

**Passage 1.**  
*Manohla Dargis writes...*

- 1 Summertime and the viewing is lousy and noisy and deedle-dee dumb, or so the received wisdom has it. It is our season of stupidity, summertime, that interminable stretch when adults surrender the nation's theatres to hordes of popcorn-chugging, sugar-jonesing, under-aged nose-pickers for whom the cinematic experience means nothing more than recycled big, bigger, biggest bangs. It is the season of mass distraction, of the tent pole, the event movie, the blockbuster. 5
- 2 Blockbuster is really just descriptive, but it often carries with it a down-market whiff, as do many pop-cultural products that come with eye-catching price tags and seem precision-tooled for young audiences. Critics often use blockbuster as easy shorthand for overinflated productions that rely more on special effects than words and characters, and that distract rather than engage the audience. At its most reductive the negative spin on blockbusters is that they signal the death of cinema art and mark the triumph of the corporate bottom line, of marketing strategies, product placements and opening-weekend returns. 10
- 3 But just because a movie blows stuff up doesn't mean it automatically stinks. A good blockbuster takes you places you might never otherwise go and shows you things you could never do. It brings you into new worlds, offers you new attractions. It takes hold of your body, making you quiver with anxiety, joy, laughter, relief. When great blockbusters sweep you up and away, they usher you into a realm of communal pleasure. In a culture of entertainment niches, they remind you of what going to the movies can still be like. They also remind you that without the human factor a blockbuster is nothing but a big empty box. Blockbusters that endure strike a balance between the spectacular and the ineffably human, whether it's Peter O'Toole framed against the never-ending desert in "Lawrence of Arabia" or Keanu Reeves coming down to earth in "The Matrix" as he realizes that he knows kung fu. 15 20
- 4 These days highbrows dismiss movie blockbusters because they are often based in fantasy rather than reality, which is generally a bad thing unless the fantasy comes with a literary pedigree like "The Lord of the Rings." Blockbusters tend to be made for adolescents instead of adults, which is also a bad thing because youngsters are untrustworthy cultural consumers. Blockbusters that open on thousands of screens are also considered dubious because anything that appeals to a wide audience is inherently suspect. I'm joking, but not really. 25
- 5 The movie industry has been in the business of big — big stars, big stories, big productions, big screens and big returns — about as long as it's been a business. And as long as the movies have told stories, they have used spectacle to sell those stories. Much has changed about the movies, but not so the uses of pyrotechnics, sweeping landscapes and all manner of cinematic awesomeness. Nowadays the armies of sword-brandishing soldiers may be largely computer generated, as in "300", but film spectacle works more or less the same now as it did in 1912 when the Italian epic "Quo Vadis?" hit screens with a cast of literally thousands and extreme action in the form of a chariot race. 30 35
- 6 Yet if audiences dig spectacle, critics often view it with suspicion, as sneers about the modern blockbuster suggest. The negative rap on blockbusters is partly due to the literary bent of a lot of critics, who privilege words over images and tend to review screenplays, or what's left of them, rather than the amalgamation of sights and sounds in front of them. But the sneers also suggest an underlying and familiar contamination anxiety. In the 1980s "Top Gun" wasn't just a glib divertissement; it was evidence that MTV had infected the movies like a deadly virus. In the same grim light "300" isn't just a shell of a movie; it's proof that the movies have been infiltrated by an outside force, namely video games. 40
- 7 The threats have changed over the years — from television to music videos, comic books, digital technologies and so on — yet what has remained constant is the idea that the movies are under siege. But if the movies have taught us anything it is that they are brilliant adapters. They mutate and shift, stretch and adjust, and they neutralize those threats the way an organism absorbs nutrients, by assimilating them. We call some of these movie mutations comic-book flicks. We compare still others to music videos, sometimes with a sigh, sometimes with a smile. And we complain about car chases and condemn blockbusters for, if we're lucky, doing the very thing we say we want from the movies: giving us a reason to watch. 45 50

## Passage 2.

*Nathan Gardels and Mike Medavoy write...*

- 1 As if it were not jarring enough that cherry trees blossomed in Central Park in January while it snowed in the Malibu hills, climate change of a different sort is unsettling this year's Hollywood awards season as well. The climate shift taking place is that films by foreigners such as "Babel", "The Queen" and "Volver" that make little at the box office are winning the top awards while the big Hollywood blockbusters, which make all the money, much of it abroad, are being virtually ignored. That's topsy-turvy, like the weather. 5
- 2 In all of these films we see the world in transition as we are living it. All have managed to break the cycle of remakes in which Hollywood has been stuck by telling new stories -- something American filmmakers, who have prided themselves on their imagination and originality, once excelled at. Meanwhile, with ever fewer exceptions, American filmmakers too often grind out formulaic, shock and awe blockbusters with the inevitable gratuitous violence, sex and special effects that may be winning the battle of Monday morning grosses, but are losing the war for hearts and minds. For all their brawn, American filmmakers, like the generals in Iraq, are in danger of losing the battle of ideas. 10
- 3 In this sense, Hollywood's "Mission Impossible III" has a lot more in common with George Bush's "mission accomplished" than we might have suspected. Despite America's continuing, but diminishing, dominance, its ability to win hearts and minds is draining away. In cinema, as in politics during the information age, it is all about whose story wins. Just as America's image has fallen in world opinion because of the Iraq war, audience trends for American blockbusters are beginning to show a decline as well, both at home and abroad. For years, the big blockbusters have grossed more abroad than at home, where infatuation with contrived spectacle has waned. But something out there is stirring. Even long-time American cultural colonies like Japan and Germany are beginning to turn to the home screen. For the first time in decades more than half of cinema admissions went to local films in Japan during 2006 while German admissions for domestic films hit a post-war high of nearly 25 per cent. This suggests they are headed to where TV viewers have long been. 15 20 25
- 4 The heat is on in Hollywood due to this change in climate, adding further woe to the digital - distribution- "You Tube" -nightmares of the studios. What's happening is that globalization accompanied by technological change is hitting Tinsel Town just like every other industry. Just as the post-World War II American order that defeated communism paved the way for new economic and political competitors from Asia to Europe to Brazil, so too American-led post-Cold War globalization -- and its backlash -- has led to cultural competition. This suggests that we may be seeing the beginning of the end of the century-long honeymoon of Hollywood, at least in its American incarnation, with the world. 30
- 5 Now that globalization has moved us all into the same neighbourhood, more and more people out there on the former periphery want to see their own stories on the screen, to see what is in their imagination and culture, at least as much as they might enjoy the latest offerings from LucasFilm or Pixar. Filmmaker Gonzalez Inarritu best captures what's happening. "The world is changing," he says. "The film community is now a global film community. It's not anymore about cultural barriers or language barriers. It's about emotion and humanity. We are using the power of cinema to cross borders. We understand that now there's a connection that needs to happen." In our global age movies must expose "the point of view of others, of those on the other side," he says. And it must be done with dignity, not portraying Third World faces as mere victims nor Japanese as cartoon caricatures. 35 40
- 6 Of course, there will always be a role for blockbusters just as there will be for aircraft carriers. But, in this new global order where America desires the spread of democracy, we're with Inarritu. Ultimately, it's about hearts and minds, not shock and awe. 45