

# *F1: The Movie*—Hollywood formulas 1, 2 and 3

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*F1: The Movie* is a film about auto racing, with Brad Pitt, Damson Idris and Javier Bardem. Director Joseph Kosinski and producer Jerry Bruckheimer previously collaborated on *Top Gun: Maverick*, which the WSWs review described as “a repugnant, empty film commissioned by the United States military to revel wholeheartedly in its war machine.”

Fortunately, patriotism and war are not ingredients of *F1*. However, this film too is essentially hollow, shedding very little light on its characters’ lives and relationships.

Sonny Hayes (Pitt) is the central, enigmatic character in the film. He left Formula One (F1) racing decades previously after a terrible accident. (In fact, as we learn, from a medical standpoint, he should never have driven again.) Hayes subsequently became a professional gambler (or gambling addict) and failed at three marriages. Now he essentially lives in his van, driving in competitions wherever and whenever he can, simply for the “love of racing.”

Rubén Cervantes (Bardem), a former teammate of Hayes’, owns the APXGP F1 Team, which is in deep financial trouble. If the team fails to win one of the remaining nine Grand Prix races, staged all over the world, the investors will sell APXGP. Cervantes implores Hayes to join him:

My best driver left for another team. So the car was a shit box. The team is in last place. My number two is a rookie.

Eventually agreeing, Hayes realizes he is being brought in as part of a desperate, last-ditch effort. Moreover, as he finds out, he wasn’t even this distressed team’s first choice, but rather its eighth.

Hayes’ new teammate is the young, up-and-coming

and arrogant Joshua Pearce (Idris). The two are initially and instinctively antagonistic. Pearce is worried about being replaced. His mother and sycophantic cousin-manager are on hand to encourage him. The latter feeds his ego.

Hayes understandably struggles at first, while his team continues to wrestle with mechanical and design issues, slow pit stops and other problems. The film follows APXGP through the course of numerous races. Hayes tends to ignore his team officials’ advice, while Pearce has little use for the “old-timer.”

Employing various somewhat dubious tricks of the trade, Hayes helps Pearce win the team’s first points. At the Italian Grand Prix, Pearce is in second place but impatiently, contrary to Hayes’ counsel, tries to overtake a car ahead of him on a curve and crashes. Out of action for several races, he unfairly blames Hayes and swears vengeance.

Hayes finds his way into a brief romance with Kate McKenna (Kerry Condon), the team’s technical director, the first woman to hold such a position. Behind the scenes conspiracies, centered in the APXGP board, put even greater pressure on Hayes or Pearce to come in first in a Grand Prix.

Things come to a head at the Abu Dhabi Grand Prix, where both Pearce and Hayes have a shot at victory and salvaging their racing team’s fortunes.

Costing between \$200 and \$300 million, *F1* was produced with the full collaboration of the industry and the Mercedes–AMG Petronas team, one of the most successful, in particular.

*Time* magazine writes that

Kosinski spent a year bugging Toto Wolff, team principal of the Mercedes–AMG Petronas F1 team, for permission to film at the Mercedes race simulator. ... Wolff finally relented. So in

the movie viewers will see Pitt and Damson Idris ... practicing on Mercedes' high-priced toys. "We were keen on contributing to making this a success," says Wolff, who along with F1 president and CEO Stefano Domenicali is credited as an executive producer. ...

Domenicali accompanied Kosinski and Pitt at a private *Top Gun* screening, to give the F1 boss a taste of the whizbang effect such a film could bring to his sport. He saw the potential. A movie fronted by Pitt could corral a mass audience and leave them wanting to know more about F1. "This has always been the strategy," says Domenicali. "To connect with new people, new markets."

A project like this, with its gigantic budget and myriad corporate connections, is unlikely to deviate from the tried and true, from cliches and formulas. It can't afford to, as far as its producers are concerned. Too much is at stake to let art and complexity interfere.

Between Mercedes and Apple Studios (which produced the film), to name only two of the corporations, huge business interests are involved, with pressing financial and other kinds of concerns.

According to *Variety*, for example,

the mood at Apple was certainly celebratory over the weekend, as the big-budget "F1" delivered the studio its first box office hit.... The film ... generated \$57 million domestically and \$146.3 million in its opening weekend. Though "F1" cost roughly \$250 million to produce and requires *several* laps around the track to turn a theatrical profit, these initial ticket sales are encouraging for an original, adult-skewing tentpole.

Pitt brings his usual charm and appeal, Bardem, Idris, Condon and the others do what they can, but the "drama" here is a mere scaffolding, an excuse for high-powered racetrack scenes.

Pitt's character is mostly a series of hackneyed traits. A nomad, a loner, his watchword is "Just let me drive,

will you?"

If a team (or a woman) wants him to stay around or come back, he is likely to respond, "One and done."

Hayes carries a lucky playing card in every race, which he places in a pocket without glancing at it. He teaches the younger Pearce a work ethic and seriousness, including the avoidance of social media and glamor and celebrity.

Why does Hayes drive?

Sometimes there's this moment in the car where everything goes quiet. My heartbeat slows. It's peaceful. And I can see everything. And no one, no one can touch me. I'm chasing that moment every time I get in the car. I don't know when I'll find it again, but man... I want to. I want to. Because in that moment... I'm flying.

Pitt's character enters and leaves the film virtually unaltered. Idris's learns to be more mature. He finally tells his manager, in regard to public appearances and such: "We're not doing it anywhere. It's all just noise. Media, engagement, followers. Listen, I've got to focus on the race." It's not very much.

There is very little here that is not predictable, and comfortable and digestible. No one is likely to be offended or challenged by anything. The world, including the multi-billion-dollar auto racing world, remains unexamined.

*F1* is a largely impersonal consumer product, assembled by committee.

The technology and skills involved in Formula 1 racing are extraordinary—the vehicles are traveling at 200 miles per hour and more, and sometimes within inches of each other. There are enough thrills and excitement in *F1* to draw in audiences, especially at a time of such lethargic blockbusters, but, in the end, this is weak and undemanding material.



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