**Video Script**

**Lecture 28 – Building a Blockbuster**

**Fall 2020**

**Welcome**

**[Sings *Jaws* theme.]** It’s *JAWS!* But more specifically, it’s how a little movie about a big shark became a cultural zeitgeist *and* a template for big-screen success that *still* informs how Hollywood writes, releases, and markets blockbuster films.

**Key Concepts**

Here are your key concepts for this lecture

**Hollywood**

Now, remember, in our last lecture we touched on a few of the issues facing the film industry in the 1960s. **[ANIMATION]** We talked about three in the last lecture—the collapse of the studio system, poor performance after *The Sound of Music*, and the loosening of the Production Code—and how those three led to “The New Hollywood.”

**[ANIMATION]** In today’s lecture, I want to add Dr. Schatz’s fourth point into the mix: increasing reliance on the calculated blockbuster.

**Blockbuster**

How do we define a blockbuster, anyway? **[ANIMATION]** Well, it’s one of those terms that we use correctly in common parlance—this is not a trick! A blockbuster is a popular and high-earning film, often meant to appeal to a wide audience.

**[ANIMATION]** The origin of the term doesn’t have anything to do with block-booking, though it would make sense, right? It’s actually based on 1940s terminology about a kind of bomb that could level a whole block. These are films that will blow everyone away with their success.

So, check, we know what a blockbuster is. But Dr. Schatz doesn’t just say that Hollywood came to rely on the blockbuster in the 1970s and into the 80s and 90s…

**Jaws**

…he says that Hollywood has “blockbuster syndrome.” What does that mean?

**[ANIMATION]** He says that in the classical era, the studios turned out a few prestige pictures each year and relished the occasional runaway box-office hit, but relied primarily on routine A-class features to generate revenues. In other words, in the Classical Hollywood era, in the 1930s and 1940s, a studio’s profits came equally from a whole bunch of mid-budget films released throughout the year.

He goes on to say that Hollywood became increasingly hit-driven, and the exception became the rule, in the 50s, 60s (and especially into the 70s, 80s, and 90s). Studios began to rely on blockbusters, not smaller pictures, as the main source of their profits. This is what he means by blockbuster syndrome: the film industry starts to lean on blockbusters so heavily for their profits, they’d likely topple if they stopped making them.

**[ANIMATION]** Further, he says that in today’s media marketplace, it has become virtually impossible to distinguish a film’s aesthetic or narrative quality from its commercial imperatives.

**Jaws 2**

So, what does that mean? It means that as we move into the era of blockbusters, it’s impossible to see these films *only as films.* The need for big box-office business means Hollywood has to design films that will produce big profits—they engineer them from the ground up, from the story to the marketing, with financial goals in mind.. So these films might be great. You might love them. They might be classics. But what your reading is saying is that you can’t untangle them from their profit-driven motives.

In order to think about this process of building a blockbuster, we’re going to take a deep dive (HAR HAR) into the first strategic blockbuster: **[ANIMATION]** 1975’s *Jaws*.

**Players**

Who are the key players in making *Jaws* a success? And more importantly, can I find awkward pictures of all of them with shark stuff?

**[ANIMATION]** First, we have director Stephen Spielberg. He’s young, just 27 yeas old when he makes this film. A student last year asked me why a studio would take a chance on such a young director for such a big project, and I think there are two answers to that. The first is what we were talking about at the end of the last lecture about whose identity and credentials make the film industry feel like they’re a reasonable risk. **[ANIMATION]** The second is that Spielberg had a preexisting relationship with *Jaws* producers Richard Zanuck and David Brown. They produced *The Sugarland Express*, which got him some praise for its car chase and action sequences. This made him a decent candidate for a big action thriller like *Jaws*.

**[ANIMATION]** Finally, there’s Peter Benchley, who wrote the novel *Jaws* is based on, as well as the screenplay.

**Five part**

Turning *Jaws* into a blockbuster required a five-part strategy that was outlined in a great article in *The Hollywood Reporter* published right around the film’s release in 1975. That strategy can be boiled down into:

**[ANIMATION]** …the book, the buzz, promotion, a release strategy, and merchandising.

Let’s look a little closer at each of these steps.

**Step 1: Book**

Step 1: We’re gonna need a bigger book. Producers Zanuck and Brown bought the rights to Peter Benchley’s book before it was even published. **[ANIMATION]** They needed to orchestrate a bestseller to build a blockbuster, so they started when the book came out. They sent copies all over Hollywood. They blanketed Martha’s Vineyard with copies that summer, knowing that lots of film industry movers and shakers vacationed there.

**Step 2: Buzz**

Step 2: We’re gonna need bigger buzz. **[ANIMATION]** The whole creative team went to the Cannes Film Festival a year early, before the movie was even out. They promote it there, but they don’t enter it into the competition—no one gets to see it yet. Why bother?

**[ANIMATION]** Because they know that press is always hovering around the film festival looking for stories. Plus, they use the festival and the trip to Europe to sell the *Jaws* book rights to international publishers, seeding international interest in the story. The dual promotion of the book and the film project far in advance of its release helps create huge anticipation for the film.

So in this quote, Zanuck and Brown are emphasizing that Universal was none too pleased with their enormous travel budget, but that the result of all this anticipation they were able to build with the press and throughout Europe paid off when the film was released.

**Step 3. Promotion**

Step 3: We’re gonna need a bigger promotional budget. **[ANIMATION]** Cannes wasn’t the only stop on the Jaws promotional tour, however. They created a television advertising campaign around the film, which was basically unheard of at the time. Films didn’t advertise on TV!

You’ll be watching those commercials via the module, but in addition to the TV ads, the team toured U.S. cities, doing press. They also did late night shows, and secured a Time magazine cover story before the film came out.

**Step 4. Release**

Step 4. We’re gonna need a…smaller release? **[ANIMATION]** This one might seem a bit counterintuitive. The release was originally planned for simultaneous release in 900-1000 theaters, which is a very wide release. This is a strategy usually used for exploitation films, salacious films, or bad films that can’t live up to their hype; the trick is to get it out everywhere so people go to see it…before word gets out that it’s a crummy movie. And no one really expected *Jaws* to be anything but a big shark movie.

When the film was complete, the team screened it for Universal chairman Lew Wasserman. He realizes that it’s not just a big shark movie, it’s *good*—it’s smart, it’s talky, it’s got a bit of that New Hollywood panache. So he says, “I want this picture to run all summer long. I don’t want people in Palm Springs to see the picture in Palm Springs. I want them to have to get in their cars and drive to see it in Hollywood.” What he means by that is that he thinks the film is good enough to drive up demand organically.

So, they cut back the initial release to about 400 theaters (which is still pretty big!). They release the movie in June of 1975, and people love it. By the end of July, they increase the release to 700 theaters, and by the end of August, it’s in 900 theaters across the country. Limiting that initial release helped to lengthen the theatrical window and increase demand, milking even more profit from the film.

**Step 5: Merch**

Step 5: We are gonna need so much effing merchandise—just so *very* much shark stuff available for purchase. But if you look at this picture closely, what you’ll notice is that they created a strong visual brand from the jump. The illustration commissioned for the cover of the novel is repeated on the film poster, and then the t-shirt, the beach towel, the lunch box, and so on and so on. The film’s recognizable design aesthetic makes for great merchandising.

**Star Wars**

You see this strategy reflected a couple of years later, with a little-known film I’m sure you’ve never heard of called *Star Wars*, which is released a couple of years later.

**Advertisement**

I was able to find this advertisement for *Star Wars* goods from roughly 1977-1978, which reflected a merchandising strategy cribbed from *Jaws*.

And while we’re here, a quick side note: for all of the misogyny that has become associated with *certain factions* of *Star Wars* fandom, this early ad for the film includes charm bracelets and earrings. This is merchandise that would clearly have been aimed at girls and women, which goes to show you that the film was not designed specifically for men.

We’ll actually pick up on the question of fandom in our next lecture, and consider its uses for the study of media history.

**Jaws**

But anyway, back to *Jaws.* As we’ve seen, every production and promotion decision that went into this film, from the book cover to *Jaws* thermoses was geared toward building a blockbuster. Did they succeed?

**[ANIMATION]** Well, let’s look at the math. The film had a combined production and advertising budget of seven million dollars. And while the branding and advertising and promotion machine was churning, the production of the film was not without some stress. Spielberg was young and untested and on thin ice during the shoot; there were budgetary overruns and time overruns and Bruce the mechanical shark was a handful to deal with and the studio was *mad*.

According to an interview that Spielberg gave *Entertainment Weekly* a few years ago, the only reason he wasn’t fired was because the president of Universal Pictures was in his corner, and Spielberg promised him the underwhelming promise: “I will finish this film. I can’t tell you what day I’ll finish this picture, but I will finish this picture.”

**[ANIMATION]** Even given the overruns on the production side, the plan works. *Jaws* becomes the first film to make $100 million (which it does in two months). It makes even more money in global releases—that preemptive work at Cannes paid off! It’s the highest grossing film until *Star Wars.* **[ANIMATION]** Adjusted for inflation, *Jaws* made over a billion dollars.

So, in this way, *Jaws* creates a formula for how studios can build these blockbuster films they need to prop up their profits. It’s not just about creating a great film—it’s about engineering demand through advertising and maximizing profits through strategy, ancillary products, and so forth.

**High Concept**

*Jaws* is also a great example of a *high-concept film*, like most blockbusters tend to be. So, what does that mean? **[ANIMATION]** People often get this definition backwards. A high-concept film relies on one simple idea—you can usually condense the description into a single sentence. The opposite would be a low-concept film, which is often character- or relationship-driven.

**[ANIMATION]** As Spielberg put it: “I like ideas, especially movie ideas, that you can hold in your hand. If a person can tell me the idea in twenty-five words or less, it’s going to make a pretty good movie.” The history is of blockbusters is *littered* with high-concept films like the one Spielberg is describing, and the one he made with Jaws.

**Jurassic Park**

Play along at home. See if you can guess the high-concept blockbuster based on very simple description. **[ANIMATION]** OMG DINOSAURS ARE BACK. **[ANIMATION]** That’s *Jurassic Park*, or any of its sequels.

**Titanic**

**[ANIMATION]** OMG THIS BOAT IS SINKING. **[ANIMATION]** *Titanic.*

**The Fast and the Furious**

**[ANIMATION]** WE’RE A FAMILY. AND IN THIS FAMILY, WE DRIVE CARS FAST. **[ANIMATION]** The many Fasts and Furiouses.

**Men in Black**

**[ANIMATION]** It’s the FBI but for Aliens*.* **[ANIMATION]** *Men in Black.*

**Snakes on a Plane**

And perhaps the ultimate high-concept film, the one that just put it right there in the title:

**[ANIMATION]** The concept is there are some motherfucking snakes on a motherfucking plane. I’m of course talking about **[ANIMATION]** Oscar-nominated domestic drama *A Marriage Story.*

**Snakes on a Plane**

No, kidding, sorry, couldn’t help myself—of course, I’m talking about *Snakes on a Plane*. If you can remember that high-concept = a bunch of snakes high in the air, you’ll never go wrong.

**Tooth Fairy**

Sometimes you can see a high-concept film from a mile away. I can’t say I’ve seen *The Tooth Fairy*, but if we were all to guess what this film’s concept is…

**[ANIMATION]** I think we could glean from the poster without a lot of difficult deductive work that the concept is “What if the Rock was the tooth fairy?”

**Bruce**

It can be easy to poke fun at high-concept films, but let’s pause and think for a moment. **[ANIMATION]** Why do you think high-concept films make for great blockbusters? Give yourself a minute or two to jot down some ideas, and then come back.

Here are some of the reasons I can think of. **[ANIMATION.]** First, simple concept-based stories are generally easy to understand, which often makes them suitable for adults and children alike. This maximizes your box-office sales. Plot driven films are often exciting films, and action-packed excitement looks great on the big screen. It’s a compelling reason for people to go to theaters, where studios make more money, than if audiences wait for a film to come out on a streaming platform, or via video rental in decades past.

High concept films are also easy to sell—by which I mean you can explain them in a compelling way through a short ad, trailer, a one-line slogan, or even an image. You know what you’re in for with *Jaws* just from the book’s cover art. And finally, it’s important to remember that high-concept is not synonymous with brainless or bad or dumb. Christopher Nolan’s films are often high-concept, for example. *Inception* is easy to describe: what if you could invade other people’s dreams to steal ideas? But that doesn’t make it a bad film.

**Scorsese**

There’s a real discursive battle, though, between people who make and love blockbusters (and to some degree comic book films fall in this category) and people who argue that they’re not good art—and sometimes not even cinema. Your reading for this lecture is a short and controversial opinion column published by director Martin Scorsese last year. During his press tour for *The Irishman*, he came down quite hard on recent blockbusters.

**[ANIMATION]** He said, “I don’t see Marvel movies. I tried, you know? But that’s not cinema. Honestly, the closest I can think of them, as well made as they are, with actors doing the best they can under the circumstances, is theme parks. It isn’t the cinema of human beings trying to convey emotional, psychological experiences to another human being.”

The column you’ll read is his attempt to explain what he meant by this, and I think by gauging your own reaction to his words (people tend to respond strongly one way or another) you will learn what you think about blockbusters. People certainly go see them. And they certainly make money, when all of their creative and financial calculations are done correctly—when they’re *Jawses,* not *Popeyes.* But are they something to be concerned about, in terms of what they mean for cinema? I leave it to you to decide for yourselves.