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► **To cite this version:**

Nathalie Dupont. Contemporary films as produced by the Hollywood Majors: a leisure activity shaped by its market and its infrastructures. Lagayette, Pierre. Loisirs et liberté en Amérique du Nord, Sorbonne Université Presses, pp.105-119, 2008, Americana (Collection), 978-2-84050-540-2. hal-04660771

**HAL Id: hal-04660771**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04660771v1>**

Submitted on 24 Jul 2024

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**Contemporary films as produced by the Hollywood Majors : a leisure activity shaped by its market and its infrastructures**  
**Nathalie Dupont, ULCO**

Nowadays, when people talk about American films, what very often springs to their minds is the term blockbusters ; worldwide, when talking about the same subject, many people say that today's Hollywood cinema does nothing more than merely entertain its audience. On a closer look, it cannot be denied that those blockbusters do not usually raise metaphysical questions, but after all, it is not their goal as most Hollywood producers and studios merely consider their activity as being part of the entertainment industry. Cinema is thus a leisure activity that has to be profitable, and this explains why, over the last thirty years or so, the Hollywood Majors have focussed their production plans on a certain kind of film- the so-called blockbusters. The present paper will therefore show how that fact has had repercussions on the American audience, on the way the latter has had access to that mass leisure and on the choice - or non-choice – it has thus been given.

**A mass-leisure activity almost restricted to a particular part of its audience.**

*Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977) is the film many link to the rebirth of entertaining cinema after the rather sad and gloomy undertone of post-Vietnam films. The worldwide success of that film providing sheer cinematographic pleasure rapidly enticed studios to produce similar projects called blockbusters which can be defined as films with a very simple story, numerous special effects and with friendly but two-dimensional characters, the whole lot being enhanced by a thunderous soundtrack. Moreover, the production cost is always expensive and, among the actors, there is always one or two stars whose names will attract as many people as possible during the first and decisive opening week-end of the release.

All those elements also explain why production costs have tremendously increased over the last thirty years

This tremendous increase however has not deterred studios from producing those blockbusters which, even if they fail to attract a big audience at home, will usually recoup their cost thanks to the foreign market (that is what happened for *Waterworld* –Kevin Reynolds,1995- or *The Patriot* – Roland Emmerich, 2000).

The Hollywood Majors knew and still know that producing a big budget film is a gamble, but they will simply keep on doing it for financial reasons :

- first of all, all American studios (apart from *Walt Disney.Co* ) have been taken over by big conglomerates whose main business does not merely consist in producing films but products that, like films, have to make a lot of money.

- those conglomerates are run by boards of trustees who, as well as the shareholders they represent, want their companies to produce the most profitable goods ; in the eyes of those people, the blockbusters are thus the perfect product to reach that aim since, in the case of a big success, it satisfies everybody's desire for profit (while fulfilling every producer's dream).

*Star Wars* and its success have thus led the studios to be constantly looking for the next blockbuster that is going to break all records, and it has become such an obsession that the *MPAA* (*Motion Picture Association of America*) has started including in its annual reports a graph showing the number of films reaching or breaking the \$10 million- and \$20 million- mark. However, as the number of films reaching those marks constantly increased, in 2002 the 'psychological' marks to reach were raised to \$50 million and \$100 million.

The fact that studios have devoted and still devote so much attention and money to big productions can also be explained by the type of audience they have targeted.

Indeed, since television invaded the American homes in the 1950s, the number and the age of people going to the cinema have been reduced , and while their elders now prefer their

comfortable lounges (equipped with a VCR and now a DVD player connected to a home cinema equipment), the younger people have become the key audience on which studios now depend. That key position held by the 12-to-29-year-olds was first confirmed by the success of *Star Wars* which was seen by youngsters again and again, a new trend at the time ; those youngsters then bought all the by-products bearing the *Star Wars* logo, thus transforming the film into an even more successful and highly profitable event.

Since the mid-1970s, studios have considered young people as a key audience even if now the American population has aged ; this was confirmed in 2004 by the *MPAA* report which showed that if those aged between 12 to 29 made up 30% of the American population, they still represented 47% of annual theatrical admissions ; those admissions are all the more interesting as that age bracket frequently goes to the cinema.

Over the last thirty years, Hollywood studios have thus made products that are essentially tailored to meet that key young audience's requirements as to what they want to see : that audience (and more especially the young males) are eager to see new spectacular images like those of the videogames they play at all day long. That fact also explains why producers will produce less films shot in a intimate setting with an intimate story as they cannot thus expect to attract the 12-to-29 age bracket ; moreover, that type of film will not generate by-products, especially the numerous computer games whose profits sometimes get close to those of the cinema industry .

Thus, the blockbusters and their numerous special effects, their fast-paced editing as well as their roaring soundtracks and musical scores are the only films able to fulfill that audience's expectations of thrilling and increasingly spectacular images they will later see again in the by-products and the games that go hand in hand with the release of a blockbuster.

'No teenagers, no blockbusters', the motto often lining producers' speeches, is thus undeniably linked to each and every big production whose profit-making potential (i.e. audience, product placements, by-products, DVDs, ancillary markets) is carefully studied before any pre-production is greenlighted. The success of some blockbusters has thus led the studios, in their race for market shares, to tailor most of their productions to that concept in order to fulfill the expectations of the target audience while answering the commercial and profit-making desires of their shareholders.

### **A leisure activity shaped by its exhibition market**

The fact that studios have favoured big-budget productions has also had repercussions on the exhibition market.

To begin with, the studios and the cinema owners quickly saw that, like their 1950s counterparts (CinemaScope, 3-D feature films), the blockbusters did not – and still do not- fit a small-sized screen since it completely downsizes the spectacular images of those big-budget productions.

Then, the rapid invasion of private sitting rooms by cable or satellite television, as well as video and then DVD players, put an end to the exhibition of B- or C- films ; the latter were then simply broadcasted via those new media, or simply made 'direct-to-video', while the distributors now focussed on dealing with the big-budget productions. That meant the slow death of the small neighbourhood cinemas while it led to the modification of the others, together with the reshaping of the distribution and film exhibition circuits which, after the 1950 and 1960 crises, underwent a transformation so as to offer their audience a proper place where they could watch blockbusters. That implied creating the best possible conditions for sound and images so as to offer what cinema owners like to call 'an entertainment experience' that, for two hours or more, will try to sweep the audience off their feet and carry them away from their daily routine and problems.

The building of multiscreen cinemas, which had started in the 1960s, was thus accelerated ; those new cinemas, often called multiplexes, inherited some of the patterns of the drive-ins , that is to say they were close to the motorways and the suburbs with easy-to-access parking lots. That is why many multiplexes were built and are still built close to or within shopping centers and malls, those modern temples dedicated to mass consumption where people can then also buy all the by-products (clothes, toys, computer games, key-rings and even fast-food meals) linked to the film they have just seen.

At the same time, the average price of a cinema ticket started increasing so as to pay for a better

comfort as well as the new 'ambiance' and the luxurious 'décors' of those new movie palaces; thus, since 1980 the average annual admission price that stood at \$2.69 in 1980 reached \$6.21 in 2004, with some yearly increases of 30% while those of the consumer price index were much more moderate .

The uppermost importance given by Hollywood studios to big budget productions that can reap huge benefits has thus led to the gradual reshaping of the exhibition business ; it transformed the cinemas into a modern version of the bygone movie palaces of silent films , thus pushing exhibitors to join the race for gigantism so as to welcome the blockbusters and their audience as befits them. As each member of that audience now expects, it means wide or giant screens, state-of-the-art auditoriums offering digital sound and unobstructed stadium seating with big comfortable seats (that can sometimes accommodate two persons).

Moreover, the shooting with digital cameras of *Star Wars II-Attack of The Clones* and *Star Wars III - Revenge of the Sith* (George Lucas, 2002 & 2005) led to the birth of a new generation of auditoriums now digitally equipped for both sound AND film (there were 88 of them in the U.S.A. in June 2004 and 198 in June 2005). In those auditoriums, the young audience, always looking for the next thrill, will have their senses saturated by the 'entertainment experience' offered by blockbusters shown in those excellent conditions.

However, the reshaping of the exhibition business has not been for the best for small independent cinema owners who have suffered a lot :

- joining the race for modernity required indeed vast sums of money they did not have
- they have also suffered because their cinemas were located in the city centres that had been virtually deserted by the middle class and that did not always have a good reputation (contrary to the shopping mall that can give you the feeling of being inside a safe cocoon), and those owners did not have the money to buy land or a building in the suburbs as prices had greatly increased there.

- to cap it all, the small independent cinema owners were in a way excluded from the market because of an 'entente' between the distributors (most of them being the Hollywood studios) and the owners of the big exhibition circuits so as only the latter would first be allowed to show the studios' blockbusters.

It thus became increasingly difficult for small independent cinema owners to survive while a greater horizontal integration of the exhibition business started and even accelerated in the 1980s thanks to the 'laissez-faire' policy of the Reagan administration. That decade and the following one also saw the opening of many new multiplexes while the total number of screens increased by 107.2 % between 1984 and 2004. The number of admissions did not however follow that pace and only increased by 28.1% over the same period of time ; that discrepancy eventually forced some cinemas to file for bankruptcy between 1999 and 2001. The situation is now financially safer, which has led to the opening of even bigger cinemas called megaplexes.

It is clear that the growth in megaplexes is taking place to the detriment of single screen cinemas as well as miniplexes which, due to their often small screens, do not offer the best possible conditions to watch a blockbuster.

The 'tailoring' of Hollywood projects to the big budget productions, coupled with the deregulation launched by the Reagan administration, thus led the 1980s to witness a horizontal re-integration in the exhibition business while small independent cinema owners gradually disappeared, with the exception of those who switched to the art films. This however does not mean that a monopoly has been created again as competition is still possible :

[...] The US exhibition industry is still very much a regional one. Only 10 circuits operate in more than six states while only five –AMC, Cinemark, Carmike, Regal and Loews Cineplex–operate in more than 20. There is enormous variety in regional competition and screen concentration. In Oregon and Arizona, there is one dominant exhibitor [...] in New Jersey six exhibitors have a significant share.

The transformation and tailoring of the exhibition business was also favoured by the modification of the way films started being released, and once again the blockbusters played their part in that process, especially after the release of *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975). Until then, the studios and the distributors used to release their important productions according to a system called the platform release : the big-budget productions would exclusively be shown in a few prestigious theatres located in the city centres and strategically well-situated in the U.S.A. (with sometimes a premiere to which many stars would be invited) ; then the distribution of a film would gradually be extended to theatres located in the suburbs and to second-rate theatres, before finally reaching the small towns. Between each stage, there would be a few weeks during which the film could not be seen. In the most extreme cases of release, there could be as much as a thousand different release dates for just one film all over the U.S.A.

*Jaws* changed all this ; the film was released in 1975 on 409 screens at the same time (while many TV spots advertised it) and the box office of its opening weekend reached the so-far-unseen \$7.06 million ; that immediate success surprised many, for that way of distributing films had been previously used for productions thought to be a failure. Steven Spielberg and *Universal* had now proved the contrary, and from then on, all the films considered as potential successes were due to be released on as many screens as possible at the same time, a releasing system that came to be called the saturation release.

Since 1975, both production costs and competition between studios for market shares have escalated, that is why the number of screens devoted to the release of *Jaws* would now seem ridiculously low when compared for example to the 4 152 ones booked for the release of *Spiderman 2* !

All the elements discussed before thus definitely prove that the shaping of the cinema production to fit the blockbuster format has had important consequences on the way the American audience has come to enjoy that leisure activity. That shaping however also raises the question of the survival of creative freedom within the Hollywood system of film production.

### **Shaping productions does not always go hand- in- hand with art and with creative freedom**

While devoting their attention to the blockbusters that are thought to be the only ones able to make up for other failures (at a time when 60% of American productions do not recoup their production costs on the American market), Hollywood producers have in fact narrowed down their productions to a limited category. As we have seen, the story of those films has to be simple so as to be understood by the widest young audience. This decisive part played by that audience implies that the films must stay within the limits of specific ratings.

A big modification of the rating system took place in 1984 with the introduction of PG-13 (General Patronage-parental guidance suggested) after unhappy parents had complained about taking their children to see *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (Steven Spielberg, 1984) which had been rated PG, but should have been rated otherwise because of very shocking blood-spilling scenes.

Then, in 1990, the X rating disappeared and was replaced by the NC-17 , which means the rating system is now as follows :

G (General Audience) : all ages admitted

PG (Parental Guidance Suggested) : some material may not be suitable for children

PG-13 (Parents Strongly Cautioned) : some material may be inappropriate for children under 13

R (Restricted) : under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian

NC-17 (No one under 17 and under Admitted)

Source : <http://www.mpa.com>

All the ratings are not used though, for the studios (with the exception of *Disney* for obvious reasons) do not want to produce films that will be rated G and thus be rejected by teenagers (who will not go and see 'films for babies' ) ; nor do studios want their products to be rated NC-17 which would deprive them of a big part of their audience. Those facts explain why, for some years now, productions from studios belonging to the MPAA have been tailored to fit three ratings, PG, PG-13, and R, with a preference for the third one.

The R rating is financially interesting since it attracts both young people and adults (because of its requirement) while allowing producers to include in R-rated films more violent scenes said to attract the young male audience aged 16 to 29.

If we take a closer look at the ratings of the sole blockbusters for the last three years, we can however notice a real domination of films rated PG-13. There are not yet many data that could enable us to say if this is going to be a lasting trend ; it is however possible to explain it :

- those PG-13 productions have been written and produced to attract as many people as possible ; thus they do not include scenes that could get the film an R, and thus could drive away the families who had considered an outing centered on the same film for everyone.

- a PG-13 rating automatically includes among the possible audience the decisive teenagers who are the ones creating a good word-of-mouth on the opening weekend that will decide on the life of the film.

For the directors however, delivering a film that has to fit a certain category of rating has had bad consequences on their work. Like the actors, directors will only be heard by studios (thus will have the power called 'clout') if their latest films have been successes at the box office ; unless they are Steven Spielberg and / or have a worldwide reputation, American directors are thus subjected to a lot of pressure from the studios, and this includes delivering a film whose rating will be that expected by the producers. According to most contracts signed by directors, that rating must not exceed an R ; were it not the case, the director could well lose the final cut and thus see his / her film recut according to the wishes of the producer .

In fact, the idea of getting a NC-17 (still too closely connected to an X in the audience's mind) is very much disliked by the studios, for it means such a rated film would lose the possibility of being marketed in many newspapers, magazines, TV and radio stations while some exhibition circuits would also be very reluctant to show such a film. That is what nearly happened to *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992) that had first been rated NC-17, thus leading to the loss of 900 screens out of the 1 200 that had been scheduled for the release ; the director then agreed to cut 42 seconds showing violent scenes, the film was resubmitted to the board and got an R rating to the satisfaction of its studio.

So the economic imperatives of the studios can in a way limit a director's creative freedom, more particularly if he / she is a newcomer and is not well-known ; he / she thus has to tailor his / her film for it to fit the intended audience, and this notably explains the small number or the inexistence of films rated 'X' or 'NC-17' in the previous two graphs.

The director also has to face the various constraints linked to the different associations signed between his/her producing studio and the manufacturers associated with the project. Nowadays many manufacturers sign indeed contracts worth between a few hundred dollars and a few millions with the studios for different products to appear in films, while other industrialists want to be associated with the release of a film (even if their products are not seen on screen) because, marketing-wise, they think they can benefit from it while promoting those products ; *Coca-Cola* thus paid \$150 billion for the right to be associated to the global marketing of the first *Harry Potter* (Chris Columbus, 2001)—thus issuing products bearing the logo of the film- while *New Line Cinema*, the producer of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy , signed an important deal with *Burger King*, allowing it to promote the first film in some 10 000 *Burger King* outlets around the world while putting a link to the trailer of the film on its site [www.burgerking.com](http://www.burgerking.com) .

The association with manufacturers is also financially interesting for the studios as those manufacturers come to share in the marketing costs of the film ; so studios are on the look-out for those types of associations, especially as production costs and marketing costs have kept increasing (between 1995 and 2005, production costs went from \$36.4 million to \$60 million while marketing costs went from \$17.07 million to \$36.2 million).

The only problem is that the counterpart of that association is often shouldered by the director who often has to take into account the manufacturers' demands : they ask (especially video and

computer game developers) to be associated with the film as soon as possible so as to develop products that will be faithful to the film in the best possible way ; manufacturers even try to have a say during the pre-production stage, and sometimes succeed in doing so:

At Universal, Hasbro executives read the first script of *Jurassic Park* and advised the designers on how to make the vehicles more appealing to toy-buying kids, says a source familiar with the situation. At Disney, Mattell reportedly pushed to invent a scene in which the raccoon braids Pocahontas's hair, the better to push Braided Beauty Pocahontas dolls. And at Warner's, sources say, the entire tone and palette of *Batman Forever* was designed to be more toy-friendly than the dark versions that preceded it. Warner's denies this, but there's no doubt that director Joel Schumacher's brighter, happier approach had Hasbro jumping for joy ; after Warner's invited a number of Hasbro executives to a private advance screening of the movie, "we gave it a big standing ovation," one attendee recalls. "I've never seen a smile that big on my boss's face."

(The somber but artistically more interesting tone Tim Burton had given to the first two films thus disappeared for economic reasons).

Moreover, the manufacturers who pay licensing fees do not want their products to be used by negatively-connoted characters (ie psychopaths for instance) but by the hero or the heroes and in a positive situation ; if that demand is not respected, they do not hesitate to file a lawsuit. That is for example the reason why, in 1996, *Reebok* suspended its advertising campaign for *Jerry Maguire* and filed a lawsuit against *Tri-Star*, asking for \$10 million worth of damages :

In press interviews, Reebok executives say they knew all along that Cuba Gooding Jr's truculent character (Tidwell) would shout "Fuck Reebok" [...] The ending was to show a commercial in which Reebok apologised for overlooking his footballing talents : "Rod Tidwell, we ignored him for years. We were wrong. We're sorry." [...] The first that Reebok heard about TriStar's decision to drop the Tidwell commercial -a scene that Reebok shot at its own expense- was on November 27, just 16 days before the film's opening. By then Reebok had already started promoting the film with tags on its products and through sweepstakes contests advertised in *Sports Illustrated* and *USA Today*. With only the four letter expletive left to linger in consumers' minds, Reebok felt a more negative image of the company could not have been created, even if arch-rival Nike had written the screenplay.

Toy manufacturers also want the films for which they bought licenses to be released at the end of the year (usually after Thanksgiving) and not in the middle, so as to take advantage of the Christmas season's buying spree which will be increased by the success of the films (or at least they hope so). If the release of a film is delayed, it means storage expenses they had not accounted for and a complete upheaval of their plans, something which always induces costs. So, studios have to abide by the release dates initially scheduled and written in the contracts signed by both parts.

But in all those cases, it is once again the director who is under pressure to deliver his / her work on time while trying to make sure the film will not become some kind of feature-length advertising (here again 'clout' has its part to play !) ; that possible drawback has not always been avoided :

"Home alone" [...] CSC said showed 31 different brand-name products a total of 42 times, "Pretty Woman" had 18 brand-names shown 20 times, and "Ghost" [ had ] 16 brand-names displayed 23 times. Also cited were [...] "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, the Movie" with 18 brand-names, "Bull Durham" which mentioned Miller&Miller Lite beer brands 21 times, and "Total recall", which showed 28 brand-name products about 55 times.

Those shooting conditions, together with the possible pressure and constraints imposed by manufacturers and the studios on many film productions, can lead to wonder what is left of creative freedom when a director has to make a focus on a certain product, add some dialogue and deliver his/her work on time without sometimes having had the time to reshoot scenes he/ she did not like. Then, one can also wonder if that increasing involvement of the merchandising industry, especially

as far as the blockbusters are concerned, has not led Hollywood productions to be more and more stereotyped while the studios have essentially favoured and greenlighted projects prone to welcome product placement and merchandising contracts .

In fact , those different factors probably explain why there is no risk-taking attitude among producers and a lack of originality in many projects (hence the proliferation of remakes, easier to market to a pre-sold audience who already knows –and liked- the story and the characters). It also means means that only powerful directors with a solid history of successful films (like Steven Spielberg for example) can afford to propose original but costly projects . Many others, even if they are recognized as true artists, have difficulty getting their projects financed because they are not profitable enough. So, those directors will usually turn themselves to independent and modest-sized companies while being aware that it is their only solution if they want to keep some artistic freedom ; Woody Allen said nothing different in 2001 :

I'm resigned to the fact that there will probably always be people willing to put up \$15m for my films but never those willing to put up \$30 m [...] *Jade Scorpion* was about \$16m, *Hollywood Endings* is about \$15m. I can't get the freedom that I want with budgets beyond that and while I would like someone to come in and give me \$30m to make a film, I don't think that is going to happen.

## **Conclusion**

In the endless balancing of financial and creative interests that underlies the entire economic structure of the film business, the financial one has unmistakably got the upperhand as far as the studios are concerned. Financial issues have thus considerably tailored Hollywood productions for the last thirty years, and the average cinema goer who drives to his/ her local cinema has thus a choice that has already been willfully limited by the producers, the distributors and the exhibitors while the directors who shot the films often had to make compromises. However, the box office failure in the U.S.A. of *Lara Croft Tomb Raider : The Cradle of Life* (Jan de Bont, 2003) and the disappointing box office results of *Hulk* (Ang Lee, 2003) show that tailoring a big-budget production does not always go hand in hand with success, and that the American cinema goers have kept a certain freedom – albeit limited - when they buy their seats. That freedom then will perhaps be enlarged thanks to the new technologies which, together with an ageing population and so an ageing audience, might put an end to the formula which has unfortunately sedated Hollywood over the last thirty years.