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Tall Revenue Features: The Genealogy of the Modern Blockbuster

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- blockbuster** (n. sl.) 1. something of great power or size, esp. an epic film or a book.
2. a huge bomb capable of destroying a whole block of buildings.¹

In the enthusiastic language of the trade, a blockbuster is, currently, a tall revenue feature.
When a picture grosses \$10,000,000 or more it's blockbusting.²

'Blockbuster' has entered common parlance as a term to describe the kind of cinema most readily associated with the dominant commercial forms of modern, mainstream, 'postclassical' or 'post-studio' Hollywood. It is typically used to refer to a film which is extraordinarily successful in financial terms. However, the term can also be extended to refer to those films which *need* to be this successful in order to have a chance of returning a profit on their equally extraordinary production costs. It is the possibility of a 'failed blockbuster' which allows the twin dictionary definitions quoted at the head of this chapter to seem complementary rather than contradictory: every blockbuster has the potential to be both an 'epic' of 'great power and size' and a 'bomb' (paradoxically the trade's preferred term for a commercial disaster).

The inbuilt imprecision of the term has led to its colloquial origins (it has only been used to describe films since the early 1950s) becoming obscured and its present meaning fudged. In contemporary public discourse, it is not uncommon to find the words 'Hollywood' and 'blockbuster' considered practically synonymous. While at one time blockbusters were distinguished partly by their exceptionalism, their status as an economic category different from and 'above' the normal run of general releases, it now seems possible to believe that Hollywood makes nothing *but* blockbusters. In seeking to place the blockbuster phenomenon historically, we might begin by considering the extent to which exceptionally successful and exceptionally expensive films have featured in the US industry's annual release schedules and box-office charts.

Throughout the silent period, only sixteen films earned domestic rentals exceeding \$2 million, with MGM's *The Big Parade* (1925) earning the highest gross of its era, \$5.1 million. No sound-era film earned as much as this until David O. Selznick's *Gone with the Wind* (1939), also released by MGM, took more than \$30 million in its first five

years. With ticket price inflation, the benchmark for high grosses rose in the 1940s; however, a comparably large gap between the top earners and the majority of successes did not appear until the 1946-7 season, when Selznick's *Duel in the Sun* and Samuel Goldwyn's *The Best Years of Our Lives* (both 1946) each grossed around \$10 million, and then again at the end of the decade, when Cecil B. DeMille's *Samson and Delilah* (1949) earned \$9 million, nearly twice as much as its nearest competitor. Thereafter, annual box-office charts have always included a few films which have placed well ahead of the rest of the pack, a tendency which was especially pronounced in the 1970s.

Many of these hits were also very high-cost productions. The most expensive silent film, MGM's *Ben-Hur* (1925), cost \$4 million and grossed \$4.55 million. This was a level of expenditure not matched until *Gone with the Wind*, which cost \$4.25 million. Thereafter, new budgetary records were set, in turn, by *Duel in the Sun* (\$6.48 million), *Quo Vadis* (1951, \$7.1 million) and *The Ten Commandments* (1956, \$13.5 million), which challenged and briefly surpassed *Gone with the Wind* as the industry's greatest ever box-office success. In cases like these, exceptional success seemed to depend upon exceptional outlay. It was 'lessons' such as these which led to the spate of blockbuster productions that marked the twenty-year period from the early 1950s to the early 1970s and to the second cycle of high spending which extends from the late 1970s through to the present day.

Heavy investment in production was and is not sufficient alone, however, to guarantee success. Particular marketing and distribution strategies were and are required to maximise the commercial potential of even the most attractively packaged and lavishly produced blockbuster film. Generalising broadly, there have been two distribution patterns typically associated with the release of blockbusters: roadshowing and saturation mass booking.

Roadshows

A roadshow is, or was, a film distributed and exhibited in a manner similar to that of a live stage performance at a legitimate theatre. Such films would open on a limited or exclusive basis in a major metropolitan centre for an extended or indefinite run at 'advanced' (raised) prices. Shows were non-continuous, typically limited to one or two performances a day and seats could be reserved. In the 1950s and 1960s - what I prefer to term the 'roadshow era' - the films might have been projected in some special screen format, such as 70mm or Cinerama, to justify their exhibition under such exceptional circumstances, or they might simply have been especially expensive or prestige-laden productions. Screenings of these films were often preceded by an orchestral overture, usually pre-recorded and played over closed curtains, and the films themselves were usually interrupted by an intermission because of their exceptional length. Souvenir programme brochures might have been offered for purchase in the foyer, and to encourage mass attendance group bookings were sought for the block sale of tickets. Not all of these features needed to be present to attract the roadshow tag in the trade press (raised prices alone could merit such a description, or an exclusive, extended run), but together they constituted the range of possibilities for the industry's elite products.

This was the preferred manner of distribution and exhibition for most would-be blockbusters from the early 1910s to the early 1970s, as it then seemed to offer the best opportunities for a proportionately large return on investment. Particularly successful roadshow engagements could last months, even years, rather than the usual two to eight weeks common for metropolitan first runs. Roadshowing was reserved for a select few releases each year. The near-universal policy for 'general release' was the presentation of films in continuous performances, without breaks between shows, so that patrons could enter the film(s) at any point, a practice carried over from vaudeville. In most cinemas, tickets could not be purchased in advance or seats reserved. These practices accounted for the majority of routine, run-of-the-mill releases and persisted throughout the years of the industry's greatest success. Habitual attendance, whether at 'specials' or 'programmers', seemed guaranteed because of the conditions of the post-Depression 1930s and the wartime and postwar 1940s. To cater for a mass public whose members might visit the cinema several times a week, a rapid turnover of programmes and a flexible admissions policy was more sensible for most houses than extended runs and fixed show times.

The realisation in the wartime boom years that the market could support fewer, more expensive and more ambitious pictures if runs (at the 'pre-release' and first-run stages) were long enough to capitalise fully on audience interest led to a reduction in output and a rise in costs per film. Thereafter, the combination of prosecution under the US anti-trust laws, leading to the divorcement of the studios' theatre chains and a consequent loosening of control over exhibition, along with the postwar decline in attendances such as led to the production of epics *Samson and Delilah* and *Quo Vadis* as essential instruments in the studios' attempt to control the market via distribution.

Encouraged by the astounding success of roadshows such as *The Ten Commandments* and *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1956); the studios were persuaded that the best way to earn large profits was to roadshow their premium product. In the period between 1956 and 1970, roadshowing came into its own as the distribution and exhibition strategy of choice. It was used for an increasing number of big films aimed at attracting back to the cinema that section of the population which no longer attended on a regular basis, but which might be persuaded to go downtown for the kind of special occasion or 'event' which a roadshow offered. Budgets rose, too, to meet the cost of productions conceived and executed on a hitherto unprecedented scale. The production of high-cost, high-prestige blockbusters and their roadshow release was a direct response by the studios to the structural and economic conditions of the 1950s and 1960s. It represented in part the studios' attempt to retain and to extend the established exhibition practices of the studio system following divorcement: it was the first run *par excellence* and represented optimum commercial performance. In addition, roadshow blockbusters offered the kind of prime product needed to entice exhibitors to offer competitive bids against one another, to guarantee extended playing time and to pay advances on box-office receipts. With these films in hand, the studios could remain in control of exhibition even after the formal divestiture of their theatres.

The promise of a blockbuster hit also permitted them, in their role as distributors, to

exact a larger than usual proportion of the box-office gross from exhibitors. By the early 1960s in the US, up to 90 per cent of receipts after deduction of the 'house nut' (theatre operating expenses) were to be remitted to the distributor. Although the operating costs of roadshow theatres were greater than for most cinemas, thus creating a larger than usual 'nut' and a lesser portion of the box-office for the distributors, this was doubtless offset by the higher ticket prices and by the payment of advance guarantees. As Tino Balio has explained, although initially reserved only for key theatres in New York and Los Angeles, and for premium roadshow releases, this type of deal became standard for national first-run exhibition of most pictures.³

Although roadshowing in its traditional sense has now, in the age of the multiplex, been largely abandoned, certain features associated with it – separate performances, tickets which can be bought in advance, runs limited only by box-office response – have been retained and successfully integrated into regular exhibition practice. The blockbuster has also become, once again, the preferred mode of the industry's most characteristic products, though their current forms, and the distribution strategies and marketing techniques associated with them, have all changed significantly. Saturation-booking patterns on the scale of today's were unknown in the studio era, but the principle of 'instant release' – reaching as large an audience as possible as quickly as possible – does also have precedents in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, notably in the methods adopted by two independent producer-distributors.

Despite the successful roadshowing of *Gone with the Wind*, David O. Selznick's two other big hits of the 1940s, *Since You Went Away* (1944) and *Duel in the Sun*, were released in a new strategy the producer had devised, which briefly became known as the 'Selznick pattern'. Selznick was concerned that the intensive and expensive advertising necessary to promote a roadshow was not economic when a film was playing in only one theatre, even at advanced prices.⁴ His new strategy involved targeting a particular territory which would be blitzed with advertising in advance of a film opening. He opened both the above-named films in several downtown Los Angeles theatres at once, along with concurrent engagements in a larger number of suburban and outlying areas, all playing continuous performances with advanced prices prior to a full general release. Multiple first runs took advantage of the public anticipation built by the advertising by making possible a greater number of admissions in a shorter space of time than with an exclusive roadshow engagement. Play-off was quicker, as were returns on the considerable investments these films represented.

An intensive publicity campaign accompanying saturation release later came to be the policy typically used for exploitation films seeking to tap the curiosity of a gullible public before negative word-of-mouth got around. A case in point is Joseph E. Levine's handling of a number of low-budget, European-made epics, notably *Hercules* (1958) and *Hercules Unchained* (1959). These two films were released through Warner Bros., but Levine himself masterminded their promotional campaigns, spending over \$1 million apiece (considerably more than their negative costs) on national advertising and publicity, including television slots and full-page newspaper spreads, and circulating some 600 prints of each title simultaneously throughout the country, twice the usual number.

The *Hercules* films and the many other 'peplum' epics of their kind, with their semi-clad, muscle-bound supermen and tongue-in-cheek heroics, aimed primarily at an audience of indiscriminating youngsters, anticipated the action-oriented blockbusters of the 1980s and 1990s. The peplums have more in common with the teenage exploitation pictures produced by American International Pictures from the 1950s on, the spaghetti Westerns which would soon supplant the production of epics in Italy, and the James Bond films which would become the definitive model for future action films in both Europe and America, than with the roadshows, which tended to depend upon an aura of prestige for their relatively up-market appeal. These latter cycles also tended to be released in the rapid mass-booking patterns pioneered by Selznick and Levine.

The adoption by the majors of multiple first runs, via the 'Selznick pattern' and its successor, the 'Premiere Showcase' (developed by United Artists in the early 1960s), was partly meant to mollify the newly built suburban theatres excluded from access to roadshows (which tended to play at the remaining downtown picture palaces) and to enhance the status, as well as speed up the supply, of regular A-movies and general releases. Although the industry, from the silent era onwards, tended to enjoy its most spectacular successes with roadshow 'super-specials', these were, almost by definition, exceptions to the norms of production and release. It is contemporary Hollywood (dating from the mid-1970s) which has become dependent on the regular production of blockbusters as its principal mode of operation. But it is the exploitation-movie release strategy, aiming to book a film on every available screen for as fast a financial return as possible, which has been adopted for them, rather than the roadshow method, which met its demise in the industry crisis of 1969–71.

New patterns of production and consumption

The takeover of the studios by large business conglomerates, at least up to 1969, did not significantly alter the industry's basic assumptions about the rightness of the roadshow policy. The number of roadshows and other blockbuster productions released by Paramount actually increased after its purchase by Gulf + Western in 1966; the same is true of Warners after its 1967 merger with Seven Arts, and United Artists following takeover by Transamerica the same year. It took the convulsion of 1969–71 to convince the studios that the roadshow had outlived its usefulness; however, the industry soon resumed its commitment to blockbusters, albeit distributed in rather different patterns. For explanation of these changes we need to examine the seismic shifts which occurred in the industry in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Between 1957 and 1964, all the studios had shown a corporate loss in at least one year, and there was no year in which at least one such loss had not been recorded. The years from 1965–8 seemed to suggest a new stability, as box-office receipts began to rise (though not attendances: the rise in income was due mainly to ticket price increases) and most of the corporations showed steady profits. For most of them, both annual revenues and the number of releases per year peaked in 1968, suggesting that Hollywood was successfully beating both the box-office recession and its own earlier

mismanagement. By the end of the following year, however, all was crisis: *Variety* reported the combined annual loss by four of the studios as \$110,066,000:

Factors held responsible are write-downs of story properties not deemed suitable for present audience interest, failure of pictures to register expected box-office, changes in amortization tables to achieve more realistic earning prospects, and higher interest rates on money invested in productions.⁵

As a result of their losses, several of the studios changed corporate ownership or executive management; a number temporarily stopped production; most 'rationalised' their corporate structure, assets and operation; and almost all announced radical new economies and revised production policies.

To read many of the standard accounts of this period, one might think that all Hollywood's troubles were due to the failure of a half-dozen or so big-budget musicals produced to capitalise on the success of *The Sound of Music* (1965). The problems, however, were more fundamental. Several interrelated factors were involved in the virtual abandonment of blockbusters (briefly) and roadshowing (more or less permanently) by the industry and their replacement by other production strategies and marketing methods: first, the high cost of many blockbuster films, set against their often meagre or disappointing returns; second, the excessive number of roadshows in circulation in the late 1960s, many of which were typically aimed at an audience which no longer represented the majority of the moviegoing population, and the consequent saturation of the market; third, general over-production of all categories of release, spreading the revenues available from a declining theatrical market ever more thinly; and fourth, the failure of revenues from ancillary markets to compensate for losses in the theatrical sector: in particular, the drop in sales of broadcast rights to television networks. In addition, the changing demographic composition of audiences in combination with new patterns of theatre construction, including their design and location, led to a rethinking of production, distribution and exhibition policies.⁶

The blockbusters of the later 1960s registered, on a regular basis, production costs which had been highly exceptional in the preceding decade and a half, even by the inflationary standards of the postwar years. Inflation itself only partly accounts for this trend; studio inefficiencies and the over-ambition of film-makers had some responsibility, too. Between 1968 and 1971, at least twenty-four pictures cost over \$10 million. Of these, probably only three made a clear profit from the domestic market: *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *Patton* and *Airport* (both 1970). Several of the studios suffering the heaviest losses in this period were those with a number of very high-budget pictures entering release (not all of them on a roadshow basis): Fox, Paramount, United Artists and MGM.

The industry's financial planning generally failed to register the impossibility of making a profitable return on expensive pictures for which, partly due to the roadshow patterns in which many were distributed, receipts were spread over a long period of time, thus increasing the amount of interest which had to be paid on production loans. A further problem was the number of releases bidding for the ever-dwindling consumer dollar.

In 1968, the seven majors collectively released 177 pictures, twenty more than the previous year. But that year also saw the first releases from three new 'mini-majors', ABC/Cinerama, Cinema Center and National General, not to mention those from independents such as Disney, Avco Embassy, Allied Artists and American International, which brought the total number of releases that year to 454.⁷ These companies were all competing in the same, mainstream market, which could no longer support such volume of product. Of the ninety films listed by *Variety* as having earned upwards of \$1 million in the domestic market for the 1968 season, only twenty-seven earned \$4 million or more; of the same number on 1969's chart, only twenty-five earned above \$4 million.⁸ This left the vast majority of commercial releases fighting over scraps.

The studios' combined annual production expenditure in this period was about \$400 million (including independent productions); total potential rental income from the world market was estimated as \$600 million, of which little more than a third was available to cover actual production expenses (after deduction of distribution fees and costs). Only the success of a few big-budget pictures disguised the fact that long-term profitability on this continuing basis was impossible. Even if the studios were to handle a reduced number of films, the concomitant reduction in distribution fees – their principal source of profit – would lead to ultimate collective bankruptcy if production costs remained at a constant level.⁹

The complete failure of a large majority of the late 1960s' roadshows can partly be accounted for by changing patterns of audience taste. Many of the major box-office successes at the end of the decade were not purpose-built blockbusters, but relatively low-budget 'sleepers' – surprise hits – such as *The Graduate* (1967, which grossed \$44.1 million domestically), *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967, \$22.8 million), *Bullitt* (1968, \$19 million), *Midnight Cowboy* (1969, \$20.5 million), *Easy Rider* (1969, \$19.1 million), *M*A*S*H* (1970, \$36.7 million) and *Woodstock* (1970, \$16.4 million). These films owed their profitability not to the mass family audience at which roadshows were traditionally aimed, but to the up-market adult and college-educated 'youth' audiences, which the studios tried increasingly to cultivate in the early 1970s.

Though many of the 'failed' roadshows were successful enough in terms of audience acceptance – *Hello, Dolly!*, *Paint Your Wagon* (both 1969) and *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (1970) all appeared in the US box-office top tens for their respective years of release – their excessively high production costs (around \$20 million each) prevented their making a profit from the theatrical market alone. This fact, in combination with the realisation of the limited revenues possible from the world market, resulted in the capping of budgets by almost all the companies from 1970 and the reduction of output overall. The number of films released by the majors fell from a post-1960 high of 177 in 1968 to an all-time low of seventy-eight in 1977.¹⁰

Roadshows were not instantly abandoned. Columbia's *Nicholas and Alexandra* (1971) and *Young Winston* (1972), and United Artists' *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971) and *Man of La Mancha* (1972), all among the more expensive pictures of their years, were roadshown in the traditional manner. Only *Fiddler on the Roof* was a success, earning \$38.3 million on a negative cost of \$9 million. Later in the decade, a few expensive prestige pictures

were launched on a limited reserved-seat, advanced-price basis: *The Great Gatsby* (1974), *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and *Heaven's Gate* (1980).¹¹ These, however, were exceptions to the norm.

Roadshows, as has been noted, were conceived primarily for exclusive, pre-release exhibition in metropolitan theatres in downtown situations. Their 'theatrical' aura was geared to this kind of viewing environment, in which the specialness of the occasion partly depended on its differentiation from other film viewing experiences and its similarity to that of the legitimate theatre. This included the scarcity value of the film itself (only one theatre playing it in each territory), as well as the theatre-like surroundings. As the downtown theatre declined, so, too, did the roadshow.

Unlike the British circuits' policy of adapting existing buildings to multi-screen use, the 1960s and 1970s saw a cinema building boom in America, with many new multiplexes being constructed from scratch, often in suburban shopping malls. Eugene Picker, president of the American National Association of Theatre Owners (NATO), explained the economic and cultural logic behind the US 'trend of building smaller theatres, seating between 300 and 500 people ... in the modern shopping centres' as follows:

These congenial new theatres undoubtedly represent the strong present-day trend of American exhibition, and I look for this pattern to expand in years to come. Construction costs tend to be reasonable in relation to the profit potential of theatres of this kind. They are often built contiguous to each other or within the same overall structure. And with automated booth equipment the theatre operator will have a substantially lower payroll and a better chance to stay on the more profitable side of the ledger.

There is another factor which is perhaps equally basic to the success of these smaller theatres. They have a sociable air and friendly atmosphere that enhances the pleasure of the movie-goer.¹²

According to a 1973 report by the American Film Institute (AFI), 498 new auditoria had been constructed in the previous year (a tenfold increase on 1969), of which 60 per cent had 400 seats or fewer.¹³ Thomas Schatz reports that the number of indoor cinema screens in America increased from around 10,000 in 1975 to reach 22,750 by 1990.¹⁴ The pronounced concentration of these new cinemas in suburban and out-of-town shopping malls significantly altered the experience of moviegoing. The combination of the small size of multiplex auditoria, their undistinguished design, the coexistence of ten or more screens within one building and the unprepossessing environment of shopping malls and leisure service complexes hardly conduced to the theatrical pretensions of roadshows.

The new theatres, and the new generation of blockbusters designed for them, also anticipated a different demographic base for the moviegoing population. In the trade's view, most roadshows, with occasional exceptions such as *2001: A Space Odyssey*, appealed 'to family audiences or, less frequently, "serious" adults'.¹⁵ According to research undertaken by the Rank Organisation in Britain, the 'prime family audience' consisted of people in the age ranges twenty-five to forty-four, with children up to the

age of fifteen. Its principal socioeconomic group was ABC 1, or middle-class professionals.¹⁶ Figures published in 1970 showed that this audience accounted for an average of 7.3 visits per annum. But the bulk of roadshow audiences did not come from this group:

The older independent marrieds, we believe, are probably the people who go to see road show films most often. The analysis of the audience profile we get with road shows in fact confirms this assumption, but they are in the main 45 to 64 ABC 1. I'm talking about the musical road-shows, of course.¹⁷

This audience group accounted for only 4.8 annual visits, the lowest average of all the segments discussed in the survey; this supports the claim, often made, that roadshows were made primarily 'for people who don't go to the pictures'.¹⁸

The most frequent filmgoers were people of all classes aged between sixteen and twenty-four, who averaged 13.5 visits a year. The AFI's 1973 report showed that seventy-three per cent of tickets sold in America were bought by people aged between twelve and twenty-nine. This, of course, was recognised as the prime target audience from the 1970s onwards, and most blockbusters of the past quarter-century have sought to reach this segment first. Roadshows may have aimed to attract a family audience, but generally targeted adults who, it was hoped, would bring their children along. Today, children and teenagers are targeted first, and it is their parents and elders who must be persuaded to accompany them.

Several innovations in exhibition strategies introduced by roadshows were eventually integrated into regular industry practice. Separate performances and bookable seats are now the norm, and long runs have been made more common by the availability of small auditoria in multiplexes, which routinely play off successful films for weeks or months on end until their box-office potential has been exhausted. However, young people are presumed not to be interested in an experience approximating 'live' theatrical conditions; so multiplexes dispense with presentational frills and operate on a similar basis to the fast-food concession stands found inside and adjacent to them. The 'product' is therefore also tailored to match this audience's presumed or demonstrated tastes.

Blockbuster trends in the 'New' Hollywood

Following, and even during, their brief period of thrift in the early 1970s, the studios once again became committed to blockbuster-oriented production policies. Their hopes became pinned on the expectation that a small number of hugely successful, and usually hugely expensive, 'tentpole' pictures would pay not only for themselves, but also for the studios' overheads and their losses on other releases. After burning its fingers in pursuit of *Easy Rider*, with the failure of a number of films aimed at the intellectual, college-educated or drop-out teenage audience, Hollywood returned to mass-market family entertainment, beginning with the cycle of disaster movies inaugurated by *Airport* and *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972). *Love Story* (1970) and *The Godfather* (1972) alerted the

industry to the viability of films made primarily for adult – but not elderly – audiences, a point subsequently confirmed by *The Exorcist* and *The Sting* (both 1973). The success of *Star Wars* (1977), *E.T. – The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) and other films illustrated the massive profit potential of family films ‘sophisticated’ enough for adults to enjoy with their children.

The resumption of interest in blockbuster production is not hard to explain. The reasons have been examined at length by historians and industry analysts, and can be summarised briefly here. All the principles of distribution leverage described earlier in relation to roadshows continued to apply for high-profile films exhibited in other patterns. The ‘conglomeration’ which characterised all the studio corporations from the 1960s onwards provided not only a safety net for a large investment – losses in theatrical film divisions could be offset by the profitability of other areas – but an incentive as well: the popular success of a blockbuster can be ‘spun off’ into the various ancillary markets in which the studios also have interests.

The importance of these markets also helps account for the centrality of ‘synergy’ – the strategic cross-promotion of products in more than one medium, with sales of each helping to spur on those of the other – to recent and contemporary Hollywood. Paramount’s manipulation of the novel and film of both *Love Story* and *The Godfather* provide seminal early examples. With the exception of the low-budget ‘sleeper’ (surprise hit) *American Graffiti* (1973), all the leading box-office hits from 1970–76 were based on, and for promotional purposes tied into, bestselling popular novels.¹⁹

‘New’ distribution patterns came to replace the traditional roadshow method. *The Godfather* opened concurrently in five New York theatres and between 350 and 400 theatres nationwide, all of which had paid advance guarantees totalling nearly \$14 million. Though advanced prices were charged for seats, the three-hour film was exhibited in continuous performances, without an intermission, and in non-anamorphic 35mm with monaural sound. Screenings ran around the clock, from 9 a.m. to after midnight, and prices on Broadway were raised from \$3.50 to \$4 after the film’s enormous box-office potential had been established with record early attendances.²⁰ As a result, the film became, briefly, the most successful of all time, grossing more than \$80 million domestically. This success led the studios once again to raise their commitment to expensive and heavily publicised ‘event’ movies: films expressly designed to make an impact on the market.²¹

However, there were other, more surprising successes which also influenced the production and distribution patterns that were to follow. Another of the sleeper hits of the early 1970s was the ecologically aware action movie *Billy Jack* (1971). Released by Warner Bros. to a modest initial gross of \$4 million, the film was the subject of a lawsuit brought against the distributor by its director/star Tom Laughlin, which resulted in its being reissued independently in 1973. This re-release was on a large-scale, ‘four-wall’ basis (i.e. the theatres were hired outright by the producer-distributor for a fixed sum rather than a percentage of the box-office) in mainly rural areas, supported by precisely targeted television advertising: an adaptation of the ‘Selznick pattern’ previously discussed.²² The success of this campaign helped the film to an ultimate gross of \$32.5



Jurassic Park (1993): released on nearly 3000 prints

million over five years and several further reissues, and to stimulate similar four-wall, regional-saturation releases.

The new blockbuster era is usually dated from the wide simultaneous release of *Jaws* (1975), which cost Universal \$12 million to produce, on 464 domestic screens, accompanied by a nationwide print and television advertising campaign.²³ This strategy was no doubt influenced by the extensive use of television advertising for the reissue of *Billy Jack* and by the multiple first-run booking pattern of *The Godfather* (with the precedents of Selznick and Levine further in the background). The success of this strategy has subsequently led to its escalation in each successive year, as each summer seemed to produce at least one film distributed on more prints than the previous year’s record-holder, so that in current terms *Jaws*’ ‘saturation’ release qualifies as a limited ‘platform’ run of the kind now given to films of ostensibly minority interest. A blanket release accompanied by intensive publicity hype involves massive additional costs in prints and advertising, driving up the cost of distribution. Whereas 500–600 prints were once considered sufficient to saturate the US market, and 80–100 for the UK, *Jurassic Park* (1993) was released in the United States on nearly 3000 prints and in Britain on a then-record 434.²⁴

Roadshows, which required a tiny number of prints for worldwide use in their early, exclusive release stage, seem highly economical by comparison.²⁵ Although they seemed to require exceptional advertising budgets to reach the largest possible audience, their actual distribution costs were not significantly higher than for most regular releases and publicity costs were typically shared with exhibitors at local level. The blanket-release strategy is now typically used even for non-blockbusters: few major-studio pictures are

now released on fewer than 1500 prints. The corollary and consequence is that a great deal rests on the success of a blockbuster's opening weekend performance, from which a disproportionately large amount of its ultimate theatrical revenue (as much as 50 or 60 per cent) may derive. If a film does not 'open' successfully, prints are very quickly pulled from theatres to make room for the following week's potential blockbuster. Thus, the possibility of a film gradually finding a large audience over a slow, lengthy release period, during which word-of-mouth has time to spread – a process which was the commercial salvation of *Doctor Zhivago* (1965) and *2001: A Space Odyssey* – has been drastically reduced.²⁶

The breakeven point on most films is typically in excess of two-and-a-half times their negative cost, which for a full-scale blockbuster may now climb to nine figures. Between 1972 and 1975, only ten Hollywood films cost \$10 million or more, and none more than \$15 million.²⁷ One of the most expensive films of this period, *The Towering Inferno* (1974), was backed jointly by two studios, Warner Bros. and Fox, to spread the cost of investment and the risk of failure.

From the late 1970s, as a renewed blockbuster policy took hold, ultra high-budget pictures once again became common: *King Kong* (1976) cost \$24 million, *Apocalypse Now* cost \$31 million and *Star Trek – The Motion Picture* (1979) cost \$42 million, while *Superman* (1978) soared to \$55 million, a record which remained for over a decade.²⁸ A negative cost of \$100 million was reached for the first time with *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) – a figure now regularly hit by special effects-dominated action films – while *Titanic* (1997) topped \$200 million in production expenses. The latter also, of course, broke the all-time record for grosses, earning more than \$600 million domestically (this figure represents box-office rather than distributor gross, unlike other figures cited in this chapter). The sharing of costs between studios has become increasingly common – *Titanic* was backed jointly by Paramount (which distributed in the domestic market) and Fox (which distributed overseas) – as have co-productions with foreign partners, notably in Germany.

On average, throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, roughly 40 per cent of big-budget films returned their negative costs from domestic theatrical release, and it was thought rare for a flop in this market to break even from foreign theatrical and ancillary markets. However, with the growth of these latter markets throughout the late 1980s and 1990s, a blockbuster may well earn two to three times its domestic gross overseas and recoup theatrical losses through video and TV sales and rentals. Ancillary markets (television, home video and other non-theatrical outlets) now vastly exceed the theatrical sector in the volume of revenue they produce. In 1992, for example, US distributors' income from domestic theatrical exhibition accounted for only 16.9 per cent of total film revenues, with a similar amount coming from foreign theatrical rentals. US home video accounted for 23.4 per cent and foreign video for 19.2 per cent, the remainder being made up from pay and cable TV, hotel and airline syndication and sales to TV networks.²⁹ Thus a new set of 'runs' has taken the place of the one maintained under the vertically integrated studio system, with the theatrical market *in toto* now effectively occupying the place of first run and the various ancillaries functioning as subsequent runs.

Generic patterns of production have also changed considerably since the 1970s. The

roadshows of the 1950s and 1960s mainly drew on classical generic traditions for their material: historical epics, musicals, Westerns, war films and even comedy, all treated on a large scale. The obsolescence of these genres by the 1980s following numerous failures, the influence of exploitation cinema and the need to appeal to young people has determined that the most common genres for recent blockbusters have been fantasy, science-fiction and occasionally horror, but most often action-adventure films the collective generic origins of which lie in the matinee serials, B-movies and exploitation movies which once seemed least amenable to blockbuster treatment. Thus, key cycles, series or, in the currently fashionable industry term, 'franchises' of blockbusters have been instituted by the success of, for example, *The Exorcist*, *Jaws*, *Star Wars*, *Superman*, *Star Trek*, *Alien* (1979), *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), *Back to the Future* (1985), *Lethal Weapon* (1987), *Die Hard* (1988), *Batman* (1989), *The Matrix* (1999) and *The Mummy* (1999).

One can even argue that the sequel, once more common among Poverty Row 'programmers' than major-studio A-movies, has itself become definable as a genre in its own right. Repeatable story formulae are certainly a mainstay of blockbuster production with their guaranteed pre-selling of a 'high concept'. Defying past industry wisdom, many blockbuster sequels in the 1980s and 1990s outgrossed their originals by a considerable margin, as for example in the cases of *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985), *Lethal Weapon 2* (1989), *Die Hard 2* (1990) and *Terminator 2*. Ancillary media have themselves exerted an influence on the generic forms of blockbusters: MTV and music videos on, for example, *Flashdance* (1983); television series on *The Fugitive* (1993), *The Flintstones* (1994), *Mission: Impossible* (1996) and *Charlie's Angels* (2000); computer games on *Mortal Kombat* (1994) and *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001); and, of course, theme park rides on *Jurassic Park*.

A very few major-studio films each year achieve industry esteem and commercial success as prestige films as well as blockbusters. Such films as *Dances with Wolves* (1990), *Schindler's List* (1993), *Braveheart* (1995), *The English Patient* (1996), *Titanic*, *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), *The Thin Red Line* (1998) and *Gladiator* (2000), all around three hours in length, would surely once have been roadshown. Several of these films – *Schindler's List*, *The English Patient*, *The Thin Red Line* – were initially presented in relatively exclusive 'platform' releases. This is a distribution strategy typically used for films the commercial potential of which is uncertain or which require the long-term build-up of word-of-mouth, or which are aimed at the art-house and/or up-market middle-class, middlebrow prestige market. Yet even these involved the simultaneous exhibition of several hundred prints, equivalent to the saturation bookings of previous decades, and were followed by more orthodox wide releases.³⁰

Six of the films just mentioned won best picture Oscars for their respective years, and the remaining two were nominated in the same category. Yet generally speaking, aside from these and a few other exceptions, blockbusters and prestige films now seem antithetical to one another. For the most part, the synthesis between popularity and prestige which the roadshows attempted to achieve has disappeared. The revival by the above films of the Western, war film, period drama and historical epic is one sign of their aspir-

ation to 'quality' and was presumably instrumental in their earning the approval of the industry. *Gladiator* is a partial remake of *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964) and was widely compared, sometimes favourably, with *Ben-Hur* (1959) and *Spartacus* (1960). But *Pearl Harbor* (2001), which re-creates the same historical events previously dramatised in *Tora! Tora! Tora!*, signally failed to achieve critical respectability and, with a negative cost of \$140 million and domestic grosses under \$200 million, has been seen as a commercial disappointment on a scale little short of its predecessor.

The traditional film musical has largely disappeared, along with the Broadway stage adaptations which characterised the last phase of the genre. Despite the success of *Grease* (1978), it is difficult to recall many screen musicals produced between John Huston's \$51.5 million film of *Annie* (1982) and Alan Parker's adaptation of the pop opera *Evita* (1996), both commercial failures.³¹ Yet the genre's conventions – and the Broadway show tune – have survived through a merger with those of the feature cartoon. *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) itself become the basis for a West End stage musical, and the London premiere run of each new Disney animation is invariably preceded for a limited period by a live musical prologue. The most recent trend in this genre is for subject matter to be drawn from properties which might once have been – and often have been – the province of live-action drama: for example, Disney's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996), *Hercules* (1997), *Mulan* (1998) and *Tarzan* (1999), Fox's *Anastasia* (1997) and Warners' *Quest for Camelot* (1998) and *The King and I* (1999). Their computer-assisted animation techniques permit the creation of scenes of spectacle which would be financially prohibitive to stage live, even with the aid of computer-generated images (CGI). The culmination of this development is perhaps DreamWorks' *The Prince of Egypt* (1998), an animated remake of *The Ten Commandments* with songs, and a chariot race clearly indebted to both *Ben-Hur* and *The Fall of the Roman Empire*.³²

Audiences have apparently not tired of high-concept blockbusters or their saturation-release as they did of roadshows three decades ago. As Chris Hugo noted in 1986, in an observation which can probably still stand for the intervening years:

In an economic climate where current figures indicate that only one film in ten actually makes a profit, the financial track record of the 'blockbusters' is a good one, even allowing for the odd mistake such as Steven Spielberg's *1941* and the problem of trying to salvage *Heaven's Gate* from expensive obscurity.³³

Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones (due for release in 2002) is the first major-studio, 'live'-action blockbuster to be filmed entirely on digital equipment. It is likely to provide the model for productions in years to come. With the technological revolution likely to follow from the imminent introduction of digital projection facilities in many of the world's cinemas – a measure which would massively reduce distribution expenses, as theatrical 'prints' could presumably be produced for little more than the cost of pressing a DVD – it seems likely that blockbuster productions and their wide release will only increase in the foreseeable future.

Notes

1. Joyce M. Hawkins and Robert Allen (eds), *The Oxford Encyclopedic English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 153.
2. Review of 'The Ten Commandments', *Variety*, 10 October 1956. Unless noted otherwise, figures for 'grosses' throughout this chapter refer to gross rentals: that is, the portion of a film's box-office receipts (usually between 40 and 50 per cent) remitted to the distributor. Unless otherwise specified, they and the production costs cited derive from the annual box-office lists and the occasional lists of big-budget features published in *Variety*.
3. Tino Balio, *United Artists: The Company that Changed the Film Industry* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), p. 208.
4. See David Thomson, *Showman: The Life of David O. Selznick* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1993), pp. 391–403, 448–73.
5. Quoted in 'In Camera', *Films and Filming*, January 1970, p. 24.
6. The best discussion of these problems is to be found in David J. Londoner, 'The Changing Economics of Entertainment', in Tino Balio (ed.), *The American Film Industry* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, revised edition, 1985), pp. 606–8, 618–19.
7. Joel Finler, *The Hollywood Story* (London: Octopus, 1988), p. 280.
8. 'Big Rental Films of 1968', *Variety*, 8 January 1969, pp. 15, 18; 'Big Rental Films of 1969', *Variety*, 7 January 1970, p. 24.
9. Michael Pye and Lynda Myles, *The Movie Brats: How the Film Generation Took Over Hollywood* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), pp. 37–40.
10. Finler, *The Hollywood Story*, p. 280.
11. R. Michael Hayes, 'Roadshow Movies: A Review of Disk Versions of Hard Ticket Features', *Widescreen Review Presents Laser Magic* (1998), p. 193; Michael Coate and William Kallay, 'Presented in 70mm', *Widescreen Review Presents the Ultimate Widescreen DVD Movie Guide*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2000, p. 260.
12. Quoted in 'Product must be right for today's market', *Kine Weekly*, 13 June 1970, p. 13.
13. Chris Hugo, 'American Cinema in the '70s: The Economic Background', *Movie*, no. 27/8 (Winter 1980/Spring 1981), p. 47.
14. Thomas Schatz, 'The New Hollywood', in Jim Collins, Hilary Radner and Ava Preacher Collins (eds), *Film Theory Goes to the Movies* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), p. 20.
15. Lee Beaupré, 'Clutch of Roadshows in Offing: Detail Par's Marketing Plans for Its Youth-oriented *Romeo & Juliet*', *Variety*, 14 August 1968, p. 5.
16. Terry McGrath, 'The market place changes – so must we', *Kine Weekly*, 29 August 1970, pp. 6–9, 32.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
18. John Gillett, quoted in John Baxter, *Hollywood in the Sixties* (London: Tantivy/Barnes, 1972), p. 152.
19. *Love Story* was written first as a screenplay, then adapted by its author, Erich Segal, into a novel which was published before the release of the film.
20. Peter Cowie, *The Godfather Book* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), pp. 66–74.
21. See Aljean Harnetz, 'How Do You Pick a Winner in Hollywood? You Don't', *New York Times*, 29 April 1973.

22. For details of *Billy Jack's* release and the 1970s revival of four-walling, see Justin Wyatt, 'From Roadshowing to Saturation Release: Majors, Independents, and Marketing/Distribution Innovations', in Jon Lewis (ed.), *The New American Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), pp. 46–86.
23. See Wyatt, *ibid.*, pp. 78–9; Richard Maltby, '“Nobody Knows Everything”: Post-Classical Historiographies and Consolidated Entertainment', in Steve Neale and Murray Smith (eds), *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 34.
24. *Moving Pictures UK*, 22 July 1993, p. 2.
25. Many US prints intended for the domestic market are redeployed for overseas distribution. It should also be borne in mind that, via interlocked projection in multiplexes, a single print can service more than one screen simultaneously.
26. There are, of course, partial exceptions to this pattern. *Star Wars* opened in the US on only forty-two prints, as, according to some accounts, exhibitors could not initially be convinced of its box-office potential.
27. See the following articles by Lawrence Cohn: '“Loss of Control” over Film Costs Stressed by *Heaven's Gate* Fiasco', *Variety*, 14 January 1981, pp. 33, 110; 'Domestic Recoup Rare on Mega-Budget Pic Rentals', *Variety*, 12 January 1982, pp. 7, 40; '40% of '87 Big-Budgeters Hit Home', *Variety*, 20 January 1988, pp. 20, 61.
28. It may be significant that a number of the late 1970s' big-budget films were independently produced, by the likes of Dino De Laurentiis, Joseph E. Levine and the Salkinds. Not for the first time, the majors followed the lead of the independents.
29. Figures taken from *Moving Pictures UK*, 29 July 1993, p. 1.
30. 'Roadshowing' is the term now used to describe the staggered release of 'art' films made available in a small number of prints which make their way slowly through the circuit of repertory cinemas.
31. At the time of writing, a film of the Broadway musical *Chicago* is currently in production.
32. Is there a better explanation than coincidence for the fact that all three films *Yul Brynner* made in 1956 – *The Ten Commandments*, *The King and I* and *Anastasia* – were remade as animated features in the space of two years?
33. Chris Hugo, 'U.S. Film Industry: Economic Background Part Two', *Movie*, no. 31/32 (Winter 1986), p. 86.

3

Westerns and Gangster Films Since the 1970s

Steve Neale

As is well known, Westerns and gangster films have played a major role in discussions of genre and Hollywood. Beginning with Robert Warshow, the roll call of theorists and critics who have focused on the gangster film, the Western or both as paradigmatic Hollywood genres has included André Bazin, John Cawelti, Edward Buscombe, Colin McArthur, Andrew Tudor, Tom Ryall and Thomas Schatz.¹ As I have argued elsewhere, this focus may have helped produce a restrictive definition of genre – a definition geared, for instance, to the unusually central role of iconography in the Western or to the urban setting and the rise-and-fall structure of the so-called 'classical' gangster film.² Given the unusual numerical prominence of A-Westerns in particular in the 1940s and 1950s, and given the heterogeneous, discontinuous and intermittent nature of gangster film production not just in the studio era, but in the 1950s and 1960s, too, it may also have helped produce a misleading picture of Hollywood's generic strategies and output from the early 1930s through to the late 1960s. Either way, the fortunes and formulae of Westerns and gangster films have varied a great deal since then. As there as yet exists no overview of the films and the trends that have marked them since the late 1970s, what I aim to do here is to sketch in their features and contours, and to identify some of the contextual factors that help account for the shape they have taken. As we shall see, television production policies, book publishing, legal judgments, demographics, and the nature of the New Hollywood – and the nature of the New Independents that have grown up alongside and interacted with it – have all, at times, been as important as the example set by any of the longstanding generic traditions or 'classic' films to which in varying ways and to varying degrees some – though by no means all – of the post-1970s gangster films and Westerns have alluded. As we shall also see, no single formula and no single cultural or industrial factor can be said to have governed developments in either. To that extent, the generalising tendencies of classical and 'postmodern' genre theory alike are – as we shall see as well – of real but only limited help.

Westerns

By the late 1970s, the production of Westerns in Hollywood had been in decline for over twenty years. As early as 1963, as Edward Buscombe points out, Westerns had already fallen as a proportion of Hollywood's output by as much as 18 per cent.³ During the