



A fanciful 1951 sketch of a Hollywood studio cafeteria, showing, among others, Bob Hope, Gary Cooper, Boris Karloff, Peter Lorre, Tallulah Bankhead, Orson Welles, Charlie Chaplin, Fred Astaire, Edward G. Robinson, Spencer Tracy, Clark Gable, Marlene Dietrich, Al Jolson.

The Movies in America

Sixty years ago, American moviegoers were dazzled by *Don Juan* (starring John Barrymore), the first film ever made with synchronized, pre-recorded sound. The "talkies" revived the flagging appeal of Hollywood's products and created new stars for the young to idolize and imitate. Today's movies, seen on the screen, on TV, and, lately, on videocassettes, reach an even wider audience. *National Lampoon's Animal House* sparked a collegiate craze for food fights and toga parties; *Star Wars* gave us "the Force" and a name for President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative. And critics debate the political significance of Sylvester Stallone's *Rambo* dramas. Here, Douglas Gomery explains how Hollywood works; Noël Carroll argues that current film fare is more escapist than ever before; and David Bordwell appraises the dilemmas of today's cinematic avant-garde.

HOLLYWOOD'S BUSINESS

by Douglas Gomery

Andy Warhol is lunching poolside, amid the palm trees and exotic bird-of-paradise flowers. CBS News's Mike Wallace has already dashed off for a taping, but director Robert Benton is still sunning himself on one of the 200 chaise longues. Nearby, a young Paramount Pictures executive is poring over a script. Gossip hounds Susan Mulcahy of the *New York Post* and Barbara Howar of "Entertainment Tonight" are sniffing out stories. In a yellow-and-white striped cabana (rent: \$35 per day), executives from Tri-Star Pictures shake hands on a new venture with a group of movie producers.

It is just another day, as the *Wall Street Journal* reported last year, at the Beverly Hills Hotel pool, long "the watering spot where movie stars and moguls meet to make deals." The hotel management even furnishes poolside secretarial service. In Hollywood legend, the Olympic-size pool (for hotel guests only; their visitors pay \$10 for admission) rivals Schwab's Pharmacy as the place to go if you want to

be "discovered." Even the pool's manager, Svend Peterson, has appeared on the big screen, in bit parts in *The Prize* (1963) and *Torn Curtain* (1966). He keeps his Screen Actors Guild membership current, just in case. Robert Evans, who became the producer of *Chinatown* (1974) and *The Cotton Club* (1984), was a women's clothing manufacturer until destiny plucked him from his Beverly Hills Hotel lounge chair three decades ago.

A mile or two down Sunset Boulevard is the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) film school, which emerged during the 1970s, along with the University of Southern California (USC) film school across town, as another launch pad for success. Enroll, Hollywood lore says, and before long the film school "mafia," led by George Lucas (B.A., USC, 1966) and Francis Ford Coppola (M.A., UCLA, 1968), will discover you.

Unfortunately, neither the "by-the-pool" nor the "at-school" method has ever produced a very high individual success rate. For anybody who really wants to make it to the top in Hollywood, who wants to be in a position to hire and fire the movie crowd at the Beverly Hills Hotel pool, there is a much clearer path: Go to law school, land a job with one of the conglomerates that dominate the movie business, and slowly work your way up.

The \$1 Billion Question

That is how Ned Tanen of Paramount Pictures and Frank G. Wells of Walt Disney Productions did it.

Hollywood's executives preside over an industry whose public profile far exceeds its economic heft. The annual net *profits* of the International Business Machines Corporation (IBM) are greater than the domestic box-office revenues (\$4.2 billion) of the entire U.S. motion picture industry. Including cameramen, actors, secretaries, and film editors (but not theater personnel), it employs only 220,000 people. Why all the glamor? Some of it comes from the high-stakes character of the business and the enormous earnings of the stars. The difference in gross revenues between an expensive flop like *Heaven's Gate* (1980) and a smash hit like *Star Wars* (1977) can amount over a period of years to nearly \$1 billion. Big films, such as *Jaws* (1975), *Out of Africa* (1985), and *The Color Purple* (1985), can leave their mark on fashion, fads, behavior, and, sometimes, pub-

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Americans love to go to the movies, especially to see love bloom. And Hollywood rarely forgets the romantic "angle." *Boy Meets Girl-Boy Loses Girl-Boy Gets Girl* was the theme of three "Andy Hardy" pictures starring Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland between 1938 and 1941.

lic debate. But, above all, Hollywood captures the popular imagination because it is still the nation's (and the world's) "dream machine," projecting private hopes and fantasies and fears onto a big screen for all to see and share.

Despite some considerable changes in the way Hollywood does business, an industry "insider" from the 1930s would still recognize today's dominant companies. Gone are the flamboyantly tyrannical movie moguls like Louis B. Mayer and Darryl F. Zanuck, the paternalistic studio system, and Hollywood's old monopoly on stardom, American-style. Many of the vast and glorious backlots, where the likes of Gary Cooper faced *High Noon* (1952) and Gene Kelly went *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) have disappeared or shrunk, now occupied by office buildings and hotels.

Yet there is one constant on the Hollywood scene: Eight multinational corporations formed more than 50 years ago still have hegemony over the production and worldwide distribution of feature films. Of the old Hollywood film factory giants, only RKO (producer of the 1933 version of *King Kong* and those dazzling Fred Astaire-Ginger Rogers musicals) has gone under, dismantled during the 1950s by its owner, the eccentric billionaire Howard Hughes.

Studio executives still make or break the careers of the Robert Evanses, Jessica Langes, and Richard Geres. They also decide whether to distribute the films of George Lucas, Francis Ford Coppola, and those of every one of Hollywood's legion of aspiring

producers and directors. And without a studio distribution contract, few film-makers can raise the \$12 million required for the average Hollywood production budget, even if they spend a lifetime at the Beverly Hills Hotel pool. (Distribution and advertising expenses add at least another 50 percent to a movie's costs.) Orson Welles, the brilliant director of *Citizen Kane* (1941) who died last year, never directed another major release after *Touch of Evil* (1957) because the studios viewed him, as his biographer Joseph McBride put it, as a "wastrel, a rebel, a continuing challenge to the Hollywood system."

"The new Hollywood," as Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) executive vice-president David Chasman observed in 1981, "is very much like the old Hollywood."

Citadels of Fantasy

The Big Eight studios have survived repeated challenges: the breakup of their theater networks, the rise of broadcast television, the advent of cable and "pay" television, and, most recently, the videocassette revolution. They show no signs of weakening. The studios, despite their age, are among the nation's most adaptable, agile corporations.

Today, old-fashioned entrepreneurs own just three of the eight studios—20th Century-Fox, MGM, and United Artists Communications. Yet their economic reach vastly exceeds anything ever dreamed of by the moguls of Hollywood's Golden Age.

The Australian-born press lord Rupert Murdoch, for example, created America's first vertically integrated movie-television company when he bought 20th Century-Fox for \$575 million in 1985 and combined it with the chain of six big-city independent TV stations that he recently acquired from Metromedia Television. This means that a Fox-made film such as *The Jewel of the Nile* (1985) can be shown by the new Fox TV stations after it appears in the nation's theaters, keeping all the film's revenues within the corporate family. Ultimately, Murdoch hopes to create a fourth television network to challenge ABC, CBS, and NBC.

Ted Turner of cable television fame agreed to buy MGM in 1985 for similar reasons: MGM's film library will feed his television operations. He made the deal with Kirk Kerkorian, another entrepreneur who still owns United Artists, which he acquired in 1981.

Two of the Big Eight are now subunits of large, diversified conglomerates: Columbia Pictures Industries has been a division of the Coca-Cola Company since 1982. And Paramount Pictures is the corporate stepchild of a billion-dollar giant, Gulf & Western Industries. Hollywood still prides itself on being a liberal, "creative" community—although Orson Welles once lamented the "gray flannel shadow" over Movieland—and not a few of its celebrities are chor-

ting over the tribulations of the buttoned-down corporate types from Coca-Cola, which has not been notably successful in the motion picture business.

In recent years, top honors at the box office have gone to studios owned by two conglomerates that specialize in entertainment: Warner Brothers, owned by Warner Communications, and Universal, a division of MCA. (MCA, following the Murdoch-Turner strategy, recently bought an independent New York television station for \$387 million.) The Disney studio, part of the Disney entertainment conglomerate, has not done so well. But with the release of *Down and Out in Beverly Hills* (1986) under its new Touchstone Films banner, it is now pursuing adult audiences, and greater profits.

In Hollywood parlance, the Big Eight corporations are "the majors." Year in, year out, they control almost 80 percent of the movie business in the United States and approximately half the market in Sweden, West Germany, and several other nations in Western Europe, not to mention Asia. (Hollywood derives roughly 50 percent of its revenues from overseas film rentals.) Every few years, a couple of bold pretenders (recently, Orion Pictures and New World Pictures) emerge to challenge the Big Eight at home, and as often as not they



*Louis B. Mayer, head of production at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, huddles with producer Cecil B. DeMille to consider plans for *Dynamite* (1929).*

PUTTING TOGETHER *TOOTSIE*

For each of the 350 or more feature films that Hollywood turns out every year, there is a "story" behind the story. But "saga" may be a better word for the making of *Tootsie*.

Tootsie was born during the 1970s as a script called *Would I Lie to You?* by a little-known writer-director named Don McGuire. Purchased by theater owner Henry Plitt and two partners, it made the rounds of Hollywood producers, directors, and agents until 1978, when it landed in the hands of comedian Buddy Hackett. Hackett wanted to play one of the supporting roles, so he took the script to a producer, Charles Evans. Evans bought an "option" on it. (Because of long delays in beginning production, he would be forced to pay to renew the option "one or two" more times.)

Months later, Evans convinced his friend, Dick Richards, director of *Farewell, My Lovely*, to show the "property" to Dustin Hoffman, his partner in a "property development" firm. Hoffman, reports author Susan Dworkin in *Making Tootsie* (1983), liked it immediately. Thus began a commitment that was to last nearly four years.

Hoffman wanted complete creative control, and he insisted that Hal Ashby direct the picture. Evans kicked himself upstairs to executive producer; Dick Richards dropped out entirely (so, eventually, did Buddy Hackett). But with a star like Hoffman on board, Evans had no trouble convincing Columbia Pictures to advance a few hundred thousand dollars in "development" money.

Hoffman set to work rewriting the story with his friend, playwright Murray Schisgal, while interviewing actors and actresses and painstakingly perfecting his make-up.



In the autumn of 1981, Columbia executives, acting as mediators, reported that Ashby was unavailable. Sydney Pollack, however, was free, and they favored him because he was a sound investment: Six of his last eight pictures had been money-makers. But Pollack would sign on only if he was guaranteed control over the "final cut"—the final version. Hoffman agreed. Pollack became both producer and director of the picture.

By November 1981, all of the principals were ready to sign on the dotted line. *Tootsie* (Hoffman's title) became a Columbia Pictures presentation of a Sydney Pollack Film, A Mirage/Punch Production. Mirage is Pollack's production company; Punch, Hoffman's. The deal: Columbia agreed to finance production of the movie from its own revolving line of bank credit to the tune of \$20 million. (Usually producers must corral outside investors to finance a film; movie investments are a popular tax shelter.) Hoffman was to be paid \$4.5 million plus a percentage of the profits; Pollack would get \$2 million and a percentage. Among the others entitled to a cut of the profits was Don McGuire, the original writer but long out of the picture.

Money in hand, Pollack (with Hoffman's help) hired his own team—55 actors and actresses and a production crew of 65 (including assistant directors, cameramen, a transportation “captain”). Hoffman's co-stars—Jessica Lange, Teri Garr, Bill Murray—were signed up. Also on Pollack's staff was a production manager who would file daily budget reports with Columbia.

During nine days of meetings at Pollack's beach house, Hoffman, Pollack, and writer Larry (*M*A*S*H*) Gelbart, who, at Columbia's urging, had replaced Murray Schisgal, worked over the script yet again. By now, the basic plot was clear: An out-of-work actor masquerades as an actress and becomes the star of a TV soap opera. Ultimately, eight writers labored over the script, at a cost of some \$1.5 million.

Filming began in New York City on April Fool's Day 1982, lasting, as *New Yorker* film critic Pauline Kael put it, a “rather scandalous” 98 days—23 days over schedule. The production budget was set at \$80,000 a day, or \$110 per minute, using the usual 12-hour workday. Having sacrificed his “final cut” privileges, Hoffman knew that he would have to fight his creative battles during the filming—he and Pollack often debated acting technique, dialogue, and lighting as the cast and crew waited. Several times, Hoffman's heavy make-up brought out a rash, delaying shooting.

By late August, when filming (all of it on location in Manhattan and upstate New York) was finished, the picture was way behind schedule for its planned Christmas 1982 release. Pollack had to have a rough cut ready to screen for theater owners by mid-October, and a completed film to show critics by mid-November. He flew back to Hollywood the day the last scene was shot, missing the cast's “wrap” party. Using a cutting room rented from Columbia, he edited the film in five weeks



instead of the usual five to six months. Among his concerns: shaping the film to get a PG (Parental Guidance) rating and attract the “family” audience. “For me,” says Pollack, “every picture is . . . a hopeless disaster until a certain point in the editing.”

Tootsie turned out to be one of the 20 percent of Hollywood films that have a happy ending: It made money, becoming the hit of the 1982 Christmas season. (According to the Motion Picture Association of America, 60 percent of all feature films never recover their costs, 20 percent break even, and the rest make money.) A year later, Home Box Office bought the cable rights to *Tootsie* for a reported \$20 million, and Columbia signed a deal to bring out a *Tootsie* videocassette priced at \$79.95. In September 1985, the movie had its TV premiere on ABC.

Four years after its release, *Tootsie*'s revenues are still rolling in. The “bottom line” will not be known for years, but Columbia's yield from rentals to U.S. and Canadian theaters alone topped \$95 million, making *Tootsie* number 11 on *Variety*'s list of all-time hits.

succeed in creating a modest hit or two. But no challenger has survived over the long haul.*

There is no secret to the majors' success. In essence, their power derives, as it always has, from their ability to distribute films. At considerable expense, they maintain offices in about 25 cities in America (and up to 65 overseas), where their representatives are in constant contact with the heads of regional theater chains. The studios' "hit parade" record at the box office is what impels theater owners (a conservative lot) to rent their products.† In the "new" Hollywood, there are dozens of independent producers, but virtually all of them pay the big studios to distribute their films.

In 1945, during the high tide of movie-going in America, the majors owned most of the nation's movie theaters. Downtown "picture palaces"—the Paramount in New York, the Oriental in Chicago, the Mastbaum in Philadelphia—were the showcases of the system. "In Hollywood's heyday," notes *Time* magazine, "the films were only celluloid but the cinemas that showed them were marble citadels of fantasy and opulence . . . some of the most exuberantly romantic architecture ever conceived in the U.S." Marcus Loew, the founder of MGM, once said, "We sell tickets to theaters, not movies."

Guess Who's Going to the Movies?

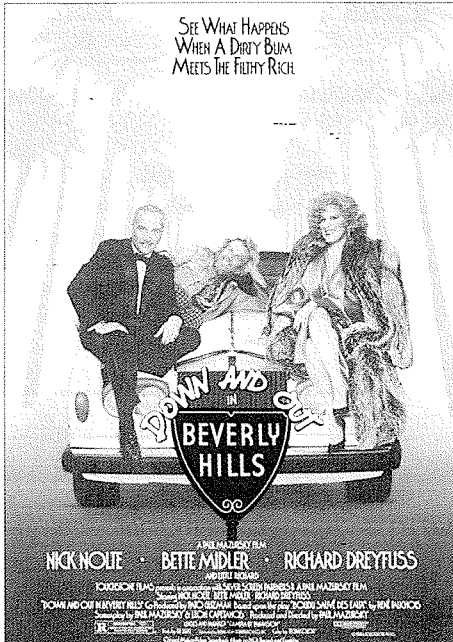
From these Xanadus, with their baroque architectural splendor and acres of seats, came the bulk of any film's revenues, even though smaller neighborhood houses, with about 500 seats, outnumbered the dream palaces by 9 to 1. In the years right after World War II, the theaters sold some 90 million tickets every week.

That all began to change in 1948, when the U.S. Supreme Court declined to hear an appeal of the Paramount antitrust case, forcing the majors to sell their theater holdings. They gradually divested themselves during the next decade—just in the nick of time, as it turned out. As middle-class Americans migrated to the suburbs, many of the downtown movie houses decayed or closed their doors.

Today, 50 regionally based companies dominate the film exhibition business, led by Cineplex Odeon, General Cinema, and United Artists Communications, each with more than 1,000 screens. (Total screens in the North American market: 20,200.) Many of these new

*The U.S. film industry is unique: In the nations of Western Europe (including Great Britain) and most other areas of the world, directors and producers must secure the backing of a single national government-owned film production authority. The search for more money and wider film distribution occasionally drives noted foreign directors such as Ingmar Bergman and Kurosawa Akira to Hollywood.

†The studios and the theaters engage in a never-ending tug-of-war. The studios' revenues come from the rental fee and a share of the box-office receipts; both sums are negotiable. To enlarge "profit centers" in which the studios cannot share, some theater owners now deploy ushers hawking popcorn and soft drinks in the aisles as well as in the lobby. One reason: Three cents worth of popcorn can be sold for \$1. Theaters now ring up some \$340 million in popcorn sales annually.



Among the matters carefully negotiated in Hollywood contracts are where and how credits will appear in movie advertisements. Here, nobody won billing above the title, a prime spot. But producer-director Paul Mazursky's name appears four times. While all three star actors are listed in the same size type, Nick Nolte has top billing.

film exhibition giants got their start as operators of drive-in theaters, the "passion pits" of the 1950s. They prospered not only because they offered a trysting place for older adolescents but because they offered a cheap night out for young parents—they could put the kids in the car's backseat, no babysitter needed. (Some families also threw their dirty laundry in the trunk: A few drive-ins offered laundromats for overworked mothers.) Opening a drive-in required only a fence, a macadam parking lot, some speakers for the cars, a projector, and an enormous screen. Best of all, the drive-ins could be built on cheap land at the edge of town.

As the suburbs matured and land became relatively more expensive, "hardtop" cinemas enjoyed a comeback, usually in the form of mini-cinemas with a couple of hundred seats squeezed into a plain box shell in a shopping center. Then, during the 1970s, came the cineplexes, usually with three to 12 screens under one roof.

In a way, the exhibition business has come full circle: The new cineplexes essentially are unadorned, chopped up versions of the glorious Paramounts and Orientals of old. (A few new theaters are even putting on some frills again to lure customers.) The economics, as *Fortune* magazine explained earlier this year, is simple. "A theater with four screens, roughly the national average, is four times more likely than a one-screen house to book a hit picture." A hit movie can be shifted to a big room, a dud to a smaller one.

ROOM AT THE TOP

In his novel Her Only Sin (1985), a portrait of one Susan-Marie Warmack, who becomes a successful Hollywood studio executive, scriptwriter Benjamin Stein describes the anxieties among those who make it to the stratosphere:

On Saturdays I often drove out to the Malibu Colony to visit Susan-Marie and [her husband] Paul. They had calls to make and scripts to read. I, the perpetual tourist, would walk along the beach and look at the millionaires. The more spectacular their manse, the more angry, terrified, and vulpine were the looks on their faces, like Damascus street assassins in gold and tailored leather, perpetually on guard against a return to dusty souks and goat's cheese. . . .

Still, I could easily see the attraction of Hollywood despite its liars, its thieves, its heartbreak, and its fundamental confusion about human life.

©

For six months a redheaded waiter served me and my various dates seaweed, dumplings, and spicy beef at Mr. Chow. Then one day he sold a script to Columbia. He got forty thousand for a first draft and a set of revisions, and then he was officially a writer. . . . The pool man for my apartment building used to bring around his girlfriend. She was a redneck with tiny features and dirty blond hair. The pool man also serviced the pool of Leonard Spellberg in West Hollywood. He saw her stretching out to rake the bottom of the pool one day while she was wearing tight white shorts. In a year, she was a regular on "The Emperor's New Clothes," a long-running series about the play and intrigues of the rich in Boca Raton. One year after that she owned the apartment building where I lived.

Seemingly, Hollywood was the Philosophers' Stone of human morphology. It could make small people big and poor people rich. More important, Hollywood could do all of this as if by magic, overnight, while the subject of the experiment in metamorphosis was sleeping, so to speak. You simply came to town, put down your number by being thin and available, and you took your chance.

The fact was that Hollywood did not make the waiter strong and happy. It did not make the pool man's girlfriend serene and contented. . . . Hollywood took those people and gave them a lifelong anxiety attack: Will my contract be renewed? Will I be able to afford the \$10,000-a-month payments on my house? . . . I am up in the stratosphere, but will I be able to stay here? Will someone younger and thinner and hipper and *luckier* come along to take my place on Parnassus and Vine?

After all, if [the newcomers] were sent heavenward by divine interference and not by any kind of real world effort and discipline, if they had simply made it because of a stroke of luck, they had to know that it could all be taken away by another stroke—of *bad* luck.

Reprinted from Her Only Sin by Benjamin Stein. © 1985 by Benjamin Stein. Reprinted with permission of St. Martin's Press, Inc.

The cineplexes are far better suited to the film release patterns that developed as the majors sold off their theater holdings. Under the old system, the studios turned out nearly a picture a week to feed their chains: A film would open for a week at downtown picture palaces, return a few months later for a week at the larger neighborhood houses, then appear on successively lower rungs of the distribution ladder. At each step down, the price of admission dropped.

"Once separated from their theater chains," writes film historian Arthur Knight, "the studio heads quickly realized that they no longer had to supply a new movie each week for their own houses. They cut back on their production schedules." The change spelled the end of the already ailing studio system: Why keep stars and directors and screenwriters on costly year-round contracts merely to work on two or three films a year?

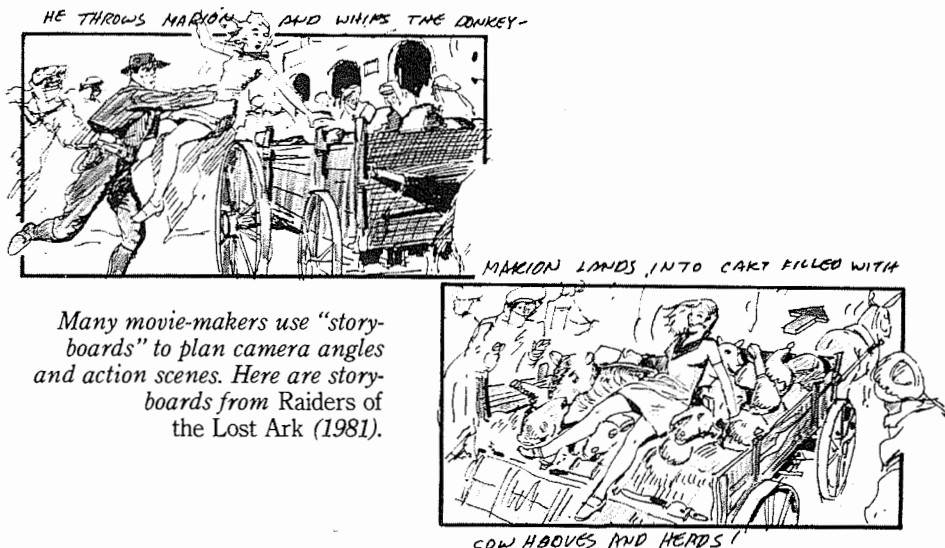
Viewing patterns also changed. After 1948, television siphoned off part of the film audience, and moviegoers who once went to the pictures no matter what was showing changed their ways. "Filmgoing used to be part of the social fabric," observes Art Murphy, a USC film professor. "Now it's an impulse purchase."

After dropping from a peak of 4.5 billion during the late 1940s, annual admissions leveled off at about one billion during the 1960s and have remained relatively steady at that number. Considering the growth of the population, this represents about a 25 percent decline in the proportion of the U.S. population going to the movies. At the same time, the composition of the movie-going audience has changed. The new schedule targets today's biggest ticket buyers: Teen-agers on school vacations. According to the *1986 International Motion Picture Almanac*, young people aged 12 to 19 make up 40 percent of the typical movie theater audience. They go out to the movies almost three times as often as their parents or grandparents. The over-40 set accounts for a mere 15 percent of ticket sales.

Adapting to TV

In the cineplex world, summer, beginning before Memorial Day and ending on the Labor Day weekend, is the season when the majors unleash their hoped-for hits. Blockbusters such as *Back to the Future* (1985) hang on for months, sometimes even a year. According to *Variety*, the industry's trade newspaper, the summer movie season accounts for nearly 50 percent of the domestic box-office take. The Christmas and Easter vacation periods are also peak periods.

Where have the older folks gone? Literally, nowhere. Most are staying home, parked in front of their television sets. The "tube" serves up not only cop shows and other standard TV fare, but a surprising number of Hollywood productions. A quick survey of *TV Guide* reveals that about one-quarter of the average television broad-



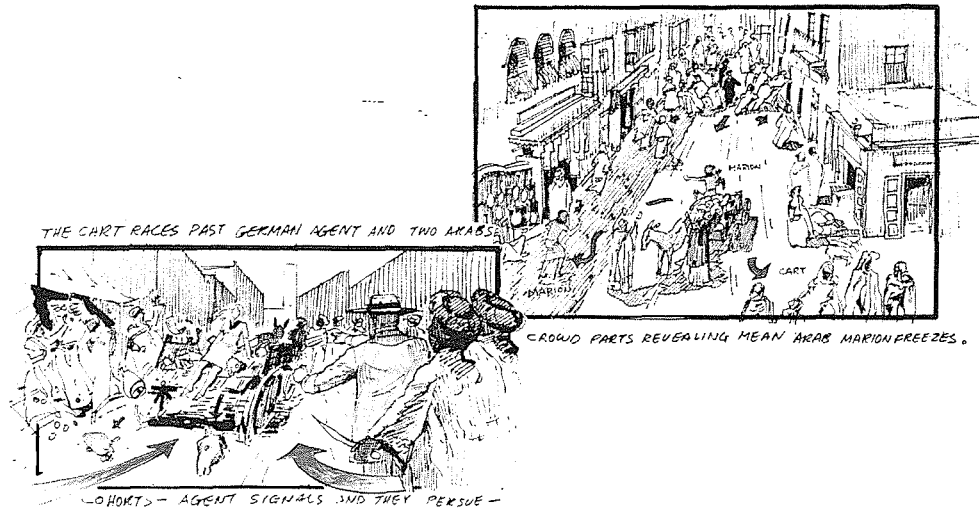
Many movie-makers use "story-boards" to plan camera angles and action scenes. Here are story-boards from *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981).

cast day is devoted to movies, most of them aired by independent stations. Add cable television's film-heavy menu and the movie time vastly increases.

During the late 1940s, the majors had tried to deal with the rise of television in a number of ways: Several attempted (unsuccessfully) to establish their own television networks or to ally themselves with existing ones. Others tried to offer more of what the public could not get from television. They came up with "3D" films, wide-screen pictures, and, in two extremely short-lived experiments, AromaRama and Smell-O-Vision. The big shift began in 1955 when Howard Hughes, then in the process of dismantling RKO, agreed to rent pre-1948 RKO feature films to the fledgling TV networks. One by one the major studios followed suit.

Thereafter, Hollywood became indispensable to television. By the late 1950s, all of the major studios had plunged into the production of TV series. Universal's television division now boasts such prime-time hits as *Miami Vice* and *Murder, She Wrote*.* During the 1960s, Hollywood began to rent recent films (usually three to five years old) to the television networks, which, thus provisioned, mounted a "Night at the Movies" for every night of the week.

*The studios are deeply involved in the production of television shows. Even without their old backlots, they retain the sound stages, prop collections, and managerial talent needed to mount elaborate prime-time series, as well as mini-series and dramatic anthologies such as Steven Spielberg's *Amazing Stories*. (Situation comedies, game shows, and soap operas are the province not of major studios but of specialized TV production companies.) In some ways, the studios' TV operations recall the old days: To work on television programs, Universal, for example, keeps over 100 writers and producers on contract.



Unhappy with the ever-increasing rents that they were paying for Hollywood studio features, the networks moved during the 1960s to create their own movie fare—the made-for-TV movie, then the mini-series and novel-for-television. Some critics dismiss these low-budget productions as the “disease of the week,” but in reality today’s made-for-TV dramas are successors to Hollywood’s “B” movies of yore. In any event, these in-house TV products have not eliminated the networks’ need to rent Hollywood films.

In 1972, Time Inc. entered the fray with Home Box Office (HBO), which for a modest monthly fee of about \$10 offered cable television viewers recent Hollywood motion pictures uncut and uninterrupted by commercials. For the first time in the television age, a way had been found to make viewers pay for what they watched in their living rooms. Thus, the term “pay television.” The result was aptly summed up by a headline in *Broadcasting* magazine: “Ten Years That Changed the World of Telecommunications.”*

Four years after HBO appeared, Sony introduced its revolutionary Betamax half-inch home videocassette recorder (VCR). Originally priced over \$1,000 (double that in today’s dollars), the cost of Beta machines and their newer rivals, the VHS, dropped to just over \$300 by 1986. And the price keeps falling. An enthusiastic American public

*For the film buff, the “superstations” offered by ordinary cable television are even better than HBO. Consider Ted Turner’s WTBS in Atlanta. Turner took a typical local independent station, complete with its commercials, sports, series reruns, and old movies, and beamed its output to America’s cable systems via satellite. Turner makes his money chiefly by charging advertisers premium rates to reach his large audience. Perhaps half of WTBS’s airtime goes to old films, providing a rich repertory cinema in the home.

has snapped up some 25 million machines; the industry expects to sell 10 million more in 1986. Such numbers, notes *Washington Post* critic Tom Shales, give "home video nearly the penetration of cable TV and, thus, virtual 'mass medium' standing."

From the beginning, Hollywood loathed the new machine. In allowing VCR owners to tape movies from their television sets, and to control when and where they would view pre-recorded films, the device seemed designed to rob Hollywood and the movie theaters of patrons. The VCR, declared Jack Valenti, president of the Motion Picture Association of America, "is a *parasitical* instrument."

The Future As Rerun

But, characteristically, Hollywood has already found a way to make the most of the VCR.

At first, the studios tried to sell pre-recorded movies to the public. But the \$80 price tag on most popular films kept the public away in droves. Then, in 1980, local entrepreneurs began to buy multiple copies of pre-recorded tapes and offer them for rent. By the mid-1980s stores renting video tapes seemed to be popping up on every street corner. Record stores and even grocery stores jumped into the business, including, most recently, the Southland Corporation, with a trial run in some of its 7,250 7-Eleven stores in the United States. These outlets are something like the old neighborhood picture houses—except that today's most popular neighborhood theater is the living room.

The studios have been quick to capitalize on the trend. In 1985, they grossed \$1.5 billion at the box office, and between \$1.5 billion and \$1.8 billion from sales of videocassettes, mostly to the rental clubs. Complaining that there is not enough "product" to satisfy demand, one videocassette manufacturer has announced plans to make its own films.

Videocassettes have created new markets. Some films only become hits when released as videos. For example, director Martin Scorsese's *Scarface* (1984) did reasonably well for Universal at the box office but later commanded the top spot among VCR rentals, thus gaining a fresh new audience.

Citing the 12 percent drop in theater attendance in 1985, the head of one large theater chain remarked recently, "Anyone who doesn't believe videocassettes are devastating competition to theaters is a fool." But Richard Fox, head of the National Association of Theater Owners, thinks that Hollywood "just didn't make the movies people wanted to see this year." The only certain victims of the VCR revolution are pornographic movie houses: As many as 40 percent of them have closed their doors since viewers gained the ability to watch movies of their choice at home.

For better or worse, the VCR is making an impact on everybody who shows motion pictures. Paradoxically, new movie screens are now going up at the fastest pace since the 1920s, mostly in shopping malls in America's outer suburbs and in affluent city neighborhoods. Why? In order to offer movie-lovers ease of access to the latest in first-run Hollywood films. For their part, HBO and other pay television channels are fighting back against the VCR by offering one-time "pay per view" showings of new films after they debut in the theaters but before they appear on videocassettes.

All of this competition guarantees that the TV networks will reduce their reliance on Hollywood's motion pictures. The trend is already well advanced. When CBS aired *Star Wars* in February 1984, that blockbuster looked to be a sure-fire ratings hit. The network doubled its prime-time ad prices. Then *Star Wars* was beaten in the ratings by ABC's *Lace*, a steamy, made-for-TV movie that cost only \$3 million to make, less than half what CBS had paid to rent *Star Wars*. Yet, as the networks seek alternatives to Big Eight products, the cable superstations and over-the-air independent TV stations will gladly take up the slack, gradually moving toward round-the-clock showings of the best and worst of Hollywood's past.

All of these changes, from the expansion of cable to the rise of the VCR, add up to one clear trend. More and more people are going to be watching more and more motion pictures. And to filmdom's Big Eight, that is nothing but good news, for they will still be shaping most of what people watch.

In Hollywood, the past exists only on film and in memory, and many of the film colony's older folk mourn the Golden Age. The parties were grander, the celebrities more glamorous, the studios more magnificent. But, such memories aside, it is remarkable how little has changed during the last 60 years. The cast of characters is different, but the same studios still direct the action. Old patterns of doing business have survived into the age of television and the VCR. Aiming at new generations of movie-viewers, the studios even turn out the same kinds of pictures—science fiction, Westerns, horror films—in the same predictable cycles. And every picture still represents a big-money gamble on public taste. In more ways than one would have imagined, watching the business of Hollywood today is like watching an old movie that one has seen before.



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,

*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

"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

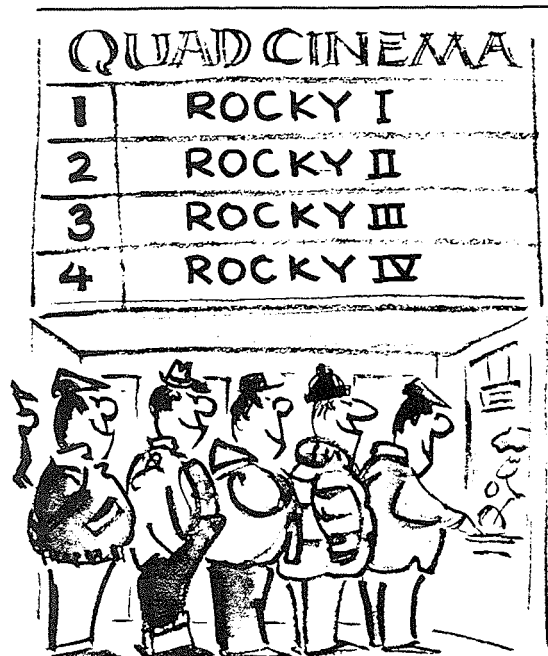
From the studios' perspective, genres were useful in plotting production strategy. Genre films come in cycles: On the principle that nothing succeeds like success, Hollywood would follow one box-office genre hit with many clones. Each would be refined in its own way. "It is as if with each commercial 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 of Frankenstein*, *Ghost of Frankenstein*, and *House of Frankenstein*, as well as *Son of Dracula* 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

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 whomever 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*

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.

THE AVANT-GARDE

by David Bordwell

If Louis B. Mayer, the Hollywood mogul, had lived until the late 1960s, he would have been startled by some of the changes in the tastes of movie-going Americans.

True, the lines would have been longest at theaters offering such easily recognizable Hollywood fare as *Dr. Dolittle* or *Paint Your Wagon*. But in the larger cities and college towns, a good many movie fans would have been elsewhere. Some would have been thronging local "art" theaters to see Ingmar Bergman's *The Hour of the Wolf* or Luis Buñuel's *Viridiana*. Others would have been at the museum watching experimental works by Stan Brakhage or Andy Warhol. And the local campus film society might have been packing them in with Jean-Luc Godard's *Weekend*, a savage denunciation of bourgeois lifestyles.

Most Americans were (and are) still going to the movies to be entertained. But the emergence after World War II of a big new generation of college graduates—some of them with film appreciation courses under their belts, many with some exposure to modernism in the arts—created a sizable audience in the United States for experimental films.

Such films were nothing new. Almost as soon as it was born, cinema encountered modernism. The meeting occurred not in the Hollywood studios but, during the 1920s, in the cafés of Paris and Berlin and the chilly meeting rooms of Moscow. Painters were attracted to cinema by its capacity to become what one artist called "drawings brought to life." Composers found its dynamic movement and montage a counterpart of musical rhythm. For artists in many fields, the new medium represented modernity itself. "Most forms of representation have had their day," declared Antonin Artaud, the French poet and founder of the "theater of cruelty," in 1930. "Life, what we call life, becomes ever more inseparable from the mind. The cinema is capable of interpreting this domain more than any other art, because idiotic order and customary clarity are its enemies."

It was thus not simply the technical side of cinema that appealed to modernist artists. Cinema was an ideal vehicle for the modernist urge to question the solidity of reality, to probe the way the world seems to the beholder.

Among the first film-makers to take this approach was Germany's Robert Wiene, in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920). With

*In a scene from Robert Wiene's hallucinatory *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), Caligari's hypnotized servant, Cesare, looms over one of his victims. Many film critics argue that Cesare represented the "enslaved" German working class.*



remarkable sets painted in the expressionist style, the film conveyed the hallucinatory vision of a madman named Francis. Only in the end is it revealed that Dr. Caligari is the warden of the insane asylum where Francis is an inmate. Yet the audience is led to wonder whether there is some larger metaphorical truth about society in the hallucinations of the madman. This theme is well-worn today, but it was novel in its time. Not until after World War II did the probing of psychic ambiguity become a common theme for movie-makers.

And there were other ambiguities. A samurai has been killed and his wife raped; a bandit has confessed. So much is fact. Yet, through flashbacks, the wife, the bandit, and a witness each present a different version of events. Was the rape resisted? Did the samurai fight bravely, or did he try to flee? That is the substance of Kurosawa Akira's *Rashomon* (1951), which inaugurated the illusion-reality theme in post-World War II cinema. Although considered "too Western" in Japan, the film had an enormous impact in the West—not least for its refusal to answer the riddles it posed. The audience never learns the truth; Kurosawa suggests that each version *is* the truth, at least to each character.

The inquiry into the relativity of perception preoccupied a whole generation of European film-makers during the 1950s and '60s. In *Wild Strawberries* (1957), Sweden's Ingmar Bergman used flashbacks to detail an old man's nostalgic revision of his past. Later, in

Persona (1966), Bergman merged almost seamlessly the chaotic dreams of a nurse on the edge of a nervous breakdown with his portrayal of her reality. Bergman suggests that film-making itself is as mysterious and impenetrable as the lives he portrays: "The illuminated face, the hand raised as if for an incantation, the old ladies at the square, the few banal words, all of these images come and attach themselves like silvery fish to my net; or, more precisely, I myself am trapped in a net, the texture of which I am not aware."

Empty Spaces

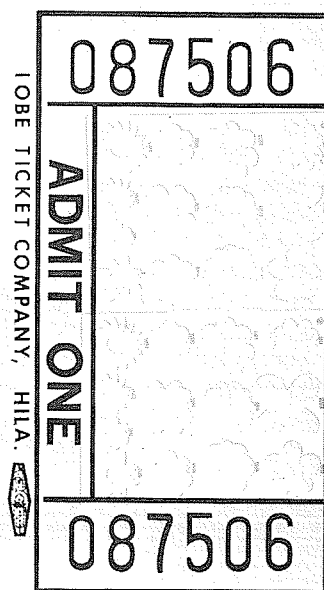
Federico Fellini's lively *8½* (1963) advanced the theme further with its hero, a harried movie director whose memories and fantasies are filtered through film conventions and clichés. Fellini thus introduced a reflection upon cinema itself, the machine for producing realistic-seeming illusions. Just as Pablo Picasso's work questioned realistic conceptions of painting, so such films as *Rashomon* and *8½* challenged the "customary clarities" of the Hollywood film. As Alain Resnais, co-director of *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), put it, "My aim is to put the spectator in such a state that a week, six months, or a year afterwards, placed before a problem, he would be prevented from cheating and be obliged to react freely."

But Resnais and his colleagues clung to the belief that a film should tell a story. Other modernists, not only in film, were going a step further, de-emphasizing story-telling, or even eliminating it altogether. They aimed to draw the audience's attention to the medium itself, to the tangible patterns of words, gestures, scenes. The idea originated in modern painting. Some painters, such as the Soviet constructivist Vladimir Tatlin (1885–1953), held that doing away with "stories" would return the spectator to a state of innocent perception, allowing him to see the elements of art clearly. Artists of a more mystical turn believed that the purist approach could provide a glimpse of the ineffable—what Kazimir Malevich (1878–1935), inventor of the school of abstract geometric painting known as suprematism, called "the semaphore of light across an infinite abyss."

Malevich's ideas were echoed after World War II in the work of young directors influenced by abstract expressionist painting. In the films of Missouri-born Stan Brakhage, perhaps the most important American avant-gardist of his generation, the "story" is no more than

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Andy Warhol's poster for the 1967 New York Film Festival. Avant-garde film-makers exhibit their works at dozens of major festivals held around the world every year in hopes of winning critical acclaim—or gaining the attention of a commercial distributor.



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an episode from his personal life or a sketchy mythic formula, transformed into a purely cinematic vision of flickering hues, flowing shapes, and endlessly changing views of mundane objects. In *Scenes from under Childhood* (1967), Brakhage produced the most poetic of home movies. He interspersed photos from a family album with images of domestic activity, as well as with superimpositions, reflections, and other distortions, to suggest the lyrical deformations of memory. In *The Text of Light* (1974), he put an ordinary ashtray close to his camera lens to create a startling play of color and shape.

The classic example of the "purist" avant-garde is probably Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967). *Wavelength* tells a "story," but it is completely fragmented. The scene is a New York loft: People come and go, play a radio, answer a phone call. Perhaps a murder is committed. But the film is organized around a camera technique. The camera is in a fixed position. Snow's zoom lens begins with a long shot inside the loft and jerkily enlarges the room little by little until the distant wall fills the frame to reveal a photograph of ocean waves. The film's 45-minute duration is thus revealed as a "wavelength."

As the frame enlarges, the audience is invited to play a perceptual guessing game. How will the shot's composition change? Will the

fragments of story ever coalesce? Snow's explanation of *Wavelength* shows that his intentions were purely abstract: "The image of the yellow chair has as much 'value' in its own world as the girl closing the window. The film events are...chosen from a kind of scale of mobility that runs from pure light events, the various perceptions of the room, to the images of moving human beings."

To which playwright Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956), another father figure of modernism, would have replied that art is about society, not just light and figures. The political and rhetorical uses of film technique had been pioneered during the 1920s by a group of young Soviet film-makers, notably Sergey Eisenstein in *Strike* (1925) and *Potemkin* (1925). Four decades later, it was to Brecht and the Soviets that young leftist film-makers turned to merge experimentation with social criticism.

Beginning at the End

From the Soviets they adopted the notion that film should not passively copy reality but challenge it through disjunctive editing, explicit commentary, and by allowing audiences to see that scenes have been staged. From Brecht came the "estrangement effect," the notion that by calling attention to the mechanics of presentation instead of concealing them Hollywood-style, actors and directors could make audiences think critically about what they were seeing.

This trend shows clearly in the work of the West German film-making team of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet. In *Not Reconciled* (1965), they depicted a fascist specter haunting Germany by interrupting scenes from the daily life of a contemporary family with an elliptical series of flashbacks to Germany during the two world wars. The characters are barely identified; the chronology of events is unclear. The camera dwells ominously on empty spaces, as if waiting for the hidden meaning of history to emerge. *History Lessons* (1972), adapted from a Brecht novel, uses anachronism to make viewers think about the links between economic and political power. Set amid the ruins of imperial Rome, it is a portrait of Julius Caesar, busily juggling state business with the pursuit of private profit, drawn largely through fake TV interviews with his toga-clad colleagues.

From Soho to Paris, today's film-makers are still experimenting with these three modernist "traditions": the illusion-reality theme, the purely cinematic statement, and the political critique built on innovative film techniques. Raul Ruiz traces the convolutions of memory and misunderstanding in such elusive films as *Three Crowns of the Sailor* (1983). The American film-maker Jim Jarmusch, in *Stranger Than Paradise* (1984), dramatizes his portrait of three wandering down-and-outers with a rigorous, almost mathematical use of framing and editing. Hans-Jurgen Syberberg's *Our Hitler: A Film*

from Germany (1977) uses Brechtian techniques to trace the links between Germany's Wagnerian romanticism and the rise of Hitler.

In recent years, many avant-garde film-makers have trimmed their sails a bit. During the late 1970s, younger directors like Wim Wenders and Rainer Werner Fassbinder (1946-82), raised on a steady diet of Hollywood classics, created a more popular "art cinema." With his recent parodies of the early *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* movies, Andy Warhol has moved into straightforward feature filmmaking, and several experimentalists have followed. Even Bruce Conner, master of the surreal compilation film, now makes commercial music videos for Devo and other rock groups. And many directors with a political message have set off in search of larger audiences, a trend best seen in such films as the popular *Night of the Shooting Stars* (1982), about Italy's internal wrestling with fascism during World War II, by the brothers Vittorio and Paolo Taviani.

The relationship between avant-garde and popular cinema is, as always, complex. The Hollywood classics of the 1930s and '40s, for example, inspired the experiments of the French New Wave directors of the 1950s, which influenced the young directors who began arriving in Hollywood during the late 1960s. The makers of popular horror and science fiction movies, always in search of new cinematic shocks, are quick to exploit new avant-garde techniques.

At the moment, the avant-garde is in a bit of a lull. But there remains a large and growing audience, ready to welcome all manner of films that would have been unthinkable during the heyday of the Hollywood studio system. The experimentalists are sure to thrive.

The work of Jean-Luc Godard perfectly exemplifies the fluctuations and adjustments within the alternative cinema. From New Wave cinephilia during the early 1960s, he shifted to strident and forbidding Marxist works later in the decade, and then to serene, voluptuous studies like *Passion* (1982). Last year, he released *Hail Mary*, a mystical retelling of the Virgin Birth in contemporary times. It is anything but conventional.

To many film connoisseurs, Godard is the symbol of cinematic modernism's vitality. The twisting path of his career suggests that there is always a new avenue for experimentation, that many possibilities remain open to avant-garde film-makers imaginative enough to seek them out. An exasperated inquisitor once demanded of Godard: "But surely you will admit that a film must have a beginning, a middle, and an end?"

"Certainly," he replied. "But not necessarily in that order."

BACKGROUND BOOKS

THE MOVIES IN AMERICA

"The coming of the motion picture," newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst once said, "was as important as that of the printing press."

Hearst, as was his wont, exaggerated a bit. But during its humble beginnings in a Menlo Park, N.J., laboratory, nobody could have guessed what an enormous impact on Americans' fantasies, mores, and morals the motion picture would have—least of all its inventor, the redoubtable Thomas Alva Edison.

Edison and his assistant, William Dickson, at first saw the moving picture as something to accompany music from Edison's phonograph, notes Emory University's David A. Cook in **A History of Narrative Film** (Norton, 1981). So they experimented with ways of putting pictures on rotating cylinders like Edison's early audio records. In the process, they created the world's first motion picture "star," a burly Menlo Park mechanic named Frederick Ott, who shamelessly hammed it up in front of the camera dressed in a white sheet belted around his middle.

In 1889, Dickson came up with the idea of putting pictures on a single film strip with sprocket holes on each side, and the Kinetograph was born. (Edison and Dickson stuck with their star: Their first picture was called *Fred Ott's Sneeze*.) In most of its essentials, it was the predecessor of the modern movie. With one crucial exception.

The Kinetograph did not project pictures on a screen; it was a peepshow. And Edison did not think enough of the machine's potential to pay the \$150 needed for an international copyright. Seizing the opportunity, Auguste and Louis Lumière, of Lyon, France, adapted Edison's technology and invented a projection system, the Cinématographe. Other projectors followed, including Edison's Kinetoscope.

So quickly did American film-makers churn out new movies that by 1926, Terry Ramsaye, a journalist turned newsreel producer, could offer up a serious 868-page study of the American cinema, **A Million and One Nights: A History of the Motion Picture** (Simon & Schuster, 1926). "For the first time in the history of the world," Ramsaye observed, "an art has sprouted, grown up, and blossomed in so brief a time that one person might stand by and see it happen."

Arthur Knight's **The Liveliest Art: A Panoramic History of the Movies** (Macmillan, 1957; rev. ed., 1978), living up to its title, is the best popular survey of film history through the late 1970s.

After attracting curious throngs during their first years, Knight recalls, movies were relegated to the clean-up spot in vaudeville revues. Most were novelty items, running no longer than a minute. Then, in 1903, Edwin S. Porter filmed one of the first coherent cinematic narratives, *The Great Train Robbery*, and before long, movies were everywhere.

American film-makers soon began to head West, to the sunshine of Burbank and Hollywood, where year-round outdoor filming was possible. In the beginning, the locals were not happy to see them. Los Angeles boarding houses hung signs that read, "Rooms to Rent—No Dogs or Actors."

The rest, as they say, is history.

Most of the insider chronicles of Hollywood's Golden Age have been lost among the countless exposés and kiss-and-tell memoirs that bring in profits for booksellers. For a distillation, consult **Hollywood on Hollywood: Tinsel Town Talks** (Faber & Faber, 1985, paper), an entertaining compendium of words wise and otherwise by Hollywood's notables, collected by freelance writer Doug McClelland.

"I am paid not to think," said a straight-faced Clark Gable, commenting on the studio system's control over his acting career. The first words Fay Wray heard about her role in *King Kong*: "You will have the tallest, darkest leading man in Hollywood." On the semi-serious side, studio boss Louis B. Mayer suggested in 1937 that Hollywood's celluloid creations were "important to world peace."

In recent years, film scholars have moved away from the "great man" view of Hollywood, the notion that a handful of top studio executives and directors dictated the way movies would be made.

By 1920, for example, Hollywood had unconsciously defined a "proper" style of film-making and ruled out most alternatives. The results are still with us: The emphasis is on telling stories with seamless narratives, usually set in more or less realistic surroundings, with at least a few characters sure to engage the sympathies of the average moviegoer. Avant-garde directors may make statements by shooting entire films composed of one-second scenes or populated by pathetic characters; in Hollywood, such things simply are not done.

Such is the thesis of *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (Columbia, 1985) by David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, all at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

A more obvious influence on movies—at least until the 1960s—was Hollywood's self-censorship at the hands of the Production Code Board (1930–68), better known as the Hays Office. Jack Vizzard's account of his years on the

board, *See No Evil: Life inside a Hollywood Censor* (Simon & Schuster, 1970) is an engaging, sympathetic look at the censors' work.

The Hays Office worried not only about nudity, blasphemy, and profanity (among the taboo words were "cripes" and "fanny") but about plots that seemed to let sinners and malefactors off too lightly. The war between the censors and the studios was unrelenting. One story has it that a screenwriter once tweaked the censors by penning the stage direction: "From offstage, we hear the scream of a naked woman."

Vizzard admits the excesses and absurdities of the old censorship, but he laments that under the industry's current rating system (G, PG, PG-13, R, X), just about anything goes, if it sells tickets.

Of all the many writers who have journeyed to Hollywood in search of fat scriptwriting fees, only F. Scott Fitzgerald, in his unfinished portrait of *The Last Tycoon* (Scribner's, 1941, cloth; 1983, paper), has written a lasting novel about movieland.

The problem for novelists may be that it is very difficult to wrap an illusion around an illusion. As David Lees and Stan Berkowitz note in *The Movie Business* (Random, 1981, cloth & paper), even Hollywood's palm trees, its brick and concrete, are deceptive. "The uninformed," they write, "show up at Hollywood and Vine and see nothing but tacky tourist traps and hookers of both sexes breathing in a lot of brown smog. Visitors find it hard to imagine that at that very corner, and nearby as well, movies are happening."



EDITOR'S NOTE: *Many of the titles in this essay were suggested by Douglas Gomery.*