

C H A P T E R

1

A Critical Redefinition: The Concept of High Concept

Consider two musicals from the late 1970s: *Grease* (1978), critically lambasted and adored by millions of teenagers, and *All That Jazz* (1979), critically lauded and admired by members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (to the tune of nine Oscar nominations). While the films fit the musical genre, to the extent that both feature singing and dancing, differences in content, marketing, and reception between the two films illuminate one of the most significant forms of production in contemporary Hollywood. More to the point, these films embody the contrast between “high concept” and “low concept.”

Grease was firmly within the mainstream of contemporary Hollywood. The potent marketing assets of the film easily distinguished it from other musicals, such as *All That Jazz*. These assets were driven first and foremost through *Grease*'s star power: John Travolta, directly after his rise to stardom in *Saturday Night Fever* (1977); pop star Olivia Newton-John; and, to attract an older audience, a host of media stars evoking the film's period of the '50s, including Frankie Avalon, Ed “Kookie” Byrnes, Eve Arden, and Sid Caesar. Of these media icons, Travolta was the most significant. Indeed, he was perhaps the industry's hottest star at that time. With *Grease* released only six months after *Fever*'s debut, the association with *Saturday Night Fever* was fresh. In addition, with a recent nomination as Best Actor, Travolta was validated critically.

The mixture of elements within the star “package” explains the rationale behind *Grease*'s marketing formula, which could be articulated as



Marketing through star power: John Travolta and Olivia Newton-John (Grease, Paramount, 1978).



Frankie Avalon in the Beauty School Dropout number: tapping an older audience segment (*Grease*, Paramount, 1978). Copyright © MCMLXXVII by Paramount Pictures Corporation.

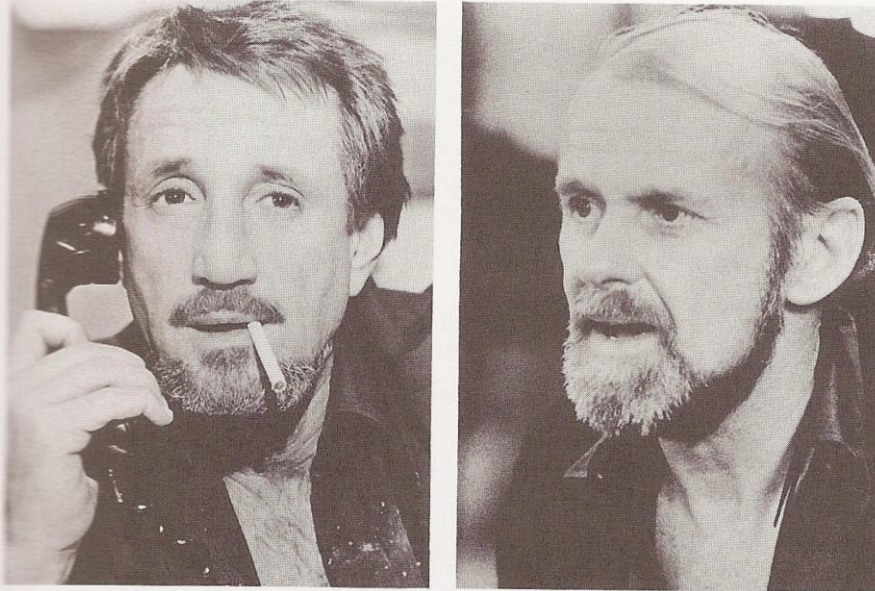
a focus both on the young, drawn to Travolta and the subject of teen romance/music, and on the older audience segments, drawn to the nostalgia. Critic David Ansen identified this double focus in commenting, "The success of *Grease* with teen audiences, who often dance on their seats as if at a concert, can have little to do with '50s nostalgia. The movie, like *Saturday Night Fever* before it, is a Dionysian celebration of middle-class values."¹ Each element of the marketing package served this formula of young and old. For instance, the merchandising—T-shirts, tie-in novels, posters—normally reserved for the young, also attempted to appeal to an older crowd. "Remember the music, the gang, the feeling? *Grease* is Paramount Pictures' smash hit musical that captures the life and times of the '50s. . . . You can share in the nostalgia too!" enthused a merchandising insert to the double-album soundtrack. The nostalgia suggested in the promo extended to the soundtrack, which included several songs by retro-'50s band Sha-Na-Na, along with

"Love Is a Many Splendored Thing" and "Look at Me, I'm Sandra Dee" (an icon certainly lost on the youth of 1978). The hit singles from the film, such as "You're the One That I Want" and "Hopelessly Devoted to You," however, had a "contemporary" '70s sound, and were, in fact, added to the original Broadway score for the film. Both decades coalesced in the new theme "Grease," sung by Franki Valli, and written and produced by Barry Gibb of the Bee Gees, the most popular group at the time, thanks to their disco songs in *Saturday Night Fever*. The mix between old and new even influenced the visual style of the film, with director Randal Kleiser commenting at the time of the release, "Stylistically, the actors will stop and break into song — that's old — but we are using all the '70s film techniques we can muster, like split screens and high-powered sound."²

In addition to the stars, the music, and the merchandising, *Grease* also had the marketing advantage of being a pre-sold property, based on the long-running musical (playing a run of 3,388 performances on Broadway).³ The film's producers, Robert Stigwood and Allan Carr, discarded half of the "strictly '50s" Broadway score, choosing to entice a younger crowd to the film.⁴ In a move that certainly enhanced the film's marketability, the dialogue in the sometimes rough theatrical musical also was pared down, and the setting moved from the urban inner city to a more innocuous Southern California locale. The result was a Disney-like musical with the traditional "bad guys" (i.e., the hoods and greasers) as heroes.

Finally, the film was represented throughout the media — in the one-sheet, soundtrack, novelizations, trailer, and other marketing forms — with an identifiable logo: a small car containing the word "GREASE" written in a fluid, grease-like style. The logo served to identify the film visually in large part since the marketers were consistent in using this logo at every possible opportunity. All these marketing assets permitted a wide opening, at that time, of 902 theaters and a strong opening weekend gross of \$9.31 million. The film continued to play very well across the summer, eventually garnering rentals to Paramount of \$96.3 million.⁵

On the other hand, *All That Jazz*, while still ostensibly a musical, could hardly be described as having the same marketing assets as *Grease*. Bob Fosse's film borrowed heavily from the art cinema, particularly Fellini's *8½* (1963), to tell the strongly autobiographical tale of an over-committed director whose personal and professional lives are derailed by a series of heart attacks, culminating in the director-protagonist's death. Such a "difficult" subject seems unlikely fare for a musical and, indeed, the film clearly was interested in examining and deconstructing



Roy Scheider as Fosse-like choreographer Joe Gideon and Bob Fosse, co-author, director, and choreographer of *All That Jazz* (*All That Jazz*, Twentieth Century Fox and Columbia, 1979).

this genre.⁶ Richard Dyer's analysis of Fosse's first film, *Sweet Charity*, aptly summarizes Fosse's approach in *All That Jazz*: "[*Sweet Charity*] uses every trick in the cinematic book to embody the musical qualities of rhythm, melody and tone, and uses its total visual, aural, and choreographic musicality to express a cynically wise view of the limitations of the musical genre."⁷ *All That Jazz* actually inverted several cornerstones of the musical, including the movement toward unification and community within the world of the film musical.

Fosse was clearly aware of the manner in which his film strayed from the traditional genre and, in fact, he stated at the time of release, "It doesn't fit into any category. You can like it or not like it, but it isn't a copy of anything else, and I'm proud of that."⁸ The commercial implications of "not fitting into any category" were numerous. Even during production, the financial risk of the film scared the distributor, Columbia, to the extent that a co-distributor, Twentieth Century-Fox, was added when Fosse exceeded his original budget by more than \$4 million.⁹ Both distributors understandably were concerned, since the film had low marketability. While leading actor Roy Scheider had appeared



Low marketability and deconstruction of the musical genre (All That Jazz, Twentieth Century-Fox and Columbia, 1979). Copyright © 1979 20th Century-Fox Film).

in financially successful films, such as *The French Connection* and *Jaws*, his name alone certainly could not “open” a film at the boxoffice. Apart from the lack of star power, the diverse themes and complex narrative defied translation into a simple marketing approach. Indeed, the one-sheet for the film lacked a focus: the graphic showed the film’s title in lights and the copy offered variations on the theme, “All that . . .” (All that work. All that glitter. All that pain. All that love. All that crazy rhythm. All that jazz.) The ad is problematic, since it conveys little about the film’s plot in its attempts to suggest the diversity of the film. Tellingly, the novelization released in conjunction with the film used a different title graphic and copy (“What makes Joe Gideon dance? Power, sex, and . . . All That Jazz”), thereby breaking continuity in the marketing and public identification with the film. In terms of the soundtrack, the film featured standards such as “Bye, Bye, Love” and “After You’re Gone,” hardly marketable in the age of the Bee Gees and disco. Consequently, the film had no marketing hooks, except for its high quality credentials which would place the film commercially into the marginalized “art house” category. As Fosse biographer Kevin Boyd Grubb

commented on the commercial performance of the film, "Not surprisingly, *All That Jazz* fared better with European audiences and critics than it did in America."¹⁰ Even classic musical fans could be alienated by the film's generic deconstruction, not to mention the frank language, nudity, and suggestiveness.

Whereas *All That Jazz* was produced despite the lack of inherent marketing opportunities, *Grease*, with its target of young and old, could be defined by its marketing possibilities. The latter film's marketing hooks are numerous and strong. In addition, the dependence of *Grease* on marketing through stars, a pre-sold property, music, merchandising, and a single image has become increasingly significant as a marketing approach. This approach can be succinctly described in a "pitch" or a one-line concept: "John Travolta and Olivia Newton-John star as the '50s greaser and the 'good girl' in the screen adaptation of the hit stage musical *Grease*." In contrast, the disparate themes and complexity of *All That Jazz* cannot be reduced readily to a concept or a single ad-line.

These differences might be articulated by describing *Grease* as a relatively high concept project, while *All That Jazz* would fall into the low concept category. This classification offers an entry point into an understanding of a significant focus for mainstream studio motion picture production. The term "high concept" originated in the television and film industries, but it was soon adopted by the popular presses, who seized the term as an indictment of Hollywood's privileging those films which seemed most likely to reap huge dollars at the boxoffice. Clearly the studios are most interested in those films with an increased likelihood of a solid return, and high concept has been used as one catch phrase to describe any number of commercial projects. I propose to offer a more precise definition of high concept through tracing the historical, institutional, and economic forces which have helped to shape this particular kind of commercial filmmaking. Through an awareness of these forces, high concept can be considered as a form of differentiated product within the mainstream film industry. This differentiation occurs in two major ways: through an emphasis on style within the films, and through an integration with marketing and merchandising.

Positing high concept as a kind or style of filmmaking in the contemporary film industry has implications for understanding not only the determinants of commercial filmmaking, but also film historiography. Indeed, in terms of film history, the period of "classical Hollywood" is marked by the mature studio system and a style of filmmaking centered on continuity; however, the traits of the "post-classical" period (i.e., after the postwar disintegration of the studio system and the concurrent rise of television) have been suggested, but not formalized. Most fre-

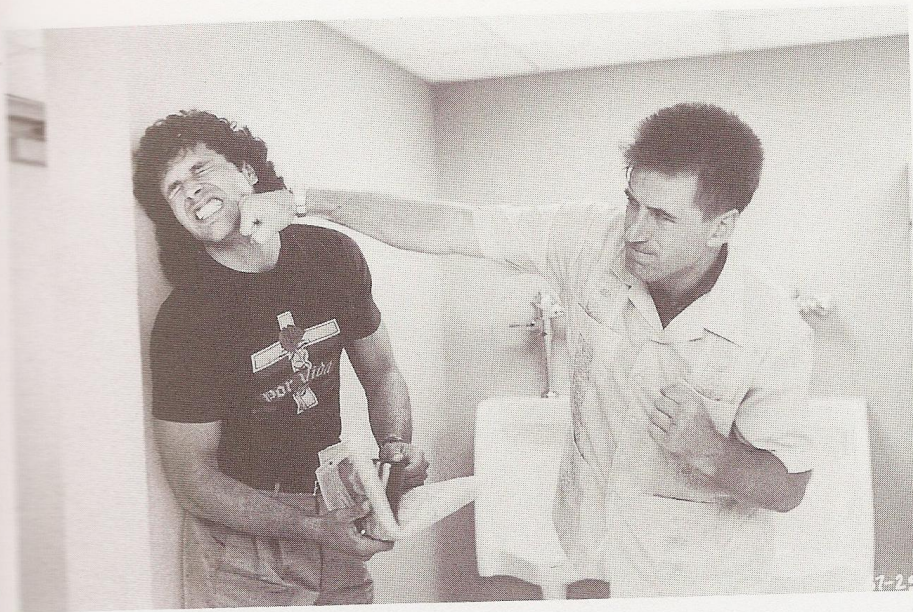
quently, a “post-classical” period is aligned with the “New Hollywood” of the ’60s and ’70s, a period characterized by auteurs and the media conglomeration of the film industry. High concept can be considered as one central development—and perhaps *the* central development—within post-classical cinema, a style of filmmaking molded by economic and institutional forces. Through high concept, the diverse manner through which economics and aesthetics are joined together can be understood, and even appreciated, at one particular time in American film history.

The Entertainment Industries on High Concept

According to the folklore of the entertainment industry, high concept as a term was first associated with Barry Diller, during his tenure in the early 1970s as a programming executive at ABC.¹¹ Diller received much credit for bolstering the network’s poor ratings, partly through the introduction of the made-for-television movie format.¹² Since Diller needed stories which could be easily summarized for a thirty-second television spot, he approved those projects which could be sold in a single sentence. This sentence would then appear in the advertising spots and in *TV Guide* synopses. The result produced television movies, like *Brian’s Song* (1971) and *That Certain Summer* (1972), whose themes and appeal were immediately obvious. Thus the demand for a marketable theme or plot became associated with the term high concept.

Instead of crediting Diller, Disney president Jeffrey Katzenberg, on the other hand, attributes the term *high concept* to Michael Eisner.¹³ According to Katzenberg, Eisner used high concept while working as a creative executive at Paramount to describe a unique idea whose originality could be conveyed briefly. Similarly, Columbia Pictures Entertainment President Peter Guber defines high concept in narrative terms. Rather than stressing the uniqueness of the idea, Guber states that high concept can be understood as a narrative which is very straightforward, easily communicated, and easily comprehended.¹⁴

The emphasis on narrative as the driving force behind high concept masks another aspect to the usage of the term within both the film and television industries.¹⁵ While the idea must be easily communicated and summarized, the concept must also be marketable in two significant ways: through the initial “pitch” for the project, and through the marketing, the “pitch” to the public. Clearly there are many films which might be summarized briefly, yet which would not be described as high concept within the film industry. Consider, for example, the concepts



Miami Blues: a concept lacking broad-based appeal (Miami Blues, Orion, 1990). Photo by Zade Rosenthal, © 1990 Orion Pictures Corporation.

which might be used to pitch *Everybody's All American* (1988: a football star and his glamorous wife face the difficulties of life after the fame fades), *Shirley Valentine* (1989: bored housewife starts a new life by running away to Greece), or *Miami Blues* (1990: charismatic, yet psychopathic, ex-con impersonates a detective to pull off some heists). All three films suggest concepts which lack broad marketability through being too limited in audience appeal: *Shirley Valentine* and *Everybody's All American* would appeal primarily to an older audience segment (particularly mature females), while *Miami Blues* lacks broad-based appeal since it is not substantively different from other cop television shows and films.

Indeed, the connection between marketability and high concept seems to be very strong in the entertainment industries. Brandon Stoddard, president of ABC Entertainment, suggests that a one-sentence high concept is nothing more than the ad line that would show up in a marketing campaign.¹⁶ Former Columbia Pictures president Dawn Steel also stresses a simple, marketable theme as central to high concept: "[The movie business in 1978] was all about capturing the spirit of the times with high-concept pictures geared to the youth audience—movies

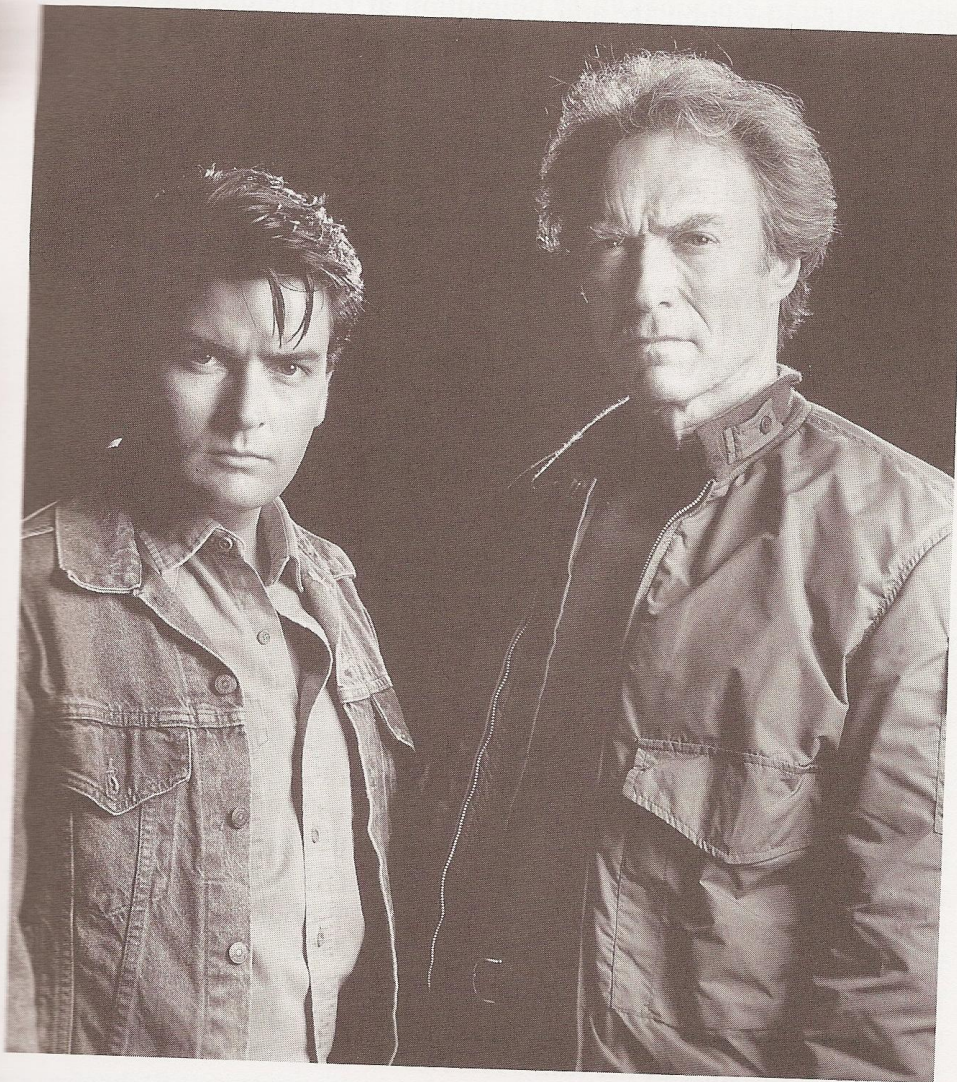


Everybody's All American: *the dramatic and domestic problems for a couple after the fame has vanished* (Everybody's All American, Warner Bros., 1988). Copyright © 1988 Warner Bros. Inc.

whose themes could be explained in a sentence or two. These were movies like *Saturday Night Fever* that were, as they were called at the time, critic-proof, so that they could bypass all the old ways of thinking."¹⁷ Following this premise, those films which are high concept could be matched by marketing campaigns that accurately represent their content, while marketing for low concept films would be more problematic, since the marketing, which inevitably operates through a reduction of the film's narrative, misrepresents the film as a whole.

Star power is one way through which a project might develop a broader marketability. In fact, another aspect of high concept within the industry is the linkage of a star's persona with a concept; for example, Clint Eastwood in a crime thriller implies a high concept project. As a qualification to this principle, it is not always true that a star ensures that a project will be high concept. When a star's persona is directly linked with a genre and the project under consideration adheres to this genre, then the film generally falls into the high concept category. For example, Clint Eastwood and Charlie Sheen as a seasoned cop

and trainee in *The Rookie* (1990) would undoubtedly be described as high concept, while Clint Eastwood as an eccentric and obsessive film director in Africa in *White Hunter, Black Heart* (1990) would not. As a condition of this principle, a star working directly *against* his image may also suggest high concept. For instance, consider the possibilities of tough guy Arnold Schwarzenegger as the tooth fairy as described in this



Star power and high concept: Clint Eastwood and Charlie Sheen in The Rookie (The Rookie, Warner Bros., 1990). Copyright © 1990 Warner Bros. Inc.

announcement from *Variety*: "Norman Lear's Act III Communications and Columbia Pictures are developing *Sweet Tooth*, a so-called high-concept comedy, as a starring vehicle for Arnold Schwarzenegger. Schwarzenegger is being primed to play the tooth fairy in the script crafted over the past two years by writer Holly Sloan — with input from Lear — for Act III Communications."¹⁸

Following a similar line of argument, Diana Widom, former Senior Vice-President of Publicity and Promotion at Paramount Pictures, defines high concept through star persona with her description of a fictitious film based on this concept: "Eddie Murphy (as Axel Foley) meets Prince Charles." The juxtaposition of Murphy with royalty immediately sets up a series of oppositions which define the concept: the difference between rich and poor, America and Britain, black and white, brazen and reserved. All these oppositions develop from the simple one-line concept. Also, as the example indicates, the concept places a familiar, commercial element—in this case, a star working within his genre (comedy)—in a slightly altered context. This play of familiarity and difference seems essential to many definitions of high concept.

A final aspect to the usage of the term high concept is the tendency to describe such projects as dealing with timely or fashionable subjects. Since high concept often describes the most commercial type of film, the term necessarily has become connected to projects which offer subject matter "in vogue." This factor sometimes results in cycles of films which deal with similar high concepts. Consider, for example, the consecutive releases of *Raising Arizona* (1987), *Three Men and a Baby* (1987), *Baby Boom* (1987), and *She's Having a Baby* (1988) which led critics to label the trend combining yuppies and babies as high concept. Alternately, the "switching bodies" films (*Like Father, Like Son* [1987], *Vice Versa* [1987], *Big* [1988], *Dream a Little Dream* [1989]) have been treated as variations on a single high concept. A clear example of a film whose concept depends upon a trendy issue would be the John Travolta/Jamie Lee Curtis film *Perfect* in 1985. Seizing upon the health club phenomenon of the early 1980s, the film was motivated almost entirely by the notion that health clubs have become the new singles bars. However, as Stuart Byron and Anne Thompson astutely comment, the film is also a perfect example of a "dated-concept movie," since the fashionable subject had been completely exhausted through news and the popular presses by the time of the film's release.¹⁹

Therefore, within the film and television industries, high concept most frequently is associated with narrative and, in particular, a form of narrative which is highly marketable. This marketability might be based upon stars, the match between a star and a premise, or a subject

matter which is fashionable. In practice, the locus of this marketability and concept in the contemporary industry is the "pitch." In fact, in order to pitch a project succinctly the film must be high concept; consider Steven Spielberg's comment: "If a person can tell me the idea in 25 words or less, it's going to make a pretty good movie. I like ideas, especially movie ideas, that you can hold in your hand."²⁰ Spielberg's opinion relates well to the vision of high concept expressed by other Hollywood representatives: a striking, easily reducible narrative which also offers a high degree of marketability.

The Critics on High Concept

Although narrative is still a focus, high concept suggests another set of meanings to the popular presses and analysts of Hollywood. These meanings are summarized aptly by Richard Schickel, who points out that with the term high concept, "high" is actually a misnomer: "What the phrase really means is that the concept is so low it can be summarized and sold on the basis of a single sentence."²¹ During the past decade, high concept has appeared with ever increasing frequency in the popular discourses of the industry: trade journals such as *Variety*, *The Hollywood Reporter*, *Boxoffice*, *Paul Kagan* newsletters, and the entertainment sections of leading news magazines. Frequently the term is used as ammunition in an indictment against the contemporary industry, suggesting a bankruptcy of creativity within Hollywood. Whereas creative executives such as Katzenberg would stress the originality of a high concept idea, media critics would suggest that high concept actually represents the zero point of creativity.

As opposed to developing new ideas, critics describe high concept as relying heavily upon the replication and combination of previously successful narratives. In the extreme, critics describe high concept films as merely combinations of other films; the *Los Angeles Times*, for instance, presented a High Concept Match Game in which *RoboCop* was defined as *Terminator* meets *Dirty Harry* and *Harry and the Hendersons* as *Gentle Ben* meets *E.T.*²² To a lesser extent, this replication can involve "revitalizing" past successes through a star or shift in emphasis. At the time of release for *Flashdance* (1983), Jon Peters remarked that he was certain of the boxoffice success of the film since *Flashdance* was, in essence, a *Rocky* (1976) for women.²³ Of course, this replication and recombination has a strong economic motive: audiences have a point of reference for the new film due to their familiarity with the other sources. A film recombining other financially successful films possesses built-in marketing hooks. This privileging of the marketing apparatus is viewed by

the media as Hollywood focusing on commerce rather than art, placing an emphasis on marketable stories rather than “original” stories.

Consequently, critics describe high concept as Hollywood crassly privileging business over any consideration of creativity or artistic expression. While some critics sympathetically attribute high concept to concerns of fiscal responsibility and accountability, the majority simply utilize the term to denigrate contemporary Hollywood.²⁴ In fact, the term has gained such a negative connotation that high concept is often associated with the most sensationalist material. Consider critic Michael Wilmington’s condemnation of the term in his review of *Nice Girls Don’t Explode* (1987): “In an era of witless, tasteless high concepts, the one in *Nice Girls Don’t Explode* ought to be eligible for some kind of award: maybe the Golden Bomb as *Terms of Endearment* collides with *Carrie*.”²⁵

Inherent in the media’s usage of the term is the importance of not just summarizing, but also selling the film through the concept. In fact, Timothy Noah foregrounds this aspect in his definition of high concept: “The ‘high concept’ approach is favored by the seller—say, a producer trying to convince a studio to put up money for his movie—because it renders a proposal misunderstanding-proof. High concept proposals are by definition easily grasped by the studio executives on the run and, further down the road, by the movie audiences, who are given only a week or two from a film’s opening to determine whether it will stay in theaters.”²⁶ This “shorthand” form of communication between industry and audience occurs through the marketing of the high concept, which is aided by the simplicity and directness of the concept. Consequently, these films are designed to be sold; as critic Owen Gleiberman describes in his review of the John Goodman film *King Ralph* (1991), “This is the sort of high-concept comedy in which the jokes seem to have been designed primarily for use in the film’s trailer.”²⁷

The understanding of high concept among the media critics actually parallels usage within the industry in many respects. Both the critics and the industry “practitioners” emphasize marketing and narrative in their definitions of high concept. But whereas the industry focuses on the uniqueness and originality of the concept, the media critics stress its creative bankruptcy. In effect, the industry utilizes high concept in a prescriptive manner—one “rule” toward a financially successful project—while the media uses the term in an evaluative sense, with high concept inevitably synonymous with being aesthetically suspect or tainted. Undoubtedly as a reaction to the negative connotation of high concept within the media, the creative community of Hollywood distances itself, in a self-serving manner, from all projects which might be

termed high concept. In a 1987 article about the development of United Artists, Jack Matthews states that "eighteen months ago, UA executives were talking about making high concept films that can be made with fiscal responsibility." Pointedly, Matthews claims that (now former) United Artists chairman Tony Thomopolous talks less about concepts ("It's *High Noon* in outer space"), and more about executing good stories.²⁸ One studio production executive, who wished to remain anonymous, recalled that the term *high concept* had been used frequently within the industry in the early 1980s, but has since been seized upon and utilized in a pejorative manner by critics: "People are amused by the algebra and vocabulary of the industry. 'High concept' is now used by some effete critic to describe a movie he doesn't like."²⁹

Economics, Aesthetics, and High Concept as "Post" Classical Cinema

At the most basic level, high concept can be considered as one result of the tension between the economics and aesthetics on which commercial studio filmmaking is based. All mainstream Hollywood filmmaking is economically oriented, through the minimization of production cost and maximization of potential boxoffice revenue. However, the connection between economics and high concept is particularly strong, since high concept appears to be the most market-driven type of film being produced. This relation can be conceptualized in two different forms. First, as Douglas Gomery and Robert Allen suggest, production practices within the film industry are influenced by shifts in the industrial structure of Hollywood. Gomery and Allen describe the relationship between an industrial mode of production (i.e., the methods through which the human, technological, and aesthetic "raw materials" are transformed into film) and the cultural product, film, in the following terms: "Each mode of production produces its own set of production practices: normative conceptions of how a particular kind of film 'should' look and sound."³⁰ Historically, as the forces forming the mode of production change across time, so does the product of film, privileging a certain "look and sound" within filmmaking. This new "look and sound" is evident in the style of the high concept picture. Second, the relation between economics and high concept exists at the level of marketing: the high concept film is designed to maximize marketability and, consequently, the economic potential at the boxoffice. This marketability is based upon such factors as stars, the match between a star and a project, a pre-sold premise (such as a remake or adaptation of a best-selling novel), and a concept which taps into a national trend or sentiment.

This relationship between economics and aesthetics, which I am positing as integral to an understanding of high concept, also possesses an important temporal dimension. High concept can be considered as a style of filmmaking which developed at a particular point in the history of postwar Hollywood. More specifically, high concept represents one strand of post-classical Hollywood cinema: a style with strong ties to the classical cinema, yet with some significant deviations in terms of composition. Theories of the classical Hollywood cinema have been a significant recent development in the field of film studies, and film scholars have utilized many different methodological and theoretical approaches to the subject. Certainly one of the most influential approaches has been the work of David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, who develop classical Hollywood cinema as a particular stylistic system with clear economic and aesthetic determinants.³¹ Characterizing the style of classic filmmaking as the result of several interconnecting causal factors, the authors are able to provide a substantial argument for the classical Hollywood cinema as a period with distinct breaks from primitive cinema. Understandably, given their focus, Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson do not consider the influence of economic and institutional changes since 1960—many of which have irrevocably altered the forms of product from Hollywood. High concept addresses how these economic and institutional changes—including the conglomeration of the film industry and the rise of television, new marketing methods, and changing distribution strategies—have extended and modified some significant traits of the classical model.

**Micro- and Macro-Analysis:
Style, Marketing, and
Differentiation of Product**

The analysis of high concept will begin at the “micro” level of the film, isolating and identifying the traits of the high concept film. The abstracted images which are the basis for the extensive marketing campaigns are derived, at least partially, from the unique style of the high concept films. This style becomes codified across successive films, so that one can identify the ways in which the style offers several modifications from the classical Hollywood cinema. More specifically this style is based upon two major components: a simplification of character and narrative, and a strong match between image and music soundtrack throughout the film. In the high concept film, the narrative frequently is composed of stock situations firmly set within the bounds of genre and viewer expectation. In fact, with the high concept film, one can see the movement of the narrative

from the single-sentence concept. So, for example, "*Top Gun* (1986) in race cars" aptly describes the narrative trajectory of *Days of Thunder* (1990): the concept encapsulizes the establishment, animation, intensification, and resolution of the plot structure, as well as the star, the style, and genre of the film.³² Conversely, a description for a film which is not high concept fails to offer a fair representation of the narrative trajectory. *Terms of Endearment* (1983) could be described as "the turbulent, but loving, relationship between a mother and daughter across three decades," but this concept fails to offer the viewer a sense of the film's overall narrative development. Consequently, the film cannot be captured by a single image through the marketing campaign in a manner similar to the selling of the high concept films.

Perhaps the most important component of this style is the relation of the image to the soundtrack, since frequently a major portion of these films is composed of extended montages which are, in effect, music video sequences. These musical sequences serve as modular set pieces which fragment the narrative. The soundtrack also accompanies a set of formal techniques which often hamper or actually halt the narrative progression: these techniques include extreme backlighting, a minimal (often almost black-and-white) color scheme, a predominance of reflected images and a tendency toward settings of high technology and industrial design. Consider just one of the "modules" from *Flashdance*: Jennifer Beals and Michael Nouri wandering hand-in-hand through an abandoned railway yard set against the song "Lady, Lady, Lady." The song matches the action only in its romantic mood, and the image of the striking couple in the perfectly lit industrial wasteland encourages a contemplation completely unconnected to the ostensible narrative. This tendency is bolstered also by the superficial narrative and characters. In some cases, the style of the productions seems to seep through onto the narrative; issues of style or image become crucial to the functioning of the characters and the development of the narrative. Consider, for example, the importance of style in performance to *Flashdance*, style in aviation to *Top Gun*, or personal style to *American Gigolo* (1980). The narrative of each film relies on style in order to progress: Alex's unique dancing style places her outside the world of both the strip clubs and the ballet, Maverick's renegade flying style causes his disciplinary problems with his superiors in *Top Gun*, and Julian Kay's choice of clothes and image separates him from all the other gigolos in Los Angeles. Furthermore, the reliance on bold images in the films reinforces the extraction of these images from the film for the film's marketing and merchandising. The reduced narrative and emphasis upon style, which often has a potent visual representation, permit, even en-



Style in the narrative, style in the production (Flashdance, Paramount, 1983). Copyright © MCMLXXXIII by Paramount Pictures Corporation.

courage, the extensive reproduction of these key images from the film in mass marketing.

If high concept can be described as a style of filmmaking at a particular point in film history, there are causal mechanisms creating and demarcating this period. The larger structural changes within the industry—such as conglomeration, the development of new technologies, and the rise in marketing and merchandising—operate to privilege films which can be summarized and sold in a single sentence. These structural changes one-by-one cannot be assigned causation of the high concept films, however. While these changes can be correlated with the development of high concept, high concept as a style of filmmaking is created by myriad forces, including important aesthetic ties to the classical cinema. Perhaps it is best to consider high concept as only one aesthetic and economic way in which cinema has developed after the classical period.

The analysis of the aesthetic qualities of high concept leads into the larger “macro” factors molding this style of filmmaking. At the broadest macro-level, the high concept film has been influenced greatly by changes in the marketplace for film during the past twenty years. An

examination of the reconfigured marketplace anchors my investigation of high concept. Following one of the basic tenets of industrial organization theory, firm behavior is affected by market structure. Therefore, as Gomery and Allen demonstrate, the film "product" invariably is shaped by the changing marketplace in which it is produced and consumed. High concept is definitely connected to two forces which have shaped the market for film powerfully in recent years: the development of new media (such as home video and cable) and the concurrent ownership changes within the film industry. These forces have minimized the boundaries between economic agents and their separate domains, splintering the marketplace for film. Two of the principal methods through which the most successful studios have responded to the changing marketplace have been the differentiation of product and the entry into the market created by new delivery systems. High concept can be seen as one of the major forms of product differentiation within the current industry. By producing high concept films, studios have been able to identify and exploit particular market segments. In this fashion, the changing economic parameters of the marketplace have helped to configure the high concept film.

High concept functions as a form of differentiated product primarily through two routes: through an integration with marketing and merchandising and through an emphasis on style. The connection between high concept and marketing begins at the level of the pitch. Recall that a pitch for a high concept product should be summed up and sold in a single sentence. The emphasis on marketing also extends through the entry of the film into the marketplace: the high concept films are accompanied by strikingly graphic print and television advertising campaigns, with many films also accompanied by merchandised product derived from the film. High concept films lend themselves to merchandising and marketing by their abstraction of a key image from the film (e.g., the hot rod forming the *Grease* logo) and through the manipulation of this image to extend the "shelf life" of the motion picture. The image, which is replicated through the advertising materials and product tie-ins, can be seen as the expression of the most commercial elements of the high concept film.

In addition to the reliance on striking images and their replication in marketing and merchandising (product tie-in) campaigns, other innovations in marketing blossomed at the same time as high concept. Consider, for example, the movement toward saturation releases utilizing television commercials, the widespread adoption of marketing research as a pre- and post-production tool, and the utilization of music soundtracks as a primary marketing focus. All these marketing methods became common practice throughout the 1970s and '80s, correlating with

the development of high concept. Again, *Grease* can be seen as a paradigm for the marketing possibilities offered through high concept—the wide (and successful) opening of *Grease* was completely dependent on the strong marketing potential built into the film. It is impossible to overestimate the importance of marketing to the operation of high concept. High concept films, which could be described as the most market-driven projects in Hollywood, are narrated as much by their marketing as by their ostensible story. In this regard, Janet Staiger and Barbara Klinger have offered persuasive arguments for the importance of promotion (which includes both marketing and merchandising) to the content, style, and reception of the Hollywood film.³³ The relationship which they posit among promotion, the film text, and reception would seem to be even more pivotal to the market-driven high concept films.

Since high concept films are conceived as highly marketable, one might wonder about the actual commercial performance of these films within the marketplace. After my investigation of the marketing strategies in the high concept films and their impact upon the films' reception, the links between this commercial style of filmmaking and their actual popularity at the boxoffice will be investigated. A statistical model accounting for boxoffice revenue will be developed, with an eye toward explaining the commercial success or failure of the high concept films. This project also reflects the increased role that market research (including forecasting) has played in the contemporary film industry, a factor which reinforces the development of high concept. Barry Litman's study, "Predicting Success of Theatrical Movies: New Empirical Evidence," offers a model for such an analysis.³⁴ As part of this analysis, the relationship between boxoffice revenue and the subset of films fitting the criteria for high concept will be analyzed. Given their marketability and the reliance upon past successes, it is probable that the high concept films would be more popular than other films. In addition, given their modularity and "recycled" quality, statistical modeling, based upon coding the film into several constitutive variables, might be able to predict their boxoffice performance with more precision than that for the "low concept" films. If high concept functions as product differentiation, as I have posited, the financial success or failure of this differentiation in the actual marketplace is a significant aspect of high concept in practice to be accounted for.

"The Look, the Hook, and the Book"

High concept can be conceived, therefore, as a product differentiated through the emphasis on style in production and through the integration of the film with its marketing.

Table 1. The Spectrum of High Concept

This table lists some examples of high concept, that is, films which illustrate allegiance to one or more traits ("the look, the hook, and the book") of high concept. This is not intended to offer an exhaustive accounting of all high concept films over the past three decades, but rather merely a suggestion of the diverse set of films which could be supported as high concept.

| | |
|---|---|
| <i>Jaws</i> (1975) | <i>Mad Max beyond Thunderdome</i> (1985) |
| <i>The Omen</i> (1976) | <i>Weird Science</i> (1985) |
| <i>King Kong</i> (1976) | <i>To Live and Die in L.A.</i> (1985) |
| <i>Star Wars</i> (1977) | <i>9½ Weeks</i> (1986) |
| <i>The Deep</i> (1977) | <i>Quicksilver</i> (1986) |
| <i>Saturday Night Fever</i> (1977) | <i>The Fly</i> (1986) |
| <i>Grease</i> (1978) | <i>American Anthem</i> (1986) |
| <i>Superman</i> (1978) | <i>Manhunter</i> (1986) |
| <i>The Main Event</i> (1979) | <i>Howard the Duck</i> (1986) |
| <i>The Jerk</i> (1980) | <i>Pretty in Pink</i> (1986) |
| <i>The Blues Brothers</i> (1980) | <i>Ferris Bueller's Day Off</i> (1986) |
| <i>Caddyshack</i> (1980) | <i>Ruthless People</i> (1986) |
| <i>The Empire Strikes Back</i> (1980) | <i>Top Gun</i> (1986) |
| <i>Urban Cowboy</i> (1980) | <i>The Lost Boys</i> (1987) |
| <i>American Gigolo</i> (1980) | <i>Dragnet</i> (1987) |
| <i>Flash Gordon</i> (1980) | <i>The Witches of Eastwick</i> (1987) |
| <i>Superman II</i> (1981) | <i>Mannequin</i> (1987) |
| <i>Endless Love</i> (1981) | <i>The Untouchables</i> (1987) |
| <i>Thief</i> (1981) | <i>Fatal Attraction</i> (1987) |
| <i>Get People</i> (1982) | <i>Beverly Hills Cop II</i> (1987) |
| <i>Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan</i> (1982) | <i>Cocktail</i> (1988) |
| <i>E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial</i> (1982) | <i>D.O.A.</i> (1988) |
| <i>Blue Thunder</i> (1983) | <i>Twins</i> (1988) |
| <i>Flashdance</i> (1983) | <i>Coming to America</i> (1988) |
| <i>Return of the Jedi</i> (1983) | <i>Black Rain</i> (1989) |
| <i>Trailing Places</i> (1984) | <i>Batman</i> (1989) |
| <i>Shaving Alive</i> (1984) | <i>Harlem Nights</i> (1989) |
| <i>Indiana Jones/Temple Doom</i> (1984) | <i>Days of Thunder</i> (1990) |
| <i>The Terminator</i> (1984) | <i>Flatliners</i> (1990) |
| <i>The Natural</i> (1984) | <i>The Hunt for Red October</i> (1990) |
| <i>The Keep</i> (1984) | <i>Dick Tracy</i> (1990) |
| <i>Footloose</i> (1984) | <i>Pretty Woman</i> (1990) |
| <i>Reckless</i> (1984) | <i>Total Recall</i> (1990) |
| <i>Thief of Hearts</i> (1984) | <i>Another 48 Hrs.</i> (1990) |
| <i>People Run</i> (1984) | <i>Kindergarten Cop</i> (1990) |
| <i>Streets of Fire</i> (1984) | <i>Hook</i> (1991) |
| <i>Germinals</i> (1984) | <i>Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves</i> (1991) |
| <i>Beverly Hills Cop</i> (1984) | <i>The Addams Family</i> (1991) |
| <i>Ghostbusters</i> (1984) | <i>Wayne's World</i> (1992) |
| <i>St. Elmo's Fire</i> (1985) | <i>Batman Returns</i> (1992) |
| <i>Commando</i> (1985) | |

This definition encompasses several aspects of high concept; to gather these aspects together in an appropriately high concept fashion, one can think of high concept as comprising “the look, the hook, and the book.” The look of the images, the marketing hooks, and the reduced narratives form the cornerstones of high concept. High concept can be described most fruitfully as a spectrum based upon these three parameters: all Hollywood films fall along the scale, some falling toward the low end of the spectrum (the low concept films), while some fall toward the high end of the spectrum (the high concept films). Few films would actually fall at either end of the spectrum—either purely low concept or purely high concept. Following from this model, films could be classified more accurately in relative, rather than absolute, terms: for example, although both projects are star-driven, the straightforward comedy *Coming to America* (1988) is more high concept than the darkly comic satire *The War of the Roses* (1989).

The attempt to construct this model of high concept should neither be viewed as an academic spin on the critics’ condemnation of commercial filmmaking, nor as an attempt to glorify the popular. Rather, the project addresses the initially curious supposition that *Grease*, along with *Jaws* (1975), *Star Wars* (1977), and *Saturday Night Fever*, is of much greater significance to American film history than the critically and institutionally recognized films of the period, such as *All That Jazz*, *Network* (1976), *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1975), and *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979). While this statement may alarm “canon” builders already periodizing the last three decades of American film, I believe that through understanding the commercial recipe and economic determinants of a film like *Grease*, one can gain a true appreciation of the contemporary landscape of American film—a landscape which has nurtured and privileged the high concept film.

Notes

1. A Critical Redefinition: The Concept of High Concept

1. David Ansen, "Rock Tycoon Robert Stigwood," *Newsweek*, July 31, 1978: 43.
2. "The Yellow Brick Road to Profit," *Time*, January 23, 1978: 46.
3. R. Serge Denisoff and William D. Romanowski, *Risky Business: Rock in Film* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transactions Publishers, 1991) 235.
4. *Ibid.* 240.
5. Rentals include money returned to the distributor, not the amount actually taken in at the boxoffice, which is referred to as the boxoffice gross.
6. See Thomas Schatz's analysis of the generic transformation in the film in *Old Hollywood/New Hollywood: Ritual, Art, and Industry* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1983) 280–281.
7. Richard Dyer, *Only Entertainment* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 61.
8. Chris Chase, "Fosse's Ego Trip," *Life*, December 1979: 94.
9. Martin Gottfried, *All His Jazz: The Life and Death of Bob Fosse* (New York: Bantam, 1990) 393.
10. Kevin Boyd Grubb, *Razzle Dazzle: The Life and Work of Bob Fosse* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989) 228.
11. Diller began his professional career as assistant to the head of programming at the age of 23 in 1965. He continued to rise at ABC, eventually leaving in 1974 as the Vice-President of Prime Time Programming at ABC. See James P. Forkan, "Paramount Exec is Adman of Year," *Advertising Age*, January 8, 1979: S2, 1. Gary Edgerton recounts Diller's innovations in "High Concept, Small Screen," *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, Fall 1991: 114–127.
12. For an interesting historical account of the development of this program-

ming form, consult Richard Levinson and William Link, *Stay Tuned* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981) 1–5.

13. Reprinted in Claudia Eller, "Katzenberg Memo: Rivals' Reactions Range from Accord to Scorn," *Variety*, January 31, 1991: 1+.

14. Interview with Peter Guber, April 27, 1988.

15. High concept is used in both film and television as a means of defining a project. The term has similar connotations in the two media.

16. Peter Biskind, "Low Concept," *Premiere*, February 1988: 74.

17. Dawn Steel, *They Can Kill You . . . But They Can't Eat You* (New York: Pocket Books, 1993) 98.

18. Will Tusher, "Schwarzenegger as the Tooth Fairy?" *Daily Variety*, August 29, 1991: 3.

19. Stuart Byron and Anne Thompson, "Summer Rentals," *LA Weekly*, September 27–October 5, 1985: 13.

20. J. Hoberman, "1975–1985: Ten Years That Shook the World," *American Film*, June 1985: 36.

21. Richard Schickel, rev. of *Irreconcilable Differences*, *Time*, October 8, 1984: 82.

22. Patrick Goldstein, "Hollywood Squared," *Los Angeles Times*, July 26, 1987: Calendar section, 40.

23. Dale Pollock, "Flashfight," *Los Angeles Times*, July 10, 1983: Calendar section, 1+.

24. For a more positive evaluation of high concept in terms of an economic strategy, see David Ansen and Peter McAlevey, "The Producer Is King Again," *Newsweek*, May 20, 1985: 84–86.

25. Michael Wilmington, "Nice Girls Don't Explode Is a Dud," *Los Angeles Times*, May 29, 1987: Calendar section, 8.

26. Timothy Noah, "Valley of the Duds," *Washington Monthly*, October 1985: 18.

27. Owen Gleiberman, rev. of *King Ralph*, *Entertainment Weekly*, March 8, 1991: 42.

28. Jack Matthews, "He Wants to Add New Pages to UA's Illustrious History," *Los Angeles Times*, November 19, 1987: C1.

29. Personal interview with studio production executive, tape on file.

30. Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985) 86.

31. David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

32. For a model of the plot structure of the genre film in these terms, consult Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* (New York: Random House, 1981).

33. In particular, consult Barbara Klinger, "Digressions at the Cinema: Reception and Mass Culture," *Cinema Journal* 28, no. 4 (1989): 3–19.

34. Barry R. Litman, "Predicting Success of Theatrical Movies: New Empirical Evidence," National Convention for Education in Journalism, Boston, August 1980.

