

# AMERICAN CINEMA OF THE 1980S

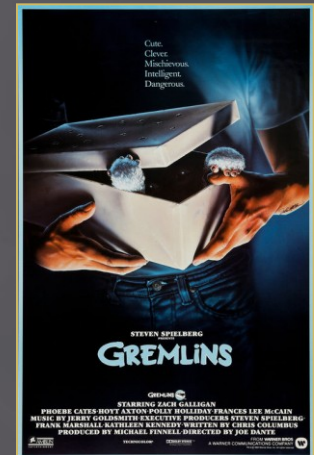
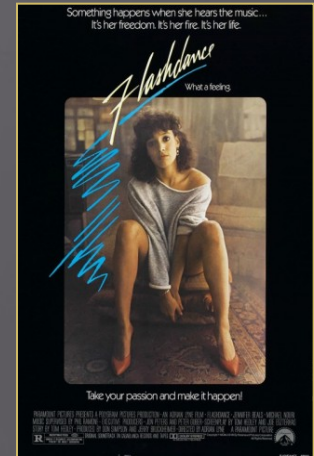
## Topic Three: High Concept

Dr. Richard Nowell  
Department of Film Studies & Audiovisual Culture,  
Masaryk University

# Targeted Learning Outcomes

To develop a sound understanding of:

1. Aesthetics and Periodization
2. The Facets of the High Concept Model
3. High Concept as film mythology



# Hollywood Aesthetics and Periodization

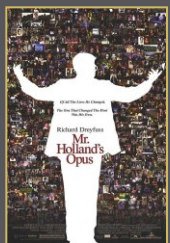
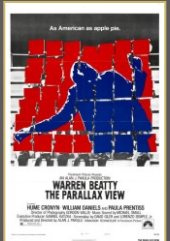
The periodization of media often involves the identification of an aesthetic regime said to emblemize the period in question

Hollywood cinema of the early 1970s is often cast as reflecting a sense of cynicism and frustration said to characterize the period

Similarly, Hollywood cinema of the 1990s is said to employ high levels of irony and detachment said to reflect this period in time

This lends itself to Hollywood histories, as it imposes order and transparency onto a secretive industry handling a range of output

Yet, while such approaches help spotlight aesthetic trends, they also risk distilling a range of output to a mythical topical essence

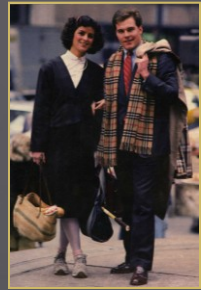


# The Feel-Good Decade

The supposed dominant aesthetic regime of 1980s positions Hollywood films as reflecting a supposed optimism of the day



This offsets readings of the topical Backlash and Cold War cinemas, in the construction of a US national cinema of the period



Historians and commentators suggest a pervasive sense of uplift was central to constructing US national identity under Reagan



Such claims rest on a partial vision of a newly buoyant America rebounding economically and geopolitically from a 1970s malaise



This notion is also central to the idea of Reaganite Entertainment; as unapologetic recreational indulgence or feelgood experience



# Reaganite Entertainment, Suppliers, Cocaine

Andrew Britton argued Reaganite Entertainment represented an urgent retreat from an unfulfilling life into “weekend culture”



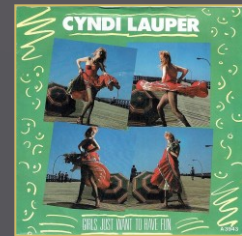
Reaganite Entertainment was thus imbued with a temporariness, superficiality, and unfulfillment demanding repeat consumption



This sense of an immediate albeit short-lasting cultural sugar high underpinned things like fashion, toys, music, food, and TV



The amphetamine-like uplift of such consumption was linked to a buoyant US business sector, who supplied consumers their fix



It was also driven by a trendy drug that provided an intense, short-lived high to the ambitious, creatives backing this culture

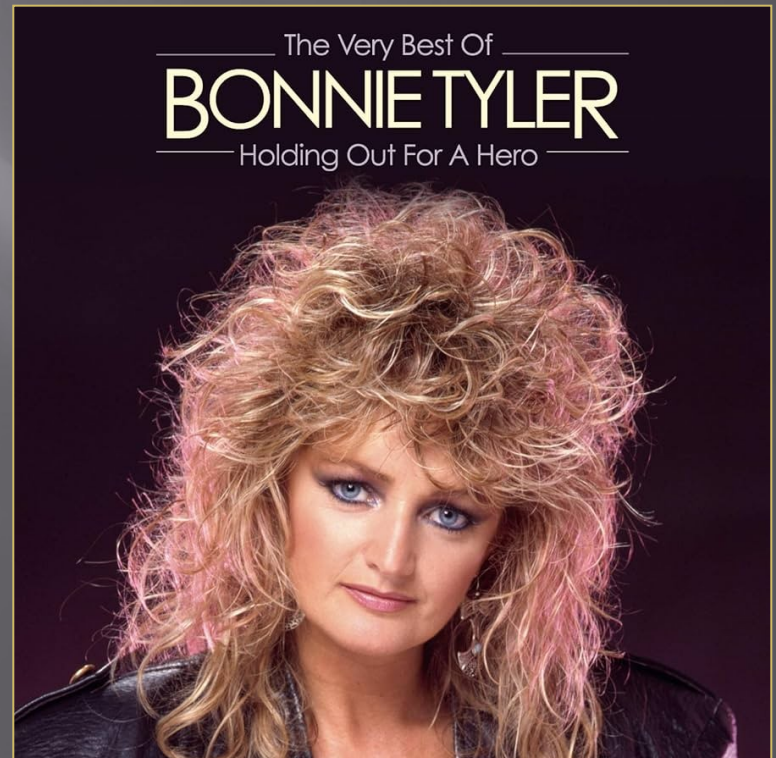




# Hi-NRG Dance & Cocaine Rock

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8iwBM\\_YB1sE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8iwBM_YB1sE)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bWcASV2sey0>



# **The Imagined Feel-Good Blockbuster Era**

The 1980s witnessed an escalation in rebranding initiated in the mid-1970s, away from downbeat art toward “entertainment on steroids”

This narrative drew a contrast to a commercially declining downbeat socially realist cinema of the late 1960s and early-to-mid 1970s

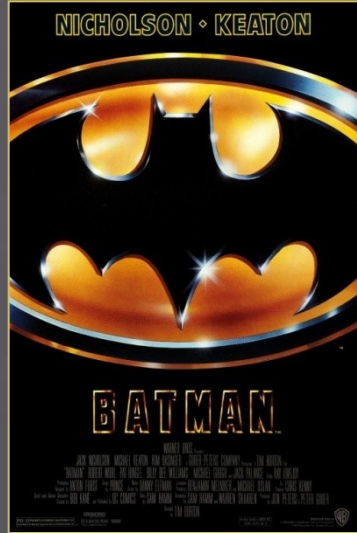
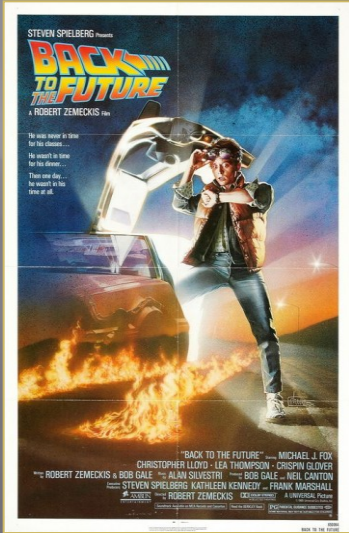
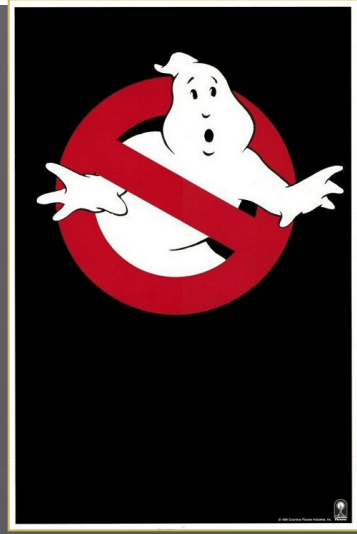
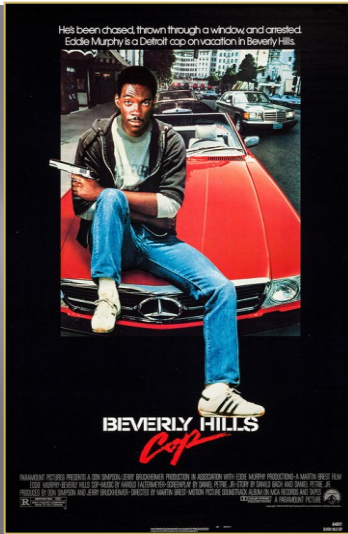
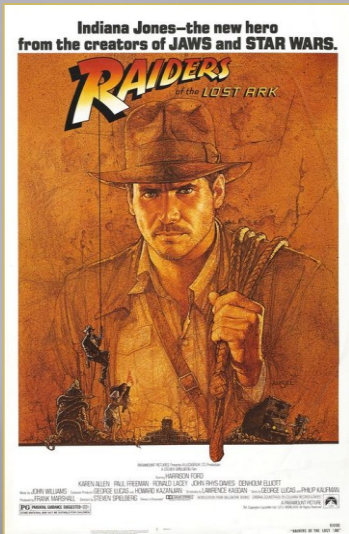
In its place was imagined to emerge a succession of high-end films calculatedly packaged to maximize exhilarating joy for fun-seekers

Associated with Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, and Simpson & Bruckheimer this practice gave rise to claims of a “Blockbuster Era”

Central to this – rather exaggerated claim – was the believe the media industries were widely employing a practice dubbed “High Concept”



# High Concept



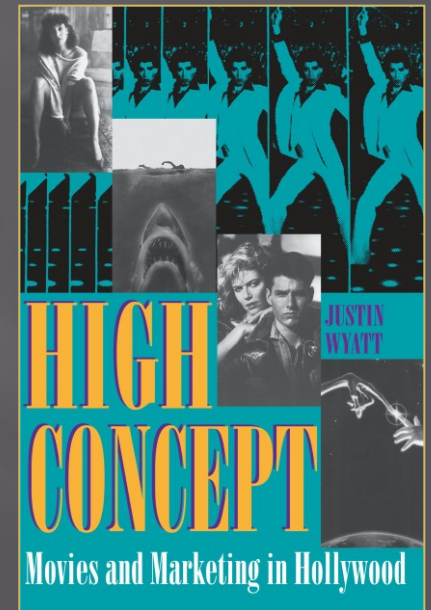


# Wyatt, “The Concept of High Concept”

In one of the most important pieces of film scholarship of the period, Wyatt unpacks the nature and logics of High Concept

What are the main facets of High Concept (“the look, the hook, and the book”)?

How did High Concept advance Hollywood’s economic interests?



# The Look – A Sugar High or the MTV/Cocaine Aesthetic

The High Concept look is an excessive aesthetic regime, insomuch as it went beyond what was needed to tell the story

Simple: it took bold, high-contrast, expressive images of comics

Sexy: it took the fetishistic elements from print advertising

Upbeat: and high-tempo montages from TV ads & pop videos

The look was often paired with uplifting rock, pop, or dance tracks boasting simplistic lyrics about sacrifice and succeeding

This look imbued films with an aggressive, superficial, bravado reminiscent of the cocaine high many of its makers enjoyed!



# *Footloose* (1984)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9W-a0Y\\_jDI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9W-a0Y_jDI)





# *Top Gun* and Berlin “Take My Breath Away”

“Watching in slow-motion as you turn to me and say ...  
‘take my breath away’”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PlBoZzHLezg>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bx51eegLTY8>



# The Hook & The Book Basic Ideas Done Basically, Everywhere all at Once

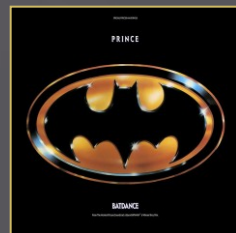
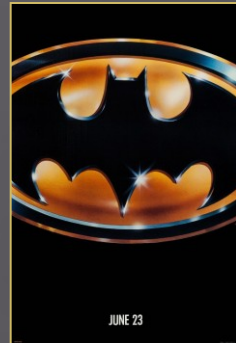
The High Concept Hook referred to a movie idea that could be distilled to an easily communicable unambiguous essence

This practice represented a short-hand of expectations involving schematic formats, clichéd scenarios, and shallow characters

In terms of marketing, this was intended to express a clear brand image that could be transferred to other media and merchandise

The High Concept Book refers to simple forms of storytelling

This approach is intended to maximize uptake by making film marketable to, and enjoyable to, “undemanding audiences”



# Pursuing Synergy: Or Towards Film as Brand

The High Concept approach thus represented efforts to maximize a film's visibility across the leisure-culture of targeted audiences



This usually meant products and services enjoyed by young folks (independent teenage consumers or children influencing parents)



Thus, logos and even simple taglines could be applied to print marketing and merchandise to increase visibility and revenue

Music-driven montages transferred seamlessly to television and pop videos; and the songs backing them to records and discos



Such practice was facilitated by Hollywood studios belonging to multimedia conglomerates that owned stakes in other media





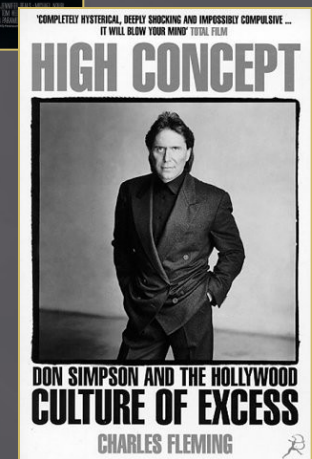
# Ray Parker Jr., “Ghostbusters”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fe93CLbHjxQ>



# *Flashdance* (1983)

1. How does this film use the High Concept look?
2. How does this film lend itself to spin-offs and merchandise?
3. Does this film have something critical to say about High Concept?



# What a Feeling... (Or When Patrick Bateman remade Rocky)

*Flashdance* represents an extreme example of High Concept cinema; a glib, superficial, narcissistic cinematic coke high



The film entwines two simple cliched stories, both rendered in ways that evoke other forms of teen-girl-friendly media



On the one hand, it relays a romance via elliptical image-based narration evocative of teen romance comic strips



On the other, it relays an underdog success story primarily through up-tempo montages reminiscent of music videos



Its focus on fetishistic advertising images and music aids transferability to print, audio, and audiovisual materials





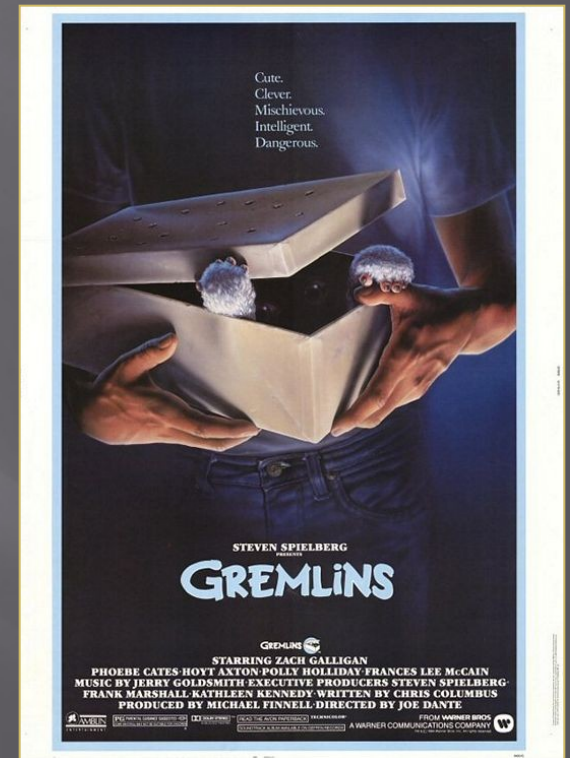
# ***Flashdance: Maniac Scene***

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kHQGjRq\\_XRE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kHQGjRq_XRE)



# *Gremlins* (1984)

1. How does this film use the High Concept look?
2. How does this film lend itself to spin-offs and merchandise?
3. Does this film have something critical to say about High Concept?



# High Concept as the Death of US Culture

In contrast to *Flashdance*, *Gremlins* uses the High Concept model, but does so in order to critique it as cultural poison



The film does this while broadly satirizing American culture; Xmas, small-town community, entrepreneurialism, and more



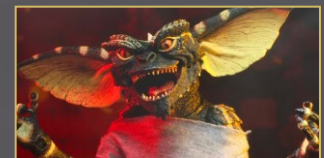
It mocks its own simple narration, by unpacking narrative rules, which upon close inspection make no sense at all



It mocks its own high concept aesthetic, including montages that are less spellbinding than chaotic; almost out-of-control



It even mocks its own High Concept dispersibility, by having its own brand reproduce to the extent it destroys “America”





# The Topicalization of American Cinema

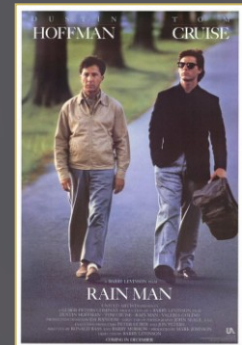
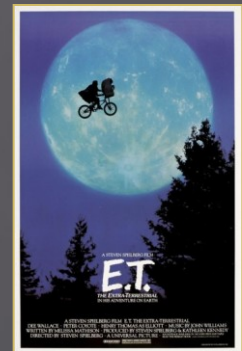
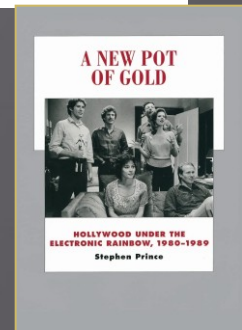
While the idea of High Concept is central to understandings of 1980s Hollywood, we need to be careful about such claims

A key strategy film stakeholders like industry-insiders, critics, scholars employ is to promote their field as supremely topical

This need is particularly strong when it comes to Hollywood, which has occupied low position in US cultural hierarchies

The construction of the period as the blockbuster era involves reducing the period to a succession of High Concept hits

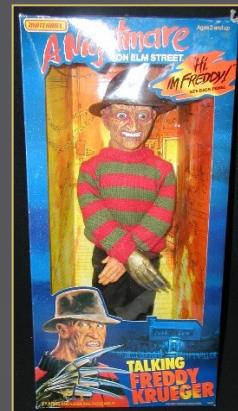
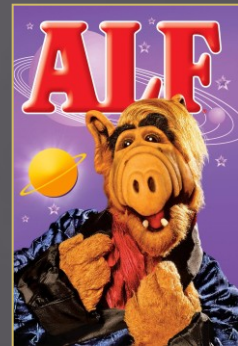
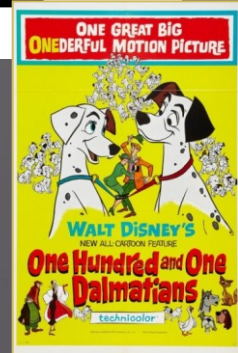
The period actually witnessed the last time hit films exhibited great variety, with most having little to do with High Concept



# Relativizing High Concept of the 1980s

There are also several issues concerning the prevalence of High Concept cinema in the so-called Blockbuster era of the 1980s

1. Surprisingly few films of the 1980s actually used all facets of the High Concept model, especially the merchandising
2. The facets of the High Concept model were all used before the 1980s, especially with respect to Disney animated films
3. The most realized High Concept properties for much of the 1980s were based around a series of independent horror films
4. Most media entertainment brands were not rooted in cinema, but primarily based in other media like Television and Toys



# High Concept Everywhere All at Once

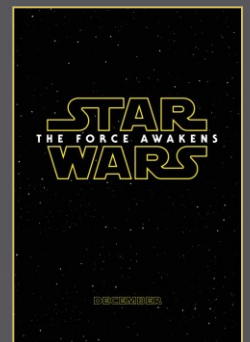
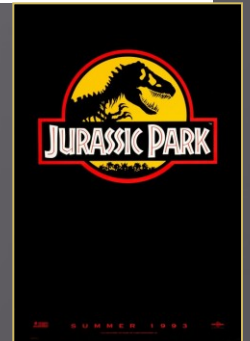
While the term is used less nowadays, it is clear that High Concept has become a preeminent Hollywood approach

Nowhere is this clearer than in the simply plotted, spectacle-driven, heavily merchandised superhero films of the 2000s

The cultural phenomena of brand *Elm Street* encouraged Hollywood to fully realize High Concept with *Batman* (1989)

In fact, the full use of High Concept in the 1990s was still largely restricted to a handful of big-budget event pictures

By the 2000s, as Hollywood increased focus on calculated blockbusters, and High Concept became truly institutionalized





## **In Sum**

A sense of unapologetic feelgood – of joy and uplift bordering on mania – underpins both the US generally and Hollywood cinema of the 1980s

Central to such claims about cinema has been the notion of the widespread adoption of an industrial-aesthetic branding strategy dubbed High Concept

Wyatt argues High Concept is characterized by stripped-back narratives; slick, fetishistic aesthetics; and bridges to other media and merchandise

In reality, the High Concept model is best understood as a topical reputation rather than a model used widely or in full in 1980s Hollywood

As an industrial aspiration, High Concept did become a self-fulfilling prophecy though, leading to its eventual institutionalization by the 2000s

## **Next Time...**

We will reconsider one of Hollywood's most important audience-targeting strategies of the 1980s...

**Topic 4:** Family Films

**Reading:** Allen, "Home Alone Together"

**Home Screenings:** *Stand By Me* (1986)  
*Big* (1988)

**[Preparatory Questions on MS TEAMS and in the Syllabus]**

**Meeting:** Thursday 07 November