

# A History of Hollywood Blockbusters

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There is something both glamorous and ominous, both exciting and vaguely threatening about the term 'Hollywood blockbuster'. It connotes a particular kind of movie, in most people's eyes probably one that is expensive, spectacular, forceful in form, style and theme; that economically as well as perhaps culturally makes a considerable impact around the world (although it may not be highly esteemed by critics); and that is seen to be American.

While etymology is not destiny (or semantics), it is worth noting that in its original meaning the word 'blockbuster' (in the past often hyphenated), according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) named 'an aerial bomb capable of destroying a whole block of buildings', the first example of this usage listed in the *OED* being from 1942.<sup>1</sup> Soon thereafter there were occasional uses of the word with regards to movies. Probably the first example was an advertisement from 1943 for the Hollywood movie *Bombardier*, whereby, as Sheldon Hall points out, the term blockbuster referred to the hoped-for impact of the movie while also playing on its storyline (about bombardiers in training) and main attraction (a climactic aerial attack).<sup>2</sup> By the 1950s, the term was widely used for Hollywood's most expensive productions (which were

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<sup>1</sup> See

<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/20347?redirectedFrom=blockbuster#eid18030344>. This and all other websites referenced in this essay were last accessed on 25 November 2020, unless noted otherwise.

<sup>2</sup> Sheldon Hall, 'Pass the Ammunition: A Short Etymology of "Blockbuster"', *The Return of the Epic Film*, ed. Andrew B. R. Elliott, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004, p. 150.

expected to be, and often were, also its biggest successes at the box office),<sup>3</sup> its original meaning gradually receding from memory.

As indicated by the *OED*'s sample quotations (there is one from 1957 mentioning 'a block-buster of an idea for a musical'), the term could also be used with reference to other media. Indeed, Wikipedia defines the blockbuster as 'a work of entertainment – especially a feature film, but also other media – that is highly popular and financially successful', or one that is very expensive and is expected to be financially successful.<sup>4</sup> And Merriam-Webster's dictionary, after first giving the word's original meaning, lists as its second meaning: 'one that is notably expensive, effective, successful, large or extravagant'.<sup>5</sup> This indicates the use of the word in instances where something that was not in fact terribly expensive to produce was a huge success anyway. (So as to avoid confusion it may be best to refer to 'blockbuster productions' when something really expensive is at issue, irrespective of its success, and to 'blockbuster hits' when something really successful is at issue, irrespective of the budget.)

Obviously, there is nothing in that latter definition which ties the word 'blockbuster' to the American film industry or, more specifically, to the sector of profit-oriented filmmaking in the United States that produces films for release in movie theatres which in turn is often

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<sup>3</sup> Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, until the 1970s, many of the biggest box office hits were also highly acclaimed by critics and at film industry awards ceremonies. See, for example, Peter Krämer, *The New Hollywood: From Bonnie and Clyde to Star Wars*, London: Wallflower, 2005, pp. 6-27.

<sup>4</sup> See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blockbuster\\_\(entertainment\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blockbuster_(entertainment)).

<sup>5</sup> See [https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/blockbuster?utm\\_campaign=sd&utm\\_medium=serp&utm\\_source=jsonld](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/blockbuster?utm_campaign=sd&utm_medium=serp&utm_source=jsonld).

referred to as Hollywood. And yet it would seem that the word is most frequently used precisely in this context. It is therefore worth taking a closer look at the meanings of 'Hollywood'.

According to the *OED* the word originally referred to 'a region near Los Angeles' (which became a municipality in 1903 and a part of Los Angeles in 1910), this region being 'the chief production centre of the US cinema business' (from the 1910s onwards; however, many of the big film production plants were actually located in other parts of Los Angeles).<sup>6</sup> Because the place Hollywood was where many films intended for theatrical release were being made, the noun 'Hollywood' came to mean, so the *OED*, '[t]he American film industry, its characteristics and background; (also) a film produced in Hollywood', whereas the adjective Hollywood meant '[o]f or characteristic of the American film industry of Hollywood' (there is some ambiguity in common usage whether 'Hollywood' encompasses the production of films for both television and theatrical release).

Judging by the text examples given in the *OED*, both usages, as well as words such as 'Hollywoodese' and 'Hollywoodian' were common by the early 1920s, while an adjective like 'Hollywoodish' (in use by the late 1920s: 'somewhat resembling Hollywood films') indicated that many phenomena, including films made outside Los Angeles, and even outside the United States, might have Hollywood qualities. Just like the word 'blockbuster' then, 'Hollywood' and its many derivatives have a range of meanings. Some are clearly tied to the

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<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/87776?rskey=EZKB4T&result=2&isAdvanced=false#eid>.

geography (and presumably the specific history and culture) of the United States, especially California, and most especially LA, others not so much, in the same way that some meanings of 'blockbuster' are connected to Hollywood while others are not.

In this essay, I sketch the history of Hollywood's biggest ('blockbuster') hits from its very beginnings in the 1910s to the present day, with reference to the US theatrical market and (from the 1970s onwards) also to the global market. In doing so, I explore the evolution of Hollywood as an industry through the examination of its most powerful companies, the so-called major studios. Most of the majors' blockbuster hits were also among their most expensive productions, but by no means all of them. Some of Hollywood's biggest hits (such as *The Graduate* [1967], *American Graffiti* [1973] and *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* [1982]) had what were, by Hollywood's standards at the time, only average, even fairly low budgets. And a significant amount of Hollywood's most expensive blockbuster productions did not do well at the box office at all (particularly notorious examples include *Heaven's Gate* [1980] and *Ishtar* [1987]).

Examining the evolution of the major Hollywood studios and of their biggest box office hits reveals complex global dimensions. Many of the founders, chief executives and most important creatives of Hollywood were European-born,<sup>7</sup> as was a substantial portion of the major studios' domestic audience (not surprising in a country largely

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Neal Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood*, London: W. H. Allen, 1989; also Peter Krämer 'Hollywood in Germany/Germany in Hollywood', *The German Cinema Book* (Second Edition), ed.

populated through on-going immigration).<sup>8</sup> From the outset a significant amount of the major studios' income came from outside the United States (initially mostly from Europe),<sup>9</sup> and across the decades this foreign income has made up an ever-increasing share of the total (with China now being by far the single most important export market).<sup>10</sup> The major studios early on developed various mechanisms to take the preferences and objections of people and institutions both in the US and in foreign markets into account when they made films for worldwide theatrical release.<sup>11</sup> Much of the source material (such as novels or plays) for the major studios' biggest hits came from outside the United States (mostly from Europe), and much of it dealt with foreign (especially European) characters and settings.<sup>12</sup>

After World War II, a significant proportion of Hollywood's biggest hits were shot at least partly, in some cases wholly, outside the United States (initially in the UK, then also in Continental Europe and

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Tim Bergfelder, Erica Carter, Deniz Göktürk and Claudia Sandberg, London: BFI, 2020, pp. 479-91.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby (eds), *American Movie Audiences: From the Turn of the Century to the Early Sound Era*, London: BFI, 1999.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Kristin Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market 1907-1934*, London: BFI, 1985; and Joseph Garncarz, *Wechselnde Vorlieben: Über die Filmpräferenzen der Europäer 1896-1939*, Frankfurt am Main: Stroemfeld, 2015, pp. 139-41.

<sup>10</sup> Sheldon Hall and Steve Neale, *Epics, Spectacles, and Blockbusters: A Hollywood History*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010, p. 177; and Peter Krämer, 'Hollywood and Its Global Audiences: A Comparative Study of the Biggest Box Office Hits in the United States and Outside the United States Since the 1970s', *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies*, ed. Richard Maltby, Daniel Biltereyst and Philippe Meers, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, p. 173.

<sup>11</sup> See especially Ruth Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood, 1918-1939*, Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Krämer, *The New Hollywood*, pp. 19-28; also Hall and Neale, *Epics, Spectacles, and Blockbusters*.

eventually all around the world).<sup>13</sup> From the 1970s onwards, a substantial share of production finance for the major studios came from abroad (especially from Europe and Asia),<sup>14</sup> and from the 1980s onwards several of the majors were (at least temporarily) owned by non-American companies.<sup>15</sup> These global dimensions raise the question whether, from the 1950s onwards, it is meaningful to call the majors and their blockbusters 'American', especially when so many of Hollywood's blockbuster hits feature neither American characters nor American settings.

My approach focuses on commonalities between the biggest hits of the major studios, that is the patterns they form, and on how these patterns change over time, but also on long-term continuities.<sup>16</sup> In the first section of this essay, I provide a snapshot of the major studios and their biggest theatrical hits around the world in the years before the Coronavirus-related, temporary shutdowns of cinemas in many

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<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Hall and Neale, *Epics, Spectacles, and Blockbusters*, pp. 135-6; Ben Goldsmith and Tom O'Regan, *The Film Studio: Film Production in the Global Economy*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005; and Greg Elmer and Mike Gasher (eds), *Contracting Out Hollywood: Runaway Productions and Foreign Location Shooting*, Lanham: Rowmand & Littlefield, 2005.

<sup>14</sup> On German finance, see Peter Krämer, 'Hollywood and the Germans: A Very Special Relationship', *The Contemporary Hollywood Film Industry*, ed. Paul McDonald and Janet Wasko, Oxford: Blackwell, 2008, pp. 244-5.

<sup>15</sup> Here and elsewhere in this essay my account of the history of the major Hollywood studios is based on authoritative accounts such as Douglas Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System: A History*, London: BFI, 2005. Also see, both for historical overviews and for up-to-date information on the most recent developments, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Major\\_film\\_studio](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Major_film_studio).

<sup>16</sup> My discussion of hit patterns builds on the ground-breaking work of Joseph Garncarz; see, for example, Joseph Garncarz, *Hollywood in Deutschland: Zur Internationalisierung der Kinokultur 1925-1990*, Frankfurt am Main: Stroemfeld, 2013. In my analysis, I use a range of generic categories for which I offer brief working definitions. I should point out that these categories are not mutually exclusive; usually films fall into several categories. Cp. Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, London: Routledge, 2000, pp. 231-57.

countries in 2020. I then go back to the origins of the major studios in the early decades of the 20th century and the emergence of superexpensive and supersuccessful theatrical releases (which I will call blockbusters although the word was not yet in use) in the 1910s, and examine the kinds of film that have been most successful at the US box office until the 1970s (including a brief outlook on the early 1980s). The final section surveys global hit patterns from the 1970s onwards.

## 1 The Major Studios and Their Biggest Global Hits from 2017 to 2019

Most of the biggest hits at the global box office in the years from 2017 to 2019 fit long-established patterns. The largest coherent group consists of superhero films telling stories that take place in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (which was first introduced with *Iron Man* in 2008), including, among others, *Spider-Man: Home Coming*, which was at number 6 in the annual chart for 2017; *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Black Panther*, the two top films of 2018; and *Avengers: Endgame*, the number 1 film of 2019.<sup>17</sup>

There are also top hits based on DC Comics (for example, *Wonder Woman* [no. 10 in 2017], *Aquaman* [no. 5 in 2018] and *Joker* [no. 6 in 2019]). DC blockbuster hits go back all the way to *Superman* in 1978. These films about superheroes and supervillains belong to the larger generic category of Science Fiction/fantasy, whereby it is worth noting

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<sup>17</sup> Annual global box office charts can be accessed through <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/year/world/>. The required year can be selected in the top left hand corner.

that many SF/fantasy films have truly epic scope, that is they deal with important events and developments affecting whole societies.

The SF/fantasy category completely dominates charts from 2017 to 2019, with comic book adaptations being complemented by new installments in long-running film series such as *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (no. 1 in 2017) and *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* (no. 7 in 2019), this series going back to the release of *Star Wars* in 1977. Other examples include *Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle* (no. 5 in 2017) and *Jumanji: The Next Level* (no. 10 in 2019), with the first *Jumanji* film having been released in 1995; and *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom* (no. 3 in 2018), the first installment in the series being from 1993.

Another important group among top hits is made up of fantasy films that do not include Science Fiction elements (such as futuristic technology and scientific explanations) but instead focus on magic and other forms of the supernatural or on alternative realities (such as a world full of talking animals and living objects). These films include *Fantastic Beasts: The Crimes of Grindelwald* (no. 10 in 2018), a film set in the Harry Potter universe (first introduced to the screen in 2001), the fairy-tale adaptation *Beauty and the Beast* (no. 2 in 2017, a live-action remake of the animated blockbuster from 1991), *The Lion King* (no. 2 in 2019, a photorealistic computer-animated remake of the 1994 cel-animated original) and *Frozen II* (no. 3 in 2019, a sequel to the animated fairy-tale from 2013).

The above films are closely related to animated hits such as *Despicable Me 3* (no. 4 in 2017, the series going back to 2010), *Incredibles 2* (no. 4 in 2018, the original having been released in 2004), and *Toy Story 4*



(no. 8 in 2019, the series going back to 1995), whereby the first two of these comically deal, respectively, with supervillains in the James Bond tradition (as well as with fantastic beings known as minions), and with superheroes. *Mission Impossible: Fallout* (no. 8 in 2018; the first in the series is from 1996) and *The Fate of the Furious* (no. 3 in 2017, the series going back to 2001) also, broadly speaking, belong into the Bond tradition (which began with *Dr. No* in 1962) of fights against supervillains and the deployment of cutting-edge, often quite futuristic technology, usually in spectacular locations all around the world. One might also call these films international adventures.

This outline covers almost all films in the annual top ten from 2017 to 2019. One film that is not covered is the musical biopic *Bohemian Rhapsody* (no. 6 in 2018), which is linked to *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Lion King* and *Frozen II*, insofar as all of these are musicals, that is films in which characters express themselves through song (and dance). The most striking departure from the above patterns is *Wolf Warrior 2*, a *Chinese* action film that was the seventh biggest hit around the world in 2017 (the much less successful *Wolf Warrior* came out in 2015). The film made almost all of its money in its huge domestic market, and only a tiny fraction in the United States and the rest of the world.<sup>18</sup> The same applies to *Operation Red Sea* (just outside the top ten for 2018 at no. 13), which is another *Chinese* action film, the animated fantasy *Ne Zha* (no. 12 in 2019) and the Science Fiction epic *The Wandering Earth* (no. 13 in 2019).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> See [https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt7131870/?ref=bo\\_se\\_r\\_1](https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt7131870/?ref=bo_se_r_1).

<sup>19</sup> See

[https://www.boxofficemojo.com/releasegroup/gr2180010501/?ref=bo\\_ydw\\_table](https://www.boxofficemojo.com/releasegroup/gr2180010501/?ref=bo_ydw_table)

The comparison between these Chinese blockbuster hits and the films discussed earlier brings into focus what is so characteristic about the operations of the major studios that are the core of what is called Hollywood. Chinese blockbuster hits are made by Chinese companies and are hugely successful in their domestic market, while hardly being shown theatrically in the rest of the world; if they are distributed in other countries at all, this is done by non-Chinese companies. By contrast, the non-Chinese global blockbuster hits are financed by the major Hollywood studios and distributed (usually by them) around the world. While these films make a lot of money in the huge American market, roughly half to two thirds of their box office income is usually generated in the rest of the world.<sup>20</sup> In many (but by no means all)<sup>21</sup> countries they beat all the competition (domestic productions as well as other imports) and dominate box office charts. Thus, while high rankings in global charts do not in any way demonstrate the global reach of Chinese films, in the case of Hollywood's biggest hits they do. (Despite this fundamental difference it is worth noting that there is considerable overlap between the types of film that Chinese companies and the major studios were most successful with from 2017 to 2019.)

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<sup>13</sup>, [https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt10627720/?ref=bo\\_se\\_r\\_1](https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt10627720/?ref=bo_se_r_1) and [https://www.boxofficemojo.com/releasegroup/gr2718781957/?ref=bo\\_ydw\\_table](https://www.boxofficemojo.com/releasegroup/gr2718781957/?ref=bo_ydw_table)  
<sup>13</sup>. Cp. the earlier performance of Japanese blockbuster hits, notably of the animated fantasy films *Spirited Away* (no. 15 in the global chart for 2001) and *Howl's Moving Castle* (no. 17 in 2004); the percentage of their box office revenues coming from outside Japan was small, but significantly larger than in the case of the Chinese hits.

<sup>20</sup> Exact percentages are listed in the annual charts referenced above.

<sup>21</sup> Most notably, from 2017 to 2019, the charts in the two by far most populous countries in the world, China and India, were dominated by domestic productions. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_highest-grossing\\_films\\_in\\_China#All-time\\_films\\_top\\_50](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_highest-grossing_films_in_China#All-time_films_top_50) and [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_highest-grossing\\_films\\_in\\_India#Domestic\\_gross\\_figures](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_highest-grossing_films_in_India#Domestic_gross_figures).

So what are the major Hollywood studios? Ranked by their share of the global top ten hits for the years 2017 to 2019, they are: Walt Disney Pictures (far ahead of the competition with almost half of the total), Sony Pictures Entertainment (SPE, which includes Columbia Pictures), Universal Pictures, Warner Bros., 20th Century Fox (which was taken over by Disney in 2019) and Paramount Pictures (previous major studios RKO, United Artists and MGM having long been dissolved or lost their status as majors). These companies are parts of large media, communication and entertainment conglomerates headquartered in the United States, with the exception of SPE which belongs to the Japanese consumer electronics company Sony (that had taken over the major studio Columbia Pictures in 1989).

As SPE shows, American ownership is by no means necessary to qualify as a major Hollywood studio. In fact, 20th Century Fox had been owned by the Australian media conglomerate News Corp. from 1985 to 2012, and Universal had belonged to the Japanese consumer electronics company Matsushita from 1990 onwards, then to the Canadian drinks company Seagram and the French utility company Vivendi, before returning into American hands (General Electric) in 2004.

What the major Hollywood studios have in common – and what distinguishes them from all other film companies – is their ability to finance what, by the standards of global filmmaking, are big-budget (often extremely-big-budget) films and to release, every year, around 10-30 such films (per studio),<sup>22</sup> mostly through their own international distribution networks, into cinemas all around the world. Just as the

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<sup>22</sup> See <https://www.the-numbers.com/market/>.

nationality of the parent company of a major studio is irrelevant, so, in principle, is where and by whom a particular film financed and distributed by a major studio is being made. For example, *Fantastic Beasts: The Crimes of Grindelwald* was scripted by British author J. K. Rowling and based on the world she had created in her Harry Potter books. The film had a British director and an international cast and crew. Set mainly in London and Paris, it was shot at Warner Bros.' studio complex in Leavesden, northwest of London.

Whereas (temporary) foreign ownership of some Hollywood studios goes back to the 1980s, Hollywood blockbuster hits that are in many, if not most, respects non-American go back to the 1950s and 1960s. For example, one of the biggest hits of the early 1950s in the US was MGM's *Quo Vadis* (1951), a film based on a Polish novel about Roman characters largely played by British actors; the film was shot in Italy, and its producer and two of its screenwriters were first generation European immigrants in the United States. Even more non-American, the MGM hit *Doctor Zhivago* (1965) was based on a Russian novel about the Russian revolution and the subsequent civil war, which was adapted by a British playwright for an Italian producer and a British director; it featured an international cast and was shot in several European countries.

There is no space to indicate the full degree of non-Americanness of Hollywood blockbuster hits in the following historical survey, but it is possible to indicate major shifts with regards to American or non-American characters and settings across the past century.

## 2 The Origins of the Major Studios and Hit Patterns in the US from the 1910s to the 1970s

Today's major studios have long histories. If we ignore a wealth of complications emerging from frequent takeovers and mergers, especially in the early years, it is possible to trace certain corporate continuities back to the 1910s (Universal, Paramount, Fox, as well as United Artists and MGM which had lost their status as major studios by the 1980s) and 1920s (Warner, Columbia and Disney as well as RKO which was dissolved in the 1950s).

With the exception of Disney (up to the 1960s), each of these companies brought together a production plant (the actual studio; this explains why the majors are called 'studios') and an international distribution network, and until the 1950s several of them also owned large theatre chains in the United States (a few re-acquired theatres in the US from the 1980s onwards). Again with the exception of Disney, across the 1910s and 1920s these companies were able to organise the regular production of what were by global standards (very) expensive movies and to distribute them (in most cases at a rate of one film per week until the 1940s and fewer thereafter)<sup>23</sup> mainly through their own international distribution networks around the world.

Until around 1910, the world's biggest film companies had been based in France, with large production facilities for short films and their own international distribution networks enabling them to dominate

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<sup>23</sup> See Joel W. Finler, *The Hollywood Story*, London: Octopus, 1988, p. 280.

international markets, including the United States.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, many of the first full-length (multi-reel) features of the early 1910s had been produced in Europe.<sup>25</sup> But it was only in the United States that a group of major studios able to produce and globally distribute a large number of high-cost features emerged.<sup>26</sup>

Rather than seeing the majors' export activities merely in terms of a kind of economic and cultural imperialism, one could also say that these companies were able to supply movie theatres all around the world with much needed high-quality – in terms of production values, cutting-edge technology and overall professionalism – product which film companies in other countries could not always supply in sufficient quantity (although, as Joseph Garnarcz has shown, audiences in Western Europe, which was the most important export market for the majors, by and large preferred domestic productions to imports until the 1960s; the same also probably applied to Latin American and Asian markets which became ever more important from the 1940s onwards).<sup>27</sup>

While the distinguishing characteristic of a major studio was – and is – its ability to produce and distribute a large number of expensive

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<sup>24</sup> See Richard Abel, *The Red Rooster Scare: Making Cinema American, 1900-1910*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

<sup>25</sup> Hall and Neale, *Epics, Spectacles, and Blockbusters*, pp. 21-34.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Eileen Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema, 1907-1915*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994, pp. 203-33. Perhaps the explosive growth of cheap dedicated movie (rather than variety) theatres (so-called nickelodeons) in the United States from 1905 onwards and the subsequent construction of large movie theatres as well as the conversion of existing theatres into cinemas created such a large domestic market that the regular production of big-budget movies became financially viable. Cp. Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema*, pp. 1-21 and 121-36; also see Gerben Bakker, *Entertainment Industrialised: The Emergence of the International Film Industry, 1890-1940*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 153 - 313.

<sup>27</sup> Garnarcz, *Wechselnde Vorlieben*, and Garnarcz, *Hollywood in Deutschland*.

films, it was never the case that production costs were equally distributed across a studio's output. Instead that output was divided into different budget categories, with the top category containing what we would now call blockbuster productions.<sup>28</sup> Presumably an extremely big budget was allocated to those productions which were seen to have the greatest promise for box office success, often because they were based on source material (such as novels, plays or stage musicals) that had already been very successful in other media, or on famous historical figures or incidents; at the same time a large investment did of course help to increase the chances of their success.

On the same basis, the major studios were willing to finance so-called 'independent' high-end producers ('independent' here meaning that these producers were not employees of a major studio) whose work they then distributed.<sup>29</sup> In fact, one of the majors, United Artists, was set up in 1919 by independent filmmakers with the main objective of controlling (and profiting from) the distribution of their own films. After World War II the major studios gradually let go of their in-house production staff and increasingly liaised with separate ('independent') companies to facilitate the production of the films they would then distribute. This went hand in hand with a dramatic increase in so-called runaway productions which took advantage of lower production costs, attractive locations and state subsidies in foreign countries.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Hall and Neale, *Epics, Spectacles, and Blockbusters*, pp. 21-61.

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, Yannis Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema: An Introduction. Second Edition*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017, Chs. 1-3.

<sup>30</sup> See, once again, Hall and Neale, *Epics, Spectacles, and Blockbusters*, pp. 135-6.

The box office performance of films varied enormously already in the 1910s, and continued to do so in subsequent decades. While there are no reliable charts, it would seem that the first full-length features imported to the US from Europe – mostly, by the standards of global film production at the time, enormously expensive productions about European and Biblical history – made much more money for their distributors and exhibitors than the short films that had previously been the standard film fare in the country.<sup>31</sup> In the wake of the success of these films, American companies also began to invest heavily in the production of full-length features, many of which also had historical subject matter. The most expensive, and most successful, of these productions was D. W. Griffith's American Civil War epic *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), which had an enormous, and highly controversial, impact, saw many re-releases, and, although figures across time are difficult to compare, was probably by far the largest box office hit in the US until the release of *Gone With the Wind*, another Civil War epic, in 1939.<sup>32</sup>

In order to trace the patterns that hit movies form, I have used various box office charts to identify the five top hits in the US for each five-year period from 1917 onwards (see Appendix 1). It is a convenient coincidence that 1917 was chosen by David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson as the start date for what they call 'Classical Hollywood Cinema' in their monumental study carrying this title;<sup>33</sup> that

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<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Hall and Neale, *Epics, Spectacles, and Blockbusters*, pp. 9-40.

<sup>32</sup> See Finler, *The Hollywood Story*, p. 276; and Melvyn Stokes, *D. W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation: A History of 'The Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time'*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

<sup>33</sup> David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985.



1927 was the year of *The Jazz Singer* which accelerated Hollywood's conversion to sound films; that 1947 was the year when the drastic decline of cinema attendance in the US set in (while the American government's anti-trust action against the major studios was about to reach the Supreme Court which ruled against the vertically integrated companies in 1948 and forced them to separate their production/distribution units from their theatre chains); that 1967 saw the impact of fundamental changes made to Hollywood's self-regulation the year before and became known as the beginning of the 'Hollywood Renaissance'; and that 1977 saw the release of *Star Wars* which helped to place Science Fiction and fantasy at the centre of Hollywood's operations. My survey of top hits in five-year steps from 1917 onwards should thus be able to capture changes surrounding these turning points in Hollywood history.<sup>34</sup>

It is important to note that the rankings I use take into account all the revenues generated by theatrical re-releases, which, in the case of quite a few films, constituted a substantial portion of the total, in the case of some Disney films even the majority. I should add that the patterns found across the top five films for each five-year period can also be found if the investigation is broadened to take into account a larger number of hit movies, but that some patterns only become obvious when such a larger number is taken into account (in some instances I will point to these latter patterns as well).

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<sup>34</sup> I have previously discussed several of these turning points in Krämer, *The New Hollywood*.

The consistently most prominent type of film in the charts until 1966 is the historical epic, which deals with important events and developments that, one might say, changed the course of history, and depicts them in a particularly spectacular fashion.<sup>35</sup> (Importantly, many musicals are set in the past as well, albeit often in a wholly imaginary or mythical past; they are rarely epic and will therefore be discussed separately.) Until the mid-1940s, blockbuster epics mostly told stories featuring American characters (such stories usually but not always taking place in the US), yet also included a few featuring foreigners (the action usually taking place outside the US). Examples of the former include *Gone With the Wind* (no. 1 for 1937-41), the World War I films *The Big Parade* (1925, no. 3 for 1922-26) and *Sergeant York* (1941, no. 5 for 1937-41), the Westerns *The Covered Wagon* (1923, no. 2 for 1922-26) and *Duel in the Sun* (1946, no. 4 for 1942-46), and the earthquake drama *San Francisco* (1936, no. 1 for 1932-36). Hit epics with foreign characters in foreign settings include the World War I film *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921, no. 1 for 1917-21) and the Biblical epic *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1926, no. 1 for 1922-26).

From the late 1940s to the mid-1960s, the historical epics among Hollywood's biggest domestic hits were almost *all* set abroad and rarely featured American characters (also, many of them were based on foreign source material, involved foreign personnel and were shot, at least partly, abroad). Examples range from the Biblical epics *Samson and Delilah* (1949, no. 3 for 1947-51), *The Ten Commandments* (1956, no. 1 for

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<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946, no. 3 for 1942-46) is a contemporary drama about returning veterans that deals with the aftermath of a historical turning point, namely World War II.

1952-56) and *Ben-Hur* (1959, no. 2 for 1957-61) to the World War II movie *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957, no. 5 for 1957-61) and the epic love stories *Cleopatra* (1963, no. 5 for 1962-66) and *Doctor Zhivago* (1965, no. 2 for 1962-66).

Wars, civil wars and revolution, national expansion, the rise of world religions and the fall of empires; battles, divinely enacted catastrophes and all kinds of natural disaster; vast landscapes, massive built structures and thousands of people, animals and vehicles on the move – these form the backdrop for the intimate stories about families, romantic couples and friendship told in most of the above films, and they also give rise to their most spectacular attractions.

By contrast, the biggest historical blockbuster hits of the decade 1967-76 – the Western *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969, no. 3 for 1967-71), the gangster drama *The Godfather* (1972), the gangster comedy-drama *The Sting* (1973) and the teen comedy-drama *American Graffiti* (1973) (these are numbers 3 to 5 for 1972-76) – did not deal with turning points in history and feature small-scale spectacle. Unlike the historical hits of the preceding fifteen years, they were also all narrowly focused on the United States and on the 20th century (and they were based on American source material, involved predominantly American personnel and were shot, almost exclusively, in the US).

The shift among historical blockbuster hits from an emphasis on (19th and 20th century) American characters and settings in the decades from the 1910s to the mid-1940s, to a very strong emphasis on non-American characters and settings (covering thousands of years of history) from the late 1940s to the mid-1960s, and then, until the mid-

1970s, to an almost exclusive focus on (20th century) American characters and settings is typical for the biggest hits across these three eras more generally (with the exception of Disney fantasy films which were mostly Eurocentric across these decades).

The second biggest category in the charts under discussion is the musical, which comes in several guises. Apart from noting the fact that many musicals are, like historical epics, set in the past, perhaps the most important distinction is that between fantasy (mostly animated and featuring magic, talking animals etc.) and (live action) non-fantasy. The latter dominated the early years of Hollywood's conversion to synchronised, pre-recorded sound. Led by the Al Jolson vehicles *The Jazz Singer* (1927) and *The Singing Fool* (1928), all top five hits for 1927-31 are musicals, as are numbers 2, 3 and 5 for 1932-36. While many musicals feature both song and dance, several songs sung mainly by Bing Crosby qualify *The Bells of St. Mary's* (1945, no. 2 for 1942-46), *Blue Skies* (1946, no. 5 for 1947-51) and *Welcome Stranger* (1947, no. 4 for 1947-51) as musicals. Further top-ranked musicals include *This is the Army* (1943, no. 4 for 1942-46), *West Side Story* (1961, no. 4 for 1957-61) and *The Sound of Music* (1965, no. 1 for 1962-66).

With the exception of *The Sound of Music* these top musical hits all feature American characters and settings. However, two Eddie Cantor blockbuster musicals from the early 1930s – *The Kid from Spain* (1932) and *Roman Scandals* (1933), respectively numbers 2 and 3 for 1932-36 – include sequences set abroad (albeit only in the protagonist's imagination in the latter film); *The Cock-Eyed World* (1929, no. 5 for 1927-31) and *This is the Army* (1943, no. 5 for 1947-51) are also partially set

abroad. A more extensive analysis of hit musicals (beyond the top fives for each five-year period) reveals that the box office performance of *The Sound of Music* is indicative of the dramatically increased success of musicals with foreign characters and settings across the 1950s and much of the 1960s (often based on foreign source material, involving foreign personnel and making use of foreign locations), with American-themed musicals coming to the fore again in the late 1960s and across the 1970s.<sup>36</sup>

The situation is different for hit musicals which have a strong magical element and were produced by Disney from 1937 onwards (mostly in animated form), based on fairy-tales or children's books. Many of them were not outstandingly successful during their original release, but accumulated enormous revenues through regular re-releases, so that they could establish a strong presence in the charts under discussion here from the late 1930s to the late 1960s. With the exception of *Lady and the Tramp* (1955, no. 5 for 1952-56), Disney's biggest hits from this period were set outside the US – mostly in the (imaginary) past – and had no American characters. Headed by *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), Disney's animated musicals are placed at numbers 2-4 for the years 1937-41, at number 1 for 1942-46 and for 1947-51, at number 5 for 1952-56, at numbers 1 and 3 for 1957-61, and at number 2 for 1967-71, with the live-action/animation hybrid *Mary Poppins* at number 3 for 1962-66.

Most of the top musicals, be they fantastic or not, are also comedies. While in surveys of preferred movie genres, comedy often

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<sup>36</sup> Cp. Krämer, *The New Hollywood*, pp. 22, 40, 98, 105-16.

comes out on top,<sup>37</sup> the blockbuster hits under investigation here include only a few films which foreground humour, and invite laughter, above everything else. In musicals, humour has to share the stage with song and dance numbers (as well as other attractions), and most of the other top hits featuring a lot of humour can perhaps best be described as comedy-dramas. This applies to Charles Chaplin's in places quite tearful *The Kid* (1920, no. 2 for 1917-21) and the – more or less romantic – comedy-dramas *Daddy Long Legs* (1919, no. 5 for 1917-21), *The Graduate* (no. 1 for 1967-71) and two previously mentioned historical films: *The Sting* and *American Graffiti*. Arguably the most out-and-out comedy among top hits is *The Freshman* (1925, no. 4 for 1922-26) featuring Harold Lloyd, and it is worth noting that Lloyd had a whole series of successes of almost the same magnitude in the early to mid-1920s.<sup>38</sup>

Just as humour can be found in many types of film, so with romantic love. As Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson have shown, the vast majority of Hollywood films from 1917 to 1960 have a love story as one of their two main storylines, which also applies to Hollywood's biggest hits.<sup>39</sup> In addition to many of the epics, musicals, Disney fantasies and comedy-dramas discussed so far, love stories are also so central to the following hits that one might characterise them as

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<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Richard Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915-1928*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994, pp. 28-31; and Peter Krämer, 'A Powerful Cinema-going Force? Hollywood and Female Audiences since the 1960s', *Identifying Hollywood's Audiences: Cultural Identity and the Movies*, ed. Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby, London: BFI, 1999, pp. 94-5.

<sup>38</sup> See Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment*, pp. 33, 304-7, and Finler, *The Hollywood Story*, p. 276.

<sup>39</sup> Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, p. 16.

romantic dramas (with a particularly tearful bent): *Way Down East* (1920, no. 3 for 1917-21) and *Love Story* (1970, no. 4 for 1967-71).

*The Sheik* (1921, no. 4 for 1917-21) deals with a woman's romantic adventures in exotic lands. Together with several of Douglas Fairbanks' historical films which just missed the top five for 1922-26,<sup>40</sup> one can see here the early flowering of a tradition of international (or exotic) adventures, in which usually male protagonists encounter numerous physical challenges in a range of spectacular locations. Later examples include the programmatically titled Jules Verne adaptation *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1956, no. 3 for 1952-56) and the James Bond movie *Thunderball* (1965, no. 4 for 1962-66).<sup>41</sup> There is considerable overlap with historical epics and war movies which often also feature physical challenges in a range of spectacular foreign locations.

Going back all the way to *San Francisco*, we find blockbuster hits in which the main storyline deals with natural forces such as earthquakes, dangerous animals or harsh weather (often in conjunction with technological breakdowns and human greed) threatening, and actually causing, damages that affect groups of people in a confined location. Such disaster movies were prominent in the charts of the 1970s, with *Airport* (1970, no. 5 for 1967-71), *Jaws* (1975, no. 1 for 1972-76) and several films just outside the top fives.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> See Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment*, pp. 33, 268-71, and Finler, *The Hollywood Story*, p. 276.

<sup>41</sup> The circus spectacle *The Greatest Show on Earth* (1952, no. 4 for 1952-56) is a stand-alone hit, which may be said to combine certain elements of the musical and the international adventure.

<sup>42</sup> Cp. Krämer, *The New Hollywood*, pp. 14-5, 107-10.

Last but not least, several of the films from 1967 onwards mentioned so far are what we might call taboo-breakers. Up to 1966, the major studios had found various ways, most successfully with the Production Code they implemented in the 1930s, to ensure that their releases were, in principle, suitable for all age groups and would cause as little offence as possible (both in the US and abroad). But the introduction of the 'suggested for mature audiences' label in 1966 and the final replacement of the Production Code with age-specific ratings in 1968, made it possible for films with previously forbidden subject matter featuring previously forbidden imagery to be given a mainstream theatrical release in the US. As a consequence, starting in 1967 graphic violence, nudity, sacrilege, transgressive sexual relations etc. became prominent in the box office charts, for example with films like *The Graduate*, *The Godfather* and *Jaws* as well as, most shockingly, *The Exorcist* (1973, no. 2 for 1972-76).<sup>43</sup>

A brief look at the top fives for 1977-81 and for 1982-86 reveals another drastic change: *Star Wars* (1977), *Star Wars: Episode V – The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) are at numbers 1-3 for 1977-81, while *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), *Star Wars: Episode 6 – Return of the Jedi* (1983) and *Ghostbusters* (1984) are the three top films for 1982-86. Like pre-1967 blockbuster hits and very much unlike the taboo-breakers of 1967-76, these are family-friendly films. Like the historical epic, the dominant generic category from the 1910s to the mid-1960s, most of them deal with (potential) turning points in history, but they do not approach this in the same way as before. *E.T.*

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<sup>43</sup> This paragraph is based on Krämer, *The New Hollywood*, pp. 47-58.



depicts what appears to be the first contact with an extra-terrestrial civilisation, surely a momentous event, as an intimate drama about family and friendship, and thus plays down the epic dimension. *Raiders of the Lost Ark* takes place in an alternative past (in which the Nazis try to instrumentalise the Ark of the Covenant), as do the *Star Wars* films (as per the first half of the tagline: 'A long time ago'). One can characterise all of these films as Science Fiction/fantasy, with many connections back to both historical (especially perhaps Biblical) epics and Disney fantasies.

Apart from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, these films feature futuristic technology (including the ghost hunting equipment in *Ghostbusters*), and they all have fantastic elements ('the Force', divine power as revealed when the Ark is opened, the parapsychological connection between Elliot and E.T., ghosts). In different ways all of these films, with the exception of *E.T.*, focus on the threat, and presentation, of large-scale destruction, like many of the historical epics, international adventures and disaster movies of the past. Planets and a Death Star explode, spiritual entities create havoc across a major city, the Nazis might find a superweapon to utilise in the forthcoming war. Much like international adventures, the *Star Wars* films and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* also show their protagonists facing challenges in a wide range of spectacular locations.

Overall the top three films for 1977-81 and for 1982-86 are split between those that focus on American characters and settings (*E.T.* and *Ghostbusters*; *Raiders of the Lost Ark* has an American protagonist but only a small part of its story takes place in the US) and those that do not (the

other three). However, if one looks at a slightly larger number of hits, it becomes obvious that Americanocentric films dominate; thus numbers 4-5 for 1977-81 and for 1982-86 all feature American characters in American settings.

### 3 Global Hit Patterns Since the 1970s

Reasonably reliable global charts (at least with regards to the outstandingly successful films) can only be found for the decades from the 1970s onwards. For earlier decades, we have to rely on the internal ledgers of some of the major studios which list a film's domestic and foreign earnings, and on the analysis of box office charts in Western Europe, which was Hollywood's most important export market.<sup>44</sup> These sources suggest that Hollywood's biggest export hits belonged to the same types as its biggest domestic hits (notably historical epics, musicals, Disney fantasies and international adventures), in fact often they were the very same films.

It is noticeable, however, that from the 1910s to the 1940s Europeanised, or Eurocentric, films (based on European source material, featuring European actors, with stories set in Europe) were more

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<sup>44</sup> See Garnarcz, *Wechselnde Vorlieben*, and Garnarcz, *Hollywood in Deutschland*. Also see the studio ledgers published as microfiche supplements to the following essays: H. Mark Glancy, 'MGM Film Grosses, 1924-1948: The Eddie Mannix Ledger', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, vol. 12, no. 2 (June 1992), pp. 127-143; Richard B. Jewell, 'RKO Film Grosses, 1929-1951: The C. J. Tevlin Ledger', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio & Television*, vol. 14, no. 1 (March 1994), pp. 37-50; and H. Mark Glancy, 'Warner Bros. Film Grosses, 1921-51: The William Schaefer Ledger', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* vol. 15, no. 1 (March 1995), pp. 55-74.

successful in Europe than Americanocentric films.<sup>45</sup> In the 1950s and early to mid-1960s Eurocentric Hollywood films (now often shot, at least in parts, in Europe and in some cases made by Europe-based filmmakers) accounted for most Hollywood's biggest hits *both* in the US and abroad. In the late 1960s and 1970s it appears that, for the first time, Americanocentric films dominated both domestic and export charts; for example, *The Godfather*, *The Exorcist* and *Jaws* were the major studios' top films for 1972-76 outside the US, and they also were at numbers 1, 2 and 4 in the US (see Appendix 1 and 2; also cp. the close correspondence between the US and global top fives for 1977-81). From then onwards, domestic and export charts overlapped considerably (with only minor systematic differences to do, for example, with Eurocentric films as well as romantic dramas and comedies which were, at the very top of the charts, more successful abroad than in the US, while in several cases Americanocentric films were more successful in the domestic market).<sup>46</sup>

If we now examine the top five global hits for each five-year period since 1977 (see Appendix 2), the dominance of Science Fiction/fantasy (including various kinds of ghost stories) is revealed to be continuous for four decades (and beyond, as the discussion of the years 2017-19 in the first section of this chapter showed). Four of the top five for 1977-81 belong into this category, four for 1982-86, three for 1987-91, four for both 1992-96 and 1997-2001, five for 2002-06 and 2007-11 and four for 2012-16. In fact, Science Fiction/fantasy is so dominant

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<sup>45</sup> Garncarz, *Wechselnde Vorlieben*, pp. 127-34, 203-51; Peter Miskell, 'International Films and International Markets: The Globalisation of Hollywood Entertainment, c. 1921-1951', *Media History*, vol. 22, no. 2 (2016), pp. 174-200.

<sup>46</sup> Krämer, 'Hollywood and Its Global Audiences', pp. 171-8.

that most of the other generic categories discussed in the previous section are present in the top fives primarily as subsets thereof.

Hence, apart from *Titanic* (1997, no. 1 for 1997-2001) and *Forrest Gump* (1994, no. 4 for 1992-96), there are no films set (primarily) in the past in the top fives except for fantasies like *Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides* (2011, no. 5 for 2007-11). *Titanic* is usually regarded as an epic which allegorises the replacement of one form of society with another through the spectacular sinking of the famous ship. It is the only top hit dealing with (potential) historical turning points apart from the many Science Fiction/fantasy films that are set in a fantastic version of the historical past (for example *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* [1989, no. 4 for 1987-91], with the Nazis once again wanting to use the power of a religious artifact), in an alternative version of the present (for example *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2* [2011, no. 2 for 2007-11]; here Lord Voldemort's oppressive regime is finally defeated), in a future extrapolated from the present (for example *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* [1991, no. 1 for 1987-91], in which the victory of robots over humanity is to be prevented) or in what appears to be a mythical past or an alternative universe (for example *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* [2003, no. 1 for 2002-06], in which yet another evil emperor is defeated).

Also, apart from *Grease* (1978, no. 3 for 1977-81), the only other musicals in the top fives are Disney fantasies (*The Lion King* [1994] and *Aladdin* [1992] which are at number 2 and 5 for 1992-96). Apart from *Furious 7* (2015, no. 4 for 2012-16), there are no international adventures except for those in the Science Fiction/fantasy category (for example the

Indiana Jones films). Furthermore, apart from *Titanic*, there are no disaster movies dealing with threats to groups of people in confined locations except for several Science Fiction/fantasy films (for example *Jurassic Park* [1993, no. 1 for 1992-96]). It is also worth noting that there are no taboo-breakers among the top fives at all, not even in the guise of Science Fiction/fantasy; the biggest hits in that category are suitable for, and often explicitly addressed to, the whole family.

Various forms of drama and comedy did continue to make it into the top fives, including the (tearful) romantic and family dramas *Forrest Gump* and *Titanic* as well as the romantic comedies *Grease* and *Pretty Woman* (1990, no. 5 for 1987-91), and the family comedy *Home Alone* (1990, no. 3 for 1987-91). But it is important to note that such films disappeared from the top fives after the 1990s, and that, in any case, they also exist within the Science Fiction/fantasy category as exemplified by the tearfully romantic drama *Ghost* (1990, no. 2 for 1987-91) and the tearful family drama *E.T.*, as well as the marriage comedy *Shrek 2* (2004, no. 5 for 2001-06).

Across the top fives for the period 1977 to 2001, films focusing on American characters and settings tend to dominate, although films that focus *exclusively* on American characters and settings are in the minority. There are several films which show American characters, often in the company of foreigners, primarily in foreign settings (such as the Indiana Jones films and *Jurassic Park*), or introduce foreign subplots (like *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* [1977, no. 5 for 1977-81] and *Independence Day* [1996, no. 3 for 1992-96]); even films wholly set in the

US may complement their American characters with foreigners, including aliens (as in *E.T.*).

In addition there are quite a few top hits, like the original Star Wars trilogy and *Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace* (1999, no. 2 for 1997-2001), the Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings and Pirates of the Caribbean movies, which have neither American characters nor US settings. In fact, this applies to all of the top five films for 2002-06. This is the high point of an overall trend since the 1970s to move away from Americanocentric films. Since 2007, however, only few top hits have been wholly American in terms of characters and settings or wholly non-American; the majority of top five hits have mixed American and foreign elements. This majority includes what is (together with the same filmmaker's *Titanic*, which features American central characters on a transatlantic journey) by far the biggest global hit since the 1970s – if one estimates the impact of rising ticket prices and a growing global cinema market –, namely Canadian writer-director-producer James Cameron's *Avatar*.

The general trend away from Americanocentric films is paralleled by a renewed emphasis of making hit movies increasingly outside the United States. After about a decade of national retrenchment starting in the late 1960s, the use of studios and locations outside the United States (especially in Canada, the UK, Australia and New Zealand, but also, for example, in Eastern Europe) has been a prominent feature of blockbuster productions since the late 1970s (see, for example, the original Star Wars trilogy and the Indiana Jones films), echoing practices

of the 1950s and early to mid-1960s.<sup>47</sup> This trend was intensified, especially by the British-based Harry Potter productions and the making of the Lord of the Rings films in New Zealand, between 2001 and 2011. Indeed, both the Harry Potter and Lord of the Rings films are so non-American – British source novels, non-American characters and settings, the use of foreign actors, studios and locations, key creative personnel from outside the United States – that it is really doubtful whether it makes any sense to call them American, although they are definitely part of Hollywood (as they were financed and distributed by Warner Bros., whereby this major studio used its New Line Cinema subsidiary for the Lord of the Rings films).

## Conclusion

Hollywood's biggest blockbuster hits form easily discernible patterns, and these patterns change over time. We can, broadly speaking, identify two major periods: from the 1910 to the mid-1960s historical epics predominated, followed by musicals and Disney fantasies; since the late 1970s, charts have been ruled by Science Fiction/fantasy films, which can be understood as a point of convergence between historical epics (now displaced into the future, an imaginary past or alternative universes) and Disney fantasies. The decade 1967-76 is a time of transformation which in many ways goes against the grain of Hollywood blockbuster cinema (most notably through the huge success

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<sup>47</sup> Again see Goldsmith and O'Regan, *The Film Studio*; and Elmer and Gasher, *Contracting Out Hollywood*.

of taboo-breaking films and the narrow focus on films set in 20th century America).

Obviously, simply to identify these patterns can only ever be a first step. The next step should be to explain both the patterns and the historical changes they have undergone, and to explore what they might tell us about a changing America, indeed about a changing world. I would think that, despite the appeal of holding forth about American and world culture at large, an explanatory approach is more important than an interpretive one and also, in a sense, a precondition for the latter. This explanatory approach would have to be comparative, in the sense that hit patterns in a range of countries have to be compared with each other for the period from the 1910s to the 1960s so as to identify which patterns may be unique to the United States. (I have stated that Hollywood's biggest export hits during this period would appear to be of the same kind as its biggest domestic hits, but this is not to say that these export hits actually dominated charts in foreign countries, because, as I have also pointed out, in major film producing countries charts were long dominated by those countries' domestic productions rather than by imports.) Explanations for unique patterns could then be sought in the United States whereas patterns the US shared with other countries would have to be explained in an international framework.

There is considerable evidence that from the 1970s onwards Hollywood finally came to dominate the charts in many large film producing countries (with extremely important exceptions such as India and China), and that from then on the list of the biggest hits in the US largely overlapped with that of the biggest hits in the rest of the world. This would seem to suggest that these global patterns should be



explained within a global framework, rather than a narrowly American one.

Indeed, in the 21st century, and perhaps ever since the 1950s, Hollywood is perhaps best understood not as an American industrial formation, but as an international network of companies (most prominent among them the major studios) that connects and utilises resources from all over the world (people, source material, finance and locations as well as production and post-production facilities) so as to make films that are to be shown to global audiences in movie theatres as well as on television and other media (video, DVD, Blu-ray, streaming services), whereby there is considerable evidence that success in movie theatres is typically replicated elsewhere.<sup>48</sup>

Intriguingly, from *Star Wars* onwards, many of the very biggest global hits have dealt with threats to global communities (on Earth, across the known galaxy or, in the case of *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers: Endgame*, even across the whole universe). More generally, we can observe that from epics like *The Birth of a Nation* via fairy-tale films like *Bambi* (1942) and international adventures like the James Bond movies all the way to *Avengers: Endgame*, many of Hollywood's biggest hits have focused not only on the threat of large-scale destruction but also the spectacular presentation of such destruction. Thus, there have always been, and continue to be, echoes of the word's original meaning in Hollywood's 'blockbuster' hits.

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<sup>48</sup> I have collected some of this evidence in Peter Krämer, 'The Walt Disney Company, Family Entertainment, and Hollywood's Global Hits', *The Oxford Handbook of Children's Films*, ed. Noel Brown, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022, pp. 569-90.

Appendix 1: Top Hits at the US Box Office for Each Five-Year Period,  
1917-1986<sup>49</sup>

1917-21

- 1 *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921)
- 2 *The Kid* (1921)
- 3 *Way Down East* (1920)
- 4 *The Sheik* (1921)
- 5 *Daddy Long Legs* (1919)

1922-26

- 1 *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1925)
- 2 *The Covered Wagon* (1923)
- 3 *The Big Parade* (1925)
- 4 *The Freshman* (1925)
- 5 *The Ten Commandments* (1923)

1927-31

- 1 *The Singing Fool* (1928)
- 2 *The Jazz Singer* (1927)
- 3 *Sunny Side Up* (1929)
- 4 *The Broadway Melody* (1929)

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<sup>49</sup> Up to 1936, the top fives up are based on Finler, *The Hollywood Story*, p. 276, and from 1937 to 1986, on Box Office Mojo's inflation-adjusted all-time US chart [https://www.boxofficemojo.com/chart/top\\_lifetime\\_gross\\_adjusted/?adjust\\_gross\\_to=2020&ref=bo\\_cso\\_ac](https://www.boxofficemojo.com/chart/top_lifetime_gross_adjusted/?adjust_gross_to=2020&ref=bo_cso_ac). However, this chart only includes the top four films for 1942-46 and the top hit of 1947-51; so I returned to Finler, *The Hollywood Story*, p. 276, to identify the missing films. I should add that I have examined a lot of information on charts and found films being ranked differently. But although the order in which films are ranked may differ from source to source, the patterns these films form are always the same.

5 *The Cock-Eyed World* (1929)

1932-36

1 *San Francisco* (1936)

2 *The Kid from Spain* (1932)

3 *Roman Scandals* (1933)

4 *Grand Hotel* (1932)

5 *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* (1933)

1937-41

1 *Gone With the Wind* (1939)

2 *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937)

3 *Fantasia* (1941)

4 *Pinocchio* (1940)

5 *Sergeant York* (1941)

1942-46

1 *Bambi* (1942)

2 *The Bells of St. Mary's* (1945)

3 *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946)

4 *Duel in the Sun* (1946)

5 *This is the Army* (1943)

1947-51

1 *Cinderella* (1950)

2 *Quo Vadis* (1951)

3 *Samson and Delilah* (1949)

4 *Welcome Stranger* (1947)

5 *Blue Skies* (1946)

1952-56

1 *The Ten Commandments* (1956)

2 *The Robe* (1953)

3 *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1956)

4 *The Greatest Show on Earth* (1952)

5 *Lady and The Tramp* (1955)

1957-61

1 *One Hundred and One Dalmations* (1961)

2 *Ben-Hur* (1959)

3 *Sleeping Beauty* (1959)

4 *West Side Story* (1961)

5 *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957)

1962-66

1 *The Sound of Music* (1965)

2 *Doctor Zhivago* (1965)

3 *Mary Poppins* (1964)

4 *Thunderball* (1965)

5 *Cleopatra* (1963)

1967-71

1 *The Graduate* (1967)

2 *The Jungle Book* (1967)

3 *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969)

4 *Love Story* (1970)

5 *Airport* (1970)

1972-76

1 *Jaws* (1975)

2 *The Exorcist* (1973)

3 *The Sting* (1973)

4 *The Godfather* (1972)

5 *American Graffiti* (1973)

1977-81

1 *Star Wars* (1977)

2 *Star Wars: Episode V – The Empire Strikes Back* (1980)

3 *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981)

4 *Grease* (1978)

5 *National Lampoon's Animal House* (1978)

1982-86

1 *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982)

2 *Star Wars: Episode VI – Return of the Jedi* (1983)

3 *Ghostbusters* (1984)

4 *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984)

5 *Back to the Future* (1985)

Appendix 2: Top Hits at the Global Box Office for each Five-Year Period,  
1972-2016<sup>50</sup>

1972-76

- 1 *Jaws* (1975)
- 2 *The Exorcist* (1973)
- 3 *The Godfather* (1972)

1977-81

- 1 *Star Wars* (1977)
- 2 *Star Wars: Episode V – The Empire Strikes Back* (1980)
- 3 *Grease* (1978)
- 4 *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981)
- 5 *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977)

1982-86

- 1 *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982)
- 2 *Star Wars: Episode VI – Return of the Jedi* (1983)
- 3 *Back to the Future* (1985)
- 4 *Top Gun* (1986)
- 5 *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984)

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<sup>50</sup> These top fives are based on Box Office Mojo's all-time worldwide box office chart; [https://www.boxofficemojo.com/chart/ww\\_top\\_lifetime\\_gross/?area=XWW&ref=bo\\_cso\\_ac](https://www.boxofficemojo.com/chart/ww_top_lifetime_gross/?area=XWW&ref=bo_cso_ac). This chart includes only three titles for the years 1972-76. I added the top 5 for 2017-21 by examining the above chart on 13 September 2022.

1987-91

- 1 *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991)
- 2 *Ghost* (1990)
- 3 *Home Alone* (1990)
- 4 *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989)
- 5 *Pretty Woman* (1990)

1992-96

- 1 *Jurassic Park* (1993)
- 2 *The Lion King* (1994)
- 3 *Independence Day* (1996)
- 4 *Forrest Gump* (1994)
- 5 *Aladdin* (1992)

1997-2001

- 1 *Titanic* (1997)
- 2 *Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace* (1999)
- 3 *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (2001)
- 4 *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001)
- 5 *The Sixth Sense* (1999)

2002-06

- 1 *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (2003)
- 2 *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest* (2006)
- 3 *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (2002)
- 4 *Finding Nemo* (2003)
- 5 *Shrek 2* (2004)

2007-11

1 *Avatar* (2009)

2 *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2* (2011)

3 *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* (2011)

4 *Toy Story 3* (2010)

5 *Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides* (2011)

2012-16

1 *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015)

2 *Jurassic World* (2015)

3 *The Avengers* (2012)

4 *Furious 7* (2015)

5 *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015)

2017-21

1 *Avengers: Endgame* (2019)

2 *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018)

3 *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021)

4 *The Lion King* (2019)

5 *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022)