

The U.S. Film Industry in the 1980s: The Introduction of “High Concept Films”

The decade of the 1980s tended to consolidate the gains made in the 1970s, rather than to initiate any new trends equal to the large number of disaster movies, buddy movies, or rogue cop (“*Dirty Harry*”) movies that characterized the previous decade. Designed and packaged for mass audience appeal, very few 80s films became what could be called “Classics”!

The era was characterized by the introduction of “high concept” films, with cinematic plots that could be easily characterized by one or two sentences (25 words or less) and therefore easily marketable and understandable. Producer Don Simpson, partnered with Jerry Bruckheimer, has been credited with the creation of the high-concept picture or modern Hollywood blockbuster, although its roots could be seen in the late 70s with films like “Jaws” (1975), “Saturday Night Fever” (1977), “Star Wars” (1977) and “Alien” (1979), which was nicknamed “*Jaws in Space*”.

Don Simpson was the first producer to understand and exploit the significance of MTV. His action-packed, loud, flashy, simplistic, and tightly-structured films brought crowds to the multiplexes every summer. His lowest common-denominator films reflected the MTV generation, such as in his debut film “Flashdance” (1983), with its pop soundtrack and iconic freeze frame ending. Other successes followed in the 80s, including “Beverly Hills Cop” (1984) with its “fish-out-of-water” high concept, the sexy “Thief of Hearts” (1984) and the the high-flying “Top Gun” (1986), the

epitome of Simpson's technique, and the stock-car racing film "Days of Thunder" (1990), again with Tom Cruise.

By the end of the 80s era as a result, most films were not designed for "thinking" adult audiences, unlike "Driving Miss Daisy" (1989), but were extremely "low brow" films for a dumbed-down teen audience looking for sheer entertainment value or thrills including, "Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure" (1989), James Cameron's "Aliens" (1986) or "Die Hard" (1988).

After the innovations of the 70s, films in the 80s were less experimental and original, but more formulaic, although there was a burst of films eager to capitalize on new special effects (CGI) techniques which were now readily available. Predictions were grim for the industry as production costs were soaring, while ticket prices were declining. The average ticket price at the beginning of the decade was about \$3, and over \$4 by the end of the decade, while the average film budget, by the end of the decade, was over \$18 million. However, fears of the demise of Hollywood proved to be premature.

The Search for a Blockbuster:

The personal cinema of 1970s auteur directors such as Francis Ford Coppola, William Friedkin, Peter Bogdanovich, Martin Scorsese and Steven Spielberg was now super-ceded by the advent of the "blockbuster" phenomenon that they had created with "The Godfather" (1972) and "Jaws" (1975).

The industry continued to pander to the tastes and desires of young people. This was one of the negative legacies of "Star Wars" (1977) of the late 1970s.

Steven Spielberg's and George Lucas' names have often been associated with the term "blockbuster" - and their films inevitably continued to contribute to the trend during this decade, such as "The Empire Strikes Back" (1980), the great and exhilarating escapist adventure film, "Raiders of the Lost Ark" (1981), and the childhood fantasy hit, "E.T.:The Extra Terrestrial" (1982), with a lovable stranded alien, inspired by Peter Pan, the resurrection themes of Christianity, and with an anti-science bias. There were others that were also successful, such as "Ghostbusters" (1984), "Romancing the Stone" (1984) and "Back to the Future" (1985), and their successive sequels

Following this model, Hollywood continued to search, with demographic research and a "**bottom line mentality**," for the one large "**event film**" that everyone, including international audiences, **had** to see. These films were filled with dazzling special effects technology, sophisticated sound tracks, mega-marketing budgets, and costly, highly-paid stars. Most big-screen event movies, scheduled to be released at advantageous times, during the summer and at Christmas-time, would take fortunes to produce but which promised potentially lucrative payoffs. In retrospect, many of the blockbusters in the 1980s, such as those mentioned above, were well-constructed films with strong characters and plots not **entirely** built upon their special-effects.

(Courtesy Filmsite.org)