Minor Variations in the Blockbuster Formula

By

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Perhaps no advancement changed the face of U.S. cinema since the addition of sound than the advent of the Hollywood blockbuster. The canons set forth by the blockbuster changed the way films are made aesthetically as well as how studios produce them. The Hollywood blockbuster as we know it today ushered in a rebirth of sorts for the studios, creating a "New Hollywood" that allowed major studios to flourish. Despite a methodical blockbuster syndrome typically used by studios, there are other ways to craft the Hollywood blockbuster that include independently financed and produced films that succeed both critically and financially.

The blockbuster was borne out of necessity as much as it was creativity. By the 1970s, gone were the guaranteed audiences that flocked to see mass produced films in the "classical" cinema age of the 1920s through the 1940s (Schatz 287). The arrival of television in the 1950s gave studios unparalleled competition, saturating the market with new programming paired with the convenience of watching from home. However it wasn't just television, as Thomas Schatz argues in his article *The New Hollywood*, which led to the decline of U.S. cinema after the classical era. He argues that it came in decade-long phases where developments both inside and outside of the film industry contributed to the decline in cinema audiences. He specifies these phases as the shift to independent film production, the changing role of studios, the emergence of television, and changes in the way audiences consume mass media (288). This combination saw studio profits drop from an average of $64 million between 1964 and 1968 to a paltry $13 million from 1969 to 1973 (Schatz 291). Though studios were hurting financially, the cinema

landscape was ripe for a change. The biggest change wasn't necessarily in how Hollywood made their films but rather in how they would be packaged and sold to audiences.

Though the "New Hollywood" period of the 1970s marks the arrival of the blockbuster era, the elements of the type of film were already in place. Schatz points out that Hollywood has been hit-driven since its postwar transformation and uses the 1946 film *Duel in the Sun* as a prototype for blockbusters to come. The film featured well known stars, a big budget, extensive narrative and high production values. Without using the term "blockbuster" producer David O. Selznick defined *Duel in the Sun* as "an exercise in making a big-grossing film" and a "tremendous milestone in motion picture merchandising and exhibition" (289). Ironically it would be the early Hollywood blockbusters that would almost be its undoing. The 1965 commercial hits *The Sound of Music* and *Dr. Zhivago* led to a series of expensive and commercially unsuccessful films. The films costs studios millions and put many studios near financial ruin (Schatz 290). Hollywood, it seems, was ahead of its time and needed the rest of the media and entertainment industries to catch up. Once they did the modern blockbuster as we know it today emerged as "entertainment machines that breed music videos and soundtrack albums, TV series and videocassettes, video games and theme park rides, novelizations and comic books" (Schatz 288).

Schatz identifies the rules that govern the blockbuster formula as star vehicles with strong production value, a risk/reward factor that includes costly marketing campaigns and the potential of building off prior film hits or other successful forms of media, simple characters and plot that can be easily turned into franchises, and a strategic theatrical release that can creates a "cultural commodity" in combination with other media forms released with the film such as video games or soundtracks (299). The culmination of these ingredients creates more than a film but a

cinematic spectacle. The film was no longer the main attraction but rather the core of a larger package being offered to audiences by Hollywood and its partners. Using the 1977 film *The Deep*, based on author Peter Benchley's follow up to *Jaws*, Jesse Algeron Rhines examined the research that went in to promoting the film, a key element of the blockbuster formula.

It took producer Peter Gruber nearly two years to design the marketing plan for The Deep. Hardcover and paperback books were released in succession. Magazine articles and excerpts followed the release of the books. The production of the film was an event in itself, with constant publicity that included a Bermuda junket. Just days before the debut of the film, Gruber released 124,000 copies of a book titled *Inside "The Deep"* which featured gossip and behind-the-scenes information. The film's release was planned for June 17, 1977, strategically chosen after the common payday of the middle of the month. The wash of promotion was expected to have hit potential filmgoers at least fifteen times in some type of fashion, be it print, television or other media exposure (326). The film was almost an afterthought and its success, Rhines points out, was based on the way Guber sold it. Perhaps no film better illustrates this than Tim Burton's 1989 film *Batman*.

It is safe to call Warner Bros. production of *Batman* a gamble. At the time, comic book films were a rarity. Warner Bros. had success in the late 1970s and into the 1980s with the *Superman* franchise, but Jason Bailey of *Flavorwire* notes the series' popularity was waning and heavily geared towards children. Burton's version was inspired more by the comic books than the 1960's *Batman* television series. It would be dark, provocative, and for Warner Bros., daring. In his essay and interview with Tim Burton, Mark Salisbury details how the back lot of Pinewood Studios in England was turned into a Gotham City described in screenwriter Sam Hamm's script as "if Hell had sprung up through the pavements and kept going" (Batman, 309).

It is branding, Bailey argues, that makes *Batman* so influential, creating a playbook that film producers would continue to duplicate. An expensive, stylish marketing campaign promoting the big budget, multi-genre action film featuring a reimagined Batman darker than what audiences had ever seen resulted in not only box office success but success in other entertainment and media arena as well. With the bat logo everywhere from t-shirts to cereal boxes in the months leading up to the film, much of the $750 million in merchandising sales came before the film even opened (Bailey). The sales were thanks in part to an innovative campaign by producers Jon Peters and Peter Gruber that helped define the *Batman* brand before the film's release. Forbes defined *Batman* as a front-loaded blockbuster, a "machine of anticipation, hype, and preordained success" that included "…cross-promotional marketing saturation" unlike the industry had ever seen." Materials included a *Bat Dance* music video by Prince, toys, fast food tie-ins and an unrefined theatrical teaser trailer six months prior to the film's release that fans reportedly paid full admittance to see only to leave as the respective movie started.

The gamble for Warner Bros. paid off. Upon its release on June 21, *Batman* became the first U.S. film to break $100 million in its first week. It was the highest grossing film of 1989 with a world-wide total of more than $500 million (Salisbury 311). More than that, it became a cultural phenomenon, spawning sequels, soundtracks, merchandise, food and beverage tie-ins and theme park rides. It took the blockbuster formula to a new level, developing a pre-film brand and creating unrivaled anticipation months before its debut. The *New York Observer's* David Handelman went as far as to call *Batman* "less movie than a corporate behemoth" (Bailey). It is a behemoth that continues to be profitable. In the fall of 2014 a 25th anniversary edition Blu-ray of Burton's *Batman* will be released by Warner Bros. Home Entertainment.

Praise could be given, however, to the 1964 James Bond film *Goldfinger* as possibly the father of the blockbuster. *Goldfinger* wasn't the first film featuring Bond, as 1962's *Dr. No* and 1963's *From Russia with Love* marked the first two installments of the franchise. It was the success of the first two films that allowed producers Albert "Cubby" Broccoli and Harry Saltzman to "create the biggest Bond yet" (Caplen 121). The pair consciously created a brand Americans would respond to, with narrative locations in Miami and Ft. Worth, Kentucky, and a plot that included an anti-American conspiracy (Caplen 122). In *Shaken & Stirred: The Feminism of James Bond* Robert Caplen notes, "The film was so popular that many theaters stayed open twenty-four hours a day to accommodate the crowds." The following year *Time* magazine called the film's box office sales "astonishing" (122). More important than the $23 million box office haul was the establishment of the James Bond franchise. One year later the next Bond film, *Thunderball*, eclipsed the box office sales of *Goldfinger* on its way to becoming the highest grossing film of 1966 (Caplen 122).

The film's marketing campaign heavily featured the women of *Goldfinger*. One television advertising campaign described the film as a mixture of, "business with girls and thrills, girls and fun, girls and danger." Prior to the film's release, a film critic noted Shirley Eaton's iconic golden girl character Jill Masterson stating, "You must have seen by now…the girl painted from head to toe in gold" (Caplen 122). Much like modern blockbusters *Goldfinger* featured a title song by Shirley Bassey that reached number one on the charts within two months of the release of the film's soundtrack (Caplen 124). *Huffington Post* writer William Bradley sees *Goldfinger* as trendsetting in the way it features fast-paced action, violence, use of high-tech gadgets, and fast, stylish cars such as the Aston Martin and newly-introduced Ford Mustang. Bradley also points to merchandising that goes beyond the film's soundtrack to include toy guns

and radios, clothes, luggage and book tie-ins. He argues that by today's standards *Goldfinger* was a bigger international success than *The Dark Knight*, and considering the record of the successive Bond films it is fair to consider *Goldfinger* one of the earliest examples of the blockbuster.

In 1989 independent film distributor Miramax gave filmmakers a new avenue by replicating the blockbuster formula on a smaller scale. The beacon of this new cinema movement was Steven Soderbergh's s*ex, lies and video tape*. With a budget of just over $1 million, the film grossed $24 million at the box office. Within ten years of *sex, lies and video tape* several major studios ran specialty divisions focused on smaller, "indie blockbusters" that included Universal Focus, Paramount Classics and Fox Searchlight (Perren 315). Despite the small budgets and independent nature of the films, Miramax and others that followed succeeded by using exploitation marketing tactics to sell their productions.

It was Spike Lee, however, that defied the odds by producing a successful independent, anti-establishment film. While the studio subsidiaries were producing small-budget films with round characters and rich narratives, Lee eschewed any notion of a safe, formulaic plot in favor of a topical and controversial subject matter in 1989s *Do the Right Thing*. He brings an element of realism not typically scene in the hyperbolic blockbuster or, perhaps, even surpassing the "indie blockbuster." Marlaine Glicksman describes Lee's films as diverse in the way they approach black issues, looking at both sides of the coin with a style that is both audacious and arrogant (341).

The film takes a stylistic approach to the contentious topic of racial tension and riots in a poor New York neighborhood. Rather than the sprawling narrative used in the blockbuster

formula, Lee's characters in *Do the Right Thing* never deviate from a one-block area of the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood. Despite the closed framing, the characters are complex and the issues of racism, poverty, family, abuse of power are examined from different points of view. In discussing the film with Glicksman, Lee said Hollywood would have likely pitted black activist Buggin' Out (Giancarlo Esposito) against the openly racist Pino (John Turturro) rather than the most sympathetic white character, Sal (Danny Aiello), against unsympathetic blacks. Lee challenges the audience in saying, "Pino didn't pick up that stuff out of the air. Some of it had to have been taught to him by his father, Sal" (343).

In the essay *We've Gotta Have It – Spike Lee, African American Film, and Cinema Studies*, Paula Massood defines Lee as a rouge filmmaker, "the quintessential inside/outside man" working both with and against the film industry. *Indiewire's* Jessica Kiang maps out the rough terrain Lee had to navigate in order to stay true to his original vision, first leaving Columbia after a regime change, then losing Paramount due to the studio asking to change the ending, and finally agreeing with Universal for less money but full artistic freedom. The result was critical acclaim, two Academy Award nominations and a spot on the American Film Institute's top 100 film list in 2007.

Do the Right Thing does share a few similarities with the modern blockbuster. Music plays a large role in the film, and the accompanying soundtrack reached number eleven on the R&B Albums chart and number sixty-eight on the Billboard Top 200 chart. The film's popularity also spawned a fashion trend, as Douglas Kellner alludes to in *Spike Lee's Do the Right Thing*, with Lee designing his own clothing line and opening a fashion store in Brooklyn (80). Because of the buzz surrounding the film, with *Newsweek* declaring, "This movie is dynamite under every seat" *Do the Right Thing* became an event. Despite these parallels the film has distanced itself

from the typical blockbuster and in some ways the "indie blockbusters" in challenging the studios, audiences, and scholars.

The blockbuster formula conceived in the 1950s and crafted to perfection in with Tim Burton's *Batman* is still very much in play today. One needs to look no further than Michael Bay's *Transformer* franchise for the proof. The big budget, multi-genre, special effects-laden action films based on Hasbro toys continue their unparalleled success at the box office. In the U.S. alone since 2007 the four films have grossed more than $377 million dollars. In China, the world's second-largest film market behind the U.S., the most recent *Transformers* installment, *Age of Extinction*, topped *Avatar* as the highest grossing film of all time with more than $300 million (Langfitt). Factor in millions more in merchandising tie-ins and you have a franchise that might just make Batman blush. Although studios continue to adhere to the safest, most profitable formula when creating a blockbuster, occasionally one might transcend studio sensibilities like *Do the Right Thing*, well outpace their budget as did *sex, lies and video tape*, or arrive ahead of their time like *Goldfinger*.

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