

Did Hollywood become a cash cow business without anyone noticing?

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No industry has been more involved in shaping trends and informing the masses; nor has any industry been the topic of near constant conversation around the water cooler more than Hollywood. While we concentrate on the latest releases and the exploits of actors while indulging our inner critic, many fail to understand the fundamental changes that Hollywood has undergone in the last 50 years. For those who have an active interest in film and have spent hours in front of the silver screen, sometimes amazed, sometimes disappointed, but mainly just content, we find our choices have changed dramatically over this period. Where once each title had a promise and mystery of its own, now for the most part we are simply checking in with known characters to find out what happens next.

Ask film fans about their “golden era” of Hollywood and it is likely many will cite the 1970s. Many of the directors who went on to become household names were a group of film school graduates at this precise time, each eager to make their mark on the industry. It is hard to believe that so much talent emerged at the same time, however this young and hungry collective included the likes of Ford Coppola, Scorsese, Friedkin, Lucas and Spielberg.

This led to the era of independent films and the demise of the stodgy era of Hollywood production that had preceded it. For the next decade, cinema marquees would advertise *Easy Rider*, *The Godfather*, *Taxi Driver*, *The Exorcist*, *The French Connection* and *Raging Bull*, gritty slices of realism more in keeping with the society from which it drew inspiration. The cast of these landmark pieces were no longer golden voiced and picture perfect; many were even anti-heroes railing against the system and represented by a new type of star. Method acting became a recognised term and ushered in the likes of De Niro, Pacino, Nicholson and Hackman.

Despite *Easy Rider* (1969) often being cited as the initial independent film that paved the way for so many inspirational efforts, the seeds of the movement’s decline and a vision of the future appeared a mere six years later. Described as the most difficult film ever made, *Jaws*, released in 1975, would become famous for a great many reasons. The seventies had drawn heavily from existing pulp fiction of the time. When Mario Puzo’s novel, *The Godfather*, was initially suggested by Francis Ford Coppola as potential film material, the then studio executives considered the source to be lowbrow and beneath the themes brought to life by film. A couple of years, millions of dollars and an armful of Oscars certainly assuaged any such fears, and a young Steven Spielberg was handed the seminal book by Peter Benchley. The on-set difficulties that followed have become legendary; from a non-working shark, to bullied cast members and a previously unheard-of moving deadline that stretched beyond a year in total. Ultimately, Spielberg appeared in the editing suite, unsure of how much usable footage he had captured and whether any narrative could be found in the canister upon canister of film. It would be fair to assume that the director himself had no idea that within his footage was the material for the world’s first blockbuster.

The term “blockbuster” has a less than pleasant origin, initially used to describe the size of bombs dropped in World War 2. From horrific beginnings, it has evolved to denote great success both in terms of impact and revenue generation. Nowadays it is mostly used in connection with films, and rightly so. Before the blockbuster era, films did not tend to have universal distribution, but rather would appear at a single venue within an area, thus maximising choice. The arrival of *Jaws* changed this business philosophy, as the feature proved so popular that every single cinema outlet nationwide began to show it. Hardly surprising, considering it has remained in the top 10 grossing films of all time since its initial release over 40 years ago. It would become the template and the benchmark for big production films that were created to dominate summer audiences as strongly as they would dominate sales at the box office. Studios would now concentrate on the big budget popcorn blockbusters each year as their main source of income. Independent became art and mainly a concern around Oscar time with very little impact on a studio’s commercial success.

This era of the summer blockbuster hit achieved full momentum in the early eighties. It now seems impossible to describe a year passing without referencing one or two films that triggered the imagination of the many and became part of our cultural history.

Star Wars was an early demonstration of this new philosophy's potential and was followed by tales that have proudly taken their place amongst household names. Ghostbusters, Beverly Hills Cop, The Breakfast Club, Dirty Dancing, Back to the Future and Jurassic Park, whether destroying the Death Star or not leaving baby in the corner, we have done so together each summer since.

Star Wars showed the potential of film-related merchandise, and suddenly the characters and stories we loved spread from the screen to the printable surface of many of life's necessities and into the hands of children across the globe. Recently the value of intellectual property became all too clear as Disney paid over US\$4 billion for Lucasfilm and the rights to the Star Wars franchise. At first criticised for massively overspending on the acquisition, many now view the price tag as an absolute bargain as the full force of Disney breathes new life into the series across all its touchpoints. Many of the films mentioned above would go on to spawn sequels and in some instances disastrous prequels, but while many fans of Star Wars may see "A New Hope" under the stewardship of Disney, it speaks to a trend that has come to dominate our trips into a darkened theatre. Hollywood no longer seems to have the appetite to explore new material. As a business model, the accepted norm has become to save big budget, big names and big marketing for commercially safer properties.

The might of Disney, including Marvel comics and Star Wars, can now predict their upcoming releases years in advance. Even the daring directors who once ushered in a creative revolution find their modern-day counterparts in charge of existing characters and well-known story arcs. A cash cow business is often defined by a withdrawal of funds into new products while simply profiting from those that are already established. With this description in mind, it is important to recognise that no sequels appeared in the top twenty films in 1996. By 2006, seven of the top 20 grossing films of the year were sequels. In 2016, only six of the top twenty films can be considered new material. So far, in 2017, much of the hype was saved for the onscreen adaptation of Wonder Woman, a film which wrapped on the 9th May 2016 marking the 123rd birthday of its creator. Since then people have paid US\$786 million to catch up with the heroine who first appeared in 1941.