

Straight to video

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From a barrage of low budget action films to the infamous banned video nasties, this primer on the straight to VHS phenomenon represents a whole era of low budget filmmaking. Sometimes you get what you pay for, sometimes some of the biggest names had small budgets. Fashion, fads and trends might well come and go, but bad taste is timeless.

Success story 1: In 1978, using a group of friends and on a shoestring, John Carpenter produces the movie Halloween for \$300,000 – what Hollywood calls no money, even back then. It proceeds to earn 78 million, not counting the franchise and everything that follows.

Inspired by Success Story 1, Success Story 2. Sean Cunningham calls a friend and the instruction is: “Let’s Rip Off Halloween.” They take out an ad in Variety magazine – pretty much type only – black and white. Bold Title. Friday The 13th. The Line at the top: The Scariest Film Ever Made. That’s it. That’s what they had, that’s all they had, no script, no actors, nothing. That ad, that non-poster, raised them the money they needed to make the low budget horror. The rest is history. It spawned several sequels.

This is the rough and tumble world of independent filmmaking. It is easier than ever to make movies, and harder than ever to fund them. Six powerful American companies control most of the international film trade, and it is no longer possible to deliver straight to VHS or DVD – streaming has replaced all that.

There was money in VHS and DVD, however, more than in streaming. And so, the straight to video market, for a time, was an abundant feast of ideas, bad acting, worse stories, occasional excellence and truly tasteless bombs.

You can still find trash these days, its just not as well remunerated, so there’s far less originality. These days, even indie films are formulaic. Straight to video, for all its ills, launched some of the biggest names, most iconic stories and well-loved entertainment properties for an entire generation of movie buffs.

Within the straight to video domain, two phenomenon stick out as so culturally significant that the impact remains to this day– the low budget empire of Cannon Films, and the Video Nasties.

Cannon

If you watched movies in the eighties, you know Cannon Films. The company was actually around much longer, it was started in 1967 and closed finally in 1994. It’s golden age was no doubt under the combined leadership of Menahem Golan and Yoram Globus between 1979 and 1989.

They essentially took Sean Cunningham’s trick and turned it into a conveyor belt of movies. Selling to distributors at film markets on the strength of posters and then churning out flick after flick with money raised on pre-sales.

While this low budget method was responsible both for movies that were bad, and movies that were so bad they were good, quite a few serious franchises and stars made their bones with Cannon.

Take Jean Claude van Damme. Bloodsport, Kickboxer, Cyborg – he would not have had a career had it not been for his formative appearances in Canon martial arts films. American Ninja spawned several sequels, some made in South Africa by South African director Cedric Sundstrom. Dolph Lundgren got his start in Masters of the Universe, a Cannon film based on the Mattel toy and cartoon range. Sho Kosugi, of Ninja III, Black Eagle and Pray For Death fame, also started here. Western martial arts movies would not have existed had it not been for Cannon.

Chuck Norris saw most of his career play out on a Cannon set – Missing in Action, Invasion USA, Delta Force, and many of the other greats.

Sly Stallone might have entered the scene with Rocky, but his career included Cobra and Over The Top, two Cannon films. And let's not forget the phenomenon that was Charles Bronson. Bronson's dry acting somehow managed to – at one point – make him the highest paid actor in Hollywood – with gems like Death Wish (1 through 5), Messenger of Death, Murphy's Law and 10 To Midnight.

Breakin' and Breakin'2 did as much for breakdancing as the Lambada films did for, well, Lambada. They also had a film called Rappin', about, well, rapping.

Highlander, with Christopher Lambert and Sean Connery, continues to have a cult following and spin offs to this day. If you're an adult that remembers watching and loving movies as a kid, chances are you have at least a few Canons among your secret and guilty pleasures.

Now deservedly disgraced, Harvey Weinstein's transformative role in film should not be forgotten. Several prominent talents got their start under his company – and he funded several features the big studios would touch.

Weinstein essentially copied the Cannon model - adding quality but keeping the independence. Directors like Tarantino simply would not have been as well known without his influence.

Cannon, then, as decried as they were, had an impact and lasting influence not just on audiences but on the entire industry.

The Video Nasties

Like all new technology, VHS disrupted society, and the law had to catch up.

In the 1980s Britain was in turmoil. Unemployment was high, society was rapidly changing, things were uncertain and tough. Films on the cinema were regulated and censored – but the industry saw VHS as a publishing medium and therefore not subject to the rules followed by theatrical releases. VHS was lucrative, so many people opened up video stores. Making movies was lucrative, so several independent producers began catering for audiences with tastes wilder than anything the big players of cinema would tolerate.

During that decade, the UK had more video recorder and player appliances per capita than anywhere else in the world. People opened them after they lost their jobs, and people were renting in record numbers.

The result was that a fully fledged independent film industry grew up in the shadow of Hollywood. The thing is: people liked horrors. And bad horror too. The scarier, wilder, wackier, the better.

Titles began to flood into the country:

I Spit On Your Grave. Last House on the Left. The Driller Killer. Zombie Flesheaters. Eaten Alive. Night Of The Demon. Cannibal Holocaust.

Most of the titles overdid things, and the poster and marketing campaigns tried to outdo each other.

At the Cinema, the best audiences could hope for was some timid Christopher Lee or Vincent Price stuff. But at home, you could watch hitherto unavailable trash. And people loved it.

They continued to love it.

Hollywood only woke up when *Evil Dead* became a 2 million pound property. The hit was so big that the studios took notice.

The infamous Video Nasties were born.

Mary Whitehouse formed the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association in 1963 to clean up what she, and 30,000 others, saw as filth on television. In the 1980s, she pivoted and crusaded against the new scourge – the video nasties.

The Daily Mail, the Sun, the Telegraph – all ran long salacious stories detailing the plots and gory details of the video nasties, warning everyone not to subject themselves to the salacious and gory plots they wrote about.

The Thatcher government got behind the campaign – and the Obscene Publications Branch of the Police began to crack down on video stores and video store owners.

These video nasties were obviously in bad taste and a danger to society, but specifically, it was alleged, posed a threat to children.

The diligent members confiscated *Apocalypse Now*, by mistake. Some were fined. Some people were sent to prison. It was a kind of moral McCarthyism.

With the advent of the internet, and mounting challenges to the idea that films – even violent and tasteless films – are detrimental to society – the power of the crusade against the video nasties were pretty much broken. Some titles remain on the list to this day, but it can be bought on the internet and watched via streaming.

Some of the titles banned were remade. Some inspired long careers – by some big name directors.

Low budget horror movies are the nurturing ground of great directors. Sam Raimi, James Cameron and many other names began their careers making nasty movies. And many nasty movies are now very nice and well-respected properties. *Aliens*. *The Terminator*. All of these were once low budget horror flicks.

The Future

In a world of streaming, no less rabid and incessant moral outrage (although, it would seem, from the other end of the political spectrum as much as the traditional one) – will anyone think back as fondly on our own era?

It seems to be that each era thinks of itself as completely revolutionary, when really it is just more of the same. In many ways this is true of our own age. Video on Demand (VOD) is all the rage and brand new, it is the streaming we all now have several dozen subscriptions to.

The latest innovation? AVOD – Advertising Funded Video On Demand. The viewers watch free and ads play. That is the cutting edge, and we used to call that television in the 1950s. The only thing is whoever is in charge of programming lost the skill of cutting with some elegance between the stories and the ads.

But the economics of streaming has changed how movies are made, and who can afford to make them.

Part of what the Hollywood strikes are about involve how platforms don't pay out royalties like DVDs and VHS once did. Some make movies straight for streaming, but often the platforms have a tight grip on the kind of things they want to show. This all allegedly leads to higher quality – but I wonder.

I think entertainment eras might well be defined by the quality of their trash – and there are no Cannons, and no Sadistic Gory Killers From The Depths of Depravity - not anymore. It's all rather vanilla and monotone.

It's also ultimately unsustainable.

People want to see things that push boundaries – and somewhere, somehow, someone will address that need. The studios may have too much faith in their own incumbent power. And the moral guardians of civilization may feel virtuous for their efforts, if ineffective.

But if nothing else, what the world might well need right now is an explosion of the most tasteless deluge of unsophisticated and banal trash.

Because with enough of that, sometimes, creativity peaks out.

And that is worth a few laughs, a few screams and a few heart pounding moments of exhilaration.