

# Hollywood: Then and now

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## ARTICLE SUMMARY

[\*] Dr Andrew Webber estudió Cine en la Universidad de Warwick durante los años 80 y fue uno de los primeros graduados en el Reino Unido a recibir un título en esta materia. Posteriormente completó una Maestría en Estudios victorianos en la Universidad de Canterbury, Kent y un Doctorado en Educación en King's College, Londres. Actualmente dirige Estudios de Medios de Comunicación en un colegio secundario de Kent, Inglaterra, es examinador y un tutor de educación para adultos. Enseña desde hace 24 años y contribuye artículos a revistas especializadas de medios de comunicación en el Reino Unido y ocasionalmente presenta ponencias en conferencias académicas.

In this article, Dr Andrew Webber argues that American films today have been divided into mainstream and art house products, with mass audiences for the former and niche markets for the latter. This is very different to American cinema in the 1970s when the films appealed to wide audiences regardless of subject matter. The article concludes, therefore, that audiences today are generally far less sophisticated in their tastes and tend to be increasingly narrow in terms of the range of films they are prepared to watch at the cinema.

Keywords: American cinema

## RESUMEN

En este artículo, Dr. Andrew Webber argumenta que las películas norteamericanas de hoy se han dividido en productos comerciales y especializados, con audiencias masivas para los primeros y mercados de nicho para los segundos. Esto es muy distinto al cine norteamericano de los años 70 cuando las películas atraían a una amplia audiencia sin importar su contenido. El artículo concluye, por lo tanto, que las audiencias de hoy son generalmente mucho menos sofisticadas en sus gustos y tienden a ser cada vez más estrechas en cuanto al rango de películas que están dispuestas a mirar en el cine.

Palabras claves: Cine norteamericano

In this article I wish to explore my thoughts on contemporary Hollywood cinema and consider the similarities of today's American films with those produced in America during the so called second golden age of the 1970s.

To begin, here is a list of the best American films I have seen this century.

In 2000, these included *Magnolia*, *The Virgin Suicides* and *Jesus' Son*; in 2001, *Thirteen Day* and *The Pledge*; in 2002, *The Royal Tenenbaums*, *Insomnia*, *Donnie Darko*, *Bowling for Columbine*; in 2003, *Far From Heaven*, *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind*, *About Schmidt*; in 2004, *Open Range*, *Capturing the Friedmans*, *The Fog of War*, *The Bourne Supremacy*, *Supersize Me*; *The Incredibles*; in 2005, *Million Dollar Baby*, *Sideways*, *Batman Begins*, *Match Point*; in 2006, *Brokeback Mountain*, *The New World*, *Marie Antoinette*, *The Prestige*, *Little Children*; in 2007, *The Fountain*, *Into the Wild*, *The Assassination of Jesse James* and *Inland Empire*, in 2008, *There Will Be Blood*, *In the Valley of Elah*, *The Mist* and *The Visitor* and (so far) in 2009 we have had *The Wrestler*, *Gran Torino*, *The Hurt Locker* and *Adventureland*.

By any standards this is an impressive and varied list. It is reassuring that some of the directors from the heady days of the 1970s are still making interesting films – Terence Malick remains cinema's key poet; in spite of severe drop-offs in terms of quality; Woody Allen is still capable of occasionally coming up trumps and, as he has got older, Clint Eastwood has become more and more interesting both as actor and director (a world without Eastwood will be a smaller world for cinema goers like myself who have grown up with his work). Contemporary film makers like Paul Thomas Anderson, Alex Payne, Wes Anderson, Todd Haynes and most notably Sofia Coppola appear to have established themselves impressive CVs; it is pleasing to see varied film makers express their views on American foreign policy and Iraq in particular (*In the Valley of Elah*, *The Visitor* and *The Hurt Locker*) and Hollywood is also still capable of letting outsiders from Australia, New Zealand and the UK make superior quality entertainment like *Thirteen Days*, *The Bourne Supremacy*, *The Assassination of Jesse James* and *Batman: the Dark Knight*. This is also an industry that still allows left-fielders like Anderson and Aronofsky to make personal, audience unfriendly films like *There Will Be Blood* and *The Fountain* and encouraged David Lynch to vanish into his own nightmare, and for that we should be truly grateful.

It might also be worth noting, however, that «movie brat» Brian De Palma has meandered badly (and should be shot for *The Black Dahlia*); Tarantino's

fire soon burnt out (*Inglorious Basterds* confirms this); Peter Jackson is largely irrelevant (although things could change with *Lovely Bones*); Shyamalan has seriously failed to live up to his early promise (*The Happening*, anyone?) and arguably the finest films about America of the last few years have not been made by Americans at all: Ang Lee (*Brokeback Mountain*), Lars Von Trier (*Dancer in the Dark*, *Dogville* and *Manderlay*), Michael Winterbottom (*The Claim*), James Marsh (*The King*), Innaritu (*21 Grams*), Cronenberg (*History of Violence*), Marc Forster (*Monster's Ball* and *Stranger than Fiction*), Sam Mendes (*American Beauty* and *Revolutionary Road*) *et al* have all helmed remarkable films this decade about America and its values.

It would be completely spurious to claim that these films are somehow «less good» than the films produced during Hollywood's second golden age – the 1970s. However, it is also interesting to note that many of the films I have listed were not particularly successful commercially. Indeed, many died a commercial death and a number of these films were denied Oscars (if these can be said to be in any way a kite mark of quality) by much lesser works.

It is also certainly the case that a significant number of these films might be loosely classed as independent films or «indies» as they are now commonly named; in other words small budget films made slightly away from the mainstream with a probable «art house» audience in mind although, to be fair to the film programmers, I managed to see almost all of these films at my local multiplexes.

So, what does this tell us about the current state of play in terms of Hollywood cinema?

To answer this question, we need to think about the movies that were made in America in the 1970s, especially those which enjoyed both a critical *and* commercial success and see if there are any parallels with the films I have listed here.

The 1970s saw Hollywood opening its doors to a new generation of male film makers (who became grouped together as the Movie Brats) who took the opportunity to make daring and decidedly different films (at first) to the films they had grown up with. Many of these film makers (Coppola, Spielberg, Paul Schrader, Scorsese) were young and had studied movies in an academic way before embarking upon their careers. Some were émigré directors like Milos Forman; a few were old hands (Lumet, Fosse) who, like Eastwood, matured with age and started to make better films as they got older, taking full advantage of the new

permissiveness and a few directors (Allen, Mike Nichols) had backgrounds in advertising or TV and brought this experience to bear upon the movies they made. All appeared committed to the idea that American cinema was an art-form which worked best when the films made were risky, realistic, well acted (this was the decade that made stars out of De Niro, Pacino, Nicholson, Hoffman, Hackman, Caan etc. described brilliantly by *Sight and Sound* writer Mike Atkinson in his excellent «American Indie: That's Entertainment» article which appears in the April 2007 edition as «actors who look like salesmen, plumbers and petty crooks») and, occasionally, darkly pessimistic or violent. The story of their careers is best told in Peter Bisskind's *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*, which every reputable media library should hold.

Key films (for me) from the 1970s include Coppola's *The Godfather*, *The Conversation* and *Apocalypse Now*; Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*; Malick's *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*; De Palma's *Carrie*; Huston's *Fat City*; Allen's *Annie Hall* and *Manhattan* and *Stardust Memories*; Fosse's *Lenny*; Friedkin's *The French Connection*; Foreman's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*; Lumet's *Network* (way ahead of its time) and *Dog Day Afternoon*; Pakula's *The Parallax View* and *Kluge* and Bogdanovich's *The Last Picture Show* and *Paper Moon*.

The first thing that strikes me about the films from the 1970s which I like is that all are directed by men (today's cinema goers should be grateful for the likes of Sofia Coppola and Kathryn Bigelow). Secondly, realism is the dominant mode of address (not computer generated effect virtual worlds) and thirdly most of these films (almost all) are about what it means to be American. In addition, if they were made today, almost all of them would probably be described as «indies.»

And yet, in 1970 there was not an independent section as we know it today. Sure Roger Corman at AIP turned out «quickies;» the horror/beach bum/hells' angels Drive-In movies met certain market needs but after Hopper and Fonda turned out *Easy Rider*, the movies made by the studios were often the sort of raw, energetic movies that the public flocked to *en masse* and which the critics also liked.

So is all that has happened a case of today's Hollywood films being divided into two camps – the mainstream and the independent sector? An alternative mainstream list of the key films of this Century would then have to include the *Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars*, *Matrix*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Spiderman*, *Shrek* and *Mission Impossible* trilogies, *Harry Potter*, *Transformers*, *Twilight* and so forth. These are all films I have seen and enjoyed (up to

a point) and yet they are also all films which have left me cold. They have been effective products, well marketed and lavishly produced (the fact that so many have been parts of trilogies is no real surprise), and yet none of them have an iota of soul. And yet all have been phenomenally successful in terms of profit for the studios and many have been firmly embraced by audiences and critics alike (especially British film magazine *Empire/Total Film* writers), with many going on to win Oscars, which once could have been seen as a quality indicator

Perhaps then this is the real difference (and arguably a cause for concern) between film-going thirty years ago and film-going today. In the 1970s, mainstream Hollywood made «independent» films; today the mainstream churns out «popular product.» The effect of this is that mass audiences today are starved of quality product in a way that 1970s audiences, presumably were not.

That's fine, if like me your love of movies runs from the populist to the alternative, but not if you are a casual cinema goer making decisions about which films to see on the basis of publicity, «stars» and reviews in magazines like *Total Film*. In the 1970s the mass audience made hits of films like *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *The Godfather* as well as the more populist fare *Terms of Endearment* and *Kramer Vs Kramer*. Using a healthy eating metaphor – they got a balanced diet; they ate well; they were not intellectually starved. Today's movie-goer is «supersized» (just think about how much money is actually being spent on movies these days – the total cost of the trilogies so popular this decade could have probably fed all the starving of the world). Today's movie-goer does not get a balanced diet unless he or she is prepared to shop around and visit some of the places which specialise in more nourishing fare like one off screenings at a local art house venue etc. if such a thing exists in their region.

The casual movie-goer in the UK, therefore, does not get trained to experience things which are a little less traditional; does not develop a taste for those (exotic) things and hence remains an avid consumer of the cinematic equivalent of junk food. In *Supersize Me*, Morgan Spurlock actually proved that a diet of nothing other than Macdonald's was seriously damaging to your health. Surely the same could be argued about cinema. If mass audiences are fed with an endless diet of *Transformers* and *Iron Man* then the chances of them having their cultural outlook stunted is very real.

Perhaps this is the main reason why Film and Popular Culture is such a crucially important subject for today's students to investigate. Instead of teaching these students «ways to read the blockbuster» or encouraging them to «appreciate the sophistication of the marketing for the films of Michael bay» or

whatever, their teachers should, in fact, be the ones opening up the doors to their students to help them develop a taste for things a little more sophisticated than the recent *Terminator* and *Star Trek* «re-imaginings.»

After all, the mainstream has more or less given up on youth – reducing the young to the demographic of «early consumers,» «lovers of paranormal romances» or anonymous «bums on seat.» This is another point well made by Atkinson in his «American Indie» article. He claims:

Entertainment technology in previous decades was a minor ingredient in the texture of our lives; when not watching or listening to our limited broadcast or theatrical options, we were taking part in the flow of humanity. Social intercourse defined us and our responsibilities to the world. Today we are consumers first, citizens second, and the castle of distraction we've built around ourselves is itself little more than a series of revenue systems devised to exploit us. We face it alone every day, slowly ceding to it control over our priorities and viewpoints.

Perhaps it is the film teacher's duty therefore to attempt to redress this obvious social failing by considering their students as individuals who will thrive better if fed something halfway decent - something which might help them grow strong and healthy: something which might actually be good for them intellectually.

If this is the case, then film teachers must be concerned with the cultural well-being of their charges for it is those teachers who will most effectively broaden the tastes of the next generation of film-goers to ensure that we never get to the stage where we are all fed with the same diet of populist but mind-numbing rot and that wonderful, eye-opening and intellectually challenging movies like *The New World*, *Inland Empire* and *Adventureland* continue to get made.

We live in (continued) hope.