

## BACK TO BASICS

by Noël Carroll

Vampires from outer space, pirate treasure, time machines, cowboys defending homesteaders, dinosaurs, a half-naked warrior vanquishing hordes of enemies, a house that turns into the biggest popcorn machine in history.

These are the images you would have seen in some of Hollywood's major productions of the past year—in *Lifeforce*, *The Goonies*, *Back to the Future*, *Silverado*, *My Science Project*, *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, and *Real Genius*.

This list may remind some older Americans of the kinds of movie choices they faced when they were children during the 1930s, '40s, or '50s. Those films could be neatly defined—as science fiction, horror, Westerns, war pictures, and slapstick comedies. For critics and movie-makers, these labels, along with others, such as musicals, mysteries, and thrillers, sort out the major film “genres.”

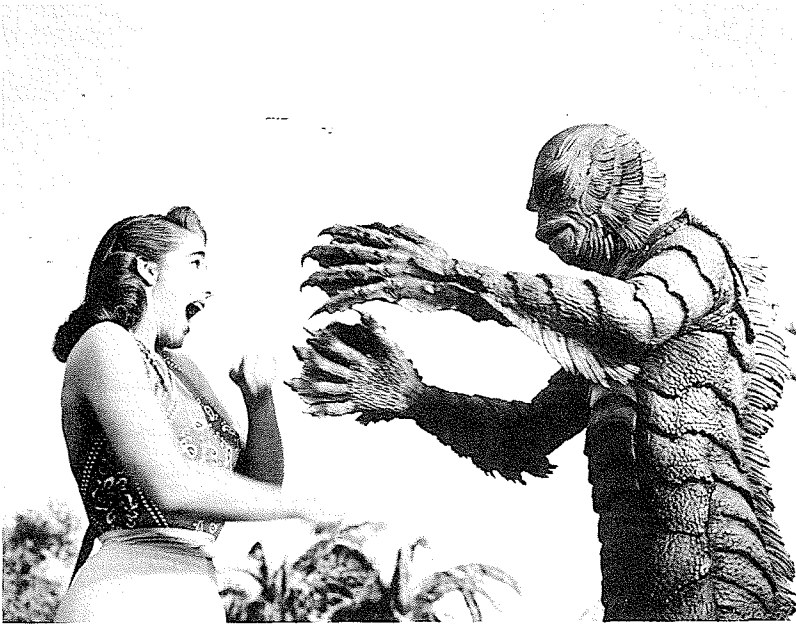
A decade and a half ago, the genre film seemed close to becoming an endangered species. Hollywood had largely turned away from the old standbys, seemingly forever (although it still produced a fair number of them), in favor of more experimental films in the vein of *Steelyard Blues* and *Five Easy Pieces*. “What these films—and others—had in common,” writes Arthur Knight, a film historian, “was their articulation of contemporary attitudes and emotions, in a language that had its own modern rhythms and nuances.”

But Hollywood attentively follows ticket sales at the box office, and by the mid-1970s, the movie-going public was telling studio executives that it wanted old-fashioned genre films again. This time, instead of churning out simple copies of past hits, Hollywood produced fairly sophisticated confections, larded with in-jokes and arcane allusions to motion picture history. Few in the audience understood those references, but crowds flocked to the new movies—science fiction, Westerns, and other variations on old recipes.

Genres, of course, have shaped film production almost since the beginnings of cinema.\* The Frenchman George Méliès enthralled turn-of-the-century audiences with “trick” films that exploited special effects in frame after frame of miraculous disappearances, apparitions,

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\*The word *genre* comes from the Latin *genus*, a kind or a sort, a category based on regularly recurring patterns. Westerns, for example, repeat certain settings (the American West in the 19th century), actions (gunfights), and certain hero-villain plot structures. But there is no one set of criteria for identifying genres. A Western must be set in the West, but a musical can be set in any time or place, as long as there is singing and dancing. A *film noir*, on the other hand, has more specific demands: a downbeat mood, signaled by dark lighting and rain-slick streets, a contemporary setting, and a pessimistic plot line. Horror films, to cite a final example, are named after the emotion they provoke.



*Half man, half fish, the Creature from the Black Lagoon was one of many screen monsters that appeared during the 1950s.*

tions, and transformations. Later, chase, escape, and rescue films, perfected during the 1910s by D. W. Griffith and others, introduced suspense as a staple ingredient of the cinema. The 1920s call to mind the great slapstick comedies of the Keystone Kops and Charlie Chaplin; the years of the Great Depression seem inextricably bound up with escapist musicals, swashbucklers, gangster films, and horror shows; the late 1940s recall the *film noir*; the 1950s, Westerns, science fiction, and thrillers.

During Hollywood's Golden Era, the general notion of genres provided film-makers with ready-made formulas for large numbers of films. A genre label, the studios discovered, helped a film find an audience. Musical fans could be counted on to turn out for the latest Busby Berkeley creation; werewolf lovers would pay to see many of the movies of that genre. Moreover, the reliance on genre production supplied a sort of common language for the film-maker and the audience. Knowing that the audience was aware of the assumptions and conventions of the form—that, for example, in horror films vampires abhor daylight—directors could spare lengthy exposition in favor of continuous action.

In the hands of an especially talented director, the shared genre

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“vocabulary” was not just a short cut but a means of creative expression. When Orson Welles opened *Citizen Kane* (1941) with a shot of an old, dark house on a hill, for example, he artfully used the imagery of the horror movie to convey the sense that his film (a thinly veiled portrait of ambitious newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst) would deal with the hidden and unholy. And Alfred Hitchcock often invoked the conventions of the thriller in order to make jokes. In *Strangers on the Train* (1951), the murderer and the hero's wife take a ride in an amusement park's Tunnel of Love. A shadow appears; there is a shriek. But when the pair reappears, the audience discovers that they have simply been flirting.

### Finding a Formula

From the studios' perspective, genres were useful in plotting production strategy. Genre films come in cycles: On the principle that nothing succeeds like success, Hollywood would follow one box-office genre hit with many clones. Each would be refined in its own way. “It is as if with each commercial effort, the studios suggested another variation on cinematic conventions,” writes Thomas Schatz, a University of Texas film scholar, “and the audience indicated whether the inventive variations would . . . be conventionalized through their repeated usage.” As the audience for one genre was exhausted, the studios could then revive and promote another genre that had lain dormant for several years.

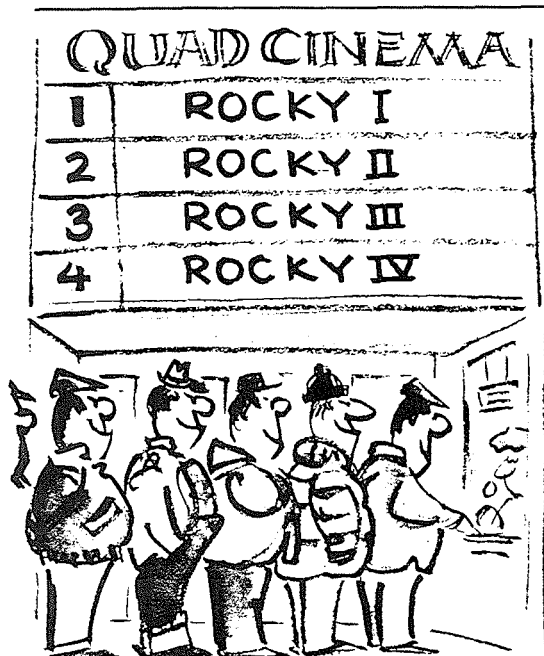
During the late 1930s and early '40s, for example, Hollywood tried, without much success, to repeat the popular horror cycle of the early Great Depression years. Make-up men busied themselves with *Son, Ghost*, and *House of Frankenstein*, as well as *Son* and *House of Dracula*. During the same era, comedians Abbott and Costello met monsters W, X, Y, and Z.

More than one film critic has seen the constant repetition and recycling in the history of popular movies as a sign that celluloid is a significant repository of contemporary myth. “When a film achieves a certain success,” the French director François Truffaut observed in 1972, “it becomes a sociological event, and the question of its quality becomes secondary.” Laconic cowpokes, bug-eyed monsters, singing sailors, and sinister, domineering gangsters rehearse on the screen the audience's hopes and fears, its notions of loyalty and authority, of masculinity and femininity.

The chief preoccupations of each genre tend to change very

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*In Hollywood, there is never too much of a good thing. Each of Sylvester Stallone's Rocky movies has earned more than \$40 million at the box office.*

little over time, but the inflections shift from one cycle to the next. Take the horror film. Its essential ingredient is *Otherness*, epitomized by a monster. Frankenstein, Dracula, and the Mummy made their screen debuts during the early 1930s, when distraction from the day-to-day difficulties of the Depression was good box office. Often, the movie monsters of the 1930s were themselves creatures of some pathos: Not a few tears were shed in movie houses over the demise of King Kong. But when Hollywood recycled the horror genre during the 1950s, the early Cold War years, things had changed. There was nothing sympathetic about the giant insects and repulsive aliens who ravaged the cinematic Earth during those years. In *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), for example, aliens from outer space slowly infiltrate a California town, taking over the bodies of its human inhabitants. Only one telltale sign gives the aliens away: They lack emotion. The Other had become a completely repulsive force bent on dehumanizing us, a stand-in for the Soviet menace.

By the late 1960s, however, it appeared that the curtain was coming down on genre movies. Amid growing domestic disarray over the war in South Vietnam and black riots in the nation's big cities, none of the old formulas seemed to work, on the silver screen or in real life. Most clearly, there was bad news at the box office.

In their perpetual quest to offer something TV could not, the studios had hit on two new high-budget genres during the early 1960s. Epic spectacles such as *Ben Hur*, *Lawrence of Arabia*, and

### THE CRITICS

Anybody who knows anything much about current movies knows these chaps. One is tall and thin, described by his partner as "cold and detached" on-camera; the other is short, a bit on the rotund side, voluble.

They are not actors. They do not even live in Hollywood. They are Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert, the odd-couple hosts of "At the Movies," a weekly half-hour syndicated TV show, based in Chicago, in which they applaud and/or deplore Hollywood's latest offerings. And Hollywood listens. "We pore over every word," one Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer executive said a few years ago.

Few of the duo's counterparts at newspapers and magazines can claim as much influence. Movie reviews have been around since the earliest days of motion pictures, when short notices of new films began appearing in newspapers. James Agee, Vachel Lindsey, and Carl Sandburg are among the noted American writers who scratched out a living as movie reviewers at one time or another during their careers. But even during the movie-happy 1920s, the limited influence of reviewers was obvious. The general public, Sandburg flatly declared, "doesn't care about [reviewers'] recommendations."

On rare occasions, a magazine critic can alter a movie's fate at the box office—as the *New Yorker's* Pauline Kael did when she broke with other reviewers and praised *Bonnie and Clyde* to the skies in 1967. Today, *Bonnie and Clyde* is considered a classic American hit. Eleven years later, Kael was right on target again when she dismissed *Grease* as "a bogus, clumsily jointed pastiche of late '50s high school musicals." This time, many other reviewers echoed her opinion. But millions of young Americans were eager to see John Travolta dance and romance with Olivia Newton-John, no matter what the critics said. They made *Grease* one of Hollywood's all-time money-makers.

Every week, *Variety*, in its inimitable style, mocks the judgments of the critics with reports on which movies audiences paid to see. In 1978, it reported that *Jaws II*, shrugged off by many critics, was "biting big" at the box office. The next year, the critically despised *Rocky II* was "Socky" in New

*Spartacus* often seemed to use Pax Romana and Pax Britannica as metaphors for Pax Americana to illustrate the trials and tribulations of imperium. (Other epics, such as *The Longest Day* and *Fifty-Five Days at Peking*, meditated more directly on American military history.) The runaway success of *The Sound of Music*, starring Julie Andrews, in 1965 marked the apogee of a series of lavish musicals celebrating the bright optimism of the times with uplift and gaiety: *Music Man*, *Mary Poppins*, and *Hello Dolly*.

When the big-budget genre balloon finally burst, notably with the flop of 20th Century-Fox's \$15 million *Star!* in 1968, it blew up with a bang. In 1969, five of the Big Eight studios were deeply in the red, and Wall Street was bearish on their future.

In that same year, the year of Richard Nixon's inauguration, Hollywood witnessed the monumental success of *Easy Rider*, a low-

York; *Heaven Can Wait* was "celestial."

The most that writers usually can hope for is to alter subtly the way Americans talk about the movies. Consider the case of Andrew Sarris, long-time film critic for Manhattan's *Village Voice*. Most moviegoers have never heard of him. But, during the 1960s, by popularizing the French auteur theory—the notion that directors are the real "authors" of movies—Sarris revolutionized the way many Americans think about films. Before Sarris, most filmgoers regarded the great Western *Rio Bravo* (1959) as a John Wayne–Dean Martin picture. Thanks to Sarris and his influence on other critics, many would now say that *Rio Bravo* is a Howard Hawks film.



Siskel and Ebert

If he were starting out today, however, Sarris and his opinions would not go very far. Critics' theories do not play well on television. And, since Siskel and Ebert made their first appearance in 1976, a host of local and network TV imitators have taken to the airwaves, diminishing further the influence of newspaper and magazine commentators. The Chicago partners, with more than 10 million viewers, remain the undisputed kings of

the aisle. They have also become stars in their own right, with each probably earning upwards of \$250,000.

The opinions of print reviewers are still (selectively) quoted in movie ads. But the scribes cannot hope to match the audiences and influence of their TV counterparts. And the studios know that. They cater to the TV folk by delivering conveniently packaged film clips of their latest releases, hoping for a few precious seconds of airtime, even if the critics turn thumbs down on the picture. What matters most to Hollywood is public attention of almost any kind—*then* favorable word-of-mouth. As the old Hollywood saying goes, "All publicity is good publicity."

—Douglas Gomery

budget motorcycle tour of America's emerging counterculture starring Peter Fonda and the then-unknown Jack Nicholson. The studios were quick to climb aboard the new bandwagon, ushering in a period of cinematic experimentation unprecedented in a half century of American film-making.

Traditional genre films were thrust into the background by a slew of original offerings that included *Alice's Restaurant*, *Zabriskie Point*, *Drive*, *He Said*, *Brewster McCloud*, *Harold and Maude*, *Mean Streets*, *Five Easy Pieces*, *M\*A\*S\*H*, and *Carnal Knowledge*.

These films reflected the nation's (or at least Hollywood's) Vietnam-afflicted, antitraditional mood. *Carnal Knowledge* was sexually explicit; *M\*A\*S\*H*, a black satire on war; *Harold and Maude* recounted the love affair of a teen-age boy and an 80-year-old woman. The films were experimental in form and composition as well as

content. The plots were loosely constructed and the editing disjunctive, reflecting the influence of Jean-Luc Godard and other directors of the French New Wave.

J. Hoberman, film critic of the *Village Voice*, recently described it all as the “small-and-weird-can-be-beautiful revolution.”

The most remarkable genre pictures of this period—such as *Bonnie and Clyde*, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, *The Long Goodbye*—were not straightforward genre exercises, but self-conscious and reflective. Their directors were well aware of the old formulas and turned them upside-down in order to thumb their noses at the established order. In *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971), for example, Robert Altman set up McCabe as a typical Western hero, a rugged individualist and founding father of a pioneer town, then exposed him as a weakling and a loser. The unrelenting hail of bullets in many of these movies echoed the domestic and international strife of the day, so the critics said, while the astounding stupidity and seediness of the new “anti-heroes” made it hard to tell who wore the white hats and who wore the black ones.

This is not to say that “experimental” and revisionist genre features monopolized the nation’s movie screens. Hollywood still churned out standardized Westerns (*The Stalking Moon*) and cops-and-robbers pictures (notably, *Bullitt* and *The French Connection*). These films, too, indirectly reflected popular anxieties about the war against evil, foreign and domestic. In Clint Eastwood’s *Dirty Harry*, a San Francisco cop deals with a psychotic terrorist named Scorpio the old-fashioned way: He kills him. And a spate of disaster films—*The Poseidon Adventure*, *Airport*, *Skyjacked*, *Earthquake*, *The Towering Inferno*—exploited the theme of entrapment, whose political and social correlates were easy to identify.

### Menu for Teenyboppers

But these efforts were the exception. For a time, experimentation thrived, commanding much greater critical and public attention than the more pedestrian genre offerings.

It was an unexpected string of blockbuster hits—William Friedkin’s *The Exorcist* in 1973, Steven Spielberg’s *Jaws* in 1975, and then George Lucas’s *Star Wars* two years later—that sent Hollywood producers rushing back to genre films. Or, as one film title later put it, back to the future.

One by one, the blockbusters slowly rose to high rank on *Variety*’s list of all-time hits. Indeed, today all of *Variety*’s top 10 are movies made since 1975.\*

\*At the top of *Variety*’s list, with \$228 million in U.S. and Canadian film rentals collected by its distributor, Universal, is *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial*. It is followed by *Star Wars*, *Return of the Jedi*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, *Jaws*, *Ghostbusters*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, *Beverly Hills Cop*, and *Grease*.

The success of these genre features underscored the fact that movie audiences had changed. No longer was Hollywood mainly in the business of offering entertainment for all ages: More than half of the people lining up at the theaters were under 25, many of them teen-agers. The older folks were staying home with TV. "If Hollywood keeps gearing movie after movie to teen-agers," quipped comedian-director Mel Brooks, "next year's Oscar will develop acne."

Youth was also making its mark in Hollywood. Spielberg (who was 24 when he agreed to make *Jaws*) and Lucas were among the first "movie brats," a new cadre of young film-makers who were beginning to make their way up the Hollywood ladder when *Jaws* swam onto the scene.\* Raised in the age of television, the newcomers had watched endless late-night reruns of Hollywood's trash and treasures. Many were also trained in university film schools when the reigning form of criticism, *auteurism*, accorded special emphasis to such Hollywood classics as Hitchcock's *Psycho* and John Ford's *The Searchers*. In the view of the auteur critics, Hollywood's previously unrecognized contract directors were maestros of film who made sharp personal statements in their works. The new directors were more than ready to follow in their footsteps.

### Slashers and Splatters

Whatever else might be said of these film-makers—that, as some critics contend, their works are clever but often empty—they know their craft. Spielberg, Lucas, and company can put the old genres through their paces with awesome precision, invent new plot twists, graft old tricks onto contemporary subject matter, and combine genres into new alloys.

But that is not all that they do. Often, the works of these new directors contain sly and not-so-sly allusions to film history—a camera movement here, the re-creation of a famous scene there. *Time* said of *Star Wars* that it was "a subliminal history of the movies, wrapped in a riveting tale of suspense and adventure." The new genre films often appear to have been designed with two audiences in mind: the connoisseurs on the lookout for "scholarly" references, and a mass of younger viewers in search of thrills.

One of the first genres to reappear was horror. Revived by the success of *The Exorcist*, which generated a half-dozen spinoffs, the trend did not appear long for this world. However, *Jaws* and *The Omen*, with its Grand Guignol stagings of stylized murders, gave the cycle a second push. Every kind of monster that audiences had ever seen rose up from its Hollywood grave: werewolves (*The Howling*,

\*The newcomers and their credits include: Joe Dante (*Gremlins*); Brian De Palma (*Body Double*); Tobe Hooper (*Poltergeist*, *Lifeorce*); Lawrence Kasdan (*Body Heat*, *Silverado*); John Landis (*National Lampoon's Animal House*, *The Blues Brothers*); Nicholas Meyer (*Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*); Irving Reitman (*Ghostbusters*); and Robert Zemeckis (*Romancing the Stone*, *Back to the Future*).





In 1984, "movie brats" George Lucas and Steven Spielberg joined forces to create Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom. Together or alone, they have been involved in seven of Variety's all-time top 10 hits.

American Werewolf in London), vampires (*Dracula*, *Lifeforce*, *The Hunger*, *Fright Night*), psychics (*Firestarter*), zombies (*Dawn of the Dead*, *The Fog*). With *The Car* and *Christine*, the studios added a new family of monsters to the Hollywood immortals: old cars.

Many of these movies share the same basic plot structure. First the monster appears, committing ghastly atrocities (the shark's mauling of a young girl in *Jaws*). Next, someone (the boy next door in *Fright Night*) discovers the agent of death (a vampire, in this case). Then, he must convince unbelievers that there really are vampires, big sharks, or whatever. And together the good guys go off to confront the monster in a final showdown.

This kind of plot seems to appeal to young audiences because it is a kind of parable about growing up. It highlights the discovery of hidden knowledge, while also dramatizing a moment when adults are finally forced to listen seriously to the young. And many horror films stress biological deformity and Otherness, thus broaching adolescent anxieties about the body.

Sometimes just the act of viewing a film can be a kind of rite of passage for teen-age boys: Are you man enough to sit through a gruesome "slasher"\* film (e.g., *Halloween*, *Friday the 13th* and its

\*"Slasher" films, in the tradition of *Psycho*, are those in which victims are done in by knives and axes. "Splatter" movies take advantage of sophisticated new special effects: Victims either explode on-screen or deteriorate in gruesome ways.

sequels, *Prom Night*), or an even gorier "splatter" film like *Scanners* or *The Evil Dead*?

A sizable share of the current menu of science fiction offerings—such as *Alien*, *The Thing*, *The Dark*—are really horror films, films about monsters. They are classified as sci-fi only because their monsters hail from outer space. A new twist in this old genre is the beatific, in contrast to horrific, sci-fi movie: *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *E.T.*, *Cocoon*. These films, with their friendly extra-terrestrials, confirm the adolescent wish for a universe filled with warm and compassionate beings.

Even more appealing to teen-age audiences is that these pictures involve quests or rites of passage. *The Last Starfighter*, for example, not only enacts the notion of a trial in cosmic proportions but exploits the desire of every girl and boy to escape the humdrum world of school and family. Because of his prowess in video games, Alex, otherwise an ordinary earthling boy next door, is drafted by the Star League of Planets to defeat the forces of the traitorous Xur.

### Knights in Punk Armor

The projection of adolescent fantasies onto big screens does not happen by accident. When Lucas was working on the script of *Star Wars*, he recalls, "I researched kids' movies and how they work and how myths work." "Do not call this film 'science fiction,'" he told the marketing men at 20th Century-Fox. "It's a space fantasy."

The commercial success of the space operas spawned several variants built around the quest and rite-of-passage themes. In the sword-and-sorcery genre—*Excalibur*, the *Conan* series, and, in 20th-century garb, *Time Bandits* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*—swords and whips replace ray guns, and magic, science. The *Mad Max* series depicts a post-apocalyptic world cloaked in imagery of the Dark Ages. Castles and chargers are made out of old cars, the barbarians are at the gates, and the spark of civilized life hinges on the outcome of stock car races between knights in punk regalia.

Today's comedies are not much closer to reality. With the exception of such sex farces as *10* and *Unfaithfully Yours*, both starring Dudley Moore, most of them are keyed to younger sensibilities. This is apparent in the flurry of films about high school romance, often in a light comic mood (*Sixteen Candles*, *Risky Business*). It is even more obvious in the aggressive irreverence of the gross-out/fraternity house humor of *Animal House* (and its numerous progeny) and the Burt Reynolds redneck car films. When they decide to sabotage their college homecoming parade with "a really futile, stupid gesture," Bluto and his *Animal House* brothers sum up the new comedy's attitude toward adult values.

Physical humor—slapstick, sight gags, and comic chases—have

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also gained a new lease on life. But the same sense of unreality prevails. Slapstick shares several traits with science fiction and supernatural films. All three genres demand the suspension of the laws of physical probability: The world becomes a kind of playground. In Woody Allen's *Zelig*, for example, a man metamorphoses into whom-ever he is with; in *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, a character steps off a movie screen that the characters are watching. This assault on the reality principle is so extreme that it verges on vulgar surrealism in films such as *The Blues Brothers*, the *Cheech and Chong* series, and *Pee Wee's Big Adventure*.

### No Place to Go

Fantasy prevails even when the settings seem real. In 1976, Sylvester Stallone restored the power of positive thinking to the screen with *Rocky*, a story about a "ham 'n egg" prize fighter who nearly wins the heavyweight boxing crown from the glamorous Apollo Creed. *Rocky* paved the way for a slew of uplifting sports films, of which Britain's *Chariots of Fire* is aesthetically the most noteworthy, as well as success stories about all sorts of down-and-outers, such as *The Verdict*.

There have been three *Rocky* sequels so far, all of them exercises in improbability. In *Rocky IV*, a boxing match becomes the solution to East-West tensions. Some of the most effective wish-fulfillment films, such as *Breaking Away* and *The Karate Kid*, have adolescents in the leading role. And, of course, the resurgence of the teen musical, spearheaded by *Saturday Night Fever*, *Fame*, and *Flashdance*, owes much to the success story motif.

The darker side of adolescent fantasy is evident in Stallone's two *Rambo* pictures. The *Rambo* movies have several ingredients that make them especially compelling to young audiences: the figure of the misunderstood loner, and the themes of betrayal and revenge. In *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, the Pentagon dispatches Rambo back to Vietnam to rescue American soldiers who have been declared "missing in action" (MIA). But then officialdom deserts him, claiming that there are no MIAs. So he uses his perfect, high school weightlifter's body to execute unstoppable rampages, leading his MIAs back to the United States over the dead bodies of scores of his foes. On the screen, Rambo transforms teen-agers' feelings of alienation and frustration into cinematic delusions of grandeur.

Of course, Hollywood has always emphasized escapism. Yet, it is astounding what a high percentage of its products today are literally fantasy films—horror, sci-fi, and absurdist comedies—or, in the case of *Rocky* and its kin, psychological fantasies. Even during the Great Depression, the heyday of Hollywood escapism, the studios released a fair number of gritty "realistic" pictures. But *The Grapes of Wrath*

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has no real counterpart today. *The Color Purple*, Steven Spielberg's effort to explore the unhappy history of the black family in America, was filmed like a fairy tale. *Country* and *The River*, two recent films that dramatized the plight of the nation's farmers, were thoroughly drenched in sentimentality. And there were many empty seats in the theaters where they were shown.

Lucas and the other new university-trained directors, with only a few notable exceptions, are no more interested in the "real world" than are their audiences. During the 1970s, they set out to rescue their heroes—not only Alfred Hitchcock and Howard Hawks, but Superman and Flash Gordon—from critical contempt and oblivion. In their eyes, the Hollywood genre movie was one of America's great art forms: How could so many people fail to see that?

In a sense, the movie brats have accomplished their revivalist mission in grand style. Indeed, they have managed to achieve a level of financial success and celebrity beyond the imaginings of their predecessors. But now they have nothing left to do. Movies have become the subject of movies, as though the most vital elements in our contemporary environment are representations and images rather than the "real world."

If today's directors are paid handsomely to indulge themselves, it is because their audiences make it profitable for the studios to sign the checks. And the youthful ticket-buying public seems to find more comfort and authenticity in honey-spun fantasy films than in those that confront political and social themes or simply dramatize the often painful realities of everyday life. Until the nation's movie audiences change their minds, Hollywood is sure to travel ever deeper into its past in search of its future.

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