



LESSON PLAN

Level: Grades 11-12
About the Author: Created by Carol Wells as part of a Media Education course taught by John Pungente at the Faculty of Education, University of Toronto, 1993

The Blockbuster Movie

Overview

This lesson introduces students to the phenomenon of the “blockbuster” movie – its history, characteristics and influences. Students will also explore the role of audience in the creation of a “blockbuster” and analyze their own responses to current blockbuster films. Students will learn about the process involved in turning a film into a blockbuster by devising promotional campaigns for an imaginary movie.

Learning Outcomes

Students will:

- understand the term "blockbuster movie" and its characteristics
- understand the social and political factors that contribute to this genre
- analyze their own responses to blockbuster films
- discuss the concept of audience with respect to the film/text
- consider the blockbuster as "event" encompassing many elements, and recognize it as a construction
- understand the steps involved in creating a blockbuster film

Preparation and Materials

Background reading for this lesson can be found in:

- Carpenter, Donna. *Media Images and Issues*. Toronto: Addison-Wesley, 1989.
- Photocopy the following handouts:
 - *Hollywood Since 1975*
 - *Responses to "Hollywood Since 1975"*
 - *Movie Questionnaire*
- Ask students to collect:
 - Clippings from newspapers or magazines about films that the class will be discussing
 - Promotional materials for featured films



Procedure

Day 1: Introduction

- Define the term "blockbuster" (*a film that is well-known and a big moneymaker*).
- Identify the common characteristics of blockbuster films. For example: a 'hot' star, topic, special effects; a well-timed release date (*i.e: summer or Christmas*); accompanying promotional merchandise – appealing to several demographic groups.
- Distribute *Hollywood Since 1975* and have students read this background document.
- Choose one or more of the questions from the *Responses to "Hollywood Since 1975"* question sheet and assign them to students. (This might be done individually or as groups.)
- Once students have completed their questions, take up the answers as a class.

Days 2 and 3: Exploration of a Chosen Film

- Have each student select a recent film and complete the *Movie Questionnaire* handout.
- Once completed, discuss the results of the questionnaires.
- Examine the multi-faceted promotion:
 - advertising for the film itself (TV, radio, newspaper, Internet)
 - film-related merchandise
 - any other promotional tie-ins (special meals at McDonald's, etc.)
- Ask students to consider the following questions: Did the promotion make you like the movie more? Less? Did it make you want to see the movie sooner or more often?
- As a group, discuss the following quote from Pauline Kael in *The New Yorker*:
In general, it can be said that the public no longer discovers movies, the public no longer makes a picture a hit. If the advertising for a movie doesn't build up an overwhelming desire to be part of the event, people just don't go. They don't listen to their own instincts, they don't listen to the critics – they listen to the advertising.
 Then, ask students to write a personal response to this observation in their logs.
- Consider the issue of audience with respect to the latest blockbuster.
 - After seeing it, for whom do you think it is appropriate?
 - Who does the advertising target?
- If the film was adapted from a book or pre-existing TV series, ask students to consider:
 - What changes were made?
 - Why do you think these changes were made?
 - In your opinion, are they successful?

Day 4: Wrap-Up and Group Assignment

- Reviewing class discussions, summarize how "the total experience" of a blockbuster film is constructed.



- Discuss how certain movies – or even lines of dialogue – have become cultural reference points or "household words."
- Explain the expression "sleeper hit." What does this say about the film industry?
- Based on the promotions they've seen, have students write a short paragraph naming a movie they predict will be a blockbuster and giving reasons for their predictions. (These could be kept until the end of the year and reviewed.)

Activity

- Create a proposal for an imaginary movie that you think will have the best possible chance to be a blockbuster.
- Consider current trends, popular stars, audience appeal, etc.
- Once you have come up with your pitch, design the promotional campaign you would use to sell the movie to the public.

Note: This assignment is very flexible. Depending on the level of the class, it could be a written piece or oral assignment, or a combination of the two. The artistic criteria for the promotional material could vary. It could also be developed into a role-play scenario where competing groups vie for a "studio executive" group's approval. This group would then choose one of the proposals and justify their choice to the rest of the class.

Recommended reading, viewing, surfing

- Top 100 All Time Highest Grossing Movies http://movieweb.com/movies/box_office/alltime.php



Hollywood Since 1975: Some Fast Cuts

The decade between 1975 and 1985 was a very important one in American film history. It was a decade of blockbuster hits and major publicity campaigns, of new technologies and special effects – all of which attracted huge audiences. In the mid-’70s, previous trends such as “the buddy film,” “the vigilante film,” and “the disaster film,” began to disappear. In their place came slapstick comedies, space operas, slasher films, remakes, and youth films.

Steven Spielberg’s *Jaws* (1975) is an example of the new kind of filmmaking that emerged during this time. Unlike the previous disaster films, *Jaws* was optimistic. It featured a man who was able to defeat not only a deadly shark but also the local immoral politicians. Fuelled by a massive publicity campaign (that was so convincing that some people imagined they saw sharks in the water near their summer cottages), the film became the fourth biggest box office success in film history at that time. (*Jaws* still ranks quite highly, at number 16 of the top 50 highest grossing movies.) Spielberg was among the new young filmmakers dubbed “the movie brats.” He, Martin Scorsese (*Taxi Driver*, 1976), Brian de Palma (*Carrie*, 1977) Francis Ford Coppola (*The Godfather*, 1971), had all grown up on a steady diet of the classic films of the ‘40s and ‘50s. Realizing that the age of classic cinema was over, many of these filmmakers worked playfully with cinematic styles by including in their works reference to old plots, reworking traditional film genres or, as in the case of Mel Brooks (*Young Frankenstein*, 1975) using the genre for comic send-ups or parodies. Eventually, some filmmakers simply recycled material from the past, in films like *Superman* (1978), *Popeye* (1980), and *Tarzan* (1984).

Trends in film are often closely related to trends in television. In 1975, ABC (the American Broadcasting Corporation) commissioned a survey that indicated viewers wanted a return to traditional values. On television, the heavy-action police shows (*Cannon*, *Kojak*, *Police Story*) were shelved, and the family hour took their place; sitcoms and superheroes became popular. Among the ten top-rated programs, the shows of producer Norman Lear ranked high (*All in the Family*, *Maude*, *The Jeffersons*). Characterized by a frank treatment of contemporary social issues – from racial prejudice to abortion – Lear’s success has not been equaled since. The social commentary of Norman Lear was soon replaced in 1977, by programs such as *Happy Days*, *Laverne and Shirley* (both influenced by the film *American Graffiti*) *Charlie’s Angels*, *Three’s Company*, and *The Love Boat*.

Sylvester Stallone as *Rocky* (1976) presented a new kind of film hero – a hero of the working class. Stallone, who declared that movies were about making the audience feel good about itself, presented film-goers with the image of realizing the impossible dream.

In 1977, George Lucas’ *Star Wars* became a mega-hit – the biggest box office hit up to that time (and still the number two top-grossing film of all time). Lucas showed Hollywood how to borrow from many elements, both current and traditional: westerns, war films, fairy tales, cartoons, myth, science-fiction films, and classics such as *The Wizard of Oz*. *Star Wars*, with its militaristic themes and space age technology was also a universal story about the quest of its hero (Luke Skywalker) for self-knowledge. Spielberg, also in 1977 released *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, which combined the science-fiction elements of *Star Wars* and the “feeling strong” mood of *Rocky*. And in 1982 came the gigantic box office hit *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial*. (Presently the fourth top-grossing film of all time, the re-release of this film in 2002 will most likely increase its standings.)

Saturday Night Fever (1977), starring John Travolta as the street-smart dance-wise hero, began another major trend. With disco all the rage, and a sound track album as a publicity boost, the film anticipated the success of later dance-musical films – *Grease* (1978), *Fame* (1980), *Flashdance* (1983), *Purple Rain* (1986), and *Dirty Dancing* (1987). With



more and more young people making up the film-going audience (60 percent attending movies were under 25), a huge youth market opened up. In 1978, *Saturday Night Fever* was followed by two films pitched to a young audience: *Grease* and *Animal House*. These films preceded both the exploitative but commercially successful films for young audiences such as *Porky's* (1982) and the more realistic teen portrayals found in the work of filmmaker John Hughes – *Breakfast Club* (1985), and *Pretty in Pink* (1986).

Comedy has often resulted in a box office bonanza. In 1980, half of the top ten money-making films were comedies: *The Jerk*, *Airplane!*, *Smokey and the Bandit II*, *Private Benjamin*, and *The Blues Brothers*.

Ghostbusters (1984), the highest-grossing comedy of its day, was a sign of the times – it was suited to the Ronald Reagan-dominated American attitudes, which embraced big business and social conservatism. Under this influence, films with the hero acting as a one-person army who “settles the score” on behalf of America appeared: *The Terminator* (1984), *Invasion USA* (1985), *Missing in Action* (1984), and *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985). Hollywood was also beginning to examine the meaning of Americans’ experience in the Vietnam War and audiences were confronted with the moral and political dilemmas surrounding it: *Coming Home* (1978), *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979). The theme continued with *Platoon* (1987) and *Good Morning Vietnam* (1987).

In the late ‘70s and early ‘80s, a number of horror films appeared. Some of them were anti-feminist slasher films – *Halloween* (1978), *Friday the 13th* (1980), *Prom Night* (1979) – but others such as *Alien* (1979), Spielberg’s *Poltergeist* (1982) and *Gremlins* (1985) had many redeeming qualities in terms of theme and artistic impression.

The films described here are only the films of the big Hollywood studios. But there has been ample proof that independent filmmakers can make it on their own. Films such as *Reds* (1981), *Return of the Secaucus Seven* (1980), *Norma Rae* (1979), and *Under Fire* (1983) are examples.

What has remained constant in many American films since the mid-‘70s is their selfreflexiveness, or the self-conscious tendency to refer to other films – their styles, dialogue, settings, and twists in plot. For a generation of filmmakers raised on television, also a self-reflexive medium, this trend was probably inevitable. Equally predictable is the recycling or exploitation of popular culture trends. For example, the police shows that were shelved in the mid-‘70s reappeared in new forms in the mid-‘80s, e.g., *Hill Street Blues* and *Miami Vice*.

The film industry is currently experiencing major challenges from several sources:

- Shifting demographics in audience groups. (For example, the youth audience declined during the early 90’s, forcing filmmakers to look for material to satisfy the need of more mature audiences. Now the youth audience is rising once again, shifting the filmmakers’ focus once again on new materials.)
- There have been huge business mergers among the big studios, often affecting the creative and economic climate necessary for good films.
- With the rise of the VCR and now, DVD’s, people are buying or renting movies, and even recording films from network television or from pay television.
- Pay television is now producing its own films and competing with films shown in theatres or rented in video stores. All of these factors have led to more fragmented audiences and to a decentralized movie industry. How well the movie industry copes will define the role of movies in the popular culture of the 1990s.

Adapted from “Ten Years That Shook the World” By Jim Hoberman, *American Film*. 1985. In Barry Duncan (ed.), *Mass Media and Popular Culture*. Toronto: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Canada Inc. 1988. pp. 157-160.



Responses to "Hollywood Since 1975: Some Fast Cuts"

1. Identify some other trends in Hollywood movies since 1985. Predict the trends you believe will occur in the next few years. What current trends may come to an end? Discuss which trends, both past and present, you like and dislike, and why.
2. What are some of the connections between the trends in television and the trends in films? In groups, research the TV shows that were popular during a particular year or two and compare them with the films that appeared in the same years. Each group could study a different year or two years.
3. *Star Wars*, *Jaws*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial*, and *Ghostbusters* were all block-buster hits. What was the basis of their appeal? What other films or TV shows have these films inspired? What other major films in recent years have inspired sequels or served as a catalyst for new trends?
4. As outlined in the concluding paragraph, the film industry is facing several important challenges. Research one or more of these challenges and present a report to the class.
5. The "Star Wars" defense systems or Clint Eastwood's famous expression in his *Dirty Harry* movies, "Go ahead. Make my day," are examples of how our language and thought has been influenced by the movies. Discuss the idea that movies have assumed a role as a metaphor for our culture, using examples from as many popular films as possible.
6. From *Casablanca* (1942) to *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1971), audiences have shown strong loyalty to certain films which are given extended runs, and are often seen several times by their adoring fans. By choosing one or more examples, research the phenomenon of cult films.
7. Do a study of some films from a non-North American country. Or, choose a non-North American film currently available in videocassette and write a review of it to present to the class. Discuss what you like and dislike about foreign films. What are the advantages of seeing films from other countries?
8. Describe the rise of Cineplex and the resulting changes to film distribution.
9. Discuss the phenomenon as a contributing factor in the rise of the blockbuster.

Adapted from Barry Duncan (ed.), *Mass Media and Popular Culture*. Toronto: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Canada Inc. 1988. p. 161.



