American Movies as a Less-than-Mass Medium

Like all great arts the motion picture has grown up by appeal to the interests of childhood and youth.

Terry Ramsaye, 1926

Films have to be made for the majority and the majority in the United States are teenagers. It's different in France and Italy where the majority are adults.

Joan Collins, 1957

Strictly speaking, American motion pictures today are not a mass medium. As any multiplex marquee attests, theatrical movies cater primarily to one segment of the entertainment audience: teenagers. Without the support of the teenage audience, few theatrical movies break even, fewer still become hits, and none become blockbusters. In America, movies reflect teenage, not mass—and definitely not adult—tastes.

This was not always so. Prior to the mid-1950s, movies were the mass medium of choice for a vast, multigenerational audience that motion picture industry officials invariably envisaged as "the public." Movies may have "sprung from minds essentially juvenile and adolescent," as Terry Ramsaye wrote in his landmark motion picture history, *A Million and One Nights* (1926), but their images captivated all kinds. Will H. Hays, president of the Motion Picture

Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) from 1922 to 1945, always insisted that movies were "art for the millions . . . speaking the language of all men of all ages." Unlike high opera or classical music, they sought no "specialty audience" but aspired to be a truly popular art, a "universal entertainment" for the entire family. "The commercial success of the screen," declared Hays, "is based on its appeal to the general public—men, women, and children." In the 1930s and 1940s, that all-embracing ideal mirrored Hollywood's pluralistic audience. By and large moviegoing *was* a familial, almost ritualistic activity, with children, adolescents, young couples, housewives, breadwinners, and the elderly partaking together of the liveliest of the arts.

The rise of television and the collapse of the old studio system destroyed that kind of universality. Since the 1950s, moviemakers have been forced to narrow their focus and attract the one group with the requisite income, leisure, and gregariousness to sustain a theatrical business. The courtship of the teenage audience began in earnest in 1955; by 1960, the romance was in full bloom. That shift in marketing strategy and production initiated a progressive "juvenilization" of film content and the film audience that is today the operative reality of the American motion picture business. The process whereby "movies for the millions" became a less-than-mass medium is best revealed in the genesis and development of what has become the industry's flagship enterprise, the teenpic.

The Exploitation Film

The teenpic is a version of the exploitation film, a loose though not wide-open category for motion pictures. Lingua franca in the regions of the motion picture industry and academic film studies alike, "exploitation" has three distinct and sometimes overlapping meanings. In its two broadest senses, "exploitation" refers both to the advertising and promotion that entice an audience into a theater and to the way the movie then endears itself to that audience. As the object of exploitation, the movie is passive, a product to be advertised and marketed; as the subject doing the exploitation, the movie is active, an agent that caters to its target audience by serving up appetizing or exotic subject matter. In its third, categorical sense, "exploitation" signifies a particular *kind* of movie.

In early industry parlance, "exploitation" meant only the process of advertising and publicity that accompanied a movie's theatrical release.

Hollywood's platonic ideal: three generations of American moviegoers exit a theater in Dixon, Illinois, 1947. (National Archives)

Motion pictures reached maturity during the "ballyhoo years" of the 1920s, and studio executives well recognized their medium's dependence on effective advertising. "The better the picture, the greater must be the exploitation campaign," declared Columbia Pictures vice president Jack Cohn in 1933. "Good pictures do not sell themselves. We will never have phenomenal box office successes without the combination of a great picture and adequate exploitation."

To help exhibitors attract an audience, the major studios maintained permanent full-scale "exploitation departments" or used the services of special agencies skilled in public relations. "Exploitation men" were responsible for devising eye-catching advertisements and concocting newsworthy stunts linked to the movie in question. During the 1930s,

the *Film Daily* included an "Exploitation Digest" in its yearbook that listed "a comprehensive summary of stunts for exploiting any type of picture" and encouraged studios to submit their favorite exploitation scheme of the past year. Hal Horne, director of advertising and public relations for United Artists, described a publicity stunt for *White Zombie* (1932) that defines this most basic meaning of "exploitation":

> When *White Zombie* was ushered into the Rivoli Theater in New York, all Broadway was startled by the sudden appearance of nine Zombies on a boardwalk erected above the marquee of the theater. Thousands packed the sidewalks and gasped with amazement as the nine figures, faithfully garbed and made up to simulate actual members of the *White Zombie* cast, went through a series of thrilling dramatic sequences. . . . The doll-like figures of the girls were dressed in white flowing robes and the men looked just as if they had been dug up from the ground with wooden splints on their legs and battered facial expressions. . . . Crowds gathered all day lured there not only by the drama enacted above the theater front but by the *White Zombie* sound effects records which included the screeching of vultures, the grinding of the sugar mill and the beating of the tom toms, and other nerve wracking sounds.

For his studio's best exploitation effort that year, Arthur L. Mayer, director of advertising, publicity, and exploitation at Paramount, chose a promotional perennial, the contest. Some sixty thousand entrants were given screen tests in "a nationwide search for a non-professional actress to play the Panther Woman in *Island of Lost Souls* [1933]." (One Kathleen Burke got the role.)

The industry's most outrageous exploitation ploys are a cherished part of Hollywood lore. Paramount's Adolph Zukor recalled the promotional campaign for a movie called *The Green Parrot* wherein a number of trained green parrots were to be set free in selected newspaper offices to squawk the movie's title. The birds performed well, but the plan was canceled when the title was changed. Universal's Carl Laemmle told of the press agent who publicized his client's latest jungle opera by checking into a first-class hotel under the name of T. R. Zan, sneaking a lion into his suite, and then ordering ten pounds of steak from room service. Laemmle approved of the "original manner" of such exploitation but counseled the less inventive to herald upcoming attractions the traditional way, through contests, "newspapers, lobbies, theater fronts, window displays, printed matter, and the like."

Since the wild days of vintage ballyhoo, promotional techniques have more than kept pace with the industry's technical improvements.

The publicity campaign for the modern theatrical movie is a precision media assault based on communications theory, depth psychology, and dead-on demographics. Today, exploitation, hype, or what is still sometimes called ballyhoo is a sophisticated national advertising campaign, the cost of which often surpasses that of the multimillion-dollar feature in the spotlight. As in Jack Cohn's time, an adequate exploitation strategy remains crucial to a movie's box office fortunes, with trailers on cable television and Web sites serving as the digital-age equivalents of the posters and playbills of yesteryear. Since the MTV-fueled success of *Flashdance* (1983) and *Footloose* (1984), rock video tie-ins have been instrumental publicity shills, while the prerelease buzz created online for *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) quickly established the Web site home page as an essential cyberspace lobby card.

Communications rather than marketing defines the second meaning of exploitation. It refers to the dialogue a movie establishes with its viewers. A movie is said to "exploit" an audience when it reflects on screen the audience's expectations and values. The implicit corollary is that it does so in a particularly egregious and manipulative way through subject matter that is particularly accessible or disreputable.

When movies shifted their emphasis from spectacles such as Thomas Edison's *The Electrocution of an Elephant* (1903) to dramas such as Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), moviemakers found that their narratives had to conform to traditional expectations or risk confusing, offending, or otherwise alienating audiences. Taking their cues from the carefully ordered middle-class world of popular nineteenth-century novels and plays, motion picture pioneers like Porter and D. W. Griffith shaped their narratives for audience approval at the same time that they created a unique filmic grammar. After *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), feature-length dramas achieved ascendancy over the picturesque slapstick of one- and two-reel comedies. The great silent clowns of the next decade—Charles Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and Harold Lloyd—made sure that their gags and bits of business were played out within a well-wrought narrative framework. "After we stopped making wild two-reelers and got into feature-length pictures, our scenario boys had to be story-conscious," recalled Buster Keaton. "We couldn't tell any far-fetched stories. . . . It would have been poison to us. An audience wanted to believe every story we told them." In short, moviemakers learned early on that theirs was fundamentally a storytelling medium and that stories affirming an audience's beliefs

were the most successful at the box office. The wise moviemaker "exploited" what was known about an audience by catering to its desires and meeting its expectations.

By 1930, a coherent Production Code could credibly posit a set of standardized audience values to guide moviemakers in the construction of their narratives and hence in the exploitation of their audience. For all its rigidity, the moral universe established in the Code expressed a rough cultural consensus: that crime should not pay; that virtue should be rewarded; that the good, handsome boy should get the good, pretty girl. As such, the Hays Office merely codified a set of narrative and thematic requirements that most commercial moviemakers observed anyway. In exploiting a culturally heterogeneous mass audience (and in creating a culturally homogeneous one), Hollywood would have had to adhere to conventions, Code or no Code. Exploitation, then, whether defined as a promotional or a communications strategy, has always been part of the American motion picture industry.

The modern sense of the term as a pejorative description for a special *kind* of motion picture ("the exploitation film") is more recent. In 1946, the show business bible *Variety* spoke of "exploitation pictures" as "films with some timely or currently controversial subject which can be exploited, capitalized on, in publicity and advertising." That *Variety* felt compelled to put "exploitation picture" within quotation marks and to define the phrase for a savvy trade audience indicates both its recent coinage as industry vernacular and its relative unfamiliarity as a production strategy. At this early date, "exploitation picture" seems to have had no negative connotations but was used simply to refer to a timely picture with a clear promotional tie-in. As examples of exploitation pictures, *Variety* cited mostly mainstream, major studio products such as RKO's *Back to Bataan* (1945), which was "released almost simultaneously" with the return of American forces to the Philippines, and Warner Bros.' *Hotel Berlin* (1945), whose release was "a race against Russia's entry into Berlin and the end of the European war." By these standards, a mainstream, big-budget prestige project such as producer Sam Goldwyn's *The Pride of the Yankees* (1942) qualifies as an exploitation picture: based on the life of Lou Gehrig and featuring many of his former teammates, it hit screens a brief thirteen months after the first baseman's death in June 1941.

By the mid-1950s the name had picked up the bad reputation it still retains. To qualify easily for motion picture exploitation, subject mat-

ter now had to be timely *and* sensational, not simply timely after the fashion of a war movie or celebrity biopic. Like their immediate predecessors, 1950s exploitation pictures drew on the public curiosity and free publicity surrounding a popular current event. These films were "exploitation naturals" because the real occurrences that inspired them had already aroused widespread interest and charted a clear promotional path for "ad-pub" (advertising-publicity) departments. For example, the juicy libel suits involving *Confidential* and *Whisper* magazines wrought MGM's *Slander* (1956), which concerned an unscrupulous editor of a *Confidential*–like scandal sheet and whose promotion was cued to the timely real-life tie-in: "MGM brings America the FIRST insider account of how the scandal magazines operate!" promised the ad copy. But to a degree unthinkable a decade earlier, the 1950s exploitation picture favored the bizarre, the licentious, and the sensational—and, following the Hollywood mainstream, depicted same with escalating daring and explicitness. In delving unashamedly into often-disreputable content and promoting it in an always-disreputable manner, the exploitation label acquired a pejorative distinction its exemplars usually lived up to.

As a production strategy, the 1950s exploitation formula typically had three elements: (1) controversial, bizarre, or timely subject matter amenable to wild promotion ("exploitation" potential in its original sense); (2) a substandard budget; and (3) a teenage audience. Movies of this ilk are *triply* exploitative, simultaneously exploiting sensational happenings (for story value), their notoriety (for publicity value), and their teenage participants (for box office value). Around 1955–56, "exploitation film" in this sense had become fairly common usage within the motion picture industry.

The 1950s exploitation picture responded to history with a distinctive speed and selectivity. Typically, the lapse between an event's appearance in the newspapers and the movie that exploited it was remarkably brief. For example, on October 4, 1957, the successful launch of the Russian satellite *Sputnik* stunned the nation. The soon-to-be-legendary Roger Corman, already one of the era's cagiest producers of exploitation pictures, felt sure that he could "cash in on the satellite craze" if he acted quickly enough. He immediately contacted his distributor, Allied Artists, "and told them I could have a *Sputnik* picture in movie theaters across the country in two months time. They said, 'Sure, do it.' It was one of the fastest movies ever made. The script was

written in less than two weeks. Six weeks after that the film *[War of the Satellites]* was being shown Coast to Coast." Throughout the 1950s, any sensational happening amenable to filmic rendering was likely to cause a rush to the Title Registration Bureau of the Motion Picture Association of America, an office whose files chart the era as well as the *New York Times Index*. In August 1958, the under-ice voyage of the submarine *Nautilus* had producers racing for the title *Atomic Submarine*. The first response of one enterprising moviemaker to the shooting down of U-2 pilot Francis Gary Powers in May 1960 was to file for the title *The True Story of Francis Gary Powers, American*. After Fidel Castro drove Fulgencia Batista y Zaldívar from Cuba on January 1, 1959, and before his communist agenda was widely known, producer Jerry Wald secured the revolutionary's cooperation for a film project based on the Cuban revolution. Under an agreement signed in Houston in April 1959, Wald acquired the rights to film Castro's life, the dictator agreeing to "turn over to Wald complete facilities in Cuba, including the army." Castro wanted Marlon Brando to play Fidel and Frank Sinatra to play his brother Raoul. Ernest Hemingway was his first choice to write the screenplay. Sam Katzman, a founding father of the exploitation movie, may have known something neither Wald nor the State Department knew: within weeks of Castro's victory, he registered the title *The Rise and Fall of Fulgencio Batista*.

Overtaken by history, some movies became inadvertent exploitation pictures. The FBI's capture of the Brinks robbers in January 1956 inspired the rerelease of Universal's fortuitous *Six Bridges to Cross* (1955), a heist movie filmed in Boston. Within an hour after the FBI cracked the case, exhibitors in Boston, Providence, and Lowell, Massachusetts, had rebooked the revamped "exploitation picture." Likewise, when Grace Kelly's role as a princess in *The Swan* (1956) became a real-life fairy tale, a standard costume drama was transformed into a Monaco exploitation movie. For sheer cynical opportunism, nothing matches Columbia's rerelease of *Cell 2455, Death Row* (1955) on the eve of Caryl Chessman's execution in May 1960. "Columbia Blasts It!" shouted the ad copy; "Timely as Today and Sizzling as the Hot Seat!" (Actually, Chessman went to the gas chamber.) Like Corman with *War of the Satellites* (1958), the resourceful exploitation moviemaker aims to get the movie into theaters in time to benefit from (transitory) public curiosity. The classic tag line for exploitation movies remains "as timely as today's headlines!"

Not every headline, however, warrants an exploitation movie. During the 1950s, commercial moviemakers shied away from quickie low-budget features about the Salk vaccine, Dwight D. Eisenhower's heart attack, or the decline of the inner-city tax base. Exploitation material, then as now, was outlandish, mildly controversial, and a little licentious—and if the movie wasn't, the advertising was. A survey of the era's history bears out the exploitation movie's twin impulses to the timely and the sensational. If the event is trendy or controversial enough, chances are an exploitation movie, somewhere, has documented it. The more enduring furors of the 1950s, like rock 'n' roll and juvenile delinquency, spawned whole exploitation cycles, historically bound clusters of films sprung from a common source.

In 1956, ten years after its initial comments on the "exploitation picture," *Variety* submitted an authoritative definition, revised and updated, for the "so-called exploitation picture": "These are low-budget films based on controversial and timely subjects that made newspaper headlines. In the main these pictures appeal to 'uncontrolled' juveniles and 'undesirables.'" Together, these three elements—controversial content, bare-bones budgets, and demographic targeting—remain characteristic of any exploitation movie, whether the scandalous material is aimed at "adults" ("sexploitation"), African Americans ("blaxploitation"), or gorehounds ("axploitation"). But because the demographic target under the most intense and incessant fire remained "juveniles"—teenagers—the exploitation film became associated mainly with its most familiar version: the teenpic.

The Teenpic as Genre

Like many movie labels, the term *teenpic* may be more reliable as a bibliographical entry than as a critical category, but it conjures a commonsense impression of a group of kindred motion pictures. In this, the designation "teenpic" is similar to the customary classifications—musical, comedy, western—that have long lent order to an otherwise unmanageable inventory of Hollywood product. The usual handle for these clusters of seemingly similar films, a word left as yet intentionally unspoken, is "genre."

As much a linguistic convenience as a serviceable organizing principle, the concept of genre is one of the most fruitful yet contentious approaches in film scholarship. In the decades since Robert Warshow's

trailblazing essays "The Gangster as Tragic Hero" (1948) and "Movie Chronicle: The Westerner" (1954), genre-based film studies have multiplied steadily, nearly matching auteurism as the critical vantage of preference for popular, if not academic, film books—though even in an academy smitten with semiotics, deconstruction, cultural studies, and other esoteric methodologies, scholarship grounded in genre is voluminous. The approach has obvious advantages. Genre brings an Aristotelian coherence to disparate subject matter, permits easy movement from particular close description to general qualitative prescription, and, not least, acknowledges the common sense, in audience and artist alike, of a movie's membership in a wider filmic community.

The etymology of the word *genre*—by way of the French from the common Greek and Latin root *genus*, meaning "kind," "stock," or "birth"—is itself suggestive. The source word generates a ready association with the classical mind, particularly the rigorous nomenclature and ideal forms of Greek philosophy. Genre criticism aptly begins with Aristotle's *Poetics*, which first applied the orderly frame of Greek thought to the arts. In positing categories for mimetic form, the *Poetics* set a procedural precedent that has challenged the interpretive dexterity and frustrated the organizational mentality of commentators on the arts ever since. Although for scientific inquiry the Aristotelian model proved congenial—two hundred years ago, Linnaeus devised a system of binomial classification for the animal world that remains basic to the natural sciences—for aesthetic inquiry Linnaean classification never led to linear progress. The modern literary critic is not discernibly closer to a definitive notion of tragedy than his baffled medieval forebear, Averroës.

Taking their miscues from the literary tradition, early genre studies in film tended to appropriate the zoological model. Typically they sought to create a Linnaean taxonomy for motion pictures by discerning "essential" formal and thematic qualities and cataloging required visual markings ("icons") for easy identification. As a method proper, genre criticism is variously inductive, deductive, and a combination of both. The inductive critic dilutes the characteristics of likely members into common group properties; the deductive critic, by contrast, posits a Platonic "supertext" (either real—"*Stagecoach* is the definitive western"—or ideal—"all westerns showcase frontier landscapes") and works a textual suspect into the prefabricated framework. The older the generic applicant, the better the approach seems to work. In a classical

studio era populated by *The Plainsman* (1936), *Stagecoach* (1939), and *Jesse James* (1939), genre criticism offers the tidy satisfactions of orderly arrangement and assured placement.

At the same time, the definition of genre has had to be flexible enough to accommodate marginal applicants that fail to meet the agreed-upon standards but nonetheless seem qualified to fill the slot. In 1981, Thomas Schatz's *Hollywood Genres* submitted a definition instructive in its looseness: a genre film is "one which involves familiar, essentially one-dimensional characters acting out a predictable story pattern within a familiar setting." Like pornography in Justice Potter Stewart's famous remark, it seems genre is a matter more of unspoken recognition than of dictionary definition: we know a western when we see one.

Or at least we used to. Since *Destry Rides Again* (1939), to take an oft-cited milestone, even ostensible westerns have resisted attempts to fence them in, no matter how wide the generic boundaries. Classical westerns, deconstructionist westerns, parodic westerns, urban westerns, revisionist westerns, postrevisionist "straight" westerns—by the time a *Rancho Notorious* (1952) or *Johnny Guitar* (1954) is corralled into its appointed place, the film is bent totally out of shape. Similarly, because story patterns mingle more readily than animal groups, even seemingly incompatible types such as the western and film noir crossbreed with disturbing promiscuity. Films such as *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944), *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), and *Colorado Territory* (1949)—to say nothing of the self-reflexive genre efforts of the poststudio era, such as *Little Big Man* (1968), *Cabaret* (1972), or *The Long Goodbye* (1973)—defy simple classification.

By the traditional measures of genre affiliation, teenpics are as elusive as any postmodernist motion picture amalgam. Paramount's *King Creole* (1958), for example, is at once a star vehicle for Elvis Presley, a musical, an urban crime drama, a familial melodrama, and (stretching things only slightly) a signature film noir of director Michael Curtiz. Both within and outside generic borders, exceptions, originals, and hybrids disrupt the system. And, as with scientific frameworks, when anomalies proliferate out of control, a paradigm shift beckons.

An alternative approach probes the development, not the definition, of genres. It begins with a recognition that anomalies and double entries are endemic to the very concept and proceeds to address the problem by sidestepping it. The standard genre questions of classification,

of ideal form, even of meaning are subordinated to the primary question of inception: where do genres—or, for the present purpose, where do teenpics—come from?

From a methodological standpoint, the critical departure is not without its own problems: it assumes but does not define the shared—and, for most viewers, unquestioned—sense of what a genre is; it appropriates the referential convenience of genrelike categorizing without observing its standards and practices; and it makes ready use of the vocabulary of genre. Perhaps the best compliment to the efficacy of "old" genre theory is that it is virtually impossible to talk about Hollywood movies without drawing on it—without accepting some of the major distinctions, without speaking the troublesome file names, and without succumbing to the temptation to add to the catalog by submitting, for instance, "rock 'n' roll," "weirdie," and "clean" teenpic chapter headings.

But whatever the downside in critical consistency, an approach that places the interrogative "Why?" before "What?" has one overriding advantage: it can actually be answered with a degree of certainty. Explaining the inception of the teenpic seems a more enlightening enterprise than debating its essence. A phenomenon whose peculiarity was first noted in the mid-1950s, the teenpic can be marked with some precision along Hollywood's historical time line. The date of a phenomenon's occurrence is a good index of the reasons for its appearance. The teenpic, then, begins around 1955, a product of the decline of classical Hollywood cinema and the rise of the privileged American teenager.