that many people understand block-booking as an exploitative bundling strategy deployed by the Hollywood studios to force theaters to rent lesser movies in order to get access to premium productions. But this book has already shown that distributors and exhibitors had traded in different package arrangements for decades. Thus, this chapter shows how block-booking in the early 1920s that resulted from a struggle between distributors and exhibitors over *entity* would determine the *playdates* for specific film titles. The practice would still situate the distributors in a position of power over exhibitors, but it wasn’t just a matter of bundling bad films with good ones. Moreover, it allowed distributors more choice and flexibility about when their films would play for audiences.

Chapter 6 examines issues of pricing. From the earliest days of cinema, distributors sold films outright or rented them at a flat rate. Although there were precedents for renting films on a percentage basis, with distributors and exhibitors splitting box-office revenues, this didn’t become the dominant industry practice until the widespread adoption of sync-sound technology in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Whereas previous accounts have largely attributed this shift in business model to the novel economics and “technology shock” of synchronous sound, Long complicates and recontextualizes this understanding. First, he shows that a good portion of exhibitors did continue to rent certain types of film at a flat rate. Second, and more importantly, Long argues that the adoption of percentage rentals resulted at least in part from the distributors’ (arguably exploitative) efforts to recoup a more representative portion of ticket sales.

The corrective seen in Chapter 6 is characteristic of much of this book, which is to say that *Playing the Percentages* adds complexity, detail, nuance, additional context, and some reframing to existing histories of the American film industry. It is commendable for aiming to provide coherent terminology and precise descriptions for a variety of activities, practices, and industrial logics that too often get overlooked, lumped together, or phrased unclearly; indeed, in some cases, the author provides precision to terms that were used vaguely or interchangeably in the historical documents themselves. Although to my eye this book primarily directs itself toward a readership of film historians, as evidenced by its bibliography, its deep dive into the particulars and pragmatics of distribution could and should make it valuable to researchers of a variety of media and media industries.

Author Biography

Daniel Herbert is a professor in the Department of Film, Television, and Media at the University of Michigan. He is the author of *Videoland: Movie Culture at the American Video Store* (UC Press, 2014) and *Maverick Movies: New Line Cinema and the Transformation of American Film* (UC Press, 2023), among other publications.

¹ Tino Balio, *United Artists: The Company Built by the Stars* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1976); Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (Pantheon, 1988); Erin Hill, *Never Done: A History of Women's Work in Media Production* (Rutgers University Press, 2016); Miranda Banks, *The Writers: A History of American Screenwriters and Their Guild* (Rutgers University Press, 2016).

² Alisa Perren, "Rethinking Distribution for the Future of Media Industry Studies," *Cinema Journal* 52, no. 3 (Spring 2013): 165–71.

³ Paul McDonald, Courtney Brannon-Donoghue, and Timothy Havens, eds., *Digital Media Distribution: Portals, Platforms, Pipelines* (New York University Press, 2021).

⁴ Derek Long, *Playing the Percentages* (University of Texas Press, 2025), 16.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.