

The Rise of the Summer Blockbuster



by
Joseph R. Granato

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**The story of the modern blockbuster
is as much a story of a revolution in marketing and
exhibition, as it is in cinematic manipulation.**

The rise of the modern blockbuster film began in 1972, with Francis Coppola's, *The Godfather*. This was the first motion picture to open in more than one theater in the same city – starting with five theaters in New York City and then to 316 theaters the second week. This was the event that redefined the clearance policy between Hollywood studios and Exhibitors. A clearance policy is when an exhibitor shows a film for which they do not own the copyrights. What is significant about this, is that now, instead of a film being released in one theater in a single city, it could open in several, thus profiting off the opening weekend box-office like never before.

The next great push for the blockbuster film came in the form of marketing and advertising. The 1973 film *Breakout*, starring Charles Bronson, was the first to ever advertise on television, with a thirty-second preview. The film did well at the box-office, and the most significant reason for that was their ability to raise awareness of the film to a massive television audience. From then on, the relationship between television and film became forever intertwined. Film used television as a medium for getting the message of movies to the public, and television relied on film for commercial profits.

Finally, with the arrival of *Jaws* in 1975, the modern blockbuster came into its own and started an entirely new genre of films that would eventually dazzle, shock, and entertain millions around the world. Hollywood had found a new way to make big money off of middle to low budget films, simply by releasing them in theaters across the country at the same time, and after weeks of extensive advertising. *Jaws* grossed a remarkable \$100 million dollars in the summer of 1975. What would follow in its path was an impressive resume of legendary Hollywood films.

In the summer of 1977, Twentieth Century Fox released *Star Wars*, which would set the standard for blockbuster films in terms of special effects and stories aimed at appealing to twelve-year old boys, who would eventually make up the primary demographics for blockbuster films. Over the years titles like *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Lethal Weapon*, *Die Hard*, and more recently, *Independence Day*, would send box-office records through the roof and give enormous profits to Hollywood, merchandising, and blockbuster movie stars. Actors like Sylvester Stallone, Harrison Ford, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Bruce Willis became the backbone of big summer movies. These actors were counted on to “open” a film simply by having their names on it. The profits gained from huge opening weekends on

blockbuster films, would pay for advertising costs, which today are fifty percent of a film's total budget, and leave the rest of the money as straight profit.

One argument against the blockbuster film cites the decline of great story telling that is the basis of recent summer movies and the fact that clever dramatic and comedic pieces are overlooked for fast money. For young screenwriters and filmmakers the blockbuster movies of today are an unequal opponent. Considering it is better for a studio to make a \$100 million dollar action film, or a \$10 million dollar dramatic film, and still profit substantially, everything in between is unlikely to receive a green-light. To think that great character scripts are turned over for action movies, simply because action movies are guaranteed moneymakers, is a blow to the creative drive. As artists, writers, and filmmakers of a new generation, we should devote ourselves to returning the story to the summer blockbuster, and using the special effects and action to complement it.

Simply stated, with the rise of the blockbuster film for quick and easy profits came the rise of poorly scripted, in essence, non-character driven stories. Films like *Godzilla*, *Armageddon* and *Deep Impact* are just a few of the big-budget Hollywood films that were released this summer that had dull stories but multi-million dollar special effects. This apparently is of no concern to Hollywood, which seems to spend less emphasis on great stories then on computer generated effects. Who loses in all of this? The greater majority of audiences who are fed nothing more than explosions instead of plots, and who can no longer rely on powerful Blockbuster films that reach emotionally and mentally, but only visually. In the words of George Lucas, "Special effects is just a means of telling a story. Special effects without a story is a pretty boring thing." I am sure Lucas himself is fed-up with the lower quality releases as a blockbuster and I would not underestimate the influence that bad summer movies have played on Lucas' decision to now release the prequels to *Star Wars*. Perhaps he will bring back the integrity that was once involved in the blockbuster film. If not, then the great blockbuster films of old are simply that...of old.