

### **Hollywood in the 1970s: The New Wave**

Although the 1970s opened with Hollywood experiencing a financial and artistic depression, the decade became a creative high point in the US film industry. Restrictions on language, adult content and sexuality, and violence had loosened up, and these elements became more widespread. The hippie movement, the civil rights movement, free love, the growth of rock and roll, changing gender roles and drug use certainly had a gigantic impact. Hollywood was renewed and reborn, following the earlier collapse of the studio system throughout the 1950s, and the works of many new and experimental film-makers during ***"Hollywood's New Wave"***.

The counter-culture of the time had influenced Hollywood to be freer, to take more risks and to experiment with alternative and more provocative themes. As old Hollywood professionals and old-style moguls died out a new generation of film makers arose. Many of the audiences and movie-makers of the late 60s had seen a glimpse of new possibilities, new story-telling techniques and more meaningful *'artistic'* options, by the influences of various European "New Wave" movements (French and Italian) and the original works of other foreign-language film-makers.

Young viewers and directors, who refused to compromise with mediocre film offerings, supported stretching the boundaries and conventional standards of film even more in this decade. The 70s decade was celebrated for films with creative and memorable subject matter that reflected the questioning spirit and truth of the times.

The Film Industry seemed to flourish at the same time that the defeat in the Vietnam War, the Kent State Massacre, the Watergate scandal, and a growing energy crisis created a tremendous disillusion in American society. There was a questioning politicized spirit among the public and a lack of faith in institutions, especially the government, which became a comment upon the lunacy of war and the dark side of the American Dream

There was a remarkable diversity of themes in the films of the 70s ranging all the way from youth countercultural films, to right-wing crime films (praising vigilantism), to blaxploitation films, anti-war films (and sarcastic comedies), feminist and women's liberation films, Martial arts, action films, and everything in-between. The film industry reflected the rampant social change and controversies raging in the country (including but not limited to gay rights, civil rights, women's rights, the environment, and the youth-hippie movement, etc.)

Widening cracks in the American dream after the 60s were reflected in a number of disturbing, skeptical, pessimistic and provocative revisionist westerns, that questioned the mythical vision of the Old West. Traditional western films in the 1970s were being transformed -- classic frontier heroes of the past were being replaced by more realistic visions of the frontier, by more violent depictions, by more authentic portrayals of racism and prejudice against Native Americans, and by "urban" cowboys who could take the law into their own hands (such as Clint Eastwood's detective "Dirty Harry" – 1971. Symbolically, this was evidenced, in part, by the deaths in this decade of two influential directors who had placed their personal imprint upon the western genre during Hollywood's classic past, John Ford (*"Stagecoach"* -1939) and Howard Hawks (*"Red River"* – 1948)

### The Blockbuster Arrives:

The "so-called" Renaissance of Hollywood in the 1970s, was built upon perfecting and updating some of the traditional film genres of Hollywood's successful past - *with* bigger, block-buster dimensions. Throughout the 1970s, studios would invest heavily in only a handful of bankrolled films, hoping that one or two would succeed profitably. Sadly, in the 70s, the once-powerful MGM Studios was forced to sell off even more of its assets, and abandon the film-making business, and diversified into other areas (mostly hotels and casinos).

Much of the focus was on box-office receipts and the production of action- and youth-oriented, blockbuster films with dazzling special effects. But it was becoming increasingly more difficult to predict what would sell or become a hit. Hollywood's economic crises in the 1950s and 1960s, especially during the war against the lure of television, were somewhat eased with the emergence in the 70s of summer "blockbuster" movies ("**Jaws**" – 1975) and event films" ("Star Wars" – 1977), marketed to mass audiences.

Both films were masterfully-made, non-controversial genre films - and presaged what would be coming in the years and decades to come. Although the budget for "**Jaws**" grew from \$4 million to \$9 million during production, it became the highest grossing film in history - until "*Star Wars*".

The average ticket price for a film in 1971 was \$1.65, and by 1978 had risen to about two and a half dollars in first-run theatres. Second-run film theatres could charge less and often dropped their admission price to

\$1.00. The average film budget by 1978 was about \$5 million - increasing dramatically to \$11 million by 1980 due to inflation and rising costs. Therefore, production of Hollywood films decreased precipitously in the late 1970s, down to 354 releases in 1978 compared to the previous year's total of 560.

#### **The First Satellite-Delivered National Cable TV Network, 1972-75**

The growth of cable TV was regarded as a serious threat to advertiser-supported broadcast television networks, independent stations, **and** movie theaters. These older institutions were protected by Federal Communications Commission (FCC) rulings that restricted cable systems from importing distant television signals. After cable deregulation in the early '70s, one of the earliest subscription-based cable networks was **The Green Channel**. After Time Inc. backed it in 1972, the name changed to HBO (Home Box Office), and the channel began using microwave transmission when the Service Electric Company offered the programming over a small Pennsylvania Cable TV system. HBO went on to become the first successful, satellite-delivered pay cable service in the U.S.

#### **The Home Video Revolution:**

Initially considered a threat to movies because consumers would be able to tape off-the-air, home video machines were dramatically re-evaluated once studios discovered lucrative sales and rentals from taped versions of their commercially-released movies. This was a new income stream that actually promoted and stimulated business. VHS video players, laser disc players and the release of films on videocassette tapes and discs

multiplied as prices plummeted, creating a new industry and adding substantial revenue and profits for the movie studios. Both “**Jaws**” and “**Star Wars**” became the first films to earn over 100 million dollars in rental fees.

All of the major Hollywood studios had their own video divisions (e.g., Warner Brothers. formed *Warner Home Video* in the late '70s), and by the late 1980s in the U.S., income from video rentals was **double** that of the theatrical box office. One of the greatest outcomes from the home video revolution, was that independent film-makers and producers could now market their films more effectively by distributing tapes and discs for home viewing.

It was clear that the advent of new ways of viewing films: (via subscription cable TV, via videocassette or laserdisc) meant that film audiences could now watch, record, or rent films that previously were difficult to see. A new wave of collecting massive libraries of films developed among consumers, who intently followed each week's new releases, and interest in film-watching burgeoned.

One major negative side-effect or downside to home-viewing, was that the concept of a “collective audience” attending a film together in a theater was being supplanted by the isolated viewer; something which will continue to plague us in the post-Covid world. Theater attendance would begin to drastically decline in the next decade due to the home video invasion.

### **Role of the Hollywood Studios:**

The established Hollywood movie studios (except for **Universal** and Walt Disney's **Buena Vista - Disney**), no longer directly controlled production. Although studios still dominated film distribution, other areas including production, filming and financing (in whole or in part) were increasingly in the hands of independent studios, producers, and/or agents. A new generation of movie stars emerged from this new system, including Jack Nicholson, Al Pacino, Robert De Niro, and Dustin Hoffman, actors who were more skilled as "characters", who could adapt and mold their screen images to play a number of diverse roles.

Major changes in the Production Code had already occurred in the previous decade when the Motion Picture Production Code was replaced by a ratings system in 1968. This culminated in the X-rated Best Picture win for **"Midnight Cowboy"** – 1969. The movie ratings system was further modified in 1970, replacing the "M" (mature) rating with PG (meaning parental guidance suggested), and redefining "R" (as at least 17 years or older, unless accompanied by parent or adult guardian). "X" rated films were limited to those eighteen and above.

By the early 1980s, the 60's era of music, free love, youthful idealism, and friendship that had extended into the 70s was clearly over. By now, the hippies (a baby boomer generation) of the 60s had become a new crop of angst-ridden, suburban-dwelling yuppies. They could only nostalgically look back to the 60s and ask what had happened to their lives. Audiences clearly identified with and revered films such as **The Big Chill (1983)**, by writer/director Lawrence Kasdan. It featured a catchy Motown soundtrack

of hit songs (by The Temptations, Aretha Franklin, Marvin Gaye, and Smokey Robinson and the Miracles) celebrated by successful, upwardly-mobile, thirty-something college grads from their days 15 years earlier at the University of Michigan, who gathered together for a weekend funeral-reunion in a summer vacation house in South Carolina. The many stars of the ensemble film - Jeff Goldblum, Kevin Kline, Tom Berenger, Glenn Close, Mary Kay Place, Jo-Beth Williams, Meg Tilly and William Hurt reflected upon the good ol' days (and the promise of what might have been but hadn't materialized), smoked dope, cooked together and paired up for sex in unpredictable ways. The film's two taglines were highly appropriate: "In a cold world you need your friends to keep you warm," and "How much love, sex, fun and friendship can a person take?"