

**THE EVOLUTION OF THE BLOCKBUSTER FILM BUSINESS MODEL DURING  
THE NEW HOLLYWOOD PERIOD: A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION OF FIVE  
CASE STUDIES, 1966-1985.**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the New Hollywood period from 1966 to 1985. Five representative blockbuster films are examined in detail: *The Godfather*, *Jaws*, *Star Wars*, *Grease* and *Back to the Future*. These are studied as a means to investigate the evolution of the blockbuster business model throughout this period from the perspective of entrepreneurial decision making, and the extent they innovated various factors, marking the success of blockbuster films, that became replicable. The thesis offers a qualitative study from the historical perspective situating the New Hollywood Era between the Studio Era and the subsequent rise of the Franchise Blockbuster Era.

The case studies share many defining markers that are central to the development of blockbuster films. The markers are examined in a cluster analysis to assess the validating range of their role in the blockbuster business model. This thesis contends that there are proxy markers of blockbuster films that add research value to understanding the entrepreneurial evolution of the blockbuster business model and its appeal to studio executive management. These markers are: scale of production budget, saturation booking of theatres, scope of advertising campaign, visual effects, audience research, source of adaptation or original creative material, extent of roles and control in business and artistic domains, use of star talent, film reviews, impact on stock price value and annual financial reports, as well as markers of narrative development. The extent to which these markers are present best defines the blockbuster film.

The markers constitute a valuable guide for minimizing and controlling the risks of investments in development, production and marketing. They also signal how studios might position a film for a successful release where revenue streams extend beyond the initial box office release phase. Contrary to a widely popular belief that the industry does not know enough to effectively predict and secure box office success, this thesis outlines a clear, cogent model of intersecting

markers that reinforce a viable blockbuster business model attuned to long-term capital profitability.

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## **Author Profile**

Educated at the universities of Heidelberg, Cambridge and the ESCP business school in Paris, the author is fluent in four languages. After taking a degree in economics and politics, he was offered a place to research towards a PhD at Wadham College, Oxford but was lured away by an offer of a job with producer Ismail Merchant on *Maurice*, starring Hugh Grant. The positive outcome to this thesis signifies the closure of a thirty-year quest to remedy that decision.

Alexander subsequently attended the London International Film School and recruited Derek Jarman to help him with his award winning short, which also featured Nigel Terry. After moving to Los Angeles, he was trained as a story analyst in the M.G.M story department and worked as an analyst for Sally Field, Dick Clark and many others.

Subsequently he became a Gray/Goodman agent and later founded Fortis Entertainment, a management company, and discovered Andrew Niccol who wrote and produced *The Truman Show* (Academy nominated for best screenplay) and directed *Gattaca*, *Simone*, *Lord of War* etc. He also discovered the screenwriter Iris Yamashita, who received an Academy nomination for the Clint Eastwood film *Letters from Iwo Jima*. After more than 5304 pitch meetings, mainly with studio heads, the author sold Fortis Entertainment to Sandra Bullock and taught at various universities, film school and colleges in the UK & US.

His interest in fostering new writing talent led to him being asked to become a consultant to the National Academy of Writing of Great Britain. In 1999 he founded [www.WriteMovies.com](http://www.WriteMovies.com) which has become an significant entry point to the industry for new talent in the US, UK, France and Germany. In 2004 his

company started an internship program enabling British students to spend eight weeks working in the Los Angeles film industry.

In addition to having been interviewed on prime-time network T.V. by Dateline N.B.C, his career has been covered by: The Hollywood Reporter, Daily Variety, The Los Angeles Times, The New Yorker, Reuters, Newsday, The London Times, Daily Mail, The Guardian and others. The author became a member of the British Film Academy (BAFTA) in 2004. He produced the romantic comedy *The List* starring Wayne Brady, Sydney Poitier, Brad Dourif, Illeana Douglas and Jane Lynch. The movie was acquired by Warner Bros.

He was appointed an expert analyst to the EU's: Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency MEDIA Program in 2016 and is continuing in that position. The author is an Associate Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (AFHEA) and has had two visiting lecturer contracts in the UK, the last one with Westminster University for three years.

## **Publications**

Ross, Alexander G. "The Confidential Studio Manual, Iowa: Fidler-Doubleday (2007).

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The author contributed a chapter to the new anthology on *Grease*. (Ed. Peter Krämer and Oliver Gruner). The book is called '*Grease is the Word*': *Exploring a Cultural Phenomenon*. It was published by Anthem Press in December 2019.

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## **“Nobody knows anything.” – William Goldman, 1983**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This thesis examines the New Hollywood period between 1966 and 1985, a time when audiences were increasingly being drawn to television, and studios were struggling to tap into the period’s complex zeitgeist. Hollywood films such as *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, 1967), *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967), *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969), *Midnight Cowboy* (John Schlesinger, 1969), and *Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid* (George Roy Hill, 1969) did not generate sufficient box office revenue to cover the studios’ overhead costs.<sup>1</sup> The economic recession in the early 1970s compounded the studios’ concerns about their viability while films such as *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972) and *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975) signalled a potential solution. For filmmakers and studio executives, the challenge became testing whether or not the blockbuster success of these films was a unique occurrence, and if they offered the industry a model from which they could replicate these markers to success.

Academy Award winning industry screenwriter William Goldman<sup>2</sup> opens his 1983 autobiographical account with the simple declaration that “nobody knows anything.” This inferred there is little divergence between investing in motion pictures<sup>3</sup> and gambling in Las Vegas. Goldman’s declaration, which could be challenged by his never having worked as a producer, director or studio executive on any film, has been accepted as a legitimate testable proposition. For example, a 2005 study (Walls, 2005, pp. 177-190) examining the prospect of modelling a film’s success based on conditional stable-distribution analysis of film returns appears to affirm Goldman’s aphorism, with a significant clarification by Caves. This became ‘the *nobody knows principle*’:

That is, producers and executives know a great deal about what has succeeded commercially in the past and constantly seek to extrapolate that knowledge to new projects. But their ability to predict at an early stage the commercial success of a new film project is almost non-existent. (Caves, 2000, p. 371).

However, the question remains if Caves intended to make the point regarding the ability to predict box office revenue after film production has been completed and when it is about to be released, or at the development stage, when studios decide how to package a project by selecting those markers which will mitigate financial risk and maximize revenue.

An extensive body of academic writing<sup>4</sup> has focused on validating the Goldman aphorism. If the film business is such a high risk, loss-making game of chance, why has Wall Street tolerated this behaviour for so long, and continued to reward the shareholders of these media companies? Furthermore, it is key to understanding the studio business model to differentiate between revenue generated by the studio for itself, and that ostensibly generated for the producers of, and investors in, a specific motion picture. This research examines five blockbuster films in detail: *The Godfather*, *Jaws*, *Star Wars*, *Grease* and *Back to the Future* to better understand the markers for a blockbuster's success, and whether or not the risks in film investment can be radically reduced and revenue enhanced.

During the timeframe selected for analysis in this thesis, at least nine calculated blockbuster films achieved unprecedented box office success (Schatz, 2013, pp. 27-56). The five purposefully selected case studies for this thesis met the criteria that they all led to sequels and the directors, the chief creative force credited with the referenced film, did not have a previous calculated blockbuster track record with a major studio. The selected case studies afford a historical approach to accounting for the entrepreneurially driven aspects of each of these precedent-setting blockbusters. This includes exploring common blockbuster markers to crosscheck each film for broader findings that test the Goldman aphorism. This identifies strategies about which the studios have learned to navigate the experiential curve in developing, producing and marketing films (Miles and Huberman, 1984). Most significantly, the analysis focuses on entrepreneurial dynamics of the directors and producers behind the blockbusters and their strategies for challenging and working within the historical pillars of Hollywood's institutionalism.

Four of the five films also shared an element of nostalgia that rejuvenated reinforced the institutional significance of genre. However, each of the five films also suggested a solution for Hollywood studios struggling during the nadir of the 1970s recession. This was partly achieved by abandoning expectations of cultural excellence and relevance as markers to success. Instead, this thesis traces the managerial and creative behaviours of the entrepreneurial players in each of the case studies, as they sought to resolve micro-level tensions and legitimize their work and the manner in which they marshalled the resources to complete their film. The historical analysis augments the understanding about how the institutional character of Hollywood gradually accepted the consensus and the institutional changes that came with the blockbuster business model.

The extant analysis serves to identify the component parts of a blockbuster; to see if there are clusters to be replicated in a model (Eisenhardt, 1989, pp. 532-55). This suggests the markers were not as much artificially imposed elements, but significantly “marked by [a director’s] very distinctive vision, one which is not shaped a priori, but is formed as the project develops” (Malloch and Kleymann, 2013, pp. 2-3). The thesis also lays the groundwork for understanding whether or not and/or to what extent, a successful blockbuster can be manufactured or whether it is substantially the product of, for lack of a better word ‘genius.’ This thesis identifies four high-level elements for a successful blockbuster: 1) the genius (unique vision) of director; 2) a narrative that makes people connect on a personal level, which identifies and taps into the contemporary cultural zeitgeist with an astute psychological understanding of mass movements; 3) an optimally timed release, and 4) the nature and quality of managerial decision making (e.g., Coppola as bricoleur, Spielberg as paternal mentor, Lucas as creative authoritarian and producer Allan Carr as the puppet-master) and the wisdom of decision making in uncertain creative and industry conditions. Correspondingly, markers of success are highlighted, which include, but are not limited scale of cost, saturation booking and distribution, expanded advertising campaigns with

merchandising tie-ins, visual effects and location shooting, audience researchs, adaptation from creative sources with a strong fandom existing base and potential to expand it and casting of character actors as opposed to expensive star talent (Epstein, 2010, p. 155). Two markers not mentioned previously in any list but added to this thesis are long-tail economic performance of a film as a capital asset and domains of artistic and business control, which explicate the roles of control within the creative-decision making process at the studios to mitigate risk, maximize revenue and refute the Goldman assumption that 'nobody knows anything.'

The idea of a calculated blockbuster (i.e., star-driven franchises) had yet to emerge in the 1970s, but the release of *Star Wars* in 1977 established the stakes for concept franchises. As advertising budgets grew relative to the production budgets of blockbusters, the studios "seem(ed) to be proficient at choosing which movies or actors to push" (Ainsley, Drèze & Zufryden, 2005, pp. 508-517). The major Hollywood studios learned to master segmentation strategies of mainstream (i.e., blockbuster) films versus those for artistic releases, especially in timing their premieres. Krider and Weinberg (1998, pp. 1-15), in examining release strategies among Hollywood's major studios, identify industry players who correctly envisioned the demand for and market performance of the films. They released blockbusters to compete with their peers' major film releases (but not of the same genre) and elected to release their smaller (i.e., portfolio budget films) during weeks of less intense industry competition.<sup>6</sup>

Another point to analyse is the issue of institutional "control" within the film industry during the New Hollywood period of 1966-85, as it was affected by the rise of young entrepreneurial directors and producers. This focuses on studio executives exercising control (in an industry considered uncontrollable) over replicable markers. To identify a cogent business model, balancing business and creative expectations for a blockbuster, it is worth assessing historical accounts, facts and figures from films in New Hollywood's first wave of blockbusters. This challenges those who embrace Goldman's

aphorism. However, while other business, marketing and film culture scholars<sup>7</sup> believe the learning curve in producing and marketing blockbuster films has improved the studios' control of the results, many also have failed to account for the quality of data and the scope of qualitative evidence behind this enhanced control. This has included studio executives paying subsidiaries, wholly owned by their employer, out of the studios' assigned budget for marketing their films. Given Goldman's aphorism, as well as the work of scholars who challenge its premise, two primary questions arise which this thesis will address:

1. Between 1966 and 1985, how did entrepreneurial directors and producers facilitate the transition in New Hollywood to the Blockbuster Business Model by standardising a set of blockbuster markers?
2. How did entrepreneurial directors and producers reframe the promise of radical, independent-led innovation in the New Hollywood period that led to a new wave of institutional control in the era of the calculated blockbuster franchise system?

Research regarding Hollywood is addressed in several streams of scholarly enquiry. Although these could intersect, they have not done so frequently, especially relative to industry questions about managerial power structures in studios, the reporting of box office numbers, and the asset valuation of films. Hollywood research is more multidisciplinary than it is interdisciplinary. These disciplines include, but are not limited to, fields of business management, organisational behaviour, econometrics, film history, cultural studies, marketing and consumer behaviour. Several points for an interdisciplinary context emerge. Regarding a managerial enquiry, all five case studies featured a director who herewith had a first blockbuster premiere with a major Hollywood studio, so the relationship between director, producer (especially where producer is different from director) and studio management is examined and compared (Kose, Ravid & Sunder, 2017, pp. 425-439). The distinctions in organizational culture dynamics under which studios operate



are internally protected, given Hollywood's intense competition and thus have made it very difficult for management scholars to carry out systematic research about the expert decision-making process in the industry (Kasof, 1995, pp. 311-366). Therefore, the thesis is suited to a qualitative, inductive approach that also draws upon broader research in entrepreneurial and innovation decision-making, and the implications for its acceptance and standardisation. As one study focusing on the creative judgment process involved in Hollywood pitch meetings notes, "interpersonal judgments of creativity typically involve dynamic processes that are strongly dependent on context (that is, they are subject to localized and situated norms and expectations about creativity)." (Elsbach and Kramer, 2003, pp. 283-301). In each case study, the director's reputational stakes were significant, given they were helming their first major studio production. In the pitch process, a consequential event in film development, the director, for example, who has a good command of the characteristics that define the high level of creative expectations in the entertainment industry "will be in a better position to know which attributes to emphasize (or to downplay) in their impression of management activities" (Elsbach and Kramer, 2003, p. 299). If they do not possess that knowledge, they may inadvertently communicate cues "suggesting slickness, lack of passion, or being too rehearsed may result in lower assessments of creative potential" (Elsbach and Kramer, p. 299). In the 1970s, studio executives, beset by recession and the move toward conglomerates and mergers, were being assessed more as dealmakers than for their visionary skills regarding the value of telling a compelling story.<sup>8</sup> Thus, it is important to consider the relationship between director/producer and studios. In each case, the director is assessed for recognizing and resolving concerns about the project's risks, without committing potentially significant errors and making themselves vulnerable to the possibility that a studio misjudged a director's effectiveness and would then be inclined to reject the project (Kasof, 1995, p. 347).

This thesis also incorporates a frequently overlooked observation about the transfer of industry power from the studios to the content creators during the 1970s, as the blockbuster business model emerged. The specialised producer's role grew during this time (Hadida, 2009) which assured protecting business interests while strengthening the negotiating hands of directors and screenwriters. This period also saw the rise of the "artistic hyphenate" by separating the domains of business and artistic control and the consolidating of artistic roles (e.g., director and screenwriter) (Baker and Faulkner, 1991).

Also notable is that each blockbuster led to new auxiliary markets for sequels, toys, fan memorabilia and conventions, theme park rides and attractions, television shows and music, without the studios' planning or endorsement at the outset.<sup>9</sup> However, once success was evident, especially in the late 1970s going into the 1980s, the studios turned toward calculating the potential. This coincided with approving production and marketing budgets that made those for the benchmark blockbusters seem penurious or modest at best, even when adjusted for inflation. This led to pre-selling sequels to established titles and paying large fees for established star talent – a notable observation given that none of the case studies presented in this thesis involved an actor able to legitimately claim such status (at the point when these films were developed and produced). In New Hollywood, not only did directors and producers set their own precedents, studio executives also focused on making their own impact without relying heavily on their predecessors, whose practices not only may have become outdated, but also no longer produced satisfactory results. Agencies and management companies handled some studio executives similarly to Hollywood stars, although with varying degrees of empowerment and success. Thus, some executives (e.g., Peter Guber and Jon Peters at Sony and producing partners Don Simpson and Jerry Bruckheimer) leveraged the relationship for making deals for film projects and engaging the available on-screen talent.<sup>10</sup> However, other conditions familiar in Hollywood's history persisted. A current CEO

hypothesises that Hollywood's expansion and contraction throughout its history has undulated with "uncanny regularity in the middle years of each decade, then bottoms out in the decade's last years, only to rise again from the '0' year driven by new innovation" (Leipzig, 2017). As innovations prove themselves, industry executives gain confidence, are willing to greenlight expansive production budgets and higher salaries for talent, up to the point where the studios become concerned that returns on investments no longer match those of earlier years in the decade (Miller & Shamsie, 1996). The blockbusters coincided with distribution's new technological advantages and strategies evolved quickly, as the first wave of box office record-holders bolstered industry confidence.

Nevertheless, in many studies about Hollywood there are still inherent knowledge gaps reinforcing Goldman's theory. Leipzig (2018) acknowledges the industry is "never really sure whether its economic viability is rising or falling; it has always seemed more of a gut feeling, at least to people outside the highest levels of the industry." The counterpoint to business studies research arises from the disciplines of film studies and cultural criticism. An important focus is on nostalgia (which figures prominently in four of the five film case studies) and fandom loyalty and legacy (elements positioned in various ways in each of the five studies), which were leveraged for new merchandising and commercial potential as long-term cultural franchises. Regarding nostalgia, the blockbuster regulated and commodified the past with little concern for historical accuracy but also became more directed toward stylised creative elements of music, fashion and cultural mores based more in popularized stereotypes than they were of critically authentic representations (Levy, 1991, p. 236). With *Back to The Future*, the most recent of the films studied in this thesis, Levy sees the film not just for the narrative experiences affecting its main character (Marty McFly) or of the creative input of Spielberg and Zemeckis, but more a "matrix within which all of these agencies are combined, along with soda ads, theme park rides, computer games, etc., as part of a complex, yet uncomplicated experience" (Levy, 1991, p. 236).

This thesis' approach seeks to respond directly to the director's creative intentions rather than a third party's interpretation (e.g., a film critic, a scholar's critical cultural enquiry). All of the directors, producers and writers involved in the selected case studies, who are still alive, were contacted. Notably, three responded. Gaps in details were also addressed by 10 other practitioners who have worked in the industry during the period covered in the thesis. For instance, the *Jaws* (1975) case study was critiqued by Peter Saphier, who was a senior Universal Studios executive at the time. He also is credited with finding the galleys for the novel and recommending it to studio chief Lew Wasserman who passed it on to the eventual producers Richard Zanuck and David Brown. A quick search on Google Scholar reveals more than 44,000 references to the film but, to the best recollection available including by the source, that critical fact is not mentioned in any of the most frequently cited references. Likewise, input from Carl Gottlieb, the screenplay writer for *Jaws*, confirmed details and answered questions that he said had not been previously addressed.

The thesis initially offers an extensive literature review that explores the definition of the blockbuster film and the characteristics that distinguish it from older genres of event, roadshow and spectacle films. The opening sections comprises a historical summary as a frame for the study, a short review of historical institutionalism as it applies to Hollywood and the implications of entrepreneurial actors as well as dynamics of strategic decision-making for innovation. It examines the New Hollywood period by summarizing the pre-calculated-blockbuster period (1965-72) leading up to the release of *The Godfather*, the first modern blockbuster, in 1972, and the ensuing period of 1973-1985, encompassing the four other films (*Jaws*, 1975; *Star Wars*, 1977, *Grease*, 1978 and *Back to The Future*, 1985). As various definitions of blockbusters are considered, a list of essential criteria emerge as markers of blockbusters. These markers are used to evaluate the contributions each film made to the blockbuster business model, which, in turn, are compared and aggregated across all five case studies (Epstein, 2010, pp. 155-

156). Eisenhardt's (1989) emphasis on 'replication logic' informs the analytical considerations that might lead to identifying patterns for further hypothesizing on articulating the business model for blockbusters. Likewise, the emphasis on Soloveichik's seminal explanation of films as long-term capital assets expands the impact of box office films from a business performance standard beyond the most frequently employed measure – comparing gross box office revenues. The interdisciplinary gaps are narrowed by incorporating critical analysis of the comprehensive body of scholarly literature by scholars of film and business studies with primary source interviews with industry players as well as broader insights from practitioners to add context in synthesizing the analysis. Each case study encompasses qualitative and quantitative aspects in assessing the film's merits on the previously mentioned markers and comparisons to financial performance, not just at the box office but also to shareholders and the studio's overall industry profitability. The conclusion examines if the viability of the central Goldman aphorism among practitioners remains relevant along with the instrumental value of the blockbuster model as a tool for radical institutional innovation. The thesis is positioned to deemphasize the Goldman aphorism that long has influenced inquiry by industry insiders and external observers (e.g., scholars) and, as its replacement, to focus on how Hollywood's existing institutions historically have adapted to innovation and novelty only to embed it so deeply into its social and creative order that resists further disruption.

## **Chapter 1**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW:**

#### **Blockbuster phenomenon as a business model**

##### **1.1 Introduction: Historical Frame**

*Some movies are born blockbusters; some achieve blockbuster status; some have blockbuster status thrust upon them (Stringer, 2003, 10).*

###### *1.1.1 Studio Era*

During the Studio Era (lasting from 1927 to 1949), the studios controlled all aspects of production, distribution and exhibition (Gomery, 1986). This power came from their ability to substantially control the vast majority of productions (which were predominantly shot on their own lots by producers, directors, actors and technicians, who were full-time salaried employees) as well as owning the majority of the most lucrative theatres. Miller and Shamsie (1996) revealed that by 1936 “the industry had matured into the oligopoly that became known as the studio system.” The studio system was established and grew rapidly through the vision of entrepreneurs including Cecil DeMille, William Fox, Carl Laemmle, Jesse Lasky and Adolph Zukor (Scott, 2005).

These entrepreneurs challenged the short-lived Edison Trust (Motion Picture Patents Company, which lasted from 1908 to 1915), which had discouraged the making of feature films. Scott (2005, p. 21) writes that in the 1910s, “independent producers were discovering that stars could be an important device for branding films and thereby helping to expand and stabilize markets.” This business model of focusing on feature films and promoting individual stars allowed the studios to apply the “portfolio” approach, which empowered executives to decide which movies would be made with whom, at what budget

and when, up to a year in advance (Prince, 2002; Sedgwick, 2004). Sedgwick and Pokorny (1998) suggest this was determined in two key stages: 1) The previous year's budget and the rate of return obtained would determine whether the current year's budget would increase or decrease. Based on that data, a global production budget would be set. 2) The decision would focus on how many low-, medium- or high-budget movies to make. This also allowed for a genre spread that, apart from obvious creative benefits, acted as a risk-reducing factor, which provided audiences with a virtually endless variety of movies targeting specific demographics instead of creating movies designed to appeal to the largest demographic common denominator.

The quintessential Hollywood executive at this time (1930s) was Irving Thalberg (1899-1936), the American film producer whose career contravenes the classic Goldman aphorism. "Thalberg's 'extravagance' justifies itself because he has a mysterious 'artistic instinct which tells him when the extra fifty or one hundred thousand will broaden, like the beam of a projection machine, into an enormous profit'" (Barone, 1995, p. 86). Thalberg's power though did not reside in the instinct but in the commanding authority he had for his disciples, which Barone describes as "[u]nlike the disciples of Jesus, none of Thalberg's 'underlings' challenge his near divine will" (p. 86).

In the context of Hollywood's opacity with regard to data connected to its business procedures and performances, Barone summarizes the institution's natural system: "In Hollywood's reification, in the image Hollywood projects of itself in order to perpetuate itself, the how and why of the industry becomes obscure. ... The answer to business problems in Hollywood cannot be found in business procedures, but rather only in movie magic" (p. 95). However, that movie magic was not impervious to one of the most wide-ranging business decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court in the twentieth century.

### *1.1.2 Paramount Decree of 1948*

When bearing in mind that: “stable demand brought a very reasonable chance of success, and control over theaters made sure all of a studio's films would have an audience” (Miller and Shamsie, 1996), the quasi-monopolistic business model must have seemed optimal to the studio moguls, yet it also set the stage for a legal challenge by the U.S. government. After the Paramount Decree of 1948, breaking up the exhibition monopoly of the studios, the latter were forced to dispose of their theatre chains at a time when the increasing impact of television and “postwar leisure consumerism” led to a drastic reduction in box office revenue (Cassady, 1957, p. 150). Neale (2013) wrote the impact of the decree was multifaceted in its impact on the Hollywood industry: “the combined effects of these rulings meant that companies could no longer guarantee exhibition of all of their films and hence could no longer sustain the overheads and levels of production that had marked the studio era.” He added the effects were exacerbated by declining cinema attendance, rising wages among consumers who sought alternatives for leisure and entertainment and the rapid spread of television.

The Studio Era was reliable for avoiding the market uncertainties that later would trigger serious concerns about declines in profit and streamlined budgets as studios acted to comply with the rulings of the Paramount Decree (Conant, 1981). Sedgwick and Pokorny (2001) say the Studio Era had been about “being less risky, in the sense of being less likely to generate losses, could only generate limited profits.” The era was also closely associated with the cascade release pattern, which meant that movies were strategically released in specific locales and expected to build up interest by word-of-mouth, reviews, referrals, etc. before being released on a greater (or fewer) number of screens (Pokorny and Sedwick, 2010). According to Sedgwick and Pokorny (1998, 2001) the 1930s studios focused on attenuating risk with the implementation of film portfolios: “In



producing an extensive annual portfolio of films the major studios expected consumers to consume widely across this portfolio, thus allowing the 'hits' of the season to emerge."

### *1.1.3 New Hollywood (1965 – 1975)*

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a new generation of independent producers and filmmakers (not unlike those in the mid-1910s) was emboldened to remake the industry's institutional character but under far different economic conditions, sociocultural dynamics and entertainment market demand that the pre-Studio Era entrepreneurs faced. Schatz (1998, p. 18) argues the economic benefits, if any, were not great in the period: "This Hollywood new wave proved to be a decidedly mixed blessing for the studios, however, since these films enjoyed the allegiance of the youth market and the adulation of critics but rarely enjoyed cross-over success with mainstream moviegoers and tended to be unsuitable for network television" Izod (1988, p. 181) narrows the focus considerably when he observes that: "the inexpensive film, even if as a sleeper it returned unexpected millions on a small investment (as *Easy Rider* (Columbia, 1969)... could not service a major's capital account."

However, it also bears noting that one must examine the duality and the paradoxes occurring in the intersecting dynamics of entrepreneurship and historical institutionalism in New Hollywood, especially if one seeks to compare the merits and disadvantages of the business model that led to *Jaws* (1975) to that which produced *Easy Rider* (1969). Metz (2006) contends that "the economics of the Hollywood Renaissance films were driven by a niche marketing that was not necessarily tied to radical politics. Thus, *Easy Rider* could be marketed toward the counterculture without actually endorsing countercultural values."

It was Jacobs (1980) who was credited with the interchangeable term of Hollywood Renaissance for New Hollywood. Her analysis comprised in-depth

chapters on five of the best-known directors during the 1970s (John Cassavetes, Robert Altman, Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese and Paul Mazurky). In outlining parallel crises both in the movie industry and in the sociopolitical environment of the country, Jacobs' emphasis is almost entirely within the factors of "artistic superiority and administrative autonomy" with little to no consideration of the commercial forces.

The missing factor in the analysis is contextualizing the phenomenon of allusion to Hollywood's historical institutionalism that New Hollywood filmmakers adapted for practical impact in the first wave of blockbusters. "In their study of film history, they learned the exemplary themes, styles, and expressive qualities as these had been selected and distilled by American auteurism," Carroll (1982) writes. "These filmmakers predictably attempted to incorporate the budding film-historical sensibility – the central intellectual event of their youthful apprenticeships – into their works (p. 54).

The seminal blockbusters rejuvenated genres that once were the heart of the institutional business model: gangster and mob reframed as adult drama, horror situated in contemporary culture and politics, science fiction as homage to classic adventure stories and comic books, the musical as nostalgia and the action time travel story. "The film-historically conscious director can deftly manipulate the old forms, satisfying the adolescent clientele while also conveniently pitching allusions to the inveterate film gnostics in the front rows," Carroll explains. "There was the genre film pure and simple, and there was also the art film in the genre film, which through its systems of allusions sent an esoteric meaning to film-literate exegetes" (p. 56).

The historical changes in Hollywood's institutional structures, according to Carroll, encompassed the industry obeying the orders of the 1948 Paramount consent decree, declines in movie audiences, big budget spectacles, the exit of

quondam moguls (such as Thalberg) and the takeovers by the corporate conglomerates during the New Hollywood period (p. 74). This opened the way for entrepreneurs to finesse their responses to conditions of creative uncertainty against the environmental constraints of the industry's recession during this period. "Once inside the industry proper, the young auteurs had a distinct advantage over the corporate managers who bankrolled Hollywood—they knew about movies," Carroll explained. "The settling down of the industry in the mid-seventies through the increasing reliance on genres strengthened rather than weakened the position of the cinephiles, who adjusted via the two-tiered system of allusion" (p. 75).

Not unlike the pioneers of the middle 1910s who paved the way for the Studio Era, the comparative youth of this new generation of directors aligned with the changing demographics of the movie-going audience and subsequent effects in the historical evolution of Hollywood's institutionalism. Cook (2000) noted the results of the Yankelovich and Associates survey the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) commissioned in 1968, which summarized that nearly half of box office tickets (48 percent) came from consumers in the 16-24 age demographic and that "being young and single is the overriding demographic precondition for being a frequent and enthusiastic moviegoer." Cook adds that films such as *Easy Rider* and *The Graduate* heartened studio executives about reversing box office declines, bolstered by his quote of a Twentieth Century Fox executive responsible for advertising and publicity who assured colleagues that "we are tied to the youthful market for the future, we have to keep up with the rhythm of young people" (Cook, 2000, pp. 67-68). Using *Star Wars* (1977) as an example, Kramer (2004) noted that preliminary market research suggested the film's strongest base of appeal was among younger and male audience members while the action-adventure elements were likely to dissuade women and older demographic segments. However, Kramer adds the real "blind spot" was ignoring the potential

draw of even younger audiences – the preteen segment: An audience survey for MPAA, conducted in 1957 showed that 31 percent of all tickets were bought by children aged 14 and younger; the market share of children under 10 was an astonishing 16 percent; thus almost every sixth ticket was bought for a young child (Opinion Research Corporation, 1957).

Kramer explained the industry's blind spot was reinforced when the new ratings protocol was introduced in the late 1960s, which was "designed to warn parents about films which were unsuitable for their children, and thus effectively removing children from the audience of a significant part of Hollywood's output." In Hollywood's obsession with covering as much of the potential market audience as possible in its release, it had become disinclined to, as Kramer explains, make films for children because they assumed that "putting off the movies' core audience and were unnecessary anyway (because younger children would want to see the films of their older siblings)." If the sentiments expressed in the late 1960s were clear, they were further amplified as New Hollywood transitioned into the blockbuster era in the mid-1970s, according to Corrigan (1991). He explained that "they alter the fundamental nature of the film product by forcing a massive alteration of the conception of an audience, since to return those massive investments means appealing to and aiming at not just the largest possible audience (the more modest strategy of classical films) but all audiences" (p. 21).

While Corrigan noted that studios had dispensed with differentiating movie audiences from television audiences, as they did in 1950s by introducing features such as wide screen technologies. Now any investment in technology, as Corrigan explained, must aim to 'undifferentiate' the desires of different audiences, usually by emphasizing the importance of that investment in and of itself (the presence or use of computer animation or of an expensive star) rather than what they might be able to represent (new spaces or depths, for instance). With blockbusters, what begins as an attempt to win a mass of teenagers quickly

becomes an attempt to absorb as many other groups as possible within that mass, especially as the overarching perspective from a conglomerate's perspective was the objective of a favorable impacts for its bottom line, profitwise.

Therefore, as Gomery (1984) contends, "the historian first needs to understand how film-making as an institution has functioned. Hollywood exists as an industry, a collection of corporations seeking profits" (p. 89). Thus, he cites the historical basis of Hollywood's distribution system which paralleled the contemporary growth of retail chain stores in American consumer history. Gomery notes the changes in film exhibition strategies that occurred during the Great Depression. "The 1920s cinema with stage shows was transformed into the double-feature cinema with its ubiquitous air-conditioning and refreshments," he writes. "Throughout all these changes the dominant chains prospered. They rigidified their system of distribution to guarantee they squeezed maximum revenue from each film they made" (p. 100). The notable shifts occurred in the aftermath of the 1948 decree, as studios sought to address a steady decline in movie attendance that occurred over the three decades leading into the middle 1970s. The rigid distribution protocols were poised to evolve in iterative steps with the release of each new record-setting blockbuster in the 1970s. These incremental actions eventually would reset the boundaries of distribution for the purposes of achieving the same objective of maximizing revenue from film releases but also more quickly than in previous eras.

## **1.2 Business Models**

In understanding the blockbuster film as part of a new institutional business model for Hollywood, the business model functions more than as a template. "Business models are not recipes *or* scientific models *or* scale and role models, but can play any – or all – of these different roles for different firms and for different purposes: and will often play multiple roles at the same time" (Baden-Fuller and

Morgan, 2010, p. 157). Noting that a significant segment of research on business models has focused on start-ups, Demil, Lecocq, Ricart and Zott (2015) indicate that less work has targeted business models of established firms and how those models evolve with time and industry and institutional changes. By explaining “the logic of the firm, the way it operates, and how it creates and captures value for its stakeholders,” the concept of the business model integrates the perspective with entrepreneurship (Demil et al, 2015). Thus, the nascent blockbuster model pinpoints a new opportunity that represents essentially a different combination of the available resources at the time. For example, budgets of blockbusters in the 1970s did not resemble the much larger allocations that became common, especially in the later 1980s and continuing a trend to the current period. “In sum, the business model brings us closer to an entrepreneurial view of strategy, which is less concerned with ‘business as usual’ in mature sectors and organizations and more with renewal and rejuvenation through opportunity creation, development, and exploitation” (Demil et al, 2015). The entrepreneurial forces behind the seminal blockbusters of the 1970s and 1980s, as selected for the thesis, illuminates the link of “strategy formulation and implementation ... [and in] reality, these tasks take place simultaneously and converge in a unique construct, the business model” (Demil et al, 2015).

Some researchers note that while some work has emphasized how organizational changes historically have resolved at least the problems for Hollywood’s major studios, the studies also have neglected a view from the investment perspective, suggesting “Hollywood has never resolved its financial problems, and still struggles to deliver returns to capital providers. In this account, the film business is mature, beset by cost recovery problems, and thus has little or no value-creating potential as a stand-alone activity” (Leaver, 2010, p. 455). Leaver’s view is pessimistic, particularly in the short-term concerns about profitability and the desire to satisfy shareholders with investment value. “More

broadly, Hollywood provides an allegory of modern capitalism under financialisation: there is a disconnect between what the capital market demands and what the product market can deliver, which intensifies the process of restructuring for no discernable improvement in corporate growth or ratios,” Leaver contends (2010, p. 476). However, ignoring, for example, Soloveichik’s (2013) argument for films as long-term capital assets, Leaver’s assessment fixates on what he sees as excessive wage and salary demands from Hollywood’s creatives and the concurrent “poor custodianship by its shareholder owners who are happy to trade but don’t govern” (p. 476). On the other hand, as the blockbuster business model encouraged a return to genre-driven films, once the staple of Hollywood’s institutional strengths, the emphasis on genre risks vulnerable exposures for a studio’s profitability, especially if institutional forces do not respond in timely ways to shifts to audience preferences.

There appears to be no standardized methodology to comprehensively assess the holistic dimension of a film’s financial performance. The emphasis on box office figures, which rely on the initial weeks of tallies from the U.S. domestic market, is inconclusive and potentially misleading. However, considering the value added to a studio library<sup>1</sup> (i.e., the company’s potentially greatest asset) by a film is significant and often overlooked. Even if a film was not destined, nor projected to achieve instant box office success, most films eventually make money because of additional platforms (from television in the 1950s, to home video in the 1980s, to streaming in 2010 onwards). In a pivotal study for the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, Soloveichik (2013) has analysed theatrical movies as having a long useful life – of at least 80 years – and, therefore, the production costs for films, as she explained, “should be treated as a capital investment.” This echoes the long tail view taken up by Sedgwick and Pokorny.

Sedgwick and Pokorny warn about broad conclusions in the blockbuster business model, citing the limitations confounded by the studios’ refusal to make

available sufficient empirically sound data: “Without production cost data it is difficult even to identify successful films, let alone assess the strategies employed in producing those films.” Thus, their research leads them to conclude that: “Hollywood knows what it is doing.”<sup>2</sup> Sedgwick (2011) observes that: “The level of profitability associated with big-budget productions has increased” which leads him to conclude that: “Surely somebody must know something?” If the assertions of many of the aforementioned scholars were correct that most movies lose money, then the U.S. stock market, as history has demonstrated, would not forgive companies that are in the loss-making business (Stein, 1989).

### **1.3 Historical Institutionalism and Entrepreneurship: Decision-Making Implications**

The conventions of Hollywood’s institutional character, as placed in a business management context curated and cultivated throughout its history, can be explored through the use of historical and archival material. The emergence of New Hollywood and the blockbuster model should be explored not as a singular basis of innovation but as a series of decisions encompassing an “*endogenous process* —i.e., Suddaby et al conclude that the more legitimate a new practice becomes, the more it erodes the power of incumbent actors and the institutional resources that support them (Suddaby, Foster and Mills, 2014, pp. 108-109). Suddaby et al (2014) amplify the argument of institutionalism as explained by a historical process by noting the significance of “the interactions of individuals” and how the interpretations of [their] actions, and the social significance attached to them, change” (p. 111). Thus, this process leading to the blockbuster model was not adopted definitively in a yes-or-no dynamic but instead as a continuous process where distinct markers of the blockbuster model were adopted partially and others were incorporated, once the effect or impact from existing



institutional conventions and practices was ascertained to the studio executive management's satisfaction (Suddaby et al, p. 113).

Miskell (2018) reinforces this approach for its potential contributions in generalizability, which he says is achieved "by placing actors firmly within their historical context, and thus ensuring that any moments of recognition between present-day reader and historical subject are all the more powerfully communicated" (p. 214). Therefore, the current analysis of purposefully selected case studies in multilayered narratives is akin to the approach Miskell identifies as "integrative histories" highlighting "patterns-in-experience," as opposed to theoretical constructs. He cites examples of research such as drawing patterns of motivations and mindsets from among accounts of individual entrepreneurs in the decision-making counterpoint of business and the environment (Miskell, 2018, p. 216).

The entrepreneur's role for the purposes of analyzing the historical processes of institutionalism becomes more visible. Several conceptual factors emerge as integral for consideration (Suddaby et al, 2014, p. 117), including the paradox of embedded agency. Drawing the parallel to the current study, this allows the researcher to investigate how some directors, producers and creators were sufficiently self-aware of the institutional environment in which they operated to leverage that knowledge and act accordingly, despite entrenched skepticism of colleagues, peers and executives, to change that institutional environment (Suddaby et al, p. 117). Thus, in eliciting key patterns of decision making in the nascent phase of the blockbuster model, one can identify and expound upon unique characteristics of those individuals who knew how to shape and conform the extant institutional environment for their aesthetic, cultural and industry purposes.

In any organized creative or artistic industry, Becker (1976) says that there are, as a practical necessity, “integrated professionals,” who “make it possible for art works to be made relatively efficiently and easily” (p. 706). However, the organized industry also produces mavericks, who unlike the integrated professional that “accepts almost completely the conventions of his world,” keeps “some loose connection to that world but refuses to conform, thus making it impossible for himself to participate in the world’s organized activities” (p. 708). However, he adds, mavericks “do not renounce all, or even very many, of the conventions of their art” (p. 709). Becker’s characterization of the maverick suits the broad descriptions of the directors and producers at the core of the five blockbuster case studies selected for this thesis. Their work changes some significant conventions in the industry but also “more or less unwittingly accepts all the rest” (Becker, 1976, p. 710). Becker argues that the maverick quality does not matter as a work’s characteristic but instead is inherent “in the relation between the work and the conventional art world to which it is related” (p. 710). Thus, once the premise of blockbusters became part of the conventional business practices, the maverick director, producer, screenwriter or other principal creative figure also becomes conventional, and, as Becker adds, “not just because life offers us many intermediate cases, it is hard to draw a line between the innovating integrated professional and the maverick” (pp. 710-711).

In their study of innovative projects in which the expert design consultants not only were expected to carry out design work but also to develop strategies for the tactics of carrying out that work, Calabretta, Gemser and Wijnberg (2017) expanded on Suddaby’s paradox of embedded agency by accepting and incorporating the tensions between intuition and rationality as the basis for understanding the triggers for innovative projects. Seeing it as a means to “plant the seeds” for acknowledging and acting upon complex behaviors in the process, the researchers conclude that “[c]reating ownership and in particular imprinting

can have a more long-term effect on embedding paradoxical thinking, since these practices act on the behavior of relevant actors (e.g., by training and coaching both the project decision makers and employees not directly involved in the project in paradoxical thinking) (p. 392).

The ongoing paradoxical tensions and changes during the New Hollywood period and the concomitant rise of the modern blockbuster could be described as a period ripe for “categorical fluidity” (Smith et al, 2017, p. 306), in which “collaboratives ... engaged in more contextual, iterative problem solving generative of more creative, novel and effective outcomes.” The entrepreneurial directors and producers associated with blockbusters stimulated debates about what aspects of Hollywood’s institutionalism were historically fixed and those most malleable, generally along the lines of decision making as they perceived the environment. In their examination of five NGO (nongovernmental organization) projects in India, Sharma and Bansal (2017) “found that actors that perceived paradoxical elements as an imperative (reality) or fluid (socially constructed) aligned their actions accordingly” (p. 361). The greatest impact was in those innovators who acknowledged fluidity as the effective condition, as they “discovered contextualized and creative ways of organizing the project activities that met the other’s needs and could engage paradox” (Sharma and Bansal, 2017, p. 361). The paradoxes of NGO businesses parallel to those of Hollywood: cultural impact and profitability and shareholder satisfaction; financial support for risk-minimal projects and creative ambitions (thereby creating a business/artistic paradox).

The categorical fluidity of the period also served Hollywood’s historical institutionalism. The phenomenal entrepreneurial success of the blockbuster cases selected for the study illuminate how the studios not only embraced the model (even if it was after the fact) for its business success but also strategically reconstructed their rhetorical history so as to solidify the perception that they

had promulgated change when, in reality, they were focused on regaining and reaffirming the industry pillars of Hollywood's historical institutionalism (Suddaby, 2016, pp. 54-55). In tandem is the emphasis on organizational legacy, which "focuses attention on particular and localized elements of the history of an individual, an organization, or an economic region that explain unique elements of competitive behavior" (Suddaby, 2016, p. 56). In the case studies selected, the directors and producers (and, in some instances, screenwriters, cinematographers, and independent marketing development executives) functioned as "institutional entrepreneurs lead[ing] efforts to identify political opportunities, frame issues and problems, mobilize constituencies, and spearhead collective attempts to infuse new beliefs, norms, and values" into the industry's social networks (Bruton, Ahlstrom and Li, 2010, p. 429).

The core entrepreneurial values, markers and their meanings that directed the entrepreneurial work of the key creative minds behind those early blockbusters eventually consolidated those marker definitions for the studios. This became the base for routinizing the blockbuster model and the greenlighting of ever-expanding production and marketing budgets. Contra Goldman's axiom that "nobody knows anything," these blockbuster entrepreneurs knew the only outcome option was to make a successful film, so in accepting the presence of "creative uncertainty," they accept the possibility of a limitless set of means to achieve the outcome (Packard, Clark and Klein, 2017). Their "dance with uncertainty" becomes "the key issue of the 'maximizer,' who [looks for the] superior alternative to the options under consideration, "such that it conforms more strongly to their own strengths and resources" (Packard et al, 2017, p. 845, 852).

As the emerging blockbuster era in the 1970s represented how the creative processes adapted to and eventually propelled economic changes in the Hollywood industry, the historical analysis not only acknowledges Suddaby's

considerations of the industry's rhetorical history and organizational legacy, as explained previously, but also the dynamics of temporal agency, which highlights the "unexpected and creative ways they use the past (and the limitations of contemporary industry constraints and limited resources to imagine the future" (Wadhvani and Lubinski, 2017, p. 777). Furthermore, the directors of these 1970s and 1980s blockbusters also were shaped by the "collective and cumulative character of entrepreneurship," signified by their common ties in film schools, status as emerging filmmakers and the willingness to consult each other periodically about creative decisions in their work (Wadhvani and Lubinski, 2017, p. 778). In some individual cases, such as Francis Ford Coppola's entrepreneurial development as director of *The Godfather*, the concept of bricolage (Lévi-Strauss, 1962) as promulgated by (Malloch and Kleymann, 2013) was highlighted by his improvisational skills to deal with concerns and constraints about financing, deadlines and studio opposition and scepticism about production and casting. In the analytical frame of forty-five years after the production process occurred, the deployment of bricolage suggests "follow-on opportunities to historically examine how entrepreneurs have redeployed existing resources in new ways over time ... [and]to consider how entrepreneurs may try to reinterpret the symbolic or semantic understanding of a resource or good in order to lend it new value (Wadhvani and Lubinski, 2017, p. 784).

In their study of 29 small business firms, Baker and Nelson (2005) observe that the process of testing and overcoming limitations encourages cognitive behaviors including "creativity, improvisation, and various social and network skills," adding the behaviors are found in bricolage "because it relies heavily on trial and error and tolerance for setbacks and also because it creates situations in which out-of-the-ordinary behavior can result in visible, out-of-the-ordinary results" (p. 354). Thus, the tolerance level for messy, ambiguous, and sometimes chaotic setbacks signals the bricoleur's (or, entrepreneur's) skills for not seeing

limited budgets or scarce resources as limitations but as an invitation to improvise and leverage as much value from penurious circumstances (Baker and Nelson, 2005, p. 356).

The New Hollywood transition period and the rise of blockbusters are conducive to understanding the intersection of Hollywood's historical institutions and how entrepreneurs strategically responded to changes and limitations in those institutions, sometimes operating as bricoleurs and as decision makers who adeptly navigated the paradoxical conditions under which they operated. The successes of directors and producers in the case studies of seminal blockbusters generated new opportunities not just for the individuals but also created institutional entities (Amblin Films, Lucasfilm, Industrial Light and Magic, etc.). The environmental dynamics of New Hollywood "motivate[d] entrepreneurs who are sympathetic to the values of a given movement to create products and new organizations that are consistent with those values," persuading others -- "even nonsympathizing entrepreneurs" -- to pursue such innovations may elect to pursue and reshaping practices that mitigated risks while endorsing larger budgets to engage similar entrepreneurial activities (Tolbert, David and Sine, 2011, p. 1337).

Targeting the strategic implications of pursuing radical innovation within a macro-environment of institutional constraints, one study incorporated a qualitative methodological approach to track how various players (i.e., entrepreneurial creative figures) interpreted, responded and overcame constraints in episodes, events and crises that occurred during the process (van Dijk, Berends, Jelinek, Romme and Weggeman, 2011, p. 1489). Responding to the legitimacy crisis regarding lack of support for innovation (p. 1493), innovators transformed and legitimized their positions (p. 1495) by "populariz[ing] new ways of thinking about the future vision of the company [and] positioning the ...

venture as a prime example of future business models and competencies. As such, they stimulate new ways of thinking and new interests” (p. 1501).

The researchers describe the process as “partly idiosyncratic,” particularly as innovators take advantage of any ambiguity in the meaning of prevailing institutional norms to “influence established micro-institutional structures and logics to the benefit of radical innovation ideas” (p. 1503). In various ways, the bricoleur, the fatherly figure, the classic impresario showman, and undisputed cultural authority, as epitomized in the thesis case studies, found their various paths, leveraging the presence and advantage of institutional “heterogeneity, multiplicity and ambiguity” (p. 1508).

### *1.3.1 The path from creativity to innovation*

Resolving the legitimacy crisis clears the path for innovators (entrepreneurs) to consolidate their influence and persuade key decision makers with the power to authorize resources that they will competently implement their ideas (Perry-Smith and Mannucci, 2017, p. 58). Describing the loop back process that permits the creative producer (e.g., screenwriters) to revise the product and pitch, researchers indicate that continued support is important but so is the opportunity to seek advice from knowledgeable, experienced peers so as to avoid the risk of “recursive loops” cementing existing habits (p. 70). The nature of institutional networks in Hollywood was transformed, especially after the 1948 Paramount consent decree, which not only ended anti-trust practices in theater holdings but also moved from the “firm-based studio system to the market-based ‘package unit’ system” that was established by the end of the 1970s (Cattani and Ferriani, 2009, p. 829). These changes facilitated the rise of the blockbuster entrepreneurs who navigated both core and peripheral networks. “By being close to the core, they can benefit from being directly exposed to sources of social legitimacy and support crucial to sustaining creative performance;” Cattani and Ferriani explain,

“[while] at the same time, by not losing touch with the periphery, they can access fresh new inputs that are more likely to blossom on the fringe of the network while escaping the conformity pressures that are typical of a more socially entrenched field” (p. 838).

Hollywood’s institutional character historically has been conservative in terms of its high degree of formalization and its encouragement of stable routines of practice and decision-making. However, even as individual entrepreneurs rose to prominence in the New Hollywood transition and the nascent phase of blockbuster movie production, the innovative, ground-breaking practices eventually were subjected to rigid controls and scripted tasks and activities that expanded the ways in which Hollywood’s institutional players could effectively codify, replicate and generate the knowledge they needed to standardise the blockbuster business model (Farshoun, 2010, p. 213). “To attain persistence, continuity, and efficiency, organizations rely on history-dependent learning processes based on reinforcement and feedback ... and build on successes, but particularly in dynamic settings they rely considerably on feed-forward processes and contemplate potential, not only actual, failure” (Farshoun, 2010, p. 217). In each of the case studies for this thesis, regarding in particular questions of genre appeal to the audience and the release and distribution patterns, there was an intricate dance between the confident creative entrepreneur and the cautious, conservative studio executive group that was uncertain about the film’s box office drawing power, given recent failures of films with similar scope or genre treatment. The duality presented in these circumstances underscored the overlapping connections between stability and change, with Farshoun (2010) adding, “such solutions enable organizations to retain some of the benefits of bureaucracy and anarchy without committing to all their liabilities, and they foster renewal while limiting the pains of comprehensive change” (p. 219).



The independent dynamics of control in the business and artistic domains were relatively short-lived. By the late 1980s, approximately 15 years after entrepreneurial directors and producers had demonstrated their blockbuster prowess, Hollywood's institutional leaders represented by studio executives had mastered the learning curve of managing the strategic paradoxes that had rattled their decision making confidence during the transitional New Hollywood period. There was not one singular event but the growing corpus of big budget, heavily marketed blockbusters from the mid-1970s onward, including several failures of a spectacular magnitude, compelled leaders to make tradeoffs in the manner in which they allocated resources to films in their studio portfolios. "A key insight here involves exploring the pattern of responses to issues over time, rather than a response to an individual issue," Smith (2014, p. 1616) explains. "This pattern adopts multiple different approaches to paradox— choosing, accommodating, and accepting. This pattern is consistently inconsistent because it involves frequent, consistent shifts between inconsistent demands" (p. 1616). This dynamic became less apparent as the blockbuster business model was embedded in the corporate mindset, especially after the middle 1980s. However, it was decidedly in force, notably in the early and middle 1970s, as some of Hollywood's institutional players at least were willing to accept the paradoxes of stability and flexibility in their industry. They alternated frequently between accepting and rejecting the ramifications of allocating resources to a phenomenon that had tested exceptionally well in its first cases but had yet to be confirmed for its long-term viability.

## **1.4 Definition of a blockbuster**

### *1.4.1 Pre-1965*

There have always been movies that have commanded greater box office revenue performance than others: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (David Hand,

1937), *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939), *The Ten Commandments* (Cecil DeMille, 1956) and *The Sound of Music* (Robert Wise, 1965), as a few examples.<sup>3</sup> They were often characterized as “hits” or “event movies” based on their box office revenue, the terms not having widely come into use until the 1940s (Neale, 2003). However, as Neale explains, the term ‘blockbuster’ was one used by the industry long before the transitional period of New Hollywood. Neale notes the term in the 1950s “coincided with the beginnings of a sustained and increased investment in productions” that were “expensive,” “lavish” and even “spectacular.” Two decades later, “it also signalled the rise of fewer but more expensive films<sup>4</sup>, eventually inaugurating a blockbuster economy with an inflationary logic that would define Hollywood’s output from the mid-1970s onward” (Grainge, 2007). The term “blockbuster” became the dominant term to differentiate these specific movies from the majority of others produced and/or released by the studios to this day.

During the studio era the portfolio approach could be controlled by the studios, but not in the post-studio era. Within any 21-month period it is virtually impossible for any studio to accurately predict which movies it will acquire and release or be involved in producing (i.e., each one to a different extent). Projects frequently collapse for various reasons: ‘creative differences’, financing, distribution, etc. Few films are entirely financed by a studio, as there are always dozens of component parts in play; the implosion of one is enough to sink a project. A more realistic approach is that studios primarily commit to blockbuster projects and then consider what else is available. The portfolio approach is only valid when the studio can select projects and create a portfolio; however, this is no longer the case, given the industry’s conglomerated structure and parent owners who control the studios.

The Studio Era was also closely associated with the cascade release pattern, which meant that movies were strategically released in specific locales

and expected to build up interest by word-of-mouth, reviews, referrals, etc. before being released on a greater (or fewer) number of screens (Pokorny & Sedgwick, 1998, 2001, 2010). Sedgwick and Pokorny's research is useful regarding quantitative data about the industry, particularly in earlier periods for the purposes of comparing the performance benchmarks of the Studio Era with New Hollywood and the post-1985 period which has been dominated by the blockbuster film franchise series. In a seminal study, Sedgwick and Pokorny (2010) delve into a comprehensive database, sourced directly from the MGM and RKO Pictures studios, covering the period of 1921-51, one of the earliest and very few available to scholars. The relevant aspect of their research perspective evaluates both manufacturer and consumer on an equal footing: "While film producers manifestly operated within a risk environment, given the wide variation in revenues generated by high budget films... consumers also experienced risk in that there may have been a considerable divergence between the pleasures that a film was expected to deliver ex ante and actual pleasures experienced ex post." By simultaneously focusing on the consumer's perspective of the movie going experience they highlight: "the part played by audiences in shaping the environment faced by producers" which, research suggests, led to the concomitant eventual dominance of big-budget movies. This was evident even in the 1930s (Sedgwick & Pokorny, 2010): "Film audiences request novelty, which severely circumscribes their willingness to learn because they are engaged in continuous experimentation for which they require an ever-changing array of films (brands) to choose between." The early studios tried to determine how to get the greatest number of viewers through their turnstiles, whilst audiences, highly suspicious (Penning, 2008) of the studio marketing department's track record (due to previous disappointing experiences with highly touted movies, as well as a lack of reliable assessors of quality), tried to ascertain which are the

quality projects that are deserving of not only their money, but also time (the opportunity costs having increased dramatically over the decades).<sup>6</sup>

#### *1.4.2 Pre-1965 Audience Research and Marketing*

According to a 1950 study (Handel, p. 69), audiences relied on the following elements to make their choice to see a film: 'hearsay' in 32 percent of cases; 'preview trailers,' 15 percent; 'reviews, articles in newspapers,' 14 percent and, 'ads in papers before attendance,' 10 percent. Decades later Sedgwick & Pokorny (2010) concur "that word of mouth and studio publicity materials were of greater importance to audiences than reviews and newspaper articles in making decisions." What is not addressed is whether audiences in the early days identified with specific movie stars and/or allowed for a form of "creative trust" that made them rely on the project choices of these actors<sup>7</sup>, or whether a form of genre burnout occurred determining that however good, for example, the next Rogers/Astaire movie would be, it would not succeed, as audiences simply desired a change. It was not until the 1940s that Hollywood, behind the producers and publishers of other mass media, began commissioning market research that employed the kind of formal and rigorous methodologies recognized in the contemporary era (Handel, 1950, p. 3). Bakker (2003) summarizes the range of approaches that were used to collect information from film audiences, in both the U.S and U.K, starting in the early years of the twentieth century. However, he also emphasises that prior to the 1940s, these approaches were generally informal and unscientific, and were often used as a basis for generating publicity, rather than gaining deeper insights into audience motivations and preferences.

Two organisations led the way in developing more formalised approaches to audience research in the 1940s. George Gallup established Audience Research, Inc., in March 1940, with a contract to provide research for the 'major' studio RKO (Ohmer, 1999). The second organisation was the Motion Picture Research

Bureau, established by Leo Handel in 1942, conducting studies exclusively for MGM.

### *1.4.3 Post-1965 Audience Research and Marketing*

Handel's work was the precursor to the National Research Group (NRG) founded in 1978, just as the blockbuster era was developing rapidly. As Epstein (2006) explains, "NRG helps them coordinate openings in such a way that their movies do not compete head-to-head for the same demographic slice of the audience," adding that all of Hollywood's major studios receive the identical weekly 'competitive positioning' report." Dutka (1992), who has covered Hollywood as part of her reporting beat for the Los Angeles Times, characterizes the NRG 'competitive positioning' report as a useful 'early warning.' She explains, "by comparing the projected turnouts for both films in the crucial quadrant(s), the studios know which film will lose the matchup, and the losing studio can reschedule its opening to a different weekend, even if it's a less advantageous time period (i.e., not the summer and not the holidays)." Dutka quotes Arnie Fishman, then chairman of Lieberman Research, who described that "[t]he goal of market research is to reduce risk. If we're only correct eight out of 10 times, that's still better than flipping a coin." NRG launched other statistical ventures to handle film consumption data. Acland (2003) summarizes the industry entrants:

MarketCast relies on information from exhibitors. Lieberman Research and Gallup [participated] in the testing and market research for films. Others include MovieFone, which produces Competitor Report, and Entertainment Data, Inc. (EDI), founded in 1976 and bought by A.C. Nielsen in 1998. EDI, whose regular column analysing the performance of movies appears in *Variety*, among other publications, collects its box office data by daily phone calls to thousands of theatres and provides other forms of industry tracking, including distributors' release schedules.

#### *1.4.4 Post-1965: The Definition of a Blockbuster*

Looking back at the older period, Sedgwick and Pokorny (2010) concede the caveat that: “the value of such information was limited by the very nature of film as a consumption experience, in which consumers were attracted by novelty and, to some extent, the unknown.” Neale (2013) explains that the “most obvious of features” linking the old and modern eras when it comes to large-scale, big budget films are “specialness,” which “in part is a function of the industry’s practice of distribution and exhibition,” and spectacle,” which is “first and foremost, a visual texture.” However, Neale believes that neither term captures the blockbuster film’s scale. More importantly for Neale, the term “representational” is insufficient, because “it tends perhaps to underplay the nonrepresentational aspects of spectacle – the overwhelming sensual experience of images and sound. For that reason, and because it links the films themselves to their conditions of exhibition, ‘presentational prowess’ might be preferred” (Hall, 2002). It is in the advantages of extended product life (e.g., purchasing copies or special editions in video format for home entertainment use) that became the most distinguishing characteristics for blockbusters in magnifying the opportunities of ‘presentational prowess’ that Neale has referenced in his work. Sedgwick (2011) contends that the blockbuster term, beginning in the 1970s, applies to commodities whose revenues exhibit long right tails. He further observes that:

- 1) These films are seen by audiences in huge numbers – vertical product differentiation, which can be seen as a form of herding.
- 2) In such markets producers often focus their marketing effort on products they hope will become ‘hits’ – ‘high concept’.
- 3) The strategic thinking underlying the blockbuster business model is that the payoff associated with a ‘hit’ film covers the losses associated with flops.

However, it is worth considering Sedgwick's assertions in more detail. While the industry generates only a small number of blockbuster films each year, the revenue generated by a single blockbuster cannot truly cover all of the other films that perform poorly at the box office in their initial runs. Yet, it also should be noted that most, if not all, films eventually make money (Soloveichik, 2013). The fact remains that many studios must still account for promotional and advertising budgets that have grown to colossal proportions. One way of identifying is by, as Epstein (2010, p. 155) has suggested, tracking how the studios create audiences (Meehan, 1984, pp. 216-225) for blockbusters from scratch and how "audience creation" has become as important a creative product as the film itself. Here, the relevant criteria for identifying blockbusters are:

1) *Scale of cost*. This relates to the expectation of a multiple financial return which potential audiences deem to be an indicator of production value.

2) *Saturation booking*.<sup>8</sup> A movie that is packaged and released<sup>9</sup> as a blockbuster has the power to monopolise<sup>10</sup> the number of cinemas it is shown in at the expense of its competitors. It should be noted that the definition of saturation booking is loose enough to question on what one's relative perspective for this should be. Even films characterised as part of saturation booking barely exceed 19 percent of available screens. The issue depends on whether individual theatrical screens or locations (where many multiplexes are located) are figured.<sup>11</sup>

3) *Size of advertising campaign*. The ability<sup>12</sup> to advertise a movie in select markets to the point of saturation is key in setting it apart from its competitors and turning it into an "event" that will attract considerable attention.<sup>13</sup>

4) *Visual effects*. A notable use of costly effects designed to draw in large audience numbers. The resources to create and implement an array of new special effects that will draw in key demographics.

5) *Audience research*. Intensive test screenings and use of marketing tools to assess whether audience reaction and word of mouth encourage the studios to market the movie as a blockbuster (though research has shown that the importance of the latter is not considerable and that studios often elect to release a movie as a blockbuster despite bad feedback).

6) *Adaptation*. Material based on a successful novel, play, TV series, real life event or comic book and video game extensions. This indicates the movie comes with a globally established fan base.

7) *Talent*. Cast actors who are not ranking stars and do not command gross points.

Neale (1980) discusses how the blockbuster revitalized a science-fiction genre that now used special effects to blend fiction and fantasy elements. “The significance of this particular cycle of films is not just that they have successfully revived a moribund genre, nor even that they have managed to make it of central rather than marginal importance (and so justify the expenditure of millions of dollars),” Neale explains. “It is, above all, that in doing both these things they have re-stated and renewed one of the fundamental powers of the cinematic institution itself: its ability to make us believe, to fill us, however reluctantly, with something like childlike wonder.” Likewise, Epstein has identified numerous common creative markers, shared by blockbusters, which narrow the genre’s definition.



Blockbuster film narratives tend to contain the following markers (Epstein, 2010):

- 1) They are based on children's stories, comic books, serials, cartoons or theme-park rides.
- 2) Feature a child or adolescent protagonist.
- 3) Highlight a fairy-tale-like plot in which a weak or ineffectual youth is transformed into a powerful and purposeful hero.
- 4) Contain only chaste relationships (i.e., ensures that it gets a PG-13 or equally ideal rating required for merchandising tie-ins and for placing ads on children's television programming).
- 5) Include characters for toy and game licensing.
- 6) Depict only stylized conflict (i.e., sufficiently non-realistic and bloodless).
- 7) Include positive resolved but still open ending with the hero prevailing over powerful villains and supernatural forces (i.e., positions franchise for sequels).
- 8) Use animation to create artificial action sequences, supernatural forces and elaborate settings.

The abovementioned markers were finessed and enhanced by New Hollywood entrepreneurs for defining and characterizing a blockbuster movie.

The blockbuster has been suited particularly to the action-adventure film genre, as Lewis (2013, p. 61) notes. “While genres go in and out of style, action-adventure, it seems, is always in play. Action-adventure depends almost entirely on casting and special effects, two keys to blockbuster entertainment.” There are markers in Epstein’s conceptualization of the blockbuster that overlap with Neale (2013), who defines the blockbuster first on the “multidimensional largeness of scale,” as indicated by markers including running time, the size of a cast and the “nature, scope, and mode of cinematic presentation of the events and situations depicted.” Other markers for Neale include considering “the amount and type of publicity they receive and by the ways in which they are distributed and shown,” as well as “deployment of expensive, up-to-date technology,” which he says include sound technologies (e.g., Dolby digital stereo and surrounding immersive sound) as well as special effects. Gomery (2013) amplifies Neale’s earlier point about “presentational prowess,” noting an essential marker was “allying with television to promote a ‘product’ so efficiently that, while up-front costs of production could soar, profits rose even faster. In turn, this symbiotic linkage to television changed all phases of the Hollywood film industry.” He adds that “without saturation marketing, particularly through expensive television advertising campaigns, no blockbuster could be created,” and the pre-production phase included “the marketing strategy [being] simultaneously devised with the script.” Lewis (2013) follows up, explaining that “[a]n effort to standardize and more accurately control product lines in the New Hollywood is at the root of the blockbuster mindset at the studios.” To summarize, the Studio Era spectacles were institutional (and entrepreneurial) antecedents of the New Hollywood blockbusters. In a later section, markers, as Lewis and others have suggested, crucial to getting a greenlight for production of a blockbuster are identified. The next section examines broadly the New Hollywood period during which modern blockbusters emerged.

## 1.5 New Hollywood and the Rise of the Blockbuster

Many scholars examining the evolution of blockbusters use *Jaws* as the benchmark for their analysis. Baker and Faulkner (1991) label *The Godfather* (1972) as the “harbinger,” explaining that it “surprised and puzzled everyone when it appeared (as first blockbusters did in book publishing and elsewhere). When *The Godfather* eclipsed every box-office record, some industry observers saw a one-time occurrence.” As they note, along with other writers in and out of Hollywood, even before *Jaws*, *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973) and *The Sting* (George Roy Hill, 1973) enjoyed blockbuster box office number and that with the “right ingredients,” a film’s audience could be huge. In *The Exorcist* and *The Sting*, the directors already had established themselves with the studios and lead actors in both films featured some of the industry’s best-known talent of the time.

Before George Lucas cemented his place as a blockbuster entrepreneur, he already earned his status as a New Hollywood entrepreneur with *American Graffiti* (1973) – considered the 44<sup>th</sup> highest box office earning movie of all time with a production and marketing budget of \$1.27 million (Hearns, 2005). Universal Studios approved a smaller budget because of low expectations for the project and considered releasing it as a film for television. It was positive word of mouth that sparked Universal to move ahead with a limited release that led to critical raves, and momentum for a successful cascade release (Hearns, 2005). Citing films such as *Easy Rider*, *The Graduate* and *American Graffiti*, Metz (2006) explains that in reconciling the demands to accommodate and create a loyal youth audience for films, the institutional formula was hardly ‘new’ in New Hollywood: “aesthetic newness tempered by ideological continuity with Hollywood conservatism. This formulation can be repeated across many of the masterpieces of the Hollywood Renaissance.”

Shone (2004) captures the overlapping trends in the industry of the 1970s, marked early in the decade by the New Hollywood directors who focused on intimate storytelling in experimental forms and the rise of blockbuster directors Steven Spielberg and George Lucas. Shone balances the practical business analysis as exemplified by the trade industry newspaper *Variety* with the auteur-friendly fundamentals that characterized many New Hollywood releases. The relevant point of discussion from Shone's book is that in Hollywood there always will be an exception to every rule, which makes it difficult to replicate the period's most successful blockbusters.

According to Neale (2003, pp. 48-50), *Jaws*, as the first movie of the 'blockbuster era', is even credited with creating "a genre in its own right." Ironically, the movie was intended to be an effects (FX) dependent project, a precursor of many that followed. In actuality, "Bruce," the animatronic shark, did not perform up to expectations, forcing Spielberg to rely on more Hitchcockian "suggestive" storytelling and rescuing the picture's prospects in the editing suite. Neale's work highlights how the evolving blockbuster definition encompasses the importance of marketable talent and large production budgets, which allow visual and sound effects technology advancements to be introduced to the industry. As Carroll notes (2013), several multifaceted distinctions emerged separating the blockbuster from the non-blockbuster. These included smaller movies being "crowded out of the audience market radar" as studios tried to compete for the prime release timeframes of summer and Christmas for blockbusters; escalating marketing budgets that made it difficult for non-blockbusters to compete; the mindset that backing a few blockbusters was the most cost-effective, direct way of quickly recouping their returns on investment, and the shift in revenue streams from U.S. theatrical releases to a multitude of "ancillary platforms" that included merchandising, theme parks, video games, product placements and franchise potential.

Other scholars have noted that New Hollywood became the foundation for a “niche consciousness, the standard-bearers of independent cinema consequently helped to establish a niche market, which could then easily be appropriated or inhaled by the mainstream industry” (Horvath, 2004, pp. 9-10). Going into the 1980s and 1990s, New Hollywood evolved into independent (“indie”) movies, often released by constantly evolving subsidiaries of the studios such as New Line, Fine Line, Sony Classics, Fox Searchlight, and Miramax, to name a few, and powerful non-studio distributors such as Hemdale, the Weinstein Company and Lion’s Gate. Finally, the majority of studio-released movies are, by definition, not blockbusters.<sup>14</sup> Horvath explains that while New Hollywood and the rise of niche-conscious markets operated on the “same logic,” the “crucial difference” between the two developments lay in the intensity of the social movements, “which rocked America in the Sixties and early Seventies, and, moreover, in the intensity in which popular culture registered these shocks.” By the Nineties, Horvath (2004) explains the “mainstream and large sections of independent cinema had succumbed to the same modes of repression and displacement as indeed had public life.” The rejuvenation in the 1970s influenced refining existing marketing strategies and tactics while new ones responded to changing demographics of potential audiences and the inevitable advancement of communication and media technologies (Neale, 2003). It also cemented the case that in the post-Fordian manufacture of blockbusters, institutional control was what brought significant results (Staiger, 1997).

This led to deconstructing the manufacturing process – from the acquisition of the literary material, to the assessment and rewriting of the screenplay, packaging, production and leveraging of the resulting film negative, complex corporate finance deals (Schatz, 2013). The 1948 Paramount decree “brought to an end decades of control of the motion picture industry in violation of the antitrust laws. The subsequent decrees enjoining restrictive trade practices

and ordering divorcement of theaters brought radical changes to the marketing of motion pictures” (Conant, 1981). Conant cited a *Business Week* article (16 September 1967, pp. 189, 192) indicating that an estimated 75 percent of the film projects failed to recover their costs. Conant describes the strategic implications: “Producers, with great uncertainty about whether the story behind the film will succeed, feel they greatly reduce uncertainty by employing the best known and therefore the most expensive actors. But scarcity of stars means fewer total films. The movement to fewer, more expensive films has increased the uncertainties in film production” (Conant, 1981, p. 82). In July 1977, as *Star Wars* was setting new summer box office records that had been established only two years earlier by *Jaws*, a *Business Week* article (11 July 1977, p. 36) had discussed if blockbuster films were worth making because of the financial risks. Studios invested large sums, emboldened by the success of *Jaws* which brought \$200 million in rental income to Universal. As Conant has explained, “the effect of concentrated investment in a few pictures per year is to aggravate the fluctuations in income” (Conant, 1981, p. 83). If the success of *Jaws* did not convince studio executives of the potential of modern blockbusters, Ainsley (2005) writes that *Star Wars* (1977) consolidated the belief.

Harris (2014) compares *Star Wars*’ financial success to the lesson of the James Bond series in the 1960s, a franchise with a similar level of obsessive fandom: “Over the 25 years that followed *Star Wars*, franchises went from being a part of the business to a big part of the business. Big, but not defining: Even as late as 1999, for instance, only four of the year’s 35 top grossers were sequels.” Franchises based on films with solid box office returns appeal to executives who try to counter three primary types of risks their industry faces (e.g., ensuring a film project is completed and not dropped because of second thoughts by producers and studios, and uncertainty about audience box office response and impact of critics and reviews, equity risks associated with higher production and

marketing budgets) (Eliashberg, Elberse & Leenders, 2006; Desai, Loeb & Veblen, 2002). Eliashberg, Elberse & Leenders (2006) also note niche consciousness in a portfolio of various film genres to guard against audience tastes that evolve quickly, especially if studios are concerned about a film performing negatively at the box office. Meanwhile, Izod (1988, p. 185) explains that non-blockbusters remain essential to studios because they “rarely finance more than a small percentage of their budgets, and most of the time they offer the producers a distribution deal which the latter discount heavily at specific banks to obtain the necessary production capital.” Furthermore, they offer options for emerging star talent should a small film be successful, as well as for established stars, writers, directors and producers who might have a “vanity” project in development (Izod, 1988, p. 186).

Before the New Hollywood movement, the industry had attempted a blockbuster approach with the critical and box office success of two mainstream films, *The Sound of Music* (1965) and *Doctor Zhivago* (1965). However, as Schatz (2013) has noted, Twentieth Century Fox, which had produced *The Sound of Music*, subsequently failed with three heavily promoted consecutive musicals, registering losses of \$11 million for *Doctor Doolittle* (1967), \$15 million for *Star!* (1968) and \$16 million for *Hello Dolly!* (1969). Of note, studio president Daryl Zanuck’s observation that: “*The Sound of Music* (1965) did more damage to the industry than any other picture. Everyone tried to copy it. We were the biggest offenders”<sup>15</sup>. He was subsequently fired by his own father. This signals the executive’s penchant to greenlight films similar in genre in the hopes of replicating the success, not as easy a task as it might appear.

With the success of two New Hollywood releases at the end of the 1960s – *Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid* and *M\*A\*S\*H* – Schatz (2013) says the studio partially recovered from near-bankruptcy status. Nevertheless, average per studio profits fell from \$64 million in the 1964-1968 period to \$13 million in

the 1969-1973 period, and studios responded by focusing on developing their real estate assets while cutting costs in payroll and management overhead, capping production budgets, and selling off fixed assets (Dominick, 1987). Streamlined operations coincided with some of the industry's major studios being taken over by corporations (Paramount by Gulf & Western, United Artists by Transamerica, Warner Bros. by Kinney National Services and MGM by investor Kirk Kerkorian) (Schatz, 2013; Webb, 2015).

With the mergers, cash flow pressures were reduced, even as the market continued to experience the effects of a national recession but parent companies were not well versed in Hollywood industry dynamics (Schatz, 2013). Horvath (2004) contends the industry's embrace of New Hollywood aesthetics was vulnerable to misinterpretation, as some did not believe that the change was a temporary response to economic setbacks of the time:

There seemed to be no other way of resolving the dialectic between 'autonomous' creativity and large investments (= expectations of profit) than by staging quasi-liberating catastrophes (from *Zabriskie Point* to *Heaven's Gate*). In many films of the New Hollywood era, these conflicts create a magnificent richness and enormous internal tensions and an incoherence, which lays bare their conditions of production and, consequently, the contradictions in American culture.

New Hollywood's experience paved the path for blockbusters as an institutional practice. Table 1.1 summarises the changes in key industry characteristics spanning the Studio Era, New Hollywood/Emergence of Blockbuster Era and Franchise Era. The industry markers of blockbuster are identified and explained in the next section.

Table 1.1. Historical comparisons of industry characteristics in Hollywood eras.

<b>Industry Characteristic</b>	<b>STUDIO ERA (1927 – 1949)</b>	<b>NEW HOLLYWOOD/EMERGENCE OF BLOCKBUSTER ERA (1965 – 1985)</b>	<b>FRANCHISE ERA (1985 – PRESENT)</b>
<b>Entrepreneur</b>	Studio contract	Director/producer/screenwriter (independent to establishing own	C-suite management/



<b>Intellectual property and licensing</b>	(heavy emphasis on controlled network)	enterprises); independent control of promotion/advertising/limited runs (Tom Laughlin: Billy Jack)	Conglomerates; emphasis on quick returns on capital investment.
<b>Creative development</b>	Original: adaptation; (Sequels non-existent; in 1960s, less than 5 percent)	Transmedia storytelling and adaptation; auteurist transforming into episodic (Sequels: 17.5 percent); near end of period, product placement, integration with comic books; emergence of CGI; presold properties (book, musical, etc.)	Sequential form (episodic), transmedia storytelling, adaptation, storyworld design; emphasis on action/adventure Superheros (presold properties with emphasis on comic books and games)
<b>Stardom</b>	Contracted stars, sometimes crossover from theatrical stage, with established popularities	Purposefully selected for calculated blockbusters; crossover from television; newcomers in first major starring role	Purposefully selected for calculated blockbusters; franchise itself is the central star with sequels rising to similar status
<b>Audience targets</b>	Mature adult film-loving audiences: crude marketing intelligence gathering eventually leads to Leo Handel's Motion Picture Research Bureau in 1940s	First concentrated acknowledgment of youth market demographics, initially teens/college students and gravitating toward even pre-adolescent markets; test screenings (Jaws); heavy TV with roadblock, co-op and boost ad options; high concept pitch; entrepreneurial approach to marketing intelligence that eventually led to NRG and consolidation of its power as a decision-making criterion for greenlighting films; MPAA Yankelovich (1967), first demographic analysis targeting younger audience demographics	Tentpole status, encompassing all demographics but heaviest emphasis on 12-29 age demographics: Prominent influence of NRG for market intelligence; deep polling of market audiences and online tracking; Fan-X/Comic-Con now more emphasis on pop culture artifacts, product, merchandise than actual love of film culture.
<b>Industry structure</b>	Production, distribution and exhibition integrated until Paramount Decree	Merchandising added to mix: With rise of conglomerates, vertical integration from Studio Era seeps in. New owners know little about film production and business.	Development of horizontal integration: crossover of media platforms and markets, including TV, DVD, Web, digital streaming services, specialized video services as distributors (Apple, Netflix, Amazon, etc.)

<b>Corporate ownership</b>	Distinct entities until Paramount Decree; industry opaqueness' careful regulation of investment and controlled expenditures economies of scale to deliver reliable flow of profits to parent company and shareholders	Transitional period to multinational media conglomerates with studio subsidiaries distinguishing portfolio options. Independent producers; shareholders influence; temporary but very limited transparency.	Conglomerates; shareholders influence; reassert industry opaqueness to protect competitive positions; Industry coordination in timing of blockbuster releases so as to allow each to have at least prominent chance at strong opening weekend release
<b>Film as product</b>	Short-term shelf-life to enhance objectives of theatrical exhibition	Short-term shelf-life but blockbuster model transition to franchise already evident; rise of independents emphasize domestic rather than theatrical demand, tied to rise of television audiences	Realization of film as capital asset; franchise is the true star and sequels intended to outlive original creators as perpetual pop culture/commercial ventures
<b>Genre</b>	Heavy emphasis on distinct genres with little or no crossover	Broadened hybrid of various genres; even amorphous distinctions of genre	Action-adventure: emphasis on plot over character
<b>Box office performers</b>	Event, spectacle, roadshow; prestige movie v. general release; platform release; holiday season for major films; no emphasis whatsoever on summer season releases	Modest budget originals perform better than expectations at box offices with platform release morphing into saturated release, inspiring sequels for continuity; test screenings ( <i>Jaws</i> ); limited wide release with introduction of summer release, eventually making Memorial Day weekend start of Hollywood summer releases	Franchise emphasis on sequels and requels (reboots/sequels as reinvention); emphasis on strong opening weekends; summer season equal status, maybe even more so, than traditional holiday season releases of Studio Era

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## 1.6 Institutional markers of blockbuster films

This section introduces the reconfigured and new institutional markers from the quantitative and qualitative evidence of the New Hollywood period of 1966-1985 (e.g., box office revenue from a specific blockbuster film as well as other studio releases; distribution patterns; comparisons to other contemporary top performers at the box office; advertising and promotional strategies; reviews by critics, and others).

The blockbuster strategy (Wyatt, 1994) has been identified as safeguarding a film against failure. Combining economic and cultural factors into research can help generate models that will predict with acceptable rigor a film's box office and long-term financial performance and will thus be a central instrument for TNMCs (transnational media corporations) to reduce the risks involved in film production. Jöckel and Döbler (2006, p. 85) identify established blockbuster and high-concept marketing strategies (King, 2002; Wyatt, 1994), a blockbuster business model that enhances Hollywood's macro structure (Maltby, 2003) and film aesthetics that "enter the audience's collective consciousness before the film's release to quickly recoup costs." The high-concept marketing strategy dominated the late 1970s and reached its climax in the 1980s. It leveraged a film's prospects on a previously sold creative property, which included best-selling novels, comics, computer games, or a character (live or animated) created either for a broadcast series or even for a live action/theatrical production.

Jöckel and Döbler note that mitigating the risk can be achieved in various ways, including the exploitation and manufacture of celebrities. Franck and Nüesch (2007) use pop idol series franchises as an example to compare the value-

generating capacities of superstars and celebrities, making distinctions between the “strong bargaining power” of ‘superstars’ and the ‘low market power’ of interchangeable ‘manufactured celebrities.’ They summarize: “No wonder that the creation and exploitation of celebrities has become a large business in the media sector. But the market potential of ‘manufactured’ celebrities is limited because they typically prevail only in ‘talent free’ entertainment.” As part of the risk minimization strategy, Lee (1998) identifies casting as critical, in which an Academy Award winning actor could be ranked quantifiably as having greater value than winners or nominees of other industry awards. Meanwhile, Albert (1998) tests a model that limited how the assumption – “causality between the presence of stars and successful films” – should be applied. Albert:

The distribution of successful films as marked by actors corresponds to a distribution wherein consumer choices are made using past information. This conclusion does not rely on consumers using stars to decide to go to a film; the star is simply the source of information that reveals the consumers’ consumption of films. This is what allows producers to use the presence of individual stars as a means to estimate the probability of a film succeeding.

Albert adds that it would be difficult to ascribe predictive value to star power, regardless of its box office. Ravid (1999) assesses a pair of competing hypotheses, one of which suggested the value of star power in the Studio Era (e.g., the market value of a long-term studio contract) and the other indicating the star as a free agent, in the aftermath of the Paramount Decree of 1948. However, the latter hypothesis, according to Ravid, is more complex because of the film’s production process, starting with the point when studios purchase options on screenplays, then decide which projects to develop, and finally seek out directors and actors to proceed on the project.

Ravid’s study was the first examining the relationship between star participation and a film’s profit position (of which he concluded there was none).

DeVany and Walls (1999) contend that attempting to manage success and reduce risk for studios, when it comes to a forthcoming film release is confounded by a “complex stochastic process that can go anywhere.” Echoing Goldman’s aphorism, DeVany and Walls (1999) used numerous variables including sequels, genres, ratings, stars, budgets, and opening screens to gauge their probability effect, conclude “the studio model of risk management lacks a foundation in theory or evidence” and “revenue forecasts have zero precision.” For example, regarding star power, the researchers note the effect is observed later in a theatrical run rather than at its opening.<sup>16</sup>

Elberse (2007) focuses on “whether the involvement of stars in a film affects the financial valuation of the studio that is producing and distributing that film.” The study’s data comprise more than 1,200 casting announcements and the impact they had on simulated and real stock trading activity for the studios. The results suggest that star involvement had no impact on the valuation of the studio or media conglomerate to which it belongs.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, Hadida (2009) concludes there is an association between a film’s leading cast member and its commercial success, if the cast members in question are known for their own commercial success.<sup>18</sup> The concern is that from a quantitative perspective, Hollywood’s historical institutional practices always have encouraged keeping data metrics opaque and strictly held private for its proprietary value.

Therefore, it is useful to review the markers of the blockbuster model in the context of Hollywood’s historical institutional practices and their evolution made possible by the decisions of the entrepreneurs behind the early blockbusters. Albert (1998, p. 250) expounds upon the “markers” that he believes defines a movie’s parameters of success in the post-studio era (1969-1995): “Recent work suggest that there is little Hollywood producers can do to ensure a successful film.” Yet he does not seem convinced of this assertion when he subsequently acknowledges: “[M]any industry representatives believe that

probabilities of success can be managed, though there has been little empirical evidence, or theoretical modelling to suggest this. Perhaps the myriad of inputs that go into film production belies modelling.” Others, such as Ravid (1999) and Elberse (2007), note the difficulties of testing hypotheses for markers of success, in an industry characterized by the one-off nature of film projects.

In their comment on Albert’s (1998) article, Sedgwick and Pokorny (1999) suggest that: “[F]ilm producers ex-ante need to give potential audiences a set of unforeseen, but not unexpected pleasures, which excite. In not knowing what they are about to experience audiences can only know ex-post whether or not their expectations have been met. This is the nature of the business as understood by Hollywood.” For example, the widespread media focus on box office numbers and the business end of entertainment, presented as news and that which can be controlled by Hollywood’s institutional players, can influence perceptions for the public about what constitutes a successful film and filmmaker (Lewis, 2013).

The institutional markers, adopted from existing lists by Epstein, Neale, Schatz et al, have been reconfigured for the thesis, as follows (with notes wherever relevant about clarifications for the current analysis):

*Scale of cost:* Normally, production value has been associated with size of production budget. In this thesis, costs of acquisition and development are considered, as potential blockbuster value is established by purchasing adaptation rights to, for example, a best-selling novel.

*Saturation booking:* This was defined according to the rise of multiplex cinemas across the country, which greatly expanded the number of available screens but also in comparably smaller numbers of seats per individual theatres. Here, the marker accounts for how studios managed the number of screens to increase steadily for sustained box office impact over the course of not just weeks, but months.

*Size of advertising campaign:* The emphasis of saturation, for the purposes of this thesis, is relevant in assessing this marker, given that marketing budgets for the case study films were more concentrated on traditional forms of print and broadcast media. Merchandising tie-ins and product placements were introduced during this period.

*Visual effects:* Ground-breaking visual effects were introduced in two of the case study films and an animatronic monster was featured in a third film. However, other visual effects impacts were introduced by location shooting, period set design and lighting techniques, which added significantly to production budget costs.

*Audience research:* While four of the films were produced before the NRG was established, other aspects of grassroots publicity efforts formed baseline audience observational efforts, including fan conventions and reporting from location set productions (e.g., *The Godfather*, *Jaws* and *Grease*).

*Adaptation:* The definition here is extended to encompass original source material's potential for building fanbase interest in sequels.

*Talent:* The emphasis here is on a new lead role casting for an actor who has not yet appeared in a mainstream studio production.

*Long-tail economic performance:* This new marker acknowledges the Soloveichik consideration of a film as a long-term capital asset with past, present and future revenue platforms taken into consideration and development of global audience markets.

*Domains of control:* This new marker accounts for the separate and overlapping roles of decision-making in the business and artistic domains. This compares the degrees of independence of domain control in various combinations of roles of producer, director and screenwriter vis-à-vis the studio management team.

The remaining markers expand and focus Epstein's blockbuster narrative elements:

*Specific source material:* This encompasses original and adapted content relating to audiences either of specific age demographics or broad spectrum of age categories, with a growing emphasis on younger markets (e.g., pre-teen) to enhance family movie-going experience.

*Child or teen protagonist:* The hero is a character being put to first consequential test in a new role or as a coming-of-age experience.

*Fantasy, fairy tale, science fiction:* As opposed to conventional single classification, the blockbuster came to represent hybrids and cross-overs in genre, encompassing one or more elements that could be shared in multiple genres.

*Family- or age-appropriate relationships:* The lead character or protagonist is involved either in a relationship, mentorship or camaraderie with other major characters.

*Characters, toys for merchandising, licensing:* Gadgets or characters in addition to lead protagonist have been developed for opportunities, suitable for diversified interests.

*Stylized conflict:* Portrayals of violence do not include scenes of death or critical injury and avoid representations of blood or gore in as many instances as practical in narrative telling.

*Open ending with hero prevailing:* This emphasizes narrative development to ensure continuity in sequels but the effect is not just with hero but with anti-hero characters as well, to suggest ever-present threats.

*Animation, special effects, CGI technology:* This ties into the extent and variety of effects used to communication hybrid genre combinations of fairy tale, fantasy, horror, adventure and science fiction.



In the next section, saturation release strategy, which was revised during the New Hollywood period, is discussed, as it relates to decisions about promotional and advertising opportunities for blockbusters.

### **1.7 Saturation blockbuster approach**

Defining the New Hollywood movie is complicated, as King (2002) explains. “Two main sets of claims can be identified. First that New Hollywood represents a style of filmmaking different from that which went before. Second, that it signifies a changed industrial context.” For instance, the era was known for studio executives’ *laissez-faire* attitude towards the creatives (Biskind, 2010), driven by the belief that minimal interference – fewer principals in the decision-making process, quicker decision timing, and lower development costs – led to a better “quality” of movie and, hence, greater success at the box office. This belief applied to the lower end of the studio production budgets where executives were prepared to accept greater levels of risk.

Another crucial factor distinguishing New Hollywood movies from blockbusters was their release strategy. The former titles were released by the platform/cascade method, whereas the latter (post-*Jaws*) approached a saturation method. But King also emphasizes that while “the stylistic and industrial levels of New Hollywood obey their own distinctive logics, they are far from autonomous. The industrial level sets particularly important horizons of possibility, as should be expected in a form of cultural production so strongly governed by commercial imperatives.” Though Sidney Sheinberg, president of Universal Pictures when *Jaws* was released in 1975, is credited with having been the first studio chief to implement a saturation booking release method, the concept had been around for a while (Handel, 1950). Schatz (1983) describes it as a process: “[w]hereby five hundred to a thousand prints of a film would be released simultaneously to theatres nationwide, accompanied by a massive advertising campaign on television, radio and in the print media. The

concentration of these efforts is usually in the large population areas.” Topf (2010) points out that while the saturation approach facilitated cost-effective advertising strategies, a “cascade/platform release film with its own hype surrounding it does not necessarily require large amounts of capital spent informing the public of its release because information about the particular film is being spread through word of mouth”. But, as distributing and screening protocols for new films often are set 30-to-60 days before a premiere, most studios feed word-of-mouth channels with trailer releases. However, in some instances, an intensified campaign immediately prior to release might generate larger volumes of word-of-mouth in messages that mention a best-selling book or song, star talent, director or a new trailer (Gelper, Peres & Eliashberg, 2014).

With *Jaws*, the front-loading of marketing budgets instructed studio executives to plan for a quick return on investment. Thus, to benefit from high-concept marketing, blockbuster movies are forced to adopt patterns labelled as saturation or wide release (Wyatt, 1994). Some could make the argument that some blockbuster succeeded because of its word-of-mouth capacity in the pre-social media era as a “water-cooler movie.” An example was the 1999 release of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the first instalment of *The Lord of the Rings* saga, which premiered in many national and international markets around the world within two weeks.<sup>19</sup> Hallett (2003) says this phenomenon defines how organizational culture is negotiated and integrated among group members – that is, people saw the film to “belong” to the already vocal tribe that had already seen the event, a prerequisite for connecting with the popular tribe. Citing how television has groomed audiences for peak “water cooler” effect, Anderson (2006) explains the limitations of the “zero-sum game” of Hollywood’s “shelf space approach,” where one popular film displaces another in competing for “privileged placement.” He continues: “By putting our commercial weight behind the big winners, we amplify the gap between them and everything else. ... These days our water coolers are

increasingly virtual—there are many different ones, and the people who gather around them are self-selected.” Focusing on the network effects of the two-sided market in advertising supported media and entertainment, Seabright and Weeds (2007) contend that “if advertising declines, such concerns may fall away—only to be replaced in a viewer-driven market by social network externalities. ... [I]n a world of channel proliferation, network effects may permit some programmes to retain a large audience share and gain a higher return.” The development of fandom, for example, in *Star Wars* (1977) created community circles for fans ranging from the casual to the highly engaged, who disseminated positive word-of-mouth outcomes more widespread than would have been achieved through traditional advertising messages alone (Humphrey, Laverie & Shields, 2018).

Likewise, Buckland (2006) takes an evolutionary perspective, observing “the platform release is ... characterized by a film’s gradual distribution around the country, from the cultural centres to the small towns.” Yet by the 1960s when national movie releases were common, Buckland explains, “When a culture becomes nationwide, interest in a product quickly develops and quickly disappears. This is why the studios changed from platform release to saturation release.” However, Buckland’s assertions are too broad for the sake of accuracy. For instance, his claim that: “[t]he studios changed from a platform to saturation release” belies the fact that studios only changed their distribution practices for their blockbuster releases and not across the board for many other releases which, to this day, enjoy platform releases.

Starting with *Jaws*, the saturation release business model emerged as a blockbuster specific protocol. Cucco (2009) highlights three lessons from *Jaws* that were standardized in the blockbuster business model: “the central role of advertising in order to guarantee the success of the film; television’s capacity to advertise a film to viewers and make them want to see it; the importance of the opening weekend, considered to be the most critical moment in the life-cycle of a

product.” Izod (1998, p. 184) concurs, adding “the studio has to decide what release pattern to use with each film. It may be given saturation booking, in which case it will open on anything from 800 to 1,000 screens ... [s]uch a release will be prepared by a massive national advertising campaign.” This has included print media, display and billboard media, radio, television, and other extras such as television feature-length presentations and even background documentaries.

Vogel (2010, p. 123) expands the discussion, noting “simultaneous global release is now often used to thwart unauthorised copying”, to which Buckland (2006, pp. 6-7) adds that “[b]lockbusters encourage the introduction of new distribution patterns, replacing classical Hollywood's preference for platform releases with a saturation release, in conjunction with saturation advertising.” Buckland is correct but again does not go into sufficient detail to make his case. Buckland points out that poor reviews and negative word of mouth likely will dampen box office receipts, which are critical in recouping the cost-inefficient investments of a platform release. Meanwhile, bad reviews or word of mouth are likely to have a delayed impact upon high-velocity releases, which are better positioned to monopolise the market for a brief period. A platform release for a blockbuster that allows customer reaction to determine its fate is simply too risky. Studio executives are more inclined to inject heavy financial resources into promoting a blockbuster with a saturation release in the hopes of making the bank before any negative reviews stop the movie's box office momentum. Platform releases, as Buckland notes, are now reserved for independent films or films most likely to gain critical acclaim.

The binding objective has always been maximization of revenue (Sedgwick & Pokorny, 2010, p. 75). By the middle of the 1970s, film directors and producers were experimenting with new marketing techniques. After a poor box office performance when his film *Billy Jack* premiered in 1971, director Tom Laughlin sued the studio Warner Bros. to reclaim distribution rights for the film.<sup>20</sup>

Wyatt (1998) cites Laughlin's film, along with the release of the sequel three years later as *The Trial of Billy Jack*, as an effective example of the four-wall strategy, in which the distributor directly rents the theatre for screenings. "The four-wall strategy placed a greater onus on the distributor, since the exhibitor received the theatre rental up front. The upside of the deal for the distributor was that, for a high-grossing film, it retained the majority of the box-office revenue." Four-wall engagements were shorter than traditional runs, often just one or two weeks, which Wyatt explains compelled directors such as Laughlin acting as their own distributors to gather as much demographic data about audiences before saturating the respective markets with advertising.

However, Laughlin surprised many industry observers when he opted not to pursue exclusively a four-wall strategy with the 1974 sequel, preferring instead to focus on saturation distribution. As Wyatt (1998) notes, "Given the extraordinary success of the original, Laughlin was able to extract strict terms from the exhibitors for the sequel: a 90/10 split toward Laughlin and a minimum cash guarantee for a low house run for each theatre." This allowed Laughlin to recoup his promotional and negative costs within seven days (Wyatt, 1998). As studios considered saturation bookings, they followed the marketing tactics associated with a four-wall strategy, which Wyatt explains coincided with an increased emphasis in broadcast marketing.<sup>21</sup>

The shift to saturated television advertising coincided with changes in movie trailers. Prior to New Hollywood, trailers were public relations tools to sell audiences with voiceovers sharing flattering quotes from reviews, and revealing little about what the movie portrays. Lewis (2013) highlights two types of trailers that became standard in promoting blockbuster films: teaser trailers often released six months before a film's scheduled premiere (e.g., promoting the film in the Christmas season prior to the following summer) and the story trailer, released closer to the film's opening date). The practices of making trailers

reflected how advertising evolved as audiences become wiser to or are desensitized toward whatever promotional tool or platform is being used to attract them. McLuhan (1967) has argued the advertiser's objective was to capture the contemporary viewer's attention instantly, not worry about an ad's timeless or creative legacy. The trailers served partially the purpose of "front-loading" the audience, a process that boosted a movie's potential blockbuster status while helping to cover and mitigate any potential risks for films that might be vulnerable to negative or lacklustre reviews and lack of word-of-mouth buzz. A study of Hollywood movie trailers as advertising during the annually televised Super Bowl game indicates that "when controlling for budget size and release date, a typical Super Bowl promoted movie from 1998-2001 has generated over 36 percent more revenue during the first week than movies that were not promoted during the Super Bowl in the same timeframe" (Yelkur, Tomkovick & Traczyk, 2004). Of the 18 Super Bowl promoted movies in the study, 15 were the top box office revenue generators for their opening weekends, while the remaining three either finished second or fourth. Meanwhile, the best performer among films not promoted during the Super Bowl was in sixth place. The marketing tactics would permit quicker, better-targeted adjustments to marketing a release pattern that went wider, as summer blockbusters were being highlighted four to six months ahead of their scheduled releases.

Focusing on timing and pacing of release, Krider and Weinberg (1998) suggest that specific release dates contribute to a film's box office performance, as "mass audiences and heavy repeat viewings are more likely when consumers have more disposable time." However, this does not only apply to the two main holiday periods during the summer and at the end of the year. There also are strategic calendar points including those following major awards presentations as well as three-day weekends and breaks in the spring and fall school year, with

opportunities to highlight films geared especially toward younger audiences (Krider et al, 2005).<sup>22</sup>

With *Jaws*, more changes occurred that would change the mindset about distribution. More than 60 percent of box-office revenues were generated by 1,000 key-run indoor theatres – out of a total of roughly 11,500 indoor and 3,500 outdoor theatres in the U.S (Madsen, 1975). However, the rapid expansion of shopping malls, which began in the mid-1960s and continued to the 1980s, also led to a quick jump in indoor theatres, beginning to increase just as *Jaws* was released. The surge of multiplex theatres more than doubled the number of screens in the U.S. in a 15-year period ending in 1990 (Fabricant, 25 November 1990). Krider et al (2005) note that a “lead-lag” approach predominates in Hollywood when it comes to managing its distribution strategy, as “movie distributors and exhibitors appear to be monitoring the weekly box office sales and then responding by adjusting distribution intensity.” Thus, when it is time to decide which “films should be moved in order to allow for a new release, especially with promising opening revenue potential, weekend box office figures are significant.” Hollywood’s entrenched institutional practices typically have resisted pull marketing techniques, such as word of mouth and how initial audience feedback inspires promotional messaging that targets fans and others who are more likely to engage in word of mouth with a new film release. Following the evolution of saturation booking during the New Hollywood period, the next section turns to corresponding shifts in promotional efforts to support distribution strategies, which have amplified a blockbuster’s ‘presentational prowess.’

### **1.8 Promotion and earned media**

As Ainsley (2005) explains, casting an actor with star power, including graphic visuals and using product placements stimulate “free publicity” value for

major films. Studios have tended to avoid micromarketing tactics that encourage word-of-mouth buzz, as discussed earlier. Regarding the broader consequences of advertising not just in Hollywood but also in other industries, Nelson (1975) notes that contrary to perceptions that excessive media advertising expenditures might exaggerate the 'hype' factor in opening week sales, the expenditures generate positive revenue effects in ensuing weeks. However, as Ainsley cites, given that nine new films were being released on average each week during 2003, one might assume that studios knew what they were doing. "However, surprisingly, Hollywood has not put much stock in sales prediction models, arguing that movies are artistic creations that cannot be modelled. The movie industry believes more in instinct and analysis by anecdote." The question of predicting box office performance and audience attendance has been subjected to numerous analyses over the last 50 years, incorporating different variables as prospective measures. Several researchers have looked at the impact of the Academy Awards, on predicting box office revenues. These include Dodds and Holbrook (1988) and Smith and Smith (1986) who conclude there is no statistical confidence because the Academy Awards impact is contingent on movie genre, the specific honour being bestowed and the year of the award. Likewise, movie genre has been studied as a potential predictor by Austin (1980), who has examined the effect of various ratings (e.g., G, PG, PG-13 and R) on movie attendance. Litman and Koch (1989) consider a broad range, including genre, rating, "well-known ideas" as source material, superstar actors and directors, production budget, scheduling and release date. Perhaps the most cogent finding (Litman & Koch, 1989) is that while the Christmas season remains the peak draw for audience numbers, releases during that time are not guaranteed box office success, given intensified studio competition to showcase new films. However, relevant to the release dates for four of the five blockbusters in this thesis, the researchers conclude "the summer season has taken on greater prominence.



Hence, there has been a redefinition of the peak season in favor of the summer” (Litman & Koch, 1989).

Print and television advertising along with trailers remained mainstays but as blockbusters emerged, Wyatt (1994, p. 113) explains how merchandising and music tie-ins became more important in studios’ marketing efforts, especially as conglomeration took hold. “So, merchandising not only maintains an image of the film in the market, but also appeals to the conglomerates’ desire for synergy between their different companies and products,” Wyatt adds that music and product merchandising have grown steadily in the marketing mix. Contextualizing the rise of conglomerates, Meehan characterizes the blockbuster as a “commercial intertext” in her research of *Batman* (1991, p. 62). She has used the *Batman* film for understanding the blockbuster film as a “multimedia, multimarket sales campaign.” Prince (2002) uses the term of “filmed entertainment” to capture all formats: home video, cable television, pay-per-view, and, today, mobile and streaming services.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Epstein (2005) notes, that the “movie business is no longer primarily about movies, it's about creating intellectual properties—the current term of art for a movie, TV series, or game—that can be sold or licensed for personal entertainment in a raft of different forms and markets.” Solovechik (2013), who has assessed a film’s capital asset value, focuses on validity of the business strategy validating the film as an intellectual property: “(1) ‘Strike while the iron is hot’, (2) ‘Open Big’, and (3) ‘Diversify your slate’. This analysis shows that in each year in question for the analysis, about 60 percent of funding allocated to feature films was invested in ‘non-original’ content and that the conglomerates that were the most efficient in applying these principles were also the best earners.” Schatz (2013, p. 34) contends that Hollywood’s long-standing characterization as a vertically integrated industry, “which ensured a closed industrial system and coherent narrative” had given way to the ‘horizontal

integration' of the New Hollywood's tightly diversified media conglomerates. Schatz (2013, p. 26) ties the rise in marketing costs to "Hollywood's deepening commitment to saturation booking and advertising, which has grown more expensive with the continued multiplex phenomenon and the increased ad opportunities due to cable and VCRs." Prince (2002) notes that mergers opened the door for hybrid markets: "This is really what is going to differentiate whether or not these mergers are going to succeed: their ability to use scale to get a whole broader set of revenues out of any one brand or product."<sup>23</sup> Eventually, these mergers would allow companies to gain control over larger shares of the box office revenue market, much like Walmart and Costco had achieved in retailing.

Meanwhile, Cucco (2009, p. 228) cites the importance of concentrating advertising costs for achieving maximum effect. "In distribution, the opening weekend has become the central moment of the life-cycle: the movie theatre is crucial to test people's reactions and establish the commercial value of the film in terms of economic performance and transfer of rights," he explains. Highlighting intense publicity blitzes that accompany saturation releases for blockbusters, Scott (2002) says incentives for "vertical reintegration of the entire production-distribution-exhibition chain in the motion-picture industry" increased anew in the 1980s and 1990s. Federal government authorities, beginning during the Reagan administration, took a looser, more tolerant view of any activities that may have, in earlier periods, been viewed as infringements of the Paramount Decree of 1948.

In prior decades, studios relied on the roadshow for event films, by charging higher ticket prices and issuing them in the context of a unique theatrical experience (Neale, 2013, p. 51). *Jaws* producers and studio executives, who had set about a saturation approach to both marketing and distribution, knew<sup>24</sup> that foregrounding the public about the process of bringing a blockbuster to the screen would enhance the audience's viewing experience (Gomery, 2013). *Jaws*

represented a transitional moment for Hollywood executives, who had hesitated in their relationship with television. “The blockbuster changed all that, allying with television to promote a ‘product’ so efficiently that, while up-front costs of production could soar, profits rose even faster. In turn, this symbiotic linkage to television changed all phases of the Hollywood film industry (Gomery, 2013).” In the early 1980s, infotainment (Wyatt, 1994, p. 106; Hyatt & Vlesmas, 1999) emerged, as the first syndicated entertainment news program premiered on television stations across the country. *Entertainment Tonight’s* success – eventually covering more than 95 percent of the television market in North America -- would inspire countless programs as well as cable networks dedicated to serious and offbeat news in the entertainment industry. Among the most prominent features was the regular reporting of television ratings and box office receipts – once the exclusive domain of trade dailies and weeklies (Caldwell, 1995).

The expansion of entertainment news coincided with the blockbuster business model and the “tent-pole films” strategy (Wyatt & Vlesmas, 1999), which “can support less certain commercial endeavours.” With marketing budgets matching those for production costs, studios typically use a blitz strategy to so a studio release can spend the first weeks as box office leader before a competing blockbuster takes hold. The fixation on box office performance of films has only intensified. In the next section, the question of impact upon box office based on film critics’ reviews is considered.

### **1.9 The impact of reviews and criticism**

While film criticism, certainly a part of Hollywood’s historical institutional chronicle, has been studied extensively, the scholarly literature has only recently focused on gathering empirical evidence to gauge the impact of reviews on box office performance. As with other markers, the results regarding film reviews

either are inconclusive or limited, at best. An indicative study of the limitations is Hirschman and Pieros (1985), who have developed their own measuring standards but limited data to the box office figures for just 10 films and culled reviews from eight publications based in New York City. The lack of empirical evidence may be due to an inherent measurement problem: “products that receive positive reviews tend to be of high quality, and it is difficult to determine whether the review or the quality is responsible for high demand” (Reinstein & Snyder, 2005). For example, negative reviews of blockbusters tended to appear in the press after the box office success was evident. If anything, the significant tilt toward positive reviews emboldened studio executives to continue and redouble their promotion efforts. In their study using reviews of established experts in film criticism, Reinstein and Snyder (2005) focus on “taking a ‘difference in differences’—the difference between a positive and negative review for movies reviewed during their opening weekends and movies reviewed after—the prediction effect can be purged and the influence effect isolated.” While other studies have used an average of hundreds of reviews, Reinstein and Snyder have tested the hypothetical possibilities that the power to influence demand may rest in a few widely respected critics.<sup>25</sup> They have analysed the timing of reviews by two of the most widely read movie critics at the time (the late Roger Ebert and the late Gene Siskel) relative to the weekend in which box office revenue is measured. Concluding the results were consistent with previous surveys about whether filmgoers went because of a positive review, especially if it was featured on a television broadcast, Reinstein and Snyder found the positive review to be significant. However, they also cite indirect effects – such as when a studio or distribution marketing decides to, redouble its marketing efforts, highlighting the positive review in its advertisements. The question is how studios utilise word of mouth as a specific target for their promotional messaging.<sup>26</sup>

In a study where both positive and negative film reviews were examined

against weekly box office revenues over an eight-week period (Basuroy, Chatterjee & Ravid, 2003), researchers have studied how critics affect box office revenue, whether as predictors or influencers and how those impacts affected by the factors of production budget size and appeal of well-known actors. The results have shown that both types of reviews are correlated with revenue trends and that critics play a dual role in the prediction and influence effect. They note the implications for studios planning their marketing campaigns:

If studios expect positive reviews, the critics should be encouraged to preview the film in advance to maximize their impact on box office revenue. However, if studios expect negative reviews, they should either forgo initial screenings for critics altogether or invite only select, “friendly” critics to screenings. If negative reviews are unavoidable, studios can use stars to blunt some of the effects by encouraging appearances of the lead actors on television shows such as *Access Hollywood* and *Entertainment Tonight*.

Basuroy, Chatterjee and Ravid produced two other sets of results, including one showing that negative reviews had a more significant impact on revenues than positive ones. They suggest that “there may be more cost effective options than spending money on advertisements that tout the positive reviews,” including forgoing advance screenings for press and industry, inviting reviewers who are more likely to offer positive feedback and delaying distribution of media kit materials in the hopes of giving the “film an extra week to survive without bad reviews.” The third set of results sought to determine if star power and budgets moderated the influence effect of reviews. They conclude that “big budgets and stars serve as an insurance policy... [where] executives can hedge their bets ... [but] these actions may not be needed and, on average, may not help returns; however, if critics pan the film, big budgets and stars can moderate the blow and perhaps save the executive’s job.” This would support an earlier point about how studio’s marketing efforts emphasizing the scale of production budgets constitute

the primary message in pushing a film's premiere through the opening weeks of its run, to gain the top box office spot.

Film critics might have substantial market power, but as Reinstein and Snyder have demonstrated, it resides in the hands of a few highly influential commentators. Even in the 1970s, film reviews were nearly as widespread as they are today. Every newspaper and magazine had at least one film critic and many had several. In journalism, they have been viewed as objective commentators and consumer advisers and the marketplace for criticism has become so broad and deep that it is difficult for any sense of serious critical bias to develop (King, 2007).<sup>27</sup> King, a World Bank researcher, has compared reviews and box office venues for virtually every film commercially released in the U.S. during 2003. While he concludes that no evidence of correlation could be found, he notes, "but if constraints imposed by strategic decisions on the scale of a film's release are considered, film criticism does appear to have affected earnings." Reviews might not have the same impact if they are quoted as part of the marketing campaign around opening weekend than if they are quoted in advertising several weeks into a film's run when studios look to bolster audience interest, as a competing film is released.

Therefore, a studio's aggressive effort to saturate the market with advertising and promotion in advance of a film's release might be the more critical determinant in opening box office numbers than a critic's assessment. As the blockbuster era took hold, "marketing expenditures have become increasingly important—between 1983 and 2003, for a film made by a member company of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) they rose an average of more than four times in real terms, or from 30 percent to 38 percent of total theatrical costs" (King, 2007). Demographics also are factored, given the target audience for the publication in which the critic is writing. Younger audiences, even in the 1970s, were less likely to be regular newspaper readers so accordingly critics aim

their reviews and commentaries at an older demographic more receptive to trusting negative judgments about particular films (Holbrook, 1999). Confirming what Reinstein and Snyder have concluded earlier, King (2007) has found mixed results in the correlation between critic's impact and box office revenue. He found zero correlation when all film genres are considered, citing the preference many critics have for foreign-made films and documentaries relative to the larger movie-going audience. As for movies with a wide distribution (i.e., that is more than 1,000 screens) King found that critical ratings have a positive impact on gross earnings; "but there is little likelihood that even excellent reviews will propel a movie into wide distribution." As for films in wide release, King concludes there is no significance even as there is a "positive relationship between critical ratings and the box office," adding a critic's recommendation during opening weekend will not be lost amidst the studio's marketing campaign message.

The studies cited above set up the frame to examine how Hollywood's institutional problems connected broadly to the post-Paramount Decree effects and the rise of television's popularity were resolved by entrepreneurs and innovators who challenged and confronted entrenched institutional players and practices in the process of developing the modern blockbuster model. It is this perspective that deconstructs Goldman's contention that, in Hollywood, "nobody knows anything." In recognizing that the predilection for inconsistent and incomplete data is itself a defining characteristic of Hollywood's historical institutional nature, the researcher then turns to the historical qualitative analysis to distil the cognition, behaviours and strategic thinking that integrated innovative practices into an existing model that rejuvenated and reconfigured many of its most venerable features. It is pertinent to consider the entrepreneur's impact on the business and artistic domains of decision-making control of a film's development and production processes and the implications for Hollywood's path

to creativity and innovation.



## **Chapter 2**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

This thesis offers a qualitative study of the blockbuster business model (BBBM™) that evolved during the New Hollywood period (1960s - 1980s) and incorporates comparative case studies representing five purposefully selected films. There are 17 institutional markers of blockbuster films considered in this study (listed in section 2.3) that help assess the blockbuster phenomenon by comparing it with the earlier New Hollywood model. The emphasis is on decision making responses both by entrepreneurs and the industry's studios to ever-changing audience demographics, technological innovation and dramatic shifts in distribution models. A contemporary blockbuster is much more likely to create a ripple effect across the various complimentary platforms than a less heavily promoted non-blockbuster movie. This study will investigate the widely held belief that the most critical indicator of a movie's success is how it fares during opening weekend at the U.S. theatre box office (Young, Gong & Van der Stede, 2010). It will challenge this concept by juxtaposing it against Soloveichik (2013) on the ongoing value created by motion pictures encompassing a period of more than 80 years.

Within the context of Hollywood's historical institutional practices and the integration of entrepreneurial decisions and innovative elements that eventually led to the blockbuster model, the objectives are framed to find evidence and identify 1) well-defined institutional markers of success in the manufacture and release of the initial wave of modern calculated blockbusters; 2) how these well-defined institutional markers were replicated in subsequent films, and in so doing, reduced the financial risk in film production.

Based on the historical review of the development of the film industry from the 1920s to the blockbuster era and the review of key literature on

entrepreneurship and innovation (e.g., Van Dijk et al, 2011, p. 1509; Wadhvani and Lubinski, 2017, p. 787), the following research questions will be investigated: The following research questions will be investigated:

1. Between 1966 and 1985, how did entrepreneurial directors and producers facilitate the transition in New Hollywood to the Blockbuster Business Model by standardising a set of blockbuster markers?
2. How did entrepreneurial directors and producers reframe the promise of radical, independent-led innovation in the New Hollywood period that led to a new wave of institutional control in the era of the calculated blockbuster franchise system?

Regarding the limits on scope, this thesis will not engage with discourse pertaining to the quality of the films produced (as reflected by critics and consumers), although this will be referenced when deconstructing the reasons for the financial performance within the selected case studies. It also will not address cultural issues: for instance, whether blockbusters are representative of and provide audiences with a better understanding of their period. During the portfolio era (e.g., the first half of the New Hollywood period), greater emphasis was placed on making culturally representative films that offered an audience a targeted, relatable, artistic statement specific to its contemporary period (e.g., *Coming Home*, 1978; *Apocalypse Now*, 1979 being among the most prominent in the transitional period) but this was not the case, especially in the latter years of the New Hollywood period, when calculated blockbusters with main characters enjoying super-hero status (*Superman*, 1978) emerged and dominated the Hollywood screen.<sup>1</sup>

## **2.2 Date Range Parameters**

The historical research parameters encompass the years 1966-1985: an era that encapsulated the shift from the New Hollywood era, to the catalyst for,

and evolution of, the blockbuster era, as well as the ensuing importance of franchises and multiple platform releases. The New Hollywood period of 1966-1985 comprised two sub-periods, known as the pre-blockbuster era (1966-1974) and the emergence of the blockbuster era (1975-1985). *The Godfather* was released in 1972, the most financially successful film released during the pre-blockbuster period. The emergence of the blockbuster period comprises the releases of *Jaws* and *Star Wars*, both of which overtook *The Godfather* in box office numbers, but it was the subsequent releases of *Grease* and *Back to The Future* that signalled the calculated blockbuster. This thesis will use Schatz's definition (2013) of the "calculated blockbuster", as movies, which are manufactured from the ground up to be blockbusters. It will delineate these as being "massive advertisements for their product line", "designed with the multimedia marketplace and franchise status in mind" (Stringer, 2013).

My research parameters are restricted to between 1966 and 1985, to undergird Thompson and Bordwell's (1994) observation about the patterns that evolved among studios in the 1970s to reverse the industry's economic decline and that still influence how the industry's output is determined. Existing research has focused on the demise of portfolio movie production in the succeeding years. While studios have focused on the production of bigger budgeted hits, the majority of movies they are involved with either as co/financiers and/or distributors remain, by definition, "portfolio" type movies. They might not exert the same control as observed during the Studio Era (1927-1949), nor do they carry the risk burden associated with that business model, in that a considerable percentage of such productions is delegated to independent film producers (a "privatization" of the process) (Eliashberg, Hui & Zhang, 2007). Or, furthermore, the movies are acquired after they are completed and tested, thus categorically reducing the risk factor.

### 2.3 Case Study Rationale and Selection

Five case studies comprise the analysis: *The Godfather* (1972), *Jaws* (1975), *Star Wars* (1977), *Grease* (1978) and *Back to The Future* (1985). Their selection was purposeful in compiling a comprehensive case history of the blockbuster evolution during the New Hollywood period. Three of the five films were adapted from established literary material (*The Godfather*, *Jaws* and *Grease*) while two were based on original material (*Star Wars* and *Back to The Future*). While elements of nostalgia could be identified either directly or indirectly in all five films, the use of nostalgia was strategically prominent in two case studies (*Grease* and *Back to The Future*). A key marker of blockbusters is franchising potential and all five films launched sequels. Another notable feature in all five of the blockbusters, which came to define in aggregate the blockbuster business model, is that at least one previously untested element central to its development and production was present. Only one of the five films had developed its release principally upon the strategic promotional concept of star power (John Travolta in *Grease*). In only *The Godfather* was the script created by a bankable screenwriter. In four of the five films, none of the directors was considered a bankable talent, as evidenced by work credited prior to directing the blockbuster in question. The only exception was Robert Zemeckis for *Back to The Future*, but he only achieved the status for a film released a year prior, in 1984 – *Romancing The Stone*.

Each case study comprises the following sections: a brief introduction; a discussion of the screenwriting process as it applied directly to strategic decisions for promotional and marketing purposes; markers of production including casting, location sets, rehearsal and filming schedules, use of special effects and other elements including music, animation and choreography; markers of marketing and promotional including print and broadcast advertising, trailers, merchandising and soundtracks; markers of distribution patterns and strategies,

box office trends and financial performance including stock price shares for respective studios; markers of critical reviews referencing the blockbuster phenomenon and implications of each blockbuster selected for the thesis, and conclusion. The markers were taken from the literature (as explained in Chapter 1).

While most existing literature on case study research, especially Eisenhardt (1989) and Yin (2009), has focused on the methodology's merit of generalizing to theory, this study's emphasis on case studies constitutes an important incremental step in establishing the "replication logic" that would be essential to building a future theory on the topic (Eisenhardt). "The search for similarity in a seemingly different pair also can lead to more sophisticated understanding," Eisenhardt explains. "When a pattern from one data source is corroborated by the evidence from another, the finding is stronger and better grounded." The approach in this study highlights a unique set of case studies that sets forth a bespoke iterative path to collect data and analyse how the blockbuster film emerged as a prevailing strategy which has attempted to outline the contours of a testable business model theory. Tsang (2014) explains that a "multiple-case design provides a stronger basis for empirical generalization than a single-case design, because the former is in a better position to show that what is to be generalized is not an idiosyncratic trait of one case." This robust approach, incorporating multiple case studies, will be employed to answer the research questions outlined above.

This thesis follows the objective of looking for patterns within the markers across all five film case studies, as suggested by Eisenhardt. The qualitative aspects include primary and secondary resources from a breadth and depth of industry practitioners as well as scholars who have focused variously on business, creative and cultural dimensions of film, in the hopes of minimising concerns about selectivity and bias. Primary source materials provide a foundation for

comparing the magnitude and impact of changes across the five case studies using the set of institutional markers covering the entire production history of the specified blockbuster films. Secondary sources served as an analytical foundation for assessing the predictive value of these proxy markers as they related to the overall box office performance, marketing impact of release and distribution strategies and ongoing revenue streams as different consumer platforms for viewing films became available.

Primary sources include direct materials or interviews that were contemporary at the time of a film's production. An example is the extensive oral history of the making of *Star Wars*, recorded during the production process and published shortly after the film's 1977 release, compiled by Charles Lippincott, the vice president for marketing and purchasing for Lucasfilm Ltd., LLC. Others include first-person accounts and interviews included in subsequent video package releases, often labelled as "bonus material," such as with *Grease* and *The Godfather*. For *Jaws*, screenwriter Carl Gottlieb (1975), who was also interviewed in 2018, kept a log published immediately after the film was released. For *Back to The Future*, Caseen Gaines, a pop culture historian, wrote a book about the production history of the franchise's three films, published in 2015 to coincide with the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first film's release.

While reviews of films released constitute secondary resources, articles from newspapers, general periodicals and trade magazines that reported on events related to various production issues and controversies at the time of the film's making are considered primary sources.<sup>2</sup> These were available for all five films, as were the studios' annual reports, representing the years when the films were released. Likewise, ads and trailers for each of the film's marketing campaigns are primary sources. These articles provided contemporary facts about the history of a film's making, the roles of directors and studio executives, decisions and changes in casting, development of screenplay and adaptation of

published materials and industry promotional events and activities. These were most prevalent in four case studies: *The Godfather*, *Jaws*, *Grease* and *Back to The Future*.

The author conducted semi-structured interviews with industry principals connected to three films (*Jaws*, *Grease* and *Back to The Future*). Requests were made to principals in all five films but some declined to participate. Access to Hollywood insiders is difficult, but the interviews the author secured occurred because of the author's professional connections. This also was the case with other industry professionals who commented more generally on business aspects, as based on their expertise to verify and expand upon existing secondary source materials or offer background details.

While the written records in the selected case studies were extensive, the historical emphasis in the research could be rounded out by conducting interviews from major creative principals. During the 1970s, the intersections of existing institutional cultures and innovative practices that would reset and realign the institutional character of Hollywood make ideal ground for comparative historical analysis. "The comparative mode can also be used in order to discover and specify the uniqueness of phenomena in a particular society (individualising comparison)" (Bilteyst and Meers, 2016, p. 17). Regarding a methodological consideration, the pillars of quantitative and scientific methods (including replication, duplication or reproducibility) by themselves necessarily do not satisfy the objectives of the cinema history researcher, Bilteyst and Meers would content. The use of qualitative methods, including interviews and oral history, signal that :interpretation and subjective evaluation are important, [also] making replication an interesting strategy to explore, mainly in an attempt to test hypotheses or to explore new dimensions" (Bilteyst and Meers, 2016, p. 24).

Given that the written history encompassed decisions made as much as 40 years ago or more, the interviews offered the opportunity to probe inner mindsets that might not have been captured in the written record. Similarly, “the interviewing process allows the astute investigator, in effect, to cross-examine informants and thereby reveal sources of bias” (Witkowski and Jones, p. 75, 2006) and “to intervene directly in the generation of historical evidence relating to the recent past” (Elliott and Davies, p. 245, 2006). While some may fault the use of interviews after such a long gap (e.g., four decades), it also permits insights to be “gained when people recount their experiences divorced in time from the emotional intensity and popular ideologies of the past” (Elliott and Davies, p. 247, 2006). This is an important point, if one acknowledges the pressing effects of the embedded networks of power in institutional Hollywood studios of that time on the cognitive mindset of individuals who may not have been fully aware of the implications of the historic changes that brought about the blockbuster model. “When examined from the distance of time, however, institutionalized power becomes more apparent, particularly when examining periods of historical disruption (Suddaby, Foster and Mills, p. 115, 2014).

Secondary resources included opinion pieces, reviews and generalized analyses in newspapers, magazines, Hollywood trade journal articles and reports published at the time and accessed via web and British Film Institute based archival research. Most box office revenues came from external sources that were aggregated by reports in industry trade publications such as *Variety* and by online sources such as *BoxOfficeMojo.com* (and *Internet Movie Database IMDb.com*) In addition, secondary source materials included scholarly and mainstream literature – both from business and financial studies perspectives as well as by widely cited industry critics, film historians and others who specialize in studying the strategic evolution of the Hollywood industry for blockbuster films. The five case studies provide a cross-sectional analysis based on the markers of innovation



that set forth the blockbuster business model in definition and practice. The analysis objective is to identify shared themes that elucidate the decision-making perspectives in creative and financial contexts, which have shaped the studio's approach in the blockbuster business model.

## **2.4 Research Integrity and Limitations**

Evaluating the roles of “expert interviews in this way are well placed for research on technical knowledge, process knowledge, as well as the interviewee's interpretive knowledge or points of view and interpretations” (Bogner, Littig & Menz, 2016, p. 15). Caution is warranted, as the author recruited interview sources, based on his own work and network within the Hollywood industry. Considering an insider with access to hands-on sources, one accepts the requirement for objectivity and self-reflexivity (Nightingale, 2008, pp. 105-106):

In observation-based research, ‘exchange’ between the researcher and the research subjects is the medium that assists the transformation of ideas and thoughts into the words and activities recorded. Exchange also acts as a corrective to the assumptions inherent in the researcher (his or her predisposition to counter-transference) that might otherwise be projected onto the research subjects.

While I conducted interviews, the process raises ethical issues similar to those identified by Nightingale”. With the interview data, for example, the benefit of being an industry insider offers advantages of incorporating previously unrecognised perspectives, knowing industry-specific terminology and elucidating sensitive information previously unknown. This includes cross checking for reliable memory recall, as subjects discuss film projects made 30 or 40 years ago. Instead of standardized questionnaires, the exchange was structured for respondents to engage with the facts and secondary source

material being presented in a case study. They were asked not only to confirm or verify details but also to address conflicting observations and assessments in secondary source materials, as well as fill gaps in detail. This encouraged them not only to respond to my observations, but those of others. In instances, where the source's recollections or statements contradict facts of record, these have been indicated and annotated. As a shortcoming in much film history research revolves around access to data and archival materials as primary sources, it becomes imperative for the researcher to contextualise first-hand observations with customary expectations of accountability and transparency.

The case study approach undertaken here incorporates the institutional markers to establish an analytical base upon which the evolving distinctions of decision-making roles in the artistic and business domains occurred and how entrepreneurs and historical institutional players mutually responded to those changes across the spectrum of the five case studies, representing the initial 15-year phase of the blockbuster era.

## Chapter 3

### THE GODFATHER

#### 3.1 Introduction

Released three years before *Jaws* (1975), *The Godfather* (1972) proved to be one of the most successful films in the first half of the New Hollywood era. Much has been written about *Jaws*' success as a pioneering blockbuster film in terms of its special effects and the near flawless innovation and coordination of its distribution and marketing campaigns (Shone, 2004). On the other hand, many scholars and film historians (Malloch & Kleymann, 2013; Braudy, 1986; Hess, 1975) have focused more on the narrative strengths of *The Godfather*, finding less evidence in the distribution and marketing efforts that helped, but were not instrumental, in catapulting the film into the record books. The narrative adaptation in *The Godfather* superseded the genre limitations of the classic gangster film by developing characters and background stories with strong appeal to reach the desired 'tent-pole' market and set the stage for franchised sequels. This chapter will compare and synthesize these approaches, reconciling the disputing claims and perspectives, to establish *The Godfather* as the preeminent original modern blockbuster that tied a popular narrative to the appeal for championing antiheroes and the Zeitgeist frame of the national cultural landscape driven by growing mistrust of the Establishment and the connection with outlaws (Santopietro, 2012).

*The Godfather* is a definitive case study for the following reasons: 1) the exceptional revenue generated by the film; 2) the direct correlation of box office performance with the Gulf & Western stock price (Allan, 16 April 1972); 3) motivation for studio executives (Baker and Faulkner, 1991) to decipher the film's phenomenal success; and 4) the consequential identification of markers of

evidence, which allowed them to replicate *The Godfather's* success. Producers began “investing more money in script development, bestselling books... and using broad new marketing techniques, thus beginning a trend toward large-scale box-office successes beyond anything ever seen before in the industry” (Santopietro, 2012). Forty-five years ago, marketing for a major film resembled even more of an unsure gamble than in today’s intense competition for blockbuster visibility. Films opened in comparably far fewer numbers of screens across the country. The idea of a film having an opening weekend box office gross in dollars equal to today’s adjusted value represented \$100 million or more in 1972 currency was unheard of and advertising budgets were focused most heavily on comparably less expensive print placements. Broadly saturated distribution of a new film was discouraged, as many studio heads and marketers worried that it would lead to a quick burnout in audience and media interest.<sup>1</sup>

By the time *The Godfather* essentially swept the top honours at the annual Academy Awards in early 1973, Hollywood studio executives had already moved rapidly within nine months to follow *The Godfather's* example. This established a trend toward large-scale box office successes, on the premise that if one Hollywood success could spawn others, then that risk could be mitigated. In the case of *The Godfather*, however, it set the tone for the future of an entire industry. By the time *Jaws* (1975) was released, studio cadres had undergone an intensive learning curve (*Business Week*, 11 July 1977, p. 36) on the optimal manufacture and release of films, not only using *The Godfather* as a learning curve, but also *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin (1973)). This provided the makers of *Jaws* with a highly evolved and tested set of tools designed to maximise its revenue. Viewing the historical evolution of the blockbuster business model, one should not underestimate the influential impact of *The Godfather* on the strategic mindset of Hollywood studios, executives, producers and directors.

This relates directly to one of the thesis research questions:

How did entrepreneurial directors and producers reframe the promise of radical, independent-led innovation in the New Hollywood period that led to a new wave of institutional control in the era of the calculated blockbuster franchise system?

In the transition phase of the New Hollywood era, with front loaded marketing budgets, studio executives focused on quicker returns for their production and promotional costs, utilized saturation or wide release strategies more frequently with the premiere of their films. However, *The Godfather's* premiere, organized without specific metrics-based support, targeted only five theatres, though its quick success encouraged distribution on a steadily expanding number of screens.

Despite Paramount's significant initial reticence about approving *The Godfather* for production, due to the disappointing performance of the 1968 Kirk Douglas Mafia genre film *The Brotherhood*, directed by Martin Ritt (Jones, 2009), the film's eventual performance convinced studio executives that the audience appeal for stories about the mafia would remain strong. They began working on the sequel well before the release of the original. This highlights a vulnerability in the evaluation process of Hollywood film-packages (Ross, 2011), as the industry, to this day, tends to favour the manufacture of sequels, and same-genre projects, based mainly on the genre<sup>2</sup> of the catalyst film, as opposed to a stand-alone project, based on its narrative merits, or lack thereof.

*The Godfather* not only benefited from a strong narrative, but also from its ability to connect with the water-cooler themes that preoccupied and united the nation at the time. The culturally-driven reactions serendipitously gave the film its boost in audience appeal. As one investigative journalist (Gagi, 19 March 1972) noted, "Reading about and viewing men who can seemingly flaunt the law at will but have precise rules of conduct to live by offers vicarious satisfactions to an American public that feels both rootless and powerless. Or perhaps it's just nostalgia for the extended family."<sup>3</sup> In so doing, the film's storyline also explored

issues of masculinity, appealing to the many men of all ages and backgrounds, who felt emasculated by an unequal justice system, as well as within work related power structures. To many, the concept of a man daring to pick up a gun to defend his family, when so-called “law and order” would not provide adequate protection, seen as an empowering and an empathetic gesture.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, such observations underscored the arguably superficial habit producers and Hollywood executives had of pigeonholing the audience and the market, believing that *The Godfather's* success was tied to the public's keen interests in and infatuation with the mafia. While gangsters had largely disappeared from the movie screen during the 1940s, television served to captivate the interest of Americans on coverage of organized crime. In 1951, an estimated 30 million viewers watched live television coverage of the U.S. Senate hearings for the Special Committee on Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce that was convened by U.S. Senator Estes Kefauver. The broadcasts made Kefauver one of the country's most recognized politicians. A decade later, televised hearings featuring Joseph Valachi of the Luciano crime family captivated similar interest. It was then when many Americans heard for the first time the mention of ‘La Cosa Nostra.’<sup>5</sup> While Americans had always loved classic western stories for film and television, the Valachi story attracted attention because he was the first person known to have worked directly in the Mafia's innermost circle to relate his experiences of how the crime organization operated.

Given the box office performance of *The Brotherhood* (1968)<sup>6</sup>, studio executives did not know whether or not audiences would watch *The Godfather*. This implies executives were not as attuned to the audience's reception nor the depth and breadth of the contemporary socio-political climate. *The Godfather* stands out in popular and critical opinion as one of the most enduring works of the American cinema. It appears at the top of countless best-film lists. As a commercial venture the original and, to a lesser extent, *The Godfather II*, were

blockbusters. With the franchise's third film released in 1990, the trilogy became a billion-dollar business.

More so than *Jaws*, *The Godfather* franchise infused a broad spectrum of contemporary social culture – both in high and low forms of art and entertainment. Many signature scenes became icons for pop culture and socio-political relevance – either by attitude or by direct quotation. Few other American films in the last half-century have influenced or have contributed so prominently to American cultural vocabulary.

Francis Ford Coppola was a classically defined *bricoleur* (Malloch & Kleymann, 2013) who effectively interwove strategic creative decisions with the practicalities of bringing a story to the screen. He made *The Godfather* before committee filmmaking and the control of agents and executives wholly changed the way films are made. *The Godfather* emboldened studio executives to believe (erroneously) that they had found a template for film success. Once these cadres seized control, which Coppola had managed to orchestrate so adeptly to maximize revenue and minimize risk, the freedom of the *bricoleur* was undercut to the point of no longer being seen as a strategic option.

This analysis focuses on the following pertinent elements in defining a blockbuster: the underpinning success of the novel and its role in generating a long lead-in campaign for marketing and promotion; the significance of roles taken by the director and producer in reconciling concerns about screenplay adaptation and character representation in the narrative framing, autonomy in creative decision-making and dealing with socio-cultural controversies that threatened to derail the production; the casting of a mix of established and new actors; and the film's deliberated release strategy and the strategic importance of expert critic reviews and audience response in theatres. The next section returns to five years before *The Godfather's* release as the process was established first

for ensuring the novel's success as a best-seller and then framing the adaptation for its translation to the cinematic screen.

### **3.2 Blockbuster Narrative Adaptation**

Even before the original novel was completed, *The Godfather* had strong expectations. A *New York Times* article in March 1967 gave the first indication that many viewed as a reinvigorating opportunity for the industry, with the announcement that Peter Bart, a Paramount executive, had optioned two novels as potential bestsellers and box office hits. Bart was known for taking early stage projects through their development, often lasting several years and that he was willing to support writers with advances or payment for rewrites (Lebo, 1997, p. 3). Bart optioned the galley of the unfinished Mario Puzo novel, originally titled "Mafia", with 114 pages of manuscript completed and the rest in outline form. In 1968, after three years of work, Puzo completed "Mafia", which was by then renamed *The Godfather*. "Not only was Putnam ready to produce a massive first printing, but Puzo's agent was negotiating a sale of paperback rights to Fawcett that would eventually net \$410,000 – at the time the largest paperback advance in publishing history." Three months before the book was published in 1969, Paramount acquired the movie rights for \$80,000 – "it would turn out to be the find of the century." It was an early indicator of the film's potential.

Browne (p. 19), a film professor at the University of California at Los Angeles who has studied the refiguring of American film genres, has argued the film's grand operatic scale connected with an unsettled nation realizing that the war in Vietnam could not end with victory for the U.S. The storyline balanced the critique of an imperfect country with positive attributes of family values, solidarity and unconditional love. Its elegiac frame emerged as a strength. They acknowledged that even news of mob activity and controversies over the depictions of Italian-Americans hardly deterred or diluted public interest or



enthusiasm for *The Godfather* story. This harkened to the popularity of the Kefauver and Valachi hearings that aired on television.

Bart (Allan, 16 April 1972) was confident and proven right: the impact of the film on the motion picture industry has been (and remains) “extraordinary.” It eradicated the inertia and defeatist attitude that often characterized Hollywood<sup>7</sup> at the time, when many wondered if Hollywood could ever compete realistically against the American public’s entrenched television viewing habits. Unlike *Jaws*, which relied on traditional horror movie tools and special effects to catch its youthful audience, the strongest but not only significant foundation for *The Godfather’s* impact upon the evolution of the blockbuster business model lies in the broad, deep discursive and relatable power of its narratives<sup>8</sup> as a model for audiences who follow the adult drama genre (Brody, 2017).

Many authors would have envied the circumstances Puzo enjoyed. Puzo had received a modest advance from his publisher G. P. Putnam Sons but Paramount Studios contemplated purchasing the film rights two years before the book was published. Twenty-six weeks into its 1969 release, the book made the top of *The New York Times’* bestsellers’ list and remained there for four and a half months.<sup>9</sup> In 1975, after *The Godfather* and its sequel were released, the novel sold more than 12.1 million copies in hardcover and paperback, with three-fourths of its total sales coming before *The Godfather’s* 1972 release. Putnam planned an extensive marketing campaign for the novel, ahead of its March 10, 1969 release.

In the 20 January 1969 issue of *Publishers Weekly* in a section titled “Spring Highspots,” which listed 275 leading books being published from February through May, a short synopsis of *The Godfather* was included. Under the synopsis was a notice, in italics: “will receive Putnam's biggest advertising and promotion campaign ever, with a full page in *NY Times’ Book Review*, large space in *Book World*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Los Angeles Times*, and elsewhere.” On page 7 of

the 10 February 1969 issue of *Publishers Weekly*, Putnam ran a large ad highlighting many books, including *The Godfather*. The book is pictured, along with a paragraph about its plot, as well as this information: "Selected by Literary Guild, sold to Fawcett for the highest six-figure price in Putnam's history, coming as a major motion picture from Paramount, here comes your #1 Fiction bestseller for spring!" It was a good example of the Pareto Principle of economics (Walls, 2005), a broader concept developed by the 19<sup>th</sup> century Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto. In Hollywood, it was reflected in the idea that a studio's largest share of profits will come not from an "average" movie but one about its potential to be successful on a blockbuster scale.

Ironically, one of the book's – and the film's – most compelling aspects was its critique of the amorality and the collapse of integrity and ethics in American business and politics. Chappetta (1972) wrote in a scholarly journal during the film's most active period of distribution that in "*The Godfather*, it is not so much that the Mafia is being used as a metaphor for American business (as a moralistic indictment of business), but that American business is being used as a metaphor for the Mafia (as an ironic "justification" of the Mafia). As Calvin Coolidge put it, 'The business of America is business' -- whatever that business might be." The *New York Times*' review of Puzo's completed novel summarized accordingly, "The deeper strength of the narrative comes from examinations of the Mafia mind... a conviction that street justice is more equal and more honest than the justice practiced in the courts" (Schaap, 27 April 1969). Browne (1972) explained, "the distinctiveness of Coppola's and Puzo's adaptation of Puzo's novel lies in its reinterpretation of the generic conventions of the crime film in the direction of the family melodrama and the epic. It is this transformation of subject matter that gives the films their popular appeal." Puzo's novel, as it was expanded in the film by Coppola, reflected the director's intention to present Michael Corleone, the son who would be the Godfather's successor as a broad metaphor for America. "Also,

I always wanted to use the Mafia as a metaphor for America,” Coppola added. “This metaphor presumably suggests that the experiences of Michael in Part One, emerging from World War II as an innocent hero, becomes progressively corrupted as he becomes involved in the family’s “business,” are to be understood as a representation of America’s post-war history” (Farber, 1972, p. 223). The question, though, became if the audience accepted and comprehended Coppola’s demythologized metaphor of the country or if they identified with the family because it represented classic family values and the importance of close-knit communities.<sup>10</sup>

*Jaws* also had a narrative-driven conceptual audience hook, but was more limited in historical scope. That film reflected in part the public’s disaffection and sagging confidence in its most trusted and valued institutions (i.e., the failure of the American military efforts in the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal in the presidency). In *Jaws*, the small-town mayor struggled to protect the beach-going citizens from the shark whilst being manipulated by the business interests of the city, in the form of business owners, who do not want anything to interfere with their beach season earnings. This correlated with *The Godfather’s* narrative appeal of the individual stepping up to do the just, fair thing while abiding potential life-altering risk to himself. This has been a persistent classical theme in many films from *The Magnificent Seven* (John Sturges (1960) to *Death Wish* (Eli Roth (2018)). *The Godfather’s* characters embodied myths that span nearly the whole spectrum of American history (Simon, 1983, p. 75):

The ‘vigilante’ myth, in that they are positively shown to protect the weak in the absence of an efficacious and non-corrupt law enforcement system. And they conform to the ‘myth of equality through violence’ in the way that they use their skills at violence and crime to rise from poverty to a position of wealth and power. Above all, there is a direct appeal to the “everyman,”

everyone who has experienced injustice and the helplessness to do anything about it.

The Everyman reference anchored the film's narrative appeal like no other crime film, specifically about the Mafia, had managed previously. Jellinek (1969) wrote that "*The Godfather* is the patriarch, Don Vito Corleone, a deliberate, old-fashioned protector and man of respect... 'Never get angry... never make a threat. Reason with people,' he advises his son... 'We will manage our world for ourselves because it is our world, Cosa Nostra. And so we have to stick together to guard against outside meddlers.'" Jellinek's comment, however, needs to be extended. Whatever virtues there were to be culled from patriarchy, the film shows that in the brutal, unconditional competition between and among men in the organized crime world that one's self-senses of security, happiness and satisfaction were undermined by the system. The reason so many people empathized with the Corleones was that (apart from the eldest son, the hot-tempered Sonny, who pays the ultimate price for challenging the Godfather's dictates) violence was on the whole only used as a last resort, when betrayed.

Puzo's novel was unique in a nonfiction genre that typically hosted accounts of mob-affiliated criminals arrested by law enforcement. *The Godfather* offered characters, unapologetically imperfect, but yet possessing the attributes of family love and loyalty. Jellinek (1969) wrote in his review of Puzo's novel, "If you want vividly unsentimental information about the Mafia, read Peter Maas' *The Valachi Papers*." Yet, it must be reiterated, even if naturally apparent, empathy for the Corleones was never meant to suggest empathy for the real mob. This highlights the significance of the source material in defining *The Godfather's* success.

Puzo's book breathed new dimensions into the stale cinematic stereotypes of Mafia criminals, not shorting narrative on detailed descriptions of violent

crimes and assassinations but rounding and amplifying characters with emotion and sincere, credible traits. Some cultural critics resisted the multidimensional, complex portrayals. Cawalti (1975), reviewer for *Critical Inquiry*, criticized the family for being “presented to us in a morally sympathetic light, as basically good and decent people who have had to turn to crime in order to survive and prosper in a corrupt and unjust society.” Puzo responded to this criticism in an interview in *Publishers' Weekly* by saying: “I think it is a novelist's job not to be a moralist but to make you care about the people in the book”.<sup>11</sup> Puzo makes no judgments except to elucidate for readers how “the actions of the Corleones and their extended family are likewise justified by the motivations behind their actions and the characterization of their victims, causing readers to both like and identify with the characters.” There are no clear protagonists or antagonists. Midwood (1971, pp. 50-51), reviewer for *Esquire* magazine, wrote, “The author has chosen to portray all Godfather's victims as vermin and his henchmen as fairly sympathetic.” Early in the novel, and in the film's opening scenes, *The Godfather* is portrayed as a loving, loyal family patriarch who only asks for the simplest forms of friendship from those who come to his office with requests, many of them commonplace and legal. No request is refused nor does he judge any of those who visit and pay their respects. Oddly, the only request that straddles the matter of morality comes from a mortuary director who wants revenge for an attack that injured his daughter. The men were arrested, tried and sentenced to three years in prison but the sentence was suspended – unsatisfactory justice for the father who asks the Godfather to go after his attackers. It is a complex and conflicted scene through which readers (and viewers) are encouraged to sympathize with the frustrated father. The Corleone family narrative defied the rising tide of postmodern fatalism, as characters were portrayed as controlling their fates, while growing stronger than ever. And, “by the smart use of adroit parallels, Puzo and Coppola further mitigate any sense of collective audience guilt at rooting for

killers,” thus turning words into revenue, as observed from the vantage point of the studio executives (Santopietro, 2012, p. 90).

Undoubtedly, these parallels were strengths without the fear of becoming unmanageable paradoxes in the telling of the story. The path for *The Godfather's* was primed by the sustained, positive reception of a novel that introduced much of the essential background and Italian terminology associated with the Mafia while offering a template as an adult drama tailored to the relevant contemporary social, cultural and political tensions of the 1970s. While the novel served the screenplay, in which Puzo assisted, the film amplified the ruthlessness the son Michael Corleone carried through in taking over the family business. Unlike the book, the young Corleone's wife does not accept the reality of her husband entering the business. The narrative also would present unique challenges in the film production. Not ironically, the story of *The Godfather's* making is nearly as compelling as the film's narrative.

### **3.3 Production**

This section summarizes the numerous production controversies and conflicts that had their bases in two aspects. One was tied to external concerns about perpetuating negative, unjustified stereotypes of Italian-Americans as Mafia figures. The other focuses on how Coppola and producer Albert Ruddy overcame the organized external resistance to the production. Coppola's skills as a *bricoleur* helped reconcile the creative and practical tensions associated with the controversy on the set as well as in the public and media.

Seven months prior to *The Godfather's* release in the spring of 1972, a *New York Times* article (Piliaggi, 15 August 1971) chronicled the production difficulties that had beleaguered the film's progress. Paramount Studio executives had received letters threatening to disrupt filming with protests, demonstrations and

wildcat strikes. Some letters expressed concerns about the film portraying Italians negatively in ways that would perpetuate ethno-racist stereotypes. The article recounted a pivotal agreement Albert Ruddy, the film's producer, eventually reached with one of the Mafia families:

The moment he reached that agreement with Colombo, Ruddy's troubles were over. There were no more Manhassetts [the Long Island location where threats of work stoppage by unionized production set employees who were under the control of mob leaders]. Suddenly, with Colombo's imprimatur, the threats of union woes evaporated. Planned demonstrations and boycotts were called off. A location for the Godfather's mall with a garden large enough for the huge wedding sequence was found on Staten Island, and Colombo's men made a house-to-house tour of the neighborhood, smoothing ruffled Italian-American feathers. Somehow, even the protest letters from Italian-American groups stopped once it was understood that an agreement had been reached with the League. When the filming actually began, Ruddy found that with Colombo's men around, instead of being harassed by neighborhood toughs, shaken down by various unions, visited by corrupt cops and generally treated like any other movie company in New York, "*The Godfather*" troupe was untouchable.

The legal infrastructure of the city not being able or willing to protect them, the producer Albert Ruddy struck a deal with the head of one of the most powerful "families," Joseph Anthony "Joe" Colombo, Sr. and overnight, their problems disappeared. It was a notable feat considering how Hollywood publicists often strain, exaggerate and use hyperbole to generate buzz for an upcoming release. In this case, Ruddy's actions and responses demonstrated how truth can be as effective if not more so, than manufactured publicity.

Several years earlier, when Paramount had eyed Puzo's novel for the film, the studio was set to release *The Brotherhood*, the 1968 film about a Vietnam War veteran who returns to his family in New York, where his father is a Mafia boss. The narrative resembled *The Godfather* story. For *The Brotherhood*, Ritt, a veteran director, was tapped to helm the production, which was well controlled with its mix of conventional location and studio camerawork. However, Ritt's scenes in

Sicily did not communicate the vibrancy that Coppola did with similar scenes for *The Godfather*. And, while there is considerably more dialogue in *The Godfather* than in *The Brotherhood*, the dialogue in Ritt's film did not develop with a climactic sequence of action in mind and seemed much less eventful than its successor. But, Ritt also did not have to endure the potentially production-ending conflicts and protests, which surrounded the making of *The Godfather*.

Despite the novel's outstanding performance on the bestsellers' list in 1969, Paramount hesitated in proceeding with *The Godfather* because of risk concerns about its financial potential. Many films, burdened by significant production costs, failed to recoup their budgets at the box office, and even Kirk Douglas' star power, was unable to propel *The Brotherhood* out of red ink territory. "Sicilian mobster films don't play" was distribution's bottom line," an observer recalled. "When you bat zero, don't make another sucker bet" (Lebo, 1997, p. 7). However, given the book's strong sales, Paramount could not afford to delay the project for too long, as many other studios and independent producers were interested in bringing Puzo's book to the screen.

Word-of-mouth buzz (Schatz, 2013) is an influential indicator of a successful cinematic adaptation of a bestselling novel. Hutcheon (2006, pp. 4, 10 and 25) explains that a successful adaptation, incorporating the requisite cinematic creative skills to make the text one's unique, autonomous expression, is "a repetition without replication," and balances "the comfort of ritual and recognition with the delight of surprise and novelty." Both genres (literature and film) are distinct because they evoke and provoke unique responses respective of their settings but both also share the ritualistic aspects of giving their readers and reviews aesthetic pleasure and entertainment. Thus, as Morrissette (1985) explains, they both fulfil their designations as art forms even as their ways of conveying images follow different paths.



In the spring of 1970, a year after the novel was released and just six weeks after the book made the top spot on *The New York Times'* bestsellers list, Paramount approved the project with Puzo, who had never penned a screenplay, writing the script and Ruddy, who had yet to bring a box office success to full realization, producing. The director for the film had yet to be named. After most of the available A-list Hollywood directors had passed, the project was offered to Coppola, then known more as a successful screenwriter<sup>12</sup> than a director, who also passed. After being reminded by his wife Eleanor of the perilous state of their finances and that he owed Warner Bros. more than \$200,000, he reconsidered.

Then in his early thirties, Coppola read the script based on Puzo's novel, and focused on the traits of the main characters. With Ruddy's support, he campaigned to make the film not as a modern version of a crime shootout film, as the studio had intended, but as a complex, narrative-driven story of high quality and wide appeal. He saw the father as a simultaneously cunning, ruthless and kind, King Lear inspired character, whose sons are incomplete descendants -- each of whom demonstrating only one of these qualities -- but not the other two. From that perspective, Coppola believed that the audiences would gravitate toward these flawed characters. Paramount warmed to *The Godfather* project as proposed by Ruddy and Coppola. With Gulf+Western supplementing the budget substantially, the production moved from an original ceiling of \$2-\$3 million to \$4-\$6 million, reflecting Coppola's desire to film the story in a period setting of the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>13</sup>

The newsworthy realities of the production issues, tied to Italian-American concerns about ethnic portrayals, gave studio publicists a path into reporters covering the film industry. As helpful as word of mouth had been in encouraging Paramount to proceed with the project, studio executives also had to deal with grassroots pressure from Italian American groups, such as the Italian American Civil Rights League which threatened to stop the film. The controversy

reverberated in various aspects directly affecting production issues, including the casting of a minor, yet significant role, in the narrative – the singer Johnny Fontaine. Popular singer Vic Damone was originally tapped for the role but in April 1971, he backed off, issuing a statement that read in part, “As an American of Italian descent, I could not in good conscience continue in the role” (*The New York Times*, 5 April 1971). At the same time, the studio relented to grassroots protests, announcing that the term “Mafia” would not be mentioned in the film, despite the numerous references to “Mafia” and “Cosa Nostra” that populated the novel’s text. The issue generated substantial attention and publicity. Records of wiretaps of organized crime chiefs by the Federal Bureau of Investigation revealed that actor Ernest Borgnine was their preference for playing the role that Marlon Brando would eventually be offered (Lebo, 1997, p. 46).

To their credit, Paramount executives did not ignore nor take lightly the concerns of the Italian American Civil Rights League. Joseph Anthony “Joe” Colombo, Sr., the boss of one of New York’s five ‘Cosa Nostra’ families, established the group (unquestionably for his own interests rather than for some altruistic purpose) in 1970. At 41, Colombo had become the first American-born boss of a New York ‘Cosa Nostra’ family. After the FBI arrested him in the spring of 1970, Colombo organized protests in New York City at FBI offices, as participants chanted and waved signs claiming undue harassment. He appeared in numerous television interviews and was comfortable in speaking engagements and fundraising events. Colombo’s public appearances emboldened many Italian Americans to join the league, who saw the group as the best opportunity to address concerns, grievances and justice not just involving the government but also the ways in which Italian Americans were portrayed in the press and entertainment. At one of its first major events, an Italian-American Unity Day rally in New York City’s Columbus Circle drew 150,000 people, including several U.S.

Congressional representatives and popular entertainers (*The New York Times*, 18 June 1970).

When Ruddy met Colombo at a New York City hotel, 600 League members attended to hear the film producer explain that *The Godfather* was not being made to defame Italian Americans or any other ethnic group but to present a narrative that went beyond the conventional high-paced shooting storyline (Lebo, 1997, p. 91). Colombo and his group had a simple yet significant request: remove the words 'Mafia' and Cosa Nostra' from the script. Colombo's presence and influence worried Paramount and Gulf+Western executives, especially after a *Wall Street Journal* article (Penn, 23 March 1971) appeared with the headline "Colombo's Crusade: Alleged Mafia Chief Runs Aggressive Drive Against Saying 'Mafia'." Executives said in a public statement that Ruddy's role as a producer would be watched over scrupulously. According to an account published in 2012 (Santopietro), Ruddy said, "I went in that morning, and Charlie was holding the *New York Times* from the day before. He was screaming at me about the price of the company's stock. I told him, 'Charlie, what can I say? I'm not a shareholder in Gulf+Western. I don't own one share in that company. My job is to get this movie made. I think I made a very good deal to allow us to shoot in New York and get some overt and covert cooperation." Not unlike the fictional Vito Corleone, who was portrayed as a man who kept his word, Colombo acted similarly toward Ruddy. There were no further threats of strikes by production set or location crews. As for Colombo's people, they enjoyed watching the spectacle of a major film in the making. As Ruddy recalled that some were hired as part of the extras but there was no evidence of any inappropriate payments or control issues. In retrospect, his comments seem naïve. Everyone realised that the Mafia controlled the logistics of transportation, unions and other elements of the film production process and that it was best to resolve disputes quietly. Ruddy and his crew

understood that for the film to proceed unimpeded, it was prudent to respect the Mafia on its turf and to ensure that no one's reputation would be disparaged.

The fiction of *The Godfather* became hardly distinguishable from the production realities, which unexpectedly gave a promotional bonus that underscored the production's authenticity. The film, thanks in large part to Coppola's vision, transformed, for the benefit of Hollywood's decision-makers, the inherent risks in producing often gratuitously violent and un-redemptive gangster stories. It helped shape the genre into providing the demographically more enticing impact of a family drama, featuring complex and relatable characters, with evolved psychological profiles, reminiscent of roles once portrayed by great studio era actors such as James Cagney, Humphrey Bogart and Edward G. Robinson.

There were other awkward moments eventually resolved to a positive outcome. Paramount executives had publicly stated that fresh faces and new actors would be cast for the film. For example, *Variety* (11 February 1971) headlined an article, "No Stars For Godfather Cast – Just Someone Named Brando." Coppola later attempted to clarify the studio's statements, "emphasizing that while he planned to use unknowns: that meant unknowns with acting experience...." (Lebo, 1997, p. 52). Letters poured in by the hundreds from would-be actors. Brando's selection after Coppola's expert manipulation of the process was quick and unanimous but the road toward selecting the actor for Michael Corleone, the decorated war veteran who would ultimately become The Godfather's heir apparent, was difficult. While Coppola lobbied for Al Pacino to take the role, studio executives did not agree after seeing what they characterised as an underwhelming screen test. Pacino was selected over studio recommendations that included Warren Beatty and Jack Nicholson. Pacino's payout was approved for just \$35,000 and the young actor was responsible for

buying himself out of his earlier commitment to another film project (*The Gang that Couldn't Shoot Straight* (James Goldstone (1971) (Chase, 7 May 1972).

Coppola's persuasive efforts had paid off with the studio accepting his demands, even as they acknowledged the risks. Coppola's position was strengthened by Puzo, who wrote a script that transcended gangster film conventions with probing character studies. Coppola won every decision point – from the green light from executives to shooting the film in New York City, to casting Brando and Pacino for the story's two most important roles. "The concessions made Paramount more concerned than ever about the fate of the production... The intensified pressure of added studio scrutiny over the filming would become a near-constant battle, creating a pressure-cooker environment for Coppola as he struggled to make his film" (Lebo, 1997, p. 65). Despite the cumulative tensions both internally and with external forces such as the Italian American Civil Rights League, Paramount executives had mastered the art of crisis communications, learning how to transform bad publicity into goodwill that would generate positive word of mouth.

Yet, as production proceeded in 1971, there were no indicators (despite the book's solid sales) that *The Godfather* would not follow the path of its disappointing predecessor *The Brotherhood*. Coppola, like another young contemporary film director who would make his own overwhelming mark three years later (Steven Spielberg), had to persist with a project that was complicated by pressures and conflicts more intense than the usual creative pressures any director faces with a major film. Coppola's strategy was based in bricolage (Malloch and Kleymann, 2013):

What we see in Coppola's work is not some sort of (partial) deviation from, or amendment to, an existing plan or procedure. Instead, we are witnessing the very process of creation itself, which does contain, within it, some degree of improvisation to deal with e.g. financial and time

constraints, opposition from the studio, etc. But these instances of improvisation happen within, and subordinate to, the larger context of a creative process that works from the bottom up, creating something that is only emerging through the process of creation itself.

Developing the label of *bricoleur*, Malloch and Kleymann (2013) envisioned Coppola's effectiveness as an "entrepreneurial and visionary bricoleur," following and expanding upon the concept first described by the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1962). They deconstruct primary elements that exemplify the role he undertook that made not only *The Godfather* a critically acclaimed and financially successful blockbuster, but also the sequels in the franchise (Malloch & Kleymann, 2013):

- his work is a flowing process, more a dialogue with the external world than a single-minded following of a pre-established plan;
- he relies on a 'stock' of tools and resources and a 'repertoire' of techniques, which he then creatively combines and uses to improvise;
- the film is the result of vision as much as improvisation and crafty use of the 'stock' and 'repertoire'.

They conclude, "Coppola's effort is entrepreneurial and visionary, and in that it is first and foremost solitary. The vision is his, and it is at first difficult to convey to other stakeholders. He follows it, improvising with resources at hand, and compromising with given constraints (e.g., finances and time limits)." The argument is compelling, considering how a prospective blockbuster model might weigh the variable representing a charismatic, controlling, visionary individual (i.e., Coppola, Spielberg, Lucas, Cameron and others) against the variables representing teamwork dynamics and managerial planning.

Coppola had to prove his acuity as a major director. This also would be the case with Steven Spielberg for *Jaws*, George Lucas for *Star Wars*, and Randal

Kleiser for *Grease*. In *Back to The Future*, director Robert Zemeckis encountered the greatest degree of scepticism in finding a studio to greenlight the project. For Coppola, one example involved Pacino, whose early work on the set disappointed some. Interviewed nearly 40 years after the movie was made, Pacino recalled, “I was out” until the murder scene in which he [Michael Corleone] shoots a police commander and mob rival in a small Italian restaurant. “They kept me after that scene. That looked pretty good I guess, when you shoot a guy. They wanted me to assert myself, so there’s a kind of assertion” (Lebo, 1997, p. 107). Pacino’s first scenes in the movie covered his return as a war hero and his courtship of the Diane Keaton character [Kate, who would become Michael Corleone’s wife], requiring an idealistic naivety, which Pacino admitted, is not what he could do best. Coppola, knowing Pacino could be fired at any time, ensured that the next scene the studio executives were shown, was a hard hitting one, the type at which Pacino excels.<sup>14</sup>

Coppola’s creative direction, highlighting the inherent conflicts and contradictions of the whatever-it-takes mentality to achieve the American dream, “served to delineate the urban boundaries of the lawful, the genre indicates the possibilities and limits of living and representing American life outside the law” (Browne, 2000). The New Hollywood period of the late 1960s and early 1970s highlighted autonomous personalities and vigilante characters, often disappointed and frustrated at the futility of institutions they had once cherished and defended. Audiences, starting with *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn (1967)) *Easy Rider* (Denis Hopper (1969)) and including *Billy Jack* (1971) were primed to accept outlaws and mavericks as legitimate protagonists and heroes. Coppola cast the law-and-order hierarchy, not the Godfather, as the moral outlaws.

Coppola demonstrated the essence of an autonomous artistic vision in making an unprecedentedly successful film. It would be the most telling irony if *The Godfather* was the first and last modern blockbuster not to be made by

committee. Just as ironical was the remaking of the Mafia's public persona. Colombo and his League members broke the conventions of staying silent; went public with their concerns about how they were perceived and viewed by the public, government, business and the entertainment industry. "The films, novels, and television serials put the Mafia code of silence into play; significantly changed the Mafia outlook on itself" (Lebo, 1997, p. 107).

Coppola superseded the trap of mass commercialism, which had been criticised for championing standardization over autonomy in the creative process. Man (2012) treats Coppola's ideological roots as an analysis and confrontation with the contradictions inherent in the physical and ethical requirements of modern big business. The film stands as a major critical statement of the American way of life by staging a drama that shows the price of such huge success. Likewise, the aesthetics of nostalgia permeate all five case studies in this thesis. Dika (2000) explains: "Coppola provided his audience with a reality substitute – an imaginative vehicle for occluding and reworking contemporary anxiety and discontent with the changes in America wrought by the Vietnam war." In *The Godfather* case, nostalgia is embedded in the tensions of sustaining traditional and cultural norms of honour in contemporary life. That may ironically be a parallel about the business dynamics of the film industry.

Coppola's intuitive appreciation for trial and error defines the bricoleur's strategic role in filmmaking (Malloch & Kleymann, 2013):

From this point of view, Coppola's bricolage can be regarded as a form of loose coupling ... which buffers him against the worst excesses of a corrosive, repressive and "gross and agent-driven, mass production Hollywood studio system"<sup>15</sup>..., inimical for the type of creative and innovative work he realised in *The Godfather*. Whatever the other limitations of open call and casual recruitment, they did at least de-couple Coppola from one of Hollywood's formal control systems, in the form of the agent. Similarly, improvisation lessens his dependence on studio-controlled resources, which, in any case, are not forthcoming.



As *The Godfather* was made before the studios became aware of the potential for making calculated blockbuster films, the studios had not as yet seen a financial incentive for controlling the production process more vigorously, which explains why Coppola could make decisions more freely, with little or no external control. But he also would have encountered executive resistance just a few years later, as the studios' C-suite personnel tightened the control protocols as a result of identifying replicable markers and risk reduction. The bricoleur's most effective capacity may only have been possible under a system of less control.

Coppola's success with *The Godfather* was not replicated with either of the sequels in the franchise, nor with his other projects (although *Apocalypse Now* (1978) was the closest in terms of creative freedom and impact and involved the director investing his own funds). However, in *The Godfather*, the bricolage dynamic served the studio's publicity efforts throughout the critical production process. This ranged from Paramount's endorsement of Puzo's novel to the resolution of various crises that threatened to stop the film. Likewise, the studio had positioned itself, courtesy of Coppola's strategic focus, to undertake other effective public relations tactics leading up to the 24 March 1972 release of *The Godfather*. The next section highlights the marketing and promotional efforts for the film.

### **3.4 Marketing and Promotion**

This section summarizes the film's promotional campaign of newspaper advertisements that tied the film's performance both critically and financially to the strong endorsements made when the novel stayed on the bestseller list for 67 weeks and how it contributed to the film's success. Paramount coordinated the mass of buzz and anticipation that grew around *The Godfather* prior to its release. The New York press, along with the Hollywood trades, extensively covered the

widespread protests by the Italian American Civil Rights League, the resolution and the eventual support of those who initially had resisted the film. They would become useful allies in Paramount's publicity strategy.

There would be no spoilers or leaks, which included no advance photos of Brando in his portrayal. Paramount negotiated with *Life* magazine, giving the publication exclusive first rights to feature Brando as *The Godfather* on its cover. "To shield the scene from, photographers, the production put up a virtual human wall around the outdoor set, using police, New York Tactical Patrol officers, production assistants, and members of the League" (Lebo, 1997, p. 115). Paramount orchestrated the anticipation, making it "the most presold commodity on the market today, everyone wants it," as proclaimed by Paramount president Frank Yablans (Lebo, 1997, p. 186). The first substantial public glimpse of whether the film had lived up to the promises of its long promotional campaign came from a short rave review of the film by the *London Express'* Ivor Davis (5 March 1972) who had viewed the film in a 25 February 1972 screening.

Ads drawing attention to *The Godfather* appeared in 1969, first promoting Puzo's novel. A 20<sup>th</sup> of March 1969 ad in *The New York Times* featured the pull quote: "A STAGGERING TRIUMPH ... the definitive novel about a sinister fraternity of crime." It included book review snippets from *Newsweek*, *Chicago Sun-Times Book Week*, *Look* magazine's Peter Prescott and a testimonial from Gerald Frank, who wrote the 1966 nonfiction book about the Boston Strangler case that was the basis of a 1968 film. Frank called the book "a blockbuster of a novel" and "a voyeur's dream." An ad a few weeks later (20 April 1969) touted the book as a "runaway best seller" in its fourth large printing with the announcement of a major motion picture coming from Paramount. The ad amplified the earlier highlights, calling it a "big, turbulent, highly entertaining novel that's rocking the nation." Unlike newspaper ads for earlier big box office hits, such as *Gone with The Wind* (1939) and *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz (1942) which featured screening

times, ticket prices and availability and quoted no critics even though the films garnered extensive positive reviews, *The Godfather* advertisements emphasized quotes from positive reviews. However, the quotes connected *The Godfather* to earlier box office classics, such as *Gone with The Wind*.

For the film's U.S. release in March 1972, the advertisements suggested superlatives, referencing Brando's performance as *The Godfather*, the faithful adaptation of the novel and the film's three-hour length (which some might have seen as a disadvantage in attracting audiences<sup>16</sup>). The 17 March 1972 ad in *The New York Times* featured pull quotes from various critics that were as exuberant as any review could be for a film: "slam-bang sentimental gangster melodrama," "one of the most brutal and moving views of American life ever designed within the limits of popular entertainment," "mamma mia, what a movie," "the characterizations are so appealing that you find yourself rooting for the so-called bad guys," and the "dynastic sweep of an Italian-American *Gone With The Wind*." The film's promotional team replicated the message tone of the novel's publisher, believing it reinforced the connection for those who had read the book. Accolades in subsequent ads followed the same superlative tones of the first wave of ads. The advertising language undergirded the rhetoric driven narrative of a widely acknowledged blockbuster. The testimonials challenged reviewers, who struggled to engage in critical one-upmanship to find phrases and text to express their views for the film many viewed as an instantaneous classic.

### **3.5 Distribution, Release and Economic Impact**

As indicated earlier, the film's promotional campaign launched three and a half years prior to its release, beginning with the novel and then through the events, which eventually resulted in a goodwill deal reached with the Italian Americans Civil Rights League. Then as the earliest reviews confirmed Paramount's enthusiasm for the audience reception, the studio's challenge became sustaining interest in the film beyond spring and going into the summer and following

autumn. This would be strategic later in the year when the industry considered nominees for the Academy Awards. “The studio’s growing enthusiasm about *The Godfather* was no doubt buttressed by the fact that months before it was released, it had already turned a profit without one ticket sold. Theatre owners had pre-booked the film with orders of \$13 million – nearly twice the production budget” (Lebo, 1997, p. 156).

Plans for the world premiere befitted what many observed already as a successful film. The studio booked five of New York City’s most prominent Loews chain theatres for a limited release on March 15, while deciding to wait nearly two weeks for a national release. Paramount timed the film’s release to coordinate with a soundtrack album and a paperback printing of 1.3 million copies of the novel that included a thirty-two page insert of stills from film scenes. Putnam also arranged a run of one million hardcover copies of the novel for distribution to bookstores once the film opened across the country. The promotional campaign’s reliance on an unconventional release pattern and conventional newspaper advertising placements starting in the major media metropolitan areas groomed the pathways for effective word-of-mouth.

*The Godfather* represented a bridge in how studios viewed distribution patterns for its most promising films. While conventional cascading release approaches still mattered, *The Godfather’s* strong performance out of the gate motivated studio executives to try innovative approaches for maximizing revenue potential. Today, a similar film would not be released as *The Godfather* was in March 1972. Many studio executives did not believe saturated distribution could work, preferring instead a cascade approach in which the buzz, if positive, from a small handful of theatres would prime the market for a lengthy national release. A 3<sup>rd</sup> of April 1972 article in *Time* magazine indicated that *The Godfather’s* five-theatre release at the outset garnered a box office take of \$568,800 (an equivalent value today would be \$3.27 million), an impressive statistic given the restricted

distribution. *Time* magazine reported that lines were so long at the theatres that sharpies were selling their spots in line at \$20 each (equal to today's value of \$115). Even as Paramount rolled out the release in 34 other cities in the U.S. Yablans, the studio president, told *Time* magazine, "The picture is nothing less than an annuity." By mid-April, just three weeks after the film premiered, a *New York Times* article (16 April 1972) indicated that the film was gaining a million dollars in box office receipts per day at 372 theatres across the country. Nationwide ticket sales for the film totalled \$26,000,815 in the first 26 days.

*Variety*, which tracked the film's box office receipts by sampling theatres across the country, revealed the film's ticket sales held consistently during the first four weeks of release, declining steadily during the next four weeks going into May until it was roughly 40 percent of its peak during the first wave of distribution. In advance of the summer holiday season, in late May and early June, the film's distribution increased to its largest levels, as reflected in the largest weekly receipts of the box office at the end of May and early June. By late July, when weekly box office grosses levelled off to a point not seen since before the beginning of the summer holiday season, Paramount reinvigorated its distribution efforts. The studio expanded the number of screens the film was shown on nationally, an unprecedented move in the early 1970s, which returned box office receipts to levels matching the overall average of the summer season. At no point, however, were the total number of screens at which *The Godfather* was showing approached any figure that would be common for a major summer blockbuster release of 2019. When the film's 11 Academy Award nominations were announced in September 1972, the film enjoyed another uptick in weekly box office receipts but the number of theatres had already declined to levels not seen since the prior spring.<sup>17</sup>

Distribution decisions for a successful film such as *The Godfather* reinforced the belief that the traditionally risk-averse studio management was

willing to experiment with different patterns to maximize revenue potential. *The Godfather* gave reason for executives to separate for good from the pre-recessionary studio system and its tendencies for inertia. Thus, studios sharpened their skills for the coming foundation of the blockbuster film which would start in earnest with the success of *Jaws* and *Star Wars* a few years later.

The film's impact on Gulf + Western's stock price was significant. After staying consistently within the \$33-35 range during the first two months, the stock rose steadily during March in anticipation of *The Godfather's* release that month. On March 29, the day of the film's national release, the stock closed at \$38.25 and the price climbed significantly in the next two weeks, reaching \$44 ¼ in the week ending April 12. The Gulf and Western's stock value in the film's first month of release had increased by more than \$97 million (nearly \$600 million in today's value). Stock prices remained above \$40 per share through the next two months and only in September, did stock prices return to levels seen prior to the release of *The Godfather*. This suggesting that the financial community at this stage still saw blockbuster films as phenomenae, with the studios not equipped to replicate these at will.

The film's release came before the emergence of multiplex theatres, which began at about the time of *Jaws* release in the summer of 1975. Yet long lines for *The Godfather* became common, especially at New York theatres.<sup>18</sup> "I remember driving in the rain down to the office that Wednesday," Ruddy said. "In front of the Orpheum there was a line for *The Godfather* around the block - at 8.15 in the morning. It was beyond anyone's dream" (Lebo, 1997, p. 201). A *Variety* reporter (12 April 1972) observing the lines at the five Loews theatres in Manhattan, which hosted the film's world premiere, called the lines of ticket patrons unprecedented, "extending nearly half a city block at each house." The five theatres had a combined seating capacity of 4,880<sup>19</sup> and attendance averaged 98 percent for

many weeks – a rare standard for many theatre-screening locations during the time.

Unlike *Jaws*, which opened to 464 screens in its national release, following an extensive television advertising campaign on all three major broadcasting networks, *The Godfather* opened nationally in late March on just 316 screens (Lebo, 1997, p. 204). While there were no television ads, the extensive print media campaign along with a re-release of the book was sufficient to keep *The Godfather's* box office pace at a record that nearly matched *Jaws* in the first month of screenings. The film's success meant that Paramount would clear its expense obligations for the production and the combine 1972 initial release and a reissue in 1973 would result in a take of more than \$85 million (equivalent today to nearly \$490 million) ("Godfather 1 all-time earner," *The Montreal Gazette*, Reuters, 9 January 1975. p. 21).

The carefully paced distribution paid its rewards in box office receipts. By the Labor Day weekend in 1972, *The Godfather* passed *The Sound of Music* (1965) and *Gone With The Wind* (1939) in box office gross (CPI adjusted) but the record would be short lived, as *The Exorcist* quickly took back the honours in 1973. By the end of 1972, after more than nine months in general release and with more than \$110 million in revenue, Paramount's management made the innovative decision to withdraw the film temporarily, in order to strike new prints for a new round of exhibition, timed to coincide with the Academy Awards. This would be hard to replicate in the current theatrical infrastructure as the screens are booked several months in advance by the studios, with a view to securing specific release slots for their prime texts.

For an industry that struggled to make profits even from large-scale film releases, the deployment of *The Godfather's* demiurgic business model encouraged other studio executives to replicate the process of adapting a complex

narrative to a profitable film (King, 2004). It signalled opportunities to stretch existing, classic genres especially in the adult dramatic category, with such dynamic films as *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski (1974), also a Paramount release, updating the film noir-detective genre. Likewise, Warner Bros. greenlighted *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (Clint Eastwood (1976), which returned its initial production budget investment ten-fold (Munn, 1992, p. 156; BoxOfficeMoro.com). Meanwhile, the horror genre brought *The Exorcist* (1973) and *Jaws* (1975).

With *The Godfather*, Paramount challenged the institutional wisdom about production management and distribution of new releases, as confirmed financially by the film's consistently strong box office performance and critically by the audience reception and reviews, an element explored in the next section. The recession at the time intensified concerns about how much risk exposure major studios were willing to sustain but the film's widespread appeal, no less one representing the adult drama genre, also liberated the studios, as they saw finally a lifeline to profitability.

### **3.6 Audience Reception and Reviews**

Given the long period of positive reviews about Puzo's novels and how Coppola and his team overcame the production controversies, it was almost anti-climactic when reviews began appearing in the press, as the critics were exuberant in their appraisals. While there were some isolated letters and reviews indicating concern about unflattering stereotypes of Italian-Americans and the amount of violence portrayed in the film, others praised it for its multi-layered treatment of characters and the moral questions raised in the story and the metaphors about the American Dream. It appeared that summary judgment was nearly unanimous, as if virtually everyone – audience and reviewers – were rapt by the film's narrative and quality of production. Publicity about the novel had primed the audience for several years and book reviews had been equally exuberant, creating substantial product awareness amongst consumers. It became a feat which all



studios would henceforth try to replicate and which would considerably affect their selection of larger budgeted projects.

While the print ads quoted numerous critics, the question remains if the reviews registered enough of a significant impact to drive box office receipts or influence Academy Award nominations. Reviews in trade publications such as *Variety* or *The Hollywood Reporter* were predicated on the film's commercial viability first and then on its aesthetics and impact upon cultural tastes. In *The Godfather*, studio marketing executives and then critics picked the appropriate cues to avoid the risk of rejecting any one particular taste. It is disingenuous for the film industry to alienate any potential audience sector, by omitting or disparaging any particular demographic (e.g., Joseph Colombo and the Italian American Civil Rights League). The studio embraced the role of corporate populist, which counters and thwarts the potential impact of elitist critics. Thus, critics became a useful target for this strategy. This resulted in both parties successfully influencing audiences: one to generate greater revenue; the other to set a marker as a political force with which to be reckoned.

However, there were exceptions – few, yet worth noting. Some came from letters to the editors of *The New York Times*. Villency (26 March 1972) wrote, “The novel and... the film cleverly appeal for public sympathy and forgiveness towards the Mafiosi, because underneath it all, they are really good family men and patriotic Americans. ... Many of the Nazi guards who killed and tortured prisoners in the concentration camps were nevertheless ‘ideal’ family men, kind and considerate toward their wives and children. *The Godfather* and Gay Talese’s loving account of the Bonnano family are the best things that have happened to the Mafia.” Taking a different approach, Steve D’Inzillo, a union business representative in New York City, wrote a letter to *The New York Times* (28 May 1972) that read in part, “From the standpoint of impression upon its audiences, it’s a deep slur, an insult to Americans of Italian extraction. Seeing the film, one

infers that most, if not all, Italian-Americans are mobsters or cold-blooded murderers.” During the summer when the film was well on its way to setting box office records, one *New York Times* critic (Shannon, 1 August 1972) lamented the film for what he saw as a romanticized affirmation of violence and perhaps even as a backlash against the studio’s willingness to negotiate Colombo’s assurance of protection:

This revolting film, already a box office success, is apparently to be mined for another thick profit. ... *The Godfather* is part of the growing pornography of violence. ... The biggest cultural ripoff that any commercial promoters have gotten away with in years. *The Godfather* stereotypes Italian-Americans as gangsters or as the half-admiring, half fearful pawns of gangsters. ... It seems to me as that Italian-Americans ought to dislike the picture intensely[.]

*The New York Times’* Canby (16 March 1972) praised the film, while addressing concerns about the portrayal of violence. He explained that to say the film “glorifies crime is to take the film both too seriously and not seriously enough. It is to deny the elation one can experience through great story telling, no matter what the bloody point of the story may be. It is also to confuse the movie’s romanticized view of crime... with a seductive view of crime, which the film does not have.” Canby’s point is significant because the film does reflect ambiguities about the stability of solid, even conservative values, regarding family, hierarchy, allegiance and patriotism and the Catholic Church, as issues of corruption arise throughout the narrative.

The uncommon bits of criticism were overcome by the adulation voiced by critics and by audiences. Following the private premiere on 15 March 1972, Charles Champlin at the *Los Angeles Times* (19 March 1972) tagged the film an “instant classic” and Pauline Kael at *The New Yorker* (18 March 1972), one of the

period's most widely read and esteemed critics, delivered the appraisal that surely pleased the studio marketing executives: "If there ever was a great example of how the best popular movies come out of the merger of commerce and art, TGF is it." One example of a critic's potential power came in a 1994 survey reported on in *The Wall Street Journal* (Simmons, 25 March 1994) that concluded that one-third of moviegoers chose films because of a favourable review by a well-known critic. However, the assessments of critics such as Champlin, Kael and Canby apparently mattered to Hollywood, because their reviews often were quoted in advertisements.

Some writers referenced nostalgia's appeal, as they looked back to the 1970s. As Browne (2000, p. 34) explained the film's period setting (1940s and 1950s) in the 1970s offers "[a] reality substitute – an imaginative vehicle for occluding and reworking contemporary anxiety and discontent with the changes in America wrought by the Vietnam War." Santopietro (2012), in an interview with *The Smithsonian* magazine (Gambino, 31 January 2012), explained how the 1970s made a particularly relevant backdrop for the release of a film that was set in the 1940s and 1950s:

On the sociological level, we had been facing the twin discouragements of the Vietnam War and Watergate, so it spoke to this sense of disillusionment that really started to permeate American life at that time. I think also the nostalgia factor with *The Godfather* cannot be underestimated, because in the early '70s (the first two films were in '72 and '74), it was such a changing world. It was the rise of feminism. It was the era of black power. And what *The Godfather* presented was this look at the vanishing white male patriarchal society. I think that struck a chord with a lot of people who felt so uncertain in this rapidly changing world. Don Corleone, a man of such certainty that he created his own laws and took them into his own hands, appealed to a lot of people.

Dessner (1972, p. 211) wrote that the film projects “the American myth of the Executive and that his Family is a parody of the structure and ethos of the modern corporation. ...Power and influence over men lurk in the background of the Executive ideal to be sure, but these are not all central to the myth. The Executive is the modern hero of civilization. ‘A nation in itself’ is a perfectly satisfactory translation of the Don’s own definition of the Mafia: ‘We will manage our world for ourselves because it is our world, *cosa nostra*.’” The irony of *The Godfather* was how it became a proxy for many studies about managerial strategies and behaviour, which reinforces nostalgia as a factor in strategic business decision making. This occurred in Hollywood’s growing reliance on blockbusters, as studio executives relied on nostalgia’s commercial appeal to reclaim powers of creative control.

### **3.7 Conclusion**

Having summarized the process from the novel’s publication and its quick success through the film’s adaptation of the story, casting, production controversies and its promotional campaign and distribution, various factors clearly emerge which account for the film’s success. *The Godfather* achieved a status reserved for only a few cherished films of the American canon: *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, George Cukor (1939), *Casablanca* (1942), *Gone with The Wind* (1939) and *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles (1941). Critics and audiences viewed the film then as an iconic indictment of the enormous price individuals and families pay for success and validation in the American dream. Likewise, today’s critics and audiences, many of whom were yet to be born when the film was released, share these sentiments.

Canby’s 1972 review is filled with many examples of astute micro- and macro-perspectives on why *The Godfather* and its immediate sequel *The Godfather II* have become among the most celebrated American films. However,

the last sentence of the review also addresses a point that echoes the project's biggest threat that was transformed into ultimately influencing the film's most strategically important economic factor: "It's nothing personal, just their way of doing business as usual," perhaps a more compelling aphorism than Goldman's proclamation that is scrutinized in this thesis.

The example in *The Godfather* references the controversies raised by Italian-American groups and Colombo who convinced Paramount to remove direct references to the Mafia and the Cosa Nostra from the film. It was key in letting the project proceed. Later, the group succeeded in preventing Macy's department store chain from selling a board game based on the film, fearing that it would perpetuate offensive stereotypes among young consumers. Before the film was completed, with Colombo at the peak of his public visibility, he was shot three times at a Columbus Circle rally on 28 June 1971 and would never recover. He died seven years later, never having woken from a coma. Without Colombo at the helm, the grassroots organization fell apart and was eventually reorganized with barely any connection to its roots. This also freed Paramount to pursue longer term channels for creative branding and licensing without being concerned about reactions from a once well-organized interest lobby.

The Italic Institute of America, a non-profit organization based in New York City, conducted a study of media bias concerning Italian Americans in 2015. Part of its analysis included surveying more than 1,500 Hollywood films released since 1914. Two findings stood out in referencing the impact of *The Godfather*:

There was a sharp increase of films featuring Italians as gangsters after the film's release (81 percent), an increase which shows no signs of slowing down forty years later; and 2) Out of over 500 films featuring Italians as gangsters, 87 percent of those movies portrayed fictional mobster characters with no basis in reality—in short, phony stereotypes, dreamed up by hack Hollywood screenwriters.

In an interview before his death in 1999, Puzo admitted that the honorific of “the godfather” was a romanticized invention, as he had sought to find an Italian—American parallel to the mythologized image of the American cowboy.<sup>20</sup> Coppola, in a 2003 interview with *Cigar Aficionado* magazine, similarly confessed that he knew nothing about Italian criminals. He added that the characters were based on “my Italian relatives, who, of course, were not criminals.”<sup>21</sup>

The Italic Institute determined that prior to the 1972 release of *The Godfather*, Hollywood had made 98 films about organized crime and the mob. After 1972, they identified 430 films. For its analysis, it established criteria for labelling elements of films as positive or negative and for determining whether a film overall should be classified as positive, neutral or negative in terms of its representation of Italian-Americans. For example: “The Godfather has complex characters, which is a plus; however, the overwhelming impression it leaves with the viewers is of a culture permeated by criminality. There is no balance; therefore, it's a ‘negative.’” The 2015 study concluded “an entrenched, institutionalized bias in Hollywood against Americans of Italian descent. The diversity of the Italian American experience has been obscured by one-dimensional stereotypes equating Italian culture with criminality. With the success of *The Godfather*, these distorted images gained popular acceptance on an unprecedented scale.” Whatever risks were present during the making of *The Godfather*, they barely mattered after the film’s spectacular opening. Likewise, studios pursued other projects with stories involving the mafia.

*Jaws* may have been the first blockbuster as a multimedia marketing and a saturated distribution model, but *The Godfather* was the preeminent original modern blockbuster that tied a compelling popular narrative to the larger sociological experiences of its audiences in timeless story-telling. The bestsellers’ popularity of the original source material in three of the five blockbusters analyzed in this study (*The Godfather*, *Jaws* and *Grease*) unquestionably

contributed to the success of the respective film adaptation but that element alone did not guarantee the resulting film's record-setting performance.

*The Godfather's* financial success rose to the stature of *Jaws* and other blockbusters that followed. "It almost single-handedly restor[ed] industry confidence [through a new] blockbuster formula by generating about 10 percent of the year's gross box-office revenues of \$1.64 billion" (Cook, 2002, p. 14). The box office success of *The Godfather* encouraged deciding investments "based on a product's actual potential for sales in its main markets – which in the early 1970s, were basically U.S. theatres, foreign theatres, and television – rather than 'assume a market that would justify the outlay' (rational behaviour before divestiture, perhaps, but not after)" (*Variety*, 7 December 1977). But, there were no formulaic guarantees, as demonstrated in the film's sequel. *The Godfather: Part II* (Francis Ford Coppola (1974) has been hailed as one of the greatest artistic achievements in cinema, managing the complexities of weaving the storylines of a sequel and prequel in one film. However, the film's total domestic box office gross was less than half of its predecessor. Ironically, *The Godfather's* idiosyncratic success turned out to be a double-edge sword for those who hoped the film would invigorate the demand for other film projects that valued cultural autonomy over cultural standardization. The film arose from a metaphorical perfect storm, creatively and financially, as it leveraged a successful novel, a cast of veteran and newly acclaimed talent, an adventurous director who managed controversy on and off set adeptly and a well-timed and well-orchestrated pre-release publicity campaign that amplified the film's strongest creative assets. There would be other mob films, for example, but none would match the success of the first blockbuster to emerge during the 1970s.

## Chapter 4

### JAWS

#### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter further investigates the film industry's evolving blockbuster business model (BBBM™) within which *Jaws* (1975) is considered with *The Godfather* as major precedents for its development. Once Hollywood absorbed *Jaws'* commercial success, studio executives learned quickly to exploit the blockbuster as an event, through synergistic strategies, fuelled especially in the early days, by monumental waves of television advertising and later saturated cross-media platform promotions (Compaine & Gomery, 2000).

The success of the initial *Jaws* release carried over to its immediate sequel. Produced on a budget of \$20 million, *Jaws 2* (1978) grossed \$102,922,376 in its initial release, not accounting for its foreign box office revenue and distribution on ancillary platforms and television. As *Jaws* screenwriter Carl Gottlieb (2018) noted in an interview with the author, the sequel set the benchmark for other franchises, adding that his self-described 'Iron Law of Sequels' dictates that "only the last one loses money." The historical context surrounding the production also must be considered. Few if any industry experts or observers were able to predict the magnitude of success *Jaws* would have, especially given the reports about serious production miscues and lapses.

This chapter focuses on the claims for and against *Jaws* as a widely acknowledged catalyst of the modern blockbuster film phenomenon. The chapter encompasses sections about the narrative's development for maximum production impact; markers of production including casting, location and the resolution of production problems; marketing and promotion; distribution,



release and economic impact and audience reception and reviews. Above all, it addresses a major thesis question: How did Spielberg and other key decision-making principals reconcile controversy and challenges in their entrepreneurial decision making that eventually would remodel Hollywood's institutional framework to accommodate a standardised set of blockbuster markers. It also considers multidimensional aspects of the issues of control, as exploited by Universal studio executives, who were empowered to direct the project. In hindsight, this innovation of management's decision-making process has not only refuted the Goldman aphorism but also provided a glimpse into a blockbuster model seen as becoming less risky upon each iteration.

The central questions, which will be addressed in this chapter, are: To what extent is the 1975 release of *Jaws* discussed as the origin point of the modern blockbuster? How did *Jaws* become a cultural phenomenon around which the term "blockbuster" coalesced, a land-grab in the manufacture of fast-paced and exciting entertainment? Did the text change the way audiences consumed films? Did it create "water-cooler" moments which transcended traditional word-of-mouth interest? The blitz of television advertising along with the memorable and provocative poster ad images and the easily recognizable musical opening theme of the film primed moviegoers to share with others the experience of watching the film. According to Neale (2000), *Jaws*, as the first movie of the modern 'blockbuster era', is even credited with creating "a genre in its own right." The movie, as Schatz (2009) explains, "recalibrated the profit potential of the Hollywood hit, and redefined its status as a marketable commodity and cultural phenomenon ... while ushering in an era of high-cost, high-tech, high-speed thrillers." *Jaws* nourished a more focused studio stance on corporate management and ownership. It engendered confidence about the motion picture business as a profitable entity, once the risk factors were minimised. The various markers

covering the production process from story development to release and distribution are covered in this chapter.

## **4.2 Narrative Adaptation**

No one was certain how *Jaws* would perform, scheduled to be released during the summer season, as opposed to the custom of studios putting their most widely anticipated releases out during the Christmas holiday season. However, *Jaws* always had been a project of uncertain projections. From a 23 June 1975 cover article in *Time* magazine released during the week of the film's official opening came the following: "We had no idea that the novel would be a best-seller," reflected Spielberg. "We involved ourselves in the project when it [the book] was only 400 pages of triple spaced galleys." Gottlieb (2018) credited David Brown's understanding of the publishing industry, adding that he believed Brown and Darryl Zanuck devoted "some off-the-books marketing and promotion money to game *The New York Times* Best Seller lists, which in those days relied on only a few bookstores in key representative markets. If you knew where to buy a few thousand copies, you could rig the charts. In 1974, when the novel reached the market, one could do that. No longer possible." As a consequence, given the global success of book series such as *Harry Potter* and *Twilight*, studios have shown a greater willingness to look for book manuscripts for adaptation, (as well as paying considerable amounts for such acquisitions) and many screenwriters have taken to having their story released as a book in preparation for doing the screenplay.

On 16 April 1973, producer Peter Saphier sent an interoffice memorandum to Lew Wasserman, who had purchased Universal Studios in 1962 and merged the corporation with his own Music Corporation of America (MCA). He shared Benchley's novel manuscript, adding that, "I suspect that the substantial interest in the property around town will eventuate in a deal by mid-week." He wrote, "I found the novel to be very exciting and one which suggests an enormously

commercial film. It could possibly be something that Alfred Hitchcock would be interested in.” In a recent interview (2018), Saphier said that within the same week, Zanuck and Brown asked Wasserman to buy the book, which he had forwarded to them. “At the end of April once the deal had been done, Dick [Zanuck] and David [Brown] stopped by my table in the studio commissary to thank me for bringing the property in,” he recalled. “I asked them how they saw the movie, and the response was ‘we’re thinking in the range of \$750K,’ to which I responded, ‘with the water and the shark?’ and they said, ‘well, maybe a million.’”

The first mention of *Jaws* came in the *Variety* issue of 8 May 1973 with the simply reported item: “Zanuck-Brown Co. at Universal has bought film rights to Peter Benchley’s first novel, *Jaws* for \$250,000<sup>1</sup> and 10 percent net profits.” The report continued that in addition to the film sale, the book [which would sell more than 7 million copies] has landed \$575,000 from Bantam for paperback reprint rights.” The figure was significant. In today’s dollars, that would amount to more than \$4.4 million. In 1999, J.K. Rowling sold the rights for the first four *Harry Potter* books to Warner Bros. for a reported \$2 million. In 1999 dollars for comparison, the author of *Jaws* was paid \$938,063 for one book. Thus, the sale of the *Jaws* rights made Benchley one of the highest paid novelists selling to a studio, in net sales terms. The sale was a precedent, long before it became a regular practice to secure \$1 million sales for blockbuster consumption.<sup>2</sup> Two years later, a report in *The Saturday Review*, published three weeks after the film’s opening encapsulated the success of Benchley’s novel: “A perfect operation, an exemplary working out of a process that calls upon the resources of a writer, agent, editors, hardcover and paperback houses, and a motion-picture company, and is not completed until shown to 60 or 70 million viewers on television. Many such are calculated, but few work so well. The goal is the jackpot. *Jaws* has hit the jackpot with the striking force of a huge shark attacking its prey” (Hollis, 1975, p. 50). This

alone shows why studio executives became more involved in controlling the markers of blockbuster films.

Gottlieb (2018) recalls that Benchley wrote the first drafts, with no experience in screenwriting, explaining that “it was a way of compensating him more for the rights without giving away too much of the movie. The producers were stingy bastards.” Concerned that the task was in the hands of a screenplay neophyte, the producers recruited Howard Sackler, an industry professional with U.S. Navy experience (*Gray Lady Down*). As Gottlieb (2018) recalls, “It was Sackler who came up with the ‘Indianapolis; speech to justify Quint’s monomania, although a fan on social media referred me to previously published passages Sackler obviously plagiarized for the details.”<sup>3</sup>

Gottlieb (2018) came on board as the time for filming approached, with a note from Spielberg attached to the current version that read simply, “Eviscerate It!” Gottlieb was accustomed to the quick turnaround rhythm of television series with weekly episodes shot in front of live audiences. He had also written screenplays that were commissioned but unproduced and he performed improvisational comedy nightly in a hit satirical revue company called *The Committee* in San Francisco and Los Angeles for many years. “I had a good sense of what would work for an audience. Any audience,” he recalled.

In 2018, he elucidated more detail:

I wrote a lengthy memo with notes and comments, some useful, some not. On a Sunday morning, three weeks before commencement of principal photography, I got a Sunday morning call from Spielberg asking if I could join him and Zanuck & Brown at the Bel Air Hotel where they were deep in a meeting; he had shown them my memo (I’m guessing), and they wanted more. I drove to the hotel, and we sat for six hours talking about the script. At the conclusion of the meeting, I was asked if I could drop everything and join Spielberg as he left for location to begin hiring local actors in Boston, to start rewriting the script (I had already been engaged as an actor, in

what was a pretty decent part—Meadows, the Editor of the *Amity Gazette*. I consulted with my wife, the official offer to rewrite came on Monday morning. I quit my job as story editor of the hit ABC-TV series *The Odd Couple*, packed my bags, and joined Spielberg on the plane to Boston.

Gottlieb's hiring made no sense. In late stage script development, it is the norm to hire a highly experienced writer, with significant credits in the genre to lend his/her name to the value of the package (i.e., the name alone suggesting quality to potential audiences, as well as acting as a draw) (Jones, 1996, p. 75). This also addresses the executive concern about reducing risks and hiring a known entity with a synergistic record.<sup>4</sup> Gottlieb was likely hired for the following: 1) his personal, trust-based relationship with Spielberg; 2) his background in television writing, meaning he was capable to deliver script lines rapidly; 3) as a neophyte writer, he was less expensive to hire and willing to spend months on location; 4) his role in the project as a 'right hand' creative member to Spielberg, helping him address other issues such as casting; 5) Gottlieb, given his newfound role, could be controlled by the director. The two ended up working daily on the script during production. Compare this to Lucas' travails with his *Star Wars* screenplay two years later and it highlights issues of control, suggesting that the two friends (Spielberg and Gottlieb) exchanged many notes on how to mitigate their own risks.

Gottlieb was present when Spielberg interviewed actors to cast the roles of Hooper and Quint. He adds, "I helped locate Richard Dreyfuss, a contemporary friend; told him I was working on the script he had already turned down, and invited him to come up to Boston and meet Spielberg and myself to discuss the direction the rewrite was headed." Gottlieb adds that the Quint role would have been ideal for actor Sterling Hayden, "who had actually been a dory fisherman on the Grand Banks and captained a schooner with a minimal crew from Tahiti to Boston when he was 21." However, a tax problem prevented Hayden from taking

on salaried work for acting, so the producers tapped Robert Shaw, “who agreed (with many conditions as to overages and scheduling).” Gottlieb transformed a script that was “formulaic, hewed too closely to the novel, and had cardboard cut-out characters (Heroic Ichthyologist, Bored and Lonely Housewife, Fanatically Obsessive Shark Hunter).” He said that his “job was to prune the undergrowth, concentrate on the Fish Story, and make all the characters sound more like human beings; if there were a few laughs along the way, so much the better.”

The script development discussions challenge the after-thought interpretations of its thematic connections to the period in which the film was made. The Vietnam War had ended and the reverberations from the Watergate scandal and the resignation of the American president finally had quieted the mood for protests and other acts of civil disobedience. Perhaps studio observers sensed a growing demand for escapism or visceral forms of pure entertainment sparking an amusement park taste for fear and adventure. This would be seen through the pre-release press coverage of the film’s production problems and the technological challenges of making a film with a mechanically controlled beast. Gottlieb (2018) explains that Spielberg had placed media embargoes prior to the film’s release on photos showing the mechanical shark. But, local residents where production had taken place leaked their home movies and Kodachrome prints to the press. He adds the strategy worked initially nonetheless, explaining “there was not yet the insatiable hunger for ‘how’d they do that.’”

*Jaws* was intended as a formulaic horror film. The opening scene was a familiar trope: a shapely innocent, frivolous swimmer being mauled by the maritime monster in dark seas. The rest of the film followed accordingly. The film paid loose homage to *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (Jack Arnold, 1954) and *Jaws*’ co-producer David Brown said “The fear in *Jaws* is [not just] of being eaten.... The phobia [of] *Jaws* ... goes right back to the moment when marine life left the sea and grew legs to stand on land.... It is a very primal fear and you don’t need to

be in a country with a shark-infested coastline to feel yourself involved in *Jaws*” (Verevis, 2013). Gottlieb (2018) cautioned against any analysis complicating the essence of the film’s script. “The second half of the story is a simple man-against-monster adventure, a ‘ripping yarn,’ featuring a tri-partite hero(s): Hooper, the Aristotelian ‘scientific man,’ Quint, the primitive and impulsive man of action, and Chief Brody, ‘Everyman,’ who must moderate their divergent approaches in the interest of their common survival. Id/Ego/Super Ego.” For example, the film ends with the two surviving members of the tripartite hero paddling in the ocean toward home.

The producers not only relied on distinct horror/monster/disaster genre narrative correlations between the film and other successful films of that period to increase its chances of success, but also strove to ensure that *Jaws* worked on more subtle, relatable levels. Biskind (1975, 2004) wrote that *Jaws* inevitably represented the turn toward the animal kingdom after studios had “exhausted its store of natural and manmade disasters and the supernatural realms of evils (*Earthquake* (Mark Robson, 1974), *Towering Inferno* (John Guillermin, 1974), *Poseidon Adventure* (Ronald Neame, 1972), *Juggernaut* (Richard Lester, 1974), *Airport 75* (Jack Smight, 1974), the terrors of the supernatural (*The Exorcist*, *Race with The Devil* (Jack Starrett, 1975), *Beyond The Door* (Ovidio G. Assonitis, 1974) *Abby* (William Girdler, 1974) *It's Alive* (Larry Cohen, 1974). He added with timely socio-political irony: “Most disaster movies, employing a scapegoating populism which comes easily to Hollywood, take a dim view of the authorities (craven officials in *Earthquake*, corrupt executives in *Towering Inferno*), and *Jaws* is no exception” (Biskind, 1975, p. 26).

While some sought to connect *Jaws* and *Deliverance* (John Boorman, 1972) within the context of male bonding for heroic purposes in an adventurous storyline, there are other aspects to be considered, such as the male characters of the film’s three chief protagonists representing different dimensions of Tom

Laughlin's *Billy Jack*, a Vietnam War veteran who defends the disenfranchised and marginalized individuals against bigots and callous, socially insensitive opportunists. Biskind (1975, p. 26), who wrote that the Watergate connection was explored in the novel and film but with different magnitudes of emphasis in narrative, noted, "It is when *Jaws* moves away from overt political comment that its politics become most evident." He likened Amity's mayor (the character Larry Vaughn) to the former president Richard Nixon, who had repeatedly invoked the legitimating of national security interests for his secrecy and obstruction. Biskind explains with due sarcasm: "It is in the service of public interest that Amity officials refuse to close the beaches and cover up the initial shark attack by altering the cause of death in the medical report." Although the book takes special pains to underline the link between Vaughn and Nixon (Brody refers to Vaughn, with heavy irony, as "the people's choice"), the film, in an exemplary expression of post-Watergate backlash, treats Vaughn with a good deal of sympathy. He is a weak, not a venal man" (Biskind, 1975, p. 26). The narrative's strength did not require contemplation of in-depth moral or ethical grey areas, so the adaptation removed subplot elements from the book that emphasised political questions of corruption. In the book there was no similar euphoric moment as at the end of the film, when the shark is exploded— emphatically a crowd-pleasing construct added by Spielberg and Gottlieb.

Spielberg set out to craft a new form of popular art in the form of the modern calculated blockbuster. He meticulously deconstructed the process, prioritising markers that blended commercial and creative objectives over those that valued exclusively creative considerations. The next section chronicles the evolution of the production process to serve these aims.



### 4.3 Production

The success of Benchley's novel – which had already sold more than 5.5 million copies before the movie's official release and quickly expanded to 7 million – was a major factor for the producers to continue with the troubled project, as suggested in the *Time* magazine cover story of June 1975. "The making of a movie on the scale of *Jaws*, however, is a case study in the recklessness, stubbornness, blindness and bravado that go into a Hollywood super-production." Gottlieb recalls studio executives travelling to Massachusetts to assess the situation. Lorraine Gray, who played the leading female role in the film, was married to Sid Sheinberg, president of Universal Studios. In the case study proven observation, that each movie owes its success to one or two individuals, whose commitment is beyond the call of duty, William Gilmore, production executive, camouflaged the true budget and scheduling, "risking his job to protect the picture," as Gottlieb (2018) recalls. "And, the truth be told, when experienced Old Hands reviewed the actuality 'on the ground' (and, 'in the water'), they concluded that everyone was working as hard as possible to make a good movie, so they gave their blessings and went home."

*Jaws* was beset by production snags that prevented the producers from exercising the control needed to bring the picture in on time and budget. Richard Dreyfuss famously remarked: "We started the film without a script, without a cast and without a shark" (Smith, *BBC*, 2005). Spielberg and Benchley went to Cannes more than a year before the film would be released to create awareness for *Jaws*. Joe Alves, the art director, designed the shark which malfunctioned repeatedly, roughly six months before filming began in May 1974. Spielberg's team hoped to complete filming in less than two months, but by the time the crew wrapped on 6 October 1974, 159 shooting days had been logged.

Regarding the faith that sustained *Jaws* during its difficult production days, Alpert (1975) admired the “cold-eyed calculation” which its producers Brown and Zanuck were known for, given their association with major box office hits such as *The Sound of Music* and *The Sting*. Returning briefly to Albert’s analytical framework (1998), two elements emerge to amplify the immediate previous discussion: 1) **genre**: was there a recent movie release of a similar genre that made a positive impression? And 2) the **track record** of the producers and the director.

Determining the genre of *Jaws* always has been debated. According to the Internet Movie Databases (IMDB) the genres of the film are: adventure, drama and thriller.<sup>6</sup> Gomery (1996) considers *Jaws* as a horror film, yet other sources (Turner Classic Movies, 2016) stress the cross-genre “DNA” of the film as including drama, action, horror, suspense and thriller. Today, blockbusters are considered as their own genre, so it becomes more complicated. In 1973, 24 horror films were produced and released in the United States, none of which had a significant impact apart from *The Exorcist* (the film was released on 26 December 1973 and is hence often considered a 1974 release). In 1974, 16 horror films were produced and released in the United States, none of which placed in the top 30 of the box office annual rental revenue as per *Variety*. So even by taking the genre of “horror” into consideration, the argument cannot be made that a cluster of contemporary horror movies made the commercial case for *Jaws*.

Spielberg’s record as director was insignificant from a box office perspective, despite the suspense of his TV film *Duel* (1971), which had been referenced by Brown and Zanuck as key in selecting Spielberg. However, Spielberg’s *The Sugarland Express* (also produced by Zanuck and Brown) registered an underwhelming performance at the box office with just \$12.8 million in total revenue (\$61.6 million in current value). Spielberg did not have a

strong fan-base following as a director, leaving open the question of his ability to deliver on *Jaws*' potential.

The track record of producing team Zanuck and Brown, however, was more impressive as purveyors of popular entertainment. They amassed executive producer credits for *The Sting* (1973) as well as Clint Eastwood's *The Eiger Sanction* (Clint Eastwood, 1975), with Zanuck also having been president of Twentieth Century Fox Studios and having functioned as an (un-credited), executive producer on *The Sound of Music* (1965) (though this track record was not mentioned on the *Jaws* film posters). Likely these credits mattered to Universal Studios in reassuring the executives that the producers knew how to deliver a successful movie but were uncertain about guaranteeing audience appeal. Also, the producing credits assigned by Hollywood studios are always diverse and often opaque in significance, with rarely anyone apart from the full "producer" being mentioned in advertising and on posters as credited for a movie's success or entitled to participate in award ceremonies.

Well before the film opened, many newspaper and magazine readers were familiar with the logistical difficulties that belied the film's final stunning effects achievement. This was not planned as a pre-release publicity strategy and the stories were initially beyond the control of Universal's publicity division. The studio's public relations team eventually capitalised on this, claiming it was their prescient planning that cemented the strategy's impact (Gottlieb, 2018). Readers knew Martha's Vineyard was substituted for Long Island as the base of operations, "that a monstrous mechanical, electronically controlled shark was used in place of the real thing for some of the scenes, but such facts in no way detract from the effects achieved by the film." Alpert (1975) stays with the theme of cold calculation of producers making a "fish story" not as interesting or compelling as *Moby Dick*: "We're being cannily manipulated, of course. The shocks are fully

intended, and like them or not, approve or disapprove, they are what is going to bring people by the millions into theatres around the world.”

The principal actors and crew shared anecdotes about *Jaws* as a project that teetered frequently on potentially catastrophic territory. There were plenty of antagonists besides the “recalcitrant mechanical shark” named Bruce.<sup>7</sup> They included “intrepid sailors and high-living yachtsmen, larcenous townspeople, tourists who were both curious about the movie and miffed that their vacations were being disrupted, striking labour unions and, inevitably, the elements” (Gottlieb, 2010). Spielberg was quoted: “*Jaws* should never have been made. It was an impossible effort.” However, a quote like this can be leveraged as a message of redemption and resilience, which, in turn, produces the platform for positive public relations. More than four decades later, the most financially successful director in film history is still haunted by the movie that made him a household name: “For a movie that became awesomely successful and gave me complete personal creative freedom, I still look back at it and even now say it was my most unhappy time in my life as a filmmaker” (Dargis, 2016).

The crew and Spielberg had settled on Martha’s Vineyard, emphasizing to sceptical residents that any disruptions to a normally peaceful community in the off-season would be rewarded with plenty of local business activity, thanks to the presence of more than 150 members from the film’s production crew. Gottlieb (2018) kept a detailed log of the various problems and ways the studio and crew resolved them.<sup>8</sup> His notes confirmed what Spielberg mentioned in interviews, and Gottlieb is prescient about the comparisons to the actual Titanic disaster, which ironically was the genesis for another blockbuster film more than two decades later (Gottlieb, 1975, p. 156):

But the strength of *Jaws* is greater than the *Titanic*’s – we are unsinkable... The book is a publishing phenomenon holding steady in the Top Ten, twenty weeks on the charts and no sign of faltering. There is no delegation

of executive trouble-shooters come out to location to personally survey the problems. No anxious demands to see some cut sequences. Here we were, forty days over schedule and about a million and a half over the budget, and it's laissez-faire time! It bespoke great confidence in the whole team and kept spirits up during the darkest days.

Gottlieb's production diary is valuable for its candour. There was talk of moving the set to Indonesia, Nova Scotia, and other locations, as part of an "if all else fails" effort. He wrote, "It called for the company to shut down and go home, except for the special effects crew, who would just stay here and learn how to make the shark work right. Then in September [1974], when the tourists and the sailboats and the high prices would be gone, everyone would reconvene on the Vineyard and we'd pick up where we left off, having worked on editing the rest of the picture in the meantime. The studio would ask SAG [Screen Actors Guild] and the stars for some kind of waiver, and pick up their salaries again in the fall" (Gottlieb, 1975, pp. 157-161). While the production issues received a lot of attention, there was little in advance discussion about the acting talent. A study about the importance of movie stars, as carried out by Albert (1998), does not apply to *Jaws* regarding the three lead actors. Roy Scheider, Robert Shaw and Richard Dreyfuss<sup>9</sup> did not constitute a typical movie star level box office draw. *Jaws* can, however, be credited for being one of the first (after *The Godfather*) modern blockbusters to challenge the notion of movie stars' importance in a film's success and to highlight the increasing importance of data and special effects (FX), even with an occasionally nonfunctional animatronics shark. To look for a similar case study (Sandler & Studlar, 1999), one should consider *Titanic's* overwhelming success at its 1997 release. The casting did not focus on star grade actors either (it should be noted that neither Leonardo DiCaprio nor Kate Winslet were a significant box office draw at that early stage of their careers). The breath-taking special effects became a major draw, especially in attracting the prized teenaged male

demographic segment, one of the most consistently loyal consumer niches for blockbuster and event films (Kramer, 1998).

While Scheider, Shaw and Dreyfuss received little attention before the release. “Shaw and Dreyfuss were Oil and Water, their animus (cultivated by the canny Shaw, a much more experienced actor), contributed to the on-screen tension between the characters,” Gottlieb (2018) recalls. Meanwhile, there was plenty of press about how the 25-foot mechanical replica of a great white shark came to be. The simple motion of making a left turn, laid out elegantly on the storyboard, consumed two days of filming. Reporters personified the contraption with details typically reserved for the film’s leading star (*Time*, 2 September 1974):

Even though the new star is coddled with his own 200-foot by 75-foot ‘Shark City’ workshop and a corps of 23 crewmen in attendance, all of Bruce’s schizoid personae are temperamental. He has a shocking tendency to corrode after his daily salt-water swishing. His grainy skin is subject to sun bleach too, so every week he needs a new epidermis. When not skillfully supervised, in fact, Bruce simply gets out of hand. Three weeks ago, during a difficult diving scene, he hauled off and rammed headfirst into his control platform. His nose job took a week, adding another delay to an enterprise already two months behind schedule.

Bruce’s troubles spread from word-of-mouth from Martha Vineyard’s residents and tourists to industry insiders who did not shy away from sharing details. There were incidents of theft and larceny, as the film crew saw everything from nylon line to generators missing from the set. Tourists pestered Spielberg and others about being extras in the film. Gottlieb (2018) confirms the details, adding, “True enough. But in the end, it was dedication and professionalism of a die-hard Hollywood studio crew, from the director down to the fat Boston Teamsters, who believed that what they were doing was worth the effort.” Meanwhile, many were impressed by Spielberg’s youth, who, at 27, was one of Hollywood’s new

generation directors. And, there were the realities of nature, which defied any meticulously calculated planning. Strong currents and tall waves disturbed boats and equipment and the water's constantly changing colour challenged film editors tasked with maintaining the film's continuity. The description of filming snags was published in the 2<sup>nd</sup> of September 1974 issue of *Time* magazine, nine months before the film's release and still nearly six weeks before the *Jaws* crew had completed filming on the set, which was nearly two months behind schedule. In 1975 coinciding with the film's release, *Time's* cover story (23<sup>rd</sup> of June 1975) about *Jaws* included further details about production snags, especially those featuring the "recalcitrant" Bruce, which sank on his debut on the set.

When filming was completed, the original budget had doubled along with the production time. Asked about what held the production together, Gottlieb (2018) says it was "held together by momentum, professional standards, a sense of creative community, and a genuine respect for 'The Genius of The System.'" He adds "Spielberg was unflappable on the set and led by example. He obviously knew what he was doing (even when he didn't), and everyone took their cue from him. Only alone in the log cabin, at night, after work, would he lose sleep and bite his nails." The press coverage helped. Today, the most successful earned media strategists would leverage such content – realistically as informative, entertaining and engaging as the stories about *Jaws'* production woes – on numerous social media and digital platforms captured in 'viral' tendencies, mentions, shares, reposts, reviews, recommendations, or content picked up by third party sites. In the pre-digital age, the principals behind the film crafted a visionary promotional campaign that started even before the original novel was published and culminated in a parallel strategy of saturated media and advertising coverage during the week of its release.<sup>10</sup>

#### 4.4 Marketing and Promotion

Finler (1985, p. 160), a journalist writing about the *Jaws* success 10 years later, concluded that “*Jaws* itself was a triumph of uninhibited consumerist packaging.” However, he virtually ignored any details about how this package was assembled prior to the release. He commented that, “It frightened its summertime audience off the beaches... and into the movie theatres,” again a reasonable, yet unsubstantiated statement, as the catalyst could just as well have been the weather, which in Los Angeles, happened to be terrible during the film’s release. The journalist claimed that: “Within six weeks one person in eight in America had seen it” (although the numbers indicated the ratio by that point in August of 1975 was much higher). He concluded: “When that kind of phenomenon occurs, it is no longer simply a successful movie: it is a deeply significant media event.” In the 1970s, newspaper and trade publications advertising runs often comprised two-thirds of the total marketing budget. But, some studio executives as well as key film personnel were concerned that initial rounds of advertising risked being so passive in tone and approach that potential moviegoers would not be moved to see *Jaws*. If a film’s opening proved promising, then studios generally increased advertising runs in size, scope and frequency, spreading from nationally prominent media markets to medium-sized and smaller ones throughout the country.

The producers followed a conventional campaign that resembled those representing earlier “spectacle” or “event” films. As Wyatt and Vlesmas (1999) noted, many Hollywood spectacles did not specifically mention a film’s production budget in the advertising but focused on broader messages about the film’s scope, such as *Gone With The Wind* (1939), *The Ten Commandments* (1956), *Spartacus* (Stanley Kubrick, 1960) and *Lawrence of Arabia* (David Lean, 1962). Spectacle films highlighted virtually everything else from talent, epic narrative, special effects and screening events. The \$30 million budget for *Cleopatra* (Joseph



L. Mankiewicz, 1963) was emphasized in the “bigger is better” advertising messages Twentieth Century Fox used to promote the film as Hollywood’s most expensive production up to that date, but the film’s box office revenue was disappointing (Wanger & Hyams, 1963, p. 224). To quote the executive producer of the academy nominated *Buddy Holly Story* (Steve Rash, 1978) Fred Kuehnert<sup>11</sup>: “If no one can prove how much money you spent on a picture, why would you not exaggerate the budget size, if it means that the hype will earn you more money?” Gottlieb (2018) explained, “Hollywood’s a fictitious construct. In every film, hardly anyone knows what the real budget is, and income and profits are unobtainable without court-ordered audits and skilled professional expert witnesses. There’s a consensus, and skilled reporter and analysts can piece together ‘the truth’ about a picture’s cost/benefit results, but it’s neither common nor discernible from its public face.” The event connotes a singular phenomenon, so attempts to replicate the glory and magic might suggest that even greater (i.e., novel/differing) inputs of marketing and financial resources for promotion and distribution will be needed to assure a similar revenue performance for the next film.

*Jaws’* release came on the heels of two strong performers in the event picture genre: *Earthquake* and *Airport* (1975). The question is whether or not studios can predict a tipping point at which audience fatigue of the blockbuster film event sets in (e.g., if everything is an event, then nothing is an event; that is why marketing protocols have to change constantly), after which they may resist and ignore subsequent marketing campaigns. Or, to the studio's detriment, audiences will stop waiting in line to see the latest blockbuster.

Spielberg cited the strategy for building *Jaws’* word of mouth and media exposure: “The release pattern was a key element in its [the film's] success. Initially, Universal was as excited about marketing the film as Bantam was in marketing the book.” In the 2002 book *Shark Trouble*, Benchley (p. 49) recalls

being contacted in 1974 by John Wilcox, producer of *The American Sportsman* television show, which ran on ABC for two decades. The hour-long show was structured as an electronic magazine, usually comprising three or four stories per episode. Benchley was invited to show what it is like to be in a cage in Australian waters with great white sharks nearby. As Benchley, a trained scuba diver and an oceanic expert who frequently worked with *National Geographic* magazine, explains, the show had previously never featured a scuba-diving segment. Benchley's television appearances were natural promotional opportunities for the film. "In one, he's captured wide-eyed and exhilarated, sitting breathless on the edge of the diving boat, fresh from a close encounter with a great white shark. Gasping with equal parts ecstasy and terror from going face-to-face with the creature in the protective cage beneath the surface, Benchley looks as if he has just seen something miraculous" (Dowling, 15 August 2014). Although Benchley criticized the adaptation of his book, he agreed to join promotional tours. He also was featured in a Rolex watch advertising campaign, where he posed next to an image of a Great White Shark, which featured the line, "In the presence of the Great White ... time suspends itself."<sup>12</sup> Even though his input on the screenplay ended early in the adaptation process, Benchley was listed in the credits as a co-writer of the screenplay. His contract terms included a 10 percent profit share based on the film's box office revenue.

Close to the film's release, there were signs that promotional intensity and frequency were being orchestrated to gauge the success of the film's opening box office performance. In *Variety*, for example, there was no or little evidence of any content to stir attention in the May 28 issue, which came out four weeks before the film's release. A small bit of content on two pages, which mentioned the *Jaws*' cast as promoting the film appeared in the following issue on June 4. Then no mention was found in the June 11 issue but a review appeared in the June 19 release. The first banner-sized or full-page ad appeared in the June 25 issue and

then it expanded with the July 2 issue, which coincided with a healthy rise in share prices for MCA Universal's stock following the release of the film two weeks prior.

The trade press amplified the buzz, with a 25<sup>th</sup> of April 1975 report in *The Hollywood Reporter* praising it as a "production problem-plagued film turning out beautifully," and as a "film of consummate suspense, tension and terror." The kicker underscored the easy prediction: "The Universal release looks like a torrid money maker everywhere... [t]he assured success of *Jaws* will minimize the 100 percent budget overrun, to the neighbourhood off \$8,000,000." The reports days after the film's June 20 release confirmed the predictions. In the same *Variety* issue with the film's first banner ad, the publication confirmed *Jaws*' "smash status," with a three-day take of more than \$1 million in just 46 theatres.<sup>13</sup> The report concluded, "Pre-sell from the Peter Benchley novel, fine reviews, for the Steven Spielberg pic for Zanuck-Brown, a big ad campaign and hotsy word of mouth drew long lines at every house on the track despite perfect summer beach weather over the weekend." Similar trade press reports from around the country reinforced the verdict.<sup>14</sup>

The initial numbers also reflected the intense brief wave of television advertising as the capstone to the media campaign. Just prior to the film's release in the week ending June 25, a series of 25 television ads of 30 seconds each were aired nightly during prime time on three nights during the week of the release, ensuring ads for the nation's three major television networks (ABC, CBS and NBC). The initial cost was \$700,000 and an additional \$300,000 was plugged into the campaign during the week of the film's formal release (or, nearly \$4.7 million in today's value). The immediate saturation was intended to generate a decisive, novel, quick and often replicated, amortization rate, instead of a slower, deliberately scaled release, as Universal executive Sidney Sheinberg (*The Hollywood Reporter*, 26<sup>th</sup> of June 1975) had anticipated. "We attempted to buy 30-second commercials on every primetime show on June 18, 19 and 20, the three

days leading to the release. We got 85 percent of what we were looking for in primetime spots with local buys,” Clark Ramsey, Universal Studios publicity director, explained. “We evaluated each market and spent approximately 47 percent of our money in print media and the other 53 percent on the electronic media, TV and radio.” Universal executives believed the television campaign would justify the advance bookings of theatre screens for the film, which were originally set to be more than 900.

As months of advance press coverage had suggested, the executives were confident about *Jaws*’ potential for success and audiences at test screenings apparently confirmed their expectations. Audiences responded positively to a pair of test screenings in Dallas on March 26, 1975 and one two days later in Long Beach, California. The final preview screening on April 24, 1975 in Hollywood incorporated cuts and revisions inspired by the responses at the earlier test events<sup>15</sup>. Lew Wasserman, chairman of Universal who had attended one of the screenings, then decided to pare the number of opening screens by nearly half to 464 in the U.S. and Canada (a number that was considered still significantly above average for a wide release).<sup>16</sup> Suggesting that he was not as yet fully comfortable with the new business model of rapid saturation.

At the time, wide openings were associated with movies of doubtful quality, in hopes of diminishing impacts of negative reviews or unflattering word of mouth. Wasserman was quoted as saying, “I want this picture to run all summer long.” It is not assured to connect today’s common mass releases directly to Wasserman’s sentiments or *Jaws*’ initial release strategy. It also is not simple to explain why the originally intended saturation/rapid release strategy was revised to a more traditional trickle-down release arrangement. Gottlieb (2018) noted that one could justify an initial ‘wide release’ as the best way to capitalise on a popular film with a limited window for playing time. That is, as he added, “go wide, take in as much money as possible, and when school starts in the fall and the box

office fails, come out a winner.” However, as he reiterated, the autumn gross box office receipts for *Jaws* sustained the pace of the summer: “It was only after the fact that people realized they had that rarest of things, a genuine hit, immune to theory and past practice, *sui generis*,” Gottlieb (2018) said.

*Jaws*’ promotional opportunities steadily expanded through the remainder of the summer and into the fall season. Customers enjoyed the options of purchasing various forms of merchandise that Universal officially licensed, including wall plaques, posters, postcards, shark-illustrated beach towels and T-shirts, plastic tumblers, plastic shark fins and shark-shaped pool inflatable devices, shark’s tooth necklaces and the soundtrack album. The Ideal Toy Company released a game in which the player had to use a hook to fish out items from the shark’s mouth before the jaws closed.

*Jaws* was part of a new trend. Merchandising had already become an important contributing element to non-theatrical film revenues for MCA and Universal Studios. In its 1975 annual report, MCA reported a 19 percent year-to-year increase for nontheatrical film revenues, up to \$9,067,000 in 1975. Of note, was MCA Publishing’s success in securing the publishing rights for more than 85 books (as documented in the MCA Annual Report of 1975) based on the studio’s film properties along with the licensing of the use of the shark motif from *Jaws* and *The Six Million Dollar Man*’s television series character for children’s toys. The template for wide merchandising tie-in strategies was established with convincing evidence for extending a film’s economic impact.

The promotional campaign for *Jaws* fused traditional Hollywood publicity strategies and tactics with tie-ins focused on merchandising and sensationalistic stories tied to sharks, part accurate and part myth. In both phases, the shark’s image became the most prominent element of the promotional campaign. Its potential threat became fodder for reporters and editorial cartoonists, as

interpreted from the iconic poster image art. Soon, any reports of encounters with sharks became material for newspapers and broadcasts and the references to *Jaws* were automatic as newsworthy pegs.

#### **4.5 Distribution, Release and Economic Impact**

While *Jaws*, for some, became the template for the blockbuster business model, the lessons from Laughlin's *Billy Jack* approach also attracted the attention of Universal Studios executives who were contemplating a best-case scenario for *Jaws*' distribution. The extraordinary success of *The Godfather* in 1972 along with the widely acknowledged visionary work of Laughlin in generating fresh interest for the *Billy Jack* films had sparked a trend toward wider releases, but it should be emphasized that *The Godfather* had debuted in just five theatres, before going wide in the second week of release. For *Jaws*, studio executives expanded Laughlin's strategic use of broadcast advertising to boost the visibility of *Billy Jack* and created a comparable national advertising strategy to coincide with *Jaws*' wide national release.

*Jaws*, however, was not the first film in the summer of 1975 to adopt such a strategy. In May of that year, Columbia Pictures followed a similar strategy for *Breakout* (Tom Gries, 1975) the thriller starring Charles Bronson, although compared to *Jaws*, it was difficult to see that film's prospects for a run to match the potential for the shark thriller's presence in the theatres. Looking to amortize an already extended marketing campaign, Sheinberg followed Wasserman's lead in scaling up the number of theatres from 464 at the 20 June release to nearly 700 five weeks later and by 15 August, *Jaws* was being shown in more than 950 theatres, close to the initial target studio executives had planned before the test screenings in March earlier that year.

The strategy worked. On 2 July 1975, *Daily Variety* reported that *Jaws*' U.S. box office total for the week would be in the "area of \$14,310,00," and "may be the largest single-week domestic box office figure for any film in industry history." Many immediately compared the success of *The Godfather*'s release some three and a half years earlier (about \$10 million in 365 "situations," as the trade press references these figures). This and any other comparison must be qualified by several factors: number of theatres, number of screenings, film's rating ("*Jaws*" was rated PG, while "*The Godfather*" was R), running time ("*Godfather*" ran about 35 percent longer), and the comparative levels of admission prices ("*Godfather*" was getting \$4 in first-run). By the end of its seventh week, based on *Variety* box office figures (25 June 1975) that sampled seven percent of the extant theatres in which the film appeared, *Jaws* already topped the cumulative grosses of *The Exorcist* in less time, on a comparable or smaller number of screens. *Jaws* notched \$24,381,432, which confirmed the box office would extrapolate out to more than \$100 million during the summer season, compared to *The Exorcist* (1973), which reached similar numbers after 25 weeks, and *The Sting* (1973), after 12 weeks. On 25 June 1975, *Variety* (pp. 16-17) provided the ready comparison: "*The Exorcist* proved that filmgoers will line up for blocks and pay millions to be frightened. But a newcomer has burst into the local scene and looks to beat the devil... This toothsome arrival has everything going to make it a top grosser. Rave reviews, advance publicity and extensive advertising stirred initial excitement, and word-of-mouth should keep *Jaws* in the swim for a long time." For the first weekend of wide release, *Jaws* grossed more than \$7 million, and was the top grosser for the following five weeks and it became the first film to reach more than \$100 million in U.S. box office receipts during its theatre run. Clearly, the strategic concerns about keeping the "legs" of the film as strong as possible for a longer duration, as outlined in the previous section, were expanded in July.

The shift may have acknowledged *Jaws'* performance, which seems even more impressive compared to the slate of summer releases with which Universal had to compete. The summer of 1975 featured numerous prominent thrillers including the sequel to the popular and successful *The French Connection II* (John Frankenheimer, 1975); *Rollerball* (Norman Jewison, 1975), a dystopic sports action film starring A-list actor James Caan; *Breakout*, the latest entry in a vigilante-themed franchise with Charles Bronson; *Night Moves* (Arthur Penn, 1975), a film starring Gene Hackman (also an A-list actor) as a former football star; *The Eiger Sanction* with Clint Eastwood (also a Universal Studios film), and *The Wind and The Lion*, John Milius' sweeping romantic adventure narrative starring Sean Connery and Candice Bergen.

The special effects and the presence of the mechanical shark drove the content for many months of well-placed news features, in a carefully orchestrated public relations and media campaign. The volume of media coverage and advertising it had received prior to its release proved to be irresistible to audiences. Gottlieb (2018) said, "the pre-release publicity was not the work of genius. It was simply the result of a studio spending enough to cover the unexpectedly high cost of a production and protect their investment." *Jaws'* performance at the box office validated the strategy and the tactics associated with it. It validated a story with which millions of readers had already positively engaged.<sup>17</sup>

*Jaws'* success also benefited from the learning curve of an aggregate of marketing techniques, of which other studios had already begun to implement with films being released before or near the opening of *Jaws*. Sheinberg's approach was innovative, though not entirely original in content. The perception of insiders and external observers indicates that studio executives had discovered unique approaches, which was disputable. Nearly flawless in executing the tactics for leveraging the value and impact of earned media (i.e., no news is bad news),



the executives set their sights on timing the saturated advertising campaign in the broadcast media optimally, to cushion the risks of spending such large sums on television promotion. Schatz (2002) describes it as a well-acknowledged process: “[w]hereby five hundred to a thousand prints of a film would be released simultaneously to theatres nationwide, accompanied by a massive advertising campaign on television, radio and in the print media. The concentration of these efforts is usually in the large population areas.” Topf (2010, p. 12) is quick to point out that while the saturation approach facilitated cost-effective advertising strategies, a “cascade/platform release film with its own hype surrounding it, does not necessarily require large amounts of capital spent informing the public of its release because information about the particular film is being spread through word of mouth.” The change in *Jaws*’ distribution was notable for suggesting a switch from a platform release to a saturation release occurs because a studio is concerned the cultural buzz does not circulate quickly enough for the phenomenon to go national. Saturation releases became the preferred model for blockbusters while platform releases are still common for many other films.

Unique in *Jaws*, while acknowledging the innovative approach taken with *Billy Jack*’s second release as discussed earlier, studio executives played a deliberate yet risky game with the film’s release strategy. They scaled back the original screen number targets for the film’s opening, while deploying an expensive saturated advertising campaign to guide the expansion of screen venues in the weeks following the film’s release. But, by the end of the summer, neither Universal nor Spielberg had any regrets.

*Jaws*’ success signalled the end of a stubborn four-year recessionary trend for the industry. Since the late 1960s, the film industry struggled to reconcile declining box office receipts and rising production costs, as studios became more vulnerable to takeovers and new conglomerates. Meanwhile, theatre operators and owners, equally mindful of holding the line on costs, moved from classic large-

screen theatres to smaller screens and houses in a multiplex format (Acland, 2005). The press did not hesitate to identify *Jaws* as a transitional moment in the industry's recent economic trend. In a 13 August 1975 *Variety* report, citing *Jaws* as the key differential, the monthly box office in major U.S. markets for July increased dramatically by an inflation-adjusted gain of 15 percent, reaching more than \$53.6 million, and for the six-month period in 1975, box office revenues rose 12 percent over the comparable period in 1974.

This also suggested that *Jaws*' presence helped energize interest in its competitors for the summer season (as noted earlier) and there was evidence of repeat business. An 8 July 1975 report in *The New York Times* emphasized the economic impact of a super hit such as *The Exorcist* and *The Sting* and the prospects for *Jaws* to reinvigorate ticket sales, which had sagged considerably in the first half of 1975. The earlier super hits had pushed U.S. movie receipts to an estimated record of \$1.8 billion, and audiences had "jumped about 15 percent last year from 1973, to about one billion." However, quoting *Variety* numbers, *The New York Times* report opined about the rising status of *Jaws*, "despite the absence of any front-ranked stars and the stewardship of a 27-year-old director virtually unknown to most moviegoers," along with being "presold" thanks to the popularity of Benchley's novel and "an onslaught of promotion." Zanuck and Brown leveraged the timing by reading the novel before its publication and purchasing the film rights, highlighting the importance of experience in this managerial decision-making process. The novel ended up being on the bestselling list for 44 weeks. While the film benefited from the positive waves generated by the novel's success, the producers did not acquire a sure-fire, calculated blockbuster grade property that was already a bestseller, as that happened later. A similar situation occurred with Mario Puzo's novel for *The Godfather*, which was optioned with just 114 pages of it having been written.<sup>18</sup>

The film amplified the success of Universal Studios' broader portfolio for its parent owner MCA. In terms of gross revenues and operating income, according to the MCA annual report for 1975, theatrical filmed entertainment registered a 41 percent increase from the previous year, reaching \$289,131,000 while operating income was up more than 82 percent for the year at \$124,022,000. The annual report singled out *Jaws*' extraordinary performance for the year, "an historic one for the Company with theatrical motion picture revenues the highest for any company in the history of the industry." It also cited the strong performance of *Earthquake* and *Airport 1975* (both films which were released in late 1974 and continued screening well into 1975), which together registered worldwide revenues of more than \$72 million. The report also cited its other strong box office performers: *The Front Page* (Billy Wilder, 1974), *The Great Waldo Pepper* (George Roy Hill, 1975), *The Eiger Sanction* and *The Other Side of The Mountain* (Larry Peerce, 1975).

The relative contributions of theatrical releases to MCA's revenues grew by more than 15 percent in just one year, from 31 percent in 1974 to 36 percent. MCA's stock prices opened the 1975-year higher than at any point in 1974, almost six months before the release of *Jaws*.

Table 4.1. MCA Common Stock Price Data

	1975		1974	
	High	Low	High	Low
1st Quarter	\$31 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>8</sub>	\$27 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>4</sub>	\$25	\$19 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>8</sub>
2nd Quarter	\$79 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>4</sub>	\$48 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>8</sub>	\$27 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>4</sub>	\$21 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>4</sub>
3rd Quarter	\$88 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>4</sub>	\$62 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub>	\$23 <sup>7</sup> / <sub>8</sub>	\$19 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>4</sub>
4th Quarter	\$89 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>8</sub>	\$59 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>8</sub>	\$28 <sup>7</sup> / <sub>8</sub>	\$19 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>4</sub>

Source: MCA Annual Report (1975).

In the second half of the reporting year, accounting for the time *Jaws* was on the screen, stock prices continued to climb to record levels but at a slower pace. The first half of the year was dominated by the strong performance of two other films, which had opened during the previous holiday season: *Earthquake* and *Airport* 1975. However, it was undeniable that *Jaws* amplified an already positive financial trend. *Jaws* set the benchmark for the appeal of the summer season as a prime timeframe to market a film that could reach a larger audience spanning many demographic groups. Universal also invested in an unprecedented volume of television advertising for a film – at a level not attempted before because such advertising outlays were considered too expensive to justify a potential return on the invested marketing dollar. Even as valuable as publicity had been as a Hollywood staple, the success of *Jaws*' product and merchandising tie-ins transformed the old publicity departments into integrated marketing and communications divisions focused on adding material value to branding and media value in equity terms.

#### 4.6 Audience Reception and Reviews

Eleven weeks into its run, *Jaws* had topped box office gross receipts of \$125 million (more than \$550 million in today's value). Showing no sign of ceding its momentum, the film nevertheless drew praise and criticism from reviewers and critics across the country. In the 1976 Academy Awards, the film was nominated for Best Picture but lost to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (Milos Forman, 1975). *Jaws*, however, earned three Oscars: Best Film Editing, Best Original Dramatic Score and Best Sound. It is likely the film's financial punch was immutable against negative criticism so it would be difficult to hazard an estimate about whether the positive reviews had some influence on box office appeal. In that same year, many critics gave some of the strongest positive reviews for *Nashville* (Robert Altman, 1975), a satirical comedy directed by Robert Altman with well-known stars of the time. The movie's box office take was barely \$10 million off a \$2.2 million production budget. That film was added in 1992 to the U.S. National Film Registry as a masterpiece of cinema.

*Jaws* seemed immutable to any degree of negative or even muted criticism. Two months into the run, Stephen Farber of *The New York Times* (24 August 1975) compared *Jaws* to *Bug* (Jeannot Szwarc, 1975), a film about giant cockroaches, which infest Los Angeles after a major earthquake. He contended that while *Bug* clearly was a cheap exploitation film intended for basic audience urges to shriek and gasp at images of giant insects, *Jaws* was the same type of film, excepting the size of the advertising budget. He held no charity for the record-breaking audiences, as he described, "those who think that they made *Jaws* a success are pitifully naïve about the mass media." In mincing no words about the brutal impact of an "efficient publicity machine," he added that "the audience that has been pummelled by Universal's aggressive media blitz is then primed to respond to a scare show that works with the ruthless insistence of a cattle prod." He used a similar tone with those critics, especially those who called Spielberg's work

“Hitchcockian,” and whose “delirious reviews are indistinguishable from press releases.” He surmised that some critics worried about being tagged as snobs or elitists and did not want to risk losing further currency as observers and curators of popular taste. He wrote, “The critics probably could not have deterred the people who get their kicks watching dismemberments and mutilations, but they should have remained detached enough to point out the flaws in plot, characterization, acting and direction.” He closed the review: “The giant success of *Jaws* may encourage them to keep aiming for the lowest common denominator; from now on, it will almost certainly be a little harder to find financing for more modest and meaningful films.”

In a decade distinguished by major commercial films many critics celebrated as achieving art-house quality, Farber’s criticism was to be expected even if it appears as snobbery in a marketplace emphasizing consumerist appeals. The question is, even as one acknowledges that there certainly are films better than others, what is really being served by sharp criticism that ends up being little more than sarcasm and cynicism. In a later generation, *New York Times* film critic (Scott, 2015, 2 October 2015) wrote:

Condescension to the mass audience and its pleasures is not cool, or fashionable or politically correct. Populist entertainment sits comfortably alongside more rarefied aesthetic pursuits, not least at the New York Film Festival itself, which routinely makes room for big, awards-hungry Hollywood movies.

Not all writers characterized *Jaws* as a precedent or prototype blockbuster but as a film indicative of an emerging industry trend. Some critics sought thoughtful balances in their assessments, and not just in mainstream newspapers and trade presses but also in other publications that emphasized broader cultural discussions for a literate audience. David Brudnoy at *The American Spectator* (1975, p. 31) labelled the film as “splendidly contrived hokum, and it should do

terrible things to the summer resort industry next season, in reruns, as it has this summer." Even in amusing ways, some prescient critics knew how difficult it would be to deny *Jaws'* cultural durability.

Journalists and critics also took note of *Jaws'* release strategy. Biskind (1975, p. 26) wrote, "[The film] diminish[ed] the importance of print reviews, making it virtually impossible for a film to build slowly, finding its audience by dint of mere quality. ... In a sense, Spielberg was the Trojan horse through which the studios began to reassert their power." Schatz (2004, p. 293) also wrote on the film's impact: "If any single film marked the arrival of the New Hollywood, it was *Jaws*, the Spielberg-directed thriller that recalibrated the profit potential of the Hollywood hit, and redefined its status as a marketable commodity and cultural phenomenon as well." More broadly, the film continues to enjoy near-universal acclaim. It currently holds a 100 percent "Fresh" rating on the review aggregate website *Rotten Tomatoes*, with the critical consensus stating "Compelling, well-crafted storytelling and a judicious sense of terror ensure Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* has remained a benchmark in the art of delivering modern blockbuster thrills." It holds a *Metacritic* score of 79, as compared to 82 for *The Exorcist* and 100 for *The Godfather*. Among nearly 400,000 ratings at IMDB.Com (Internet Movie Database), it holds an 8.1 rating (on a 10-point scale), compared to 9.2 for *The Godfather*, and 8.0 for *The Exorcist*.

Some of the nation's best-known critics offered generous appraisals. In his original review at the *Chicago Sun Times*, Roger Ebert (1975) called it "a sensationally effective action picture, a scary thriller that works all the better because it's populated with characters that have been developed into human beings." However, Ebert's long-time counterpart at the *Chicago Tribune*, Gene Siskel (20 June 1975), was hardly positive: "What this movie is about, and where it succeeds best, is the primordial level of fear. The characters, for the most part, and the non-fish elements in the story, are comparatively weak and not

believable." Many highly visible mainstream media outlets were effusive in their praise. *Variety's* A.D. Murphy (18 June 1975) praised Spielberg's directorial skills and called Robert Shaw's performance "absolutely magnificent." Pauline Kael (1976, pp. 195-196) called it "the most cheerfully perverse scare movie ever made... [with] more zest than an early Woody Allen picture, a lot more electricity, [and] it's funny in a Woody Allen sort of way." Frank Rich of *The New York Times* wrote "Spielberg is blessed with a talent that is absurdly absent from most American filmmakers these days: this man actually knows how to tell a story on screen. ... It speaks well of this director's gifts that some of the most frightening sequences in *Jaws* are those where we don't even see the shark" (1975, c.f. McBride, 1999, p. 256). Some were more nuanced in their criticisms. Vincent Canby, of *The New York Times* (21 June 1975), said "It's a measure of how the film operates that not once do we feel particular sympathy for any of the shark's victims...In the best films, characters are revealed in terms of the action. In movies like *Jaws*, characters are simply functions of the action. They're at its service." He added: "If you think about *Jaws* for more than 45 seconds you will recognize it as nonsense, but it's the sort of nonsense that can be a good deal of fun, if you like to have the wits scared out of you at irregular intervals." Good critics would admit their summary judgments might be fallible, when considered in retrospect. The purpose of a negative review might be less focused on worrying about a film's viability at the box office than on some long-term concerns about artistic decision making in the film industry.

In a 20<sup>th</sup> of June 1975 review headlined "Don't Go Near The Water," *Los Angeles Times* critic Charles Champlin labelled it as "flat-bush melodrama," called the calculated ending "pulp story hokum," and added that, "[i]f the whole project from manuscript forward has been a commercially calculated confection, the tipoff in the movie is the stubborn refusal of the key characters to come in to sharp focus." In a 2012 appearance, Champlin talked about his dual responsibilities as a



critic to the people who make films and to his readership at *The Los Angeles Times*. He added, “Conflicting obligations? Not at all. I think you fulfill your obligation to the creative community by trying to understand and state as sympathetically as you can, what the intentions of the film were.”<sup>19</sup> Champlin’s critical perspective differed from others who did not disparage the calculated thriller as compromising artistic values.

Penelope Gilliatt’s 7<sup>th</sup> of July 1975 review in *The New Yorker* magazine hit a suitably 1970s tone: “The film is punk. It is also a thug thrashing around the streets of Manhattan to swallow up the 4<sup>th</sup> of July crowds. The very wit of the way it excites audiences by delaying its signalled calamities is knowing and lowly... It provides the thrill that thus speciously passes for the dramatically satisfying.” She focused on a broader cultural trend comparing *Jaws* to another summer thriller competing for attention on the screen: *Rollerball*. She explained: “*Jaws*’ is a foolish exercise in special effects, not to be mistaken for sci-fi, ‘*Rollerball*’ is ideological sci-fi, but politically as purblind as any film dealing in augury that I have ever seen, and both films are dependent on sorts of grossness, lassitude, and blood lust that they break their necks to create in us. Without our compliance, which we could contemplate withholding, they would be non-negotiable goods.” It is an astute consumer report framed as a film review.

Positive or not, the reviews acknowledged a durable cultural phenomenon. If critics believed they had as solid a read on their own audiences as they did on decision-making in Hollywood, then they had underestimated the cultural zeitgeist “water-cooler” among those who saw the film more than once.

#### **4.7 Conclusion**

*Jaws* encompassed the gist of every marker for a classic blockbuster film. Its eventually substantial production budget was accompanied by an aggressive

marketing campaign that leveraged the best-selling success of the novel from which it was adapted as well as prime-time television for an unprecedented saturation of teaser commercials in the week just prior to its release. This was accompanied by equally aggressive merchandising campaigns with numerous shark motif products. Although studio executives scaled back by almost half its original ambitious plans for theatrical release, less than two months into *Jaws'* summer opening, the film was screened simultaneously on the largest number of screens at one time up until that point in Hollywood history. With the exception of featuring a main storyline child or teen protagonist, the narrative elements completely suited the long-tail economic expectations of a blockbuster film story, along with its merchandising potential. It was the first film to indicate the potential box office of the summer theatrical season as opposed to the Christmas season, which was more popular at the time.

Its success emboldened studios to continue with the marketing and distribution practices that had elevated the film to blockbuster status even if those practices were not necessarily unprecedented. But, it also set a new standard as a disaster film with special effects that Spielberg had turned into, as Cook (2002, p. 255) has described it, "a visceral machine of entertainment designed to achieve maximum cinematic punch on every level." Cook added that in *Jaws*, obviously special effects mattered, as the cost for them represented a quarter of the final negative cost of \$12 million. However, even accounting for its extraordinary performance, the film simply confirmed or consolidated existing industry trends and practices, as demonstrated in this chapter.

*Jaws'* nationwide release and concurrent ad campaign reinforced the value of previous experiments with saturation booking and advertising, which had placed increased importance on a film's box-office performance in its opening weeks of release. "Front-loading" the audience had already become a widespread marketing ploy, because it maximised a movie's event status while diminishing

the potential damage done to weak pictures by negative reviews and poor word of mouth. *Jaws* confirmed the viability of the "summer hit," indicating that studio executives had a better grasp of seasonal release tactics and other new movie-going trends. In summary, caution must be exercised in categorizing *Jaws* as the earliest standard bearer for the blockbuster trend.

*Jaws*, however, was more than a cinematic phenomenon. It became a cultural phenomenon, because of the press it received in a period encompassing its production, along with the publication of the novel that would be the centrepiece for the screenplay. *Jaws'* cultural endurance engendered much deeper roots, even as the decade following its release was marked by blockbusters, larger in budget, technical effects and marketing campaigns. However, as much as the press highlighted the curiosity of the behind-the-scenes workings of the animatronics shark, it would be unwise to suggest that studio executives pursued the objective along the lines of suggesting that anything with sharks would sell in historically popular numbers. In a 20 August 2012 MTV interview, Gottlieb spoke about the film carrying two legacies: one in terms of its combined marketing and distribution success:

[b]ut the other lasting legacy of that movie is—and I always hoped people would take it to heart even now—is that there's no substitute for great story and great characters. You can have mechanical contraptions of incredible complexity—I watched *The Avengers* on the airplane and watched all kinds of mechanical creatures get beat up by superheroes. But the lack of empathy that you feel for the people you see on screen, the victims are essentially nameless. They just get killed or eaten or destroyed or vaporized. [In] *Jaws*, you cared about every victim, you cared about every survivor, and you cared about the three guys on the mission. And you felt bad that Quint died and you felt good that Hooper survived, you felt glad that Brody came out of it unscathed.

The extent and speed of *Jaws*' success surprised many observers, but it also signalled a broader orientation about marketing and promotion in a media environment more sensitised to even the smallest fluctuations in readership and viewership. The experience of *Jaws* was like no other event or big-budget film that came before it. In shifting the emphasis from *Jaws*' financial success as the first Hollywood summer blockbuster, this analysis rounds out a comprehensive blockbuster business model, as elements of marketing, distribution, story adaptation, star power and technical effects converged to become the baseline upon which they would evolve with subsequent blockbusters.

## Chapter 5

### STAR WARS

#### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter shows that *Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope* (1977) further evolved the evolutionary arc of the blockbuster business model that began with *The Godfather* (1972) and continued with *Jaws* (1975). It will make the case that its box office performance challenged ongoing doubts about the blockbuster model, which could reduce risk, increase revenue and be replicated, but also highlighted the growing importance of ancillary marketing and revenue platforms, which engendered many unique controversies.

As a case study, *Star Wars* (1977) initially appeared to confirm Goldman's (1983) "nobody knows anything" aphorism, substantiating Twentieth Century Fox's persistent scepticism about the film's viability. Lucas introduced numerous monetisation opportunities that many at the studio believed he was relying on little more than intuition. However, Lucas is one of the most calculating and risk-averse creators of blockbusters ever to have worked in Hollywood. Set within the context of the two prior case studies, Lucas, relied not on instinct as much as he did on his professional relationship with Francis Ford Coppola (Farber, 1974), (Lewis, 1997), as well as from his friendship with Steven Spielberg (Kramer, 2017, p. 195), all of them having met and supported each other by association with the University of Southern California film school (Mara, 2014).

The experience of having directed *American Graffiti* (1973) (Dempsey, 1973, p. 58) equipped Lucas with the skill-set to determine the markers to enhance the financial performance of his movie (release date and number of screens, word of mouth, unique special effects (FX), merchandising, basing the screenplay on previously successful narratives) and those which would threaten

its prospects (imperceptive studio executives). Lucas concluded control mattered the most. He therefore set out, early in his career, to control his intellectual property to the greatest possible extent, leaving as little of the decision-making power as possible in the hands of studio executives.

Ironically, despite Lucas' shunning of the extant studio business model, *Star Wars* success became the platform upon which the calculated blockbuster was embedded in the industry. *Star Wars* was the first summer film of its genre to be released in advance of the Memorial holiday weekend in late May.<sup>1</sup> The case study addresses both research questions in the thesis:

1. Between 1966 and 1985, how did entrepreneurial directors and producers facilitate the transition in New Hollywood to the Blockbuster Business Model by standardising a set of blockbuster markers?
2. How did entrepreneurial directors and producers reframe the promise of radical, independent-led innovation in the New Hollywood period that led to a new wave of institutional control in the era of the calculated blockbuster franchise system?

*Star Wars* used the value of merchandising tie-ins to expand the potential business base for the blockbuster film. In his characterization of the film's blockbuster status, Schatz (1993) takes note of the tie-ins and "licensing and merchandising bonanza," concluding that "strictly as a movie franchise it had tremendous legs." However, this is an incomplete analysis because Schatz and other critics do not account for *Star Wars*' essence of cultural timelessness, preferring instead to treat the phenomenon as a disruptive episode in the film industry's business approach to blockbusters, whereas it was destined to become part of its defining DNA.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter will discuss the way *Star Wars* focused on pre-release strategies to ensure favourable word-of-mouth among science-fiction fans, primarily through conventions for followers and admirers of science fiction and for a comic book series highlighting the film's story. In tandem with efforts to legitimize a broad cult-oriented brand, was the positioning of George Lucas, the director and writer, as the ultimate originator of all elements representing the *Star Wars* brand. Hills (2003, p. 183) notes how the film was marketed to consolidate its cultural status as a "myth for a timeless audience" and how fans subsequently adopted the elements of the promotional and marketing campaign in their own discourses. Thus, the promotional efforts "paradoxically link[ed] Lucas-as-auteur to a sense of films as mythologically transcendent, and thus as somehow beyond authorship" (Hills, 2003, p. 186). Furthermore, the fans' loyalty to Lucas as creative authority and their corresponding loyalty to the promotional discourses of *Star Wars* as timeless mythology, ensured that those promotional elements would remain in circulation with each new release of the *Star Wars* franchise (Hills, 2003, p. 187).

*Star Wars* fully transferred New Hollywood to the blockbuster era. Every conceivable marker was employed. One signal was the studio's Lucas inspired insistence – not the rating board of the Motion Picture Association of America – on seeking a PG (Parental Guidance) rating, instead of G, for the film. Looking toward the prospect of briskly paced, big-budget blockbusters especially aimed at young audiences, studio executives, as Lippincott's extensive oral history interviews (Rinzler and Lippincott. 2007, pp. 289-290) indicate, believed that a G rating (General Audiences – all ages admitted), would confuse audiences. That is, the intergalactic combat scenes might be considered too intense for young children and that at the same time a G rating would dissuade teenagers, college students and others from considering the film as cool enough to be relevant to their contemporary culture.

Lucas' creative vision and team management skills replicated similar markers distilled by Coppola in *The Godfather* and Spielberg in *Jaws*. The difference is that Lucas did not enjoy the same level of studio backing that his peers did. While there were built-in fan bases for both of those films that originated with their respective novels, with *Star Wars*, the challenge was to marshal interest from a more diffuse fan base interested in science fiction. *Star Wars* resulted from Lucas' deep research into story lines that had a robust track record of moving audiences<sup>3</sup> and were inspired by globally familiar frames of hero storytelling (Campbell, 2008). *Star Wars* deviated from science fiction traditions of complex and often dystopian exploration and character renderings as portrayed in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968), *Planet of the Apes* (Franklin J. Schaffner, 1968), *Westworld* (Michael Crichton, 1973) and *Logan's Run* (Michael Anderson, 1976). *Star Wars* pointed toward a different branch of science fiction, inspiring a new generation of uplifting, magically conceived stories of battle, conquest and hero identity. Secular in tone, *Star Wars* embedded heroism within an ecumenical frame convenient to the word-of-mouth<sup>4</sup> dynamic that Lucas believed was essential for *Star Wars*'s success (Arnold, 1977).

The topical relevance of *Star Wars*' narrative, as articulated by film critics, was formidable for its venerable success. On the surface, Goldman's claim that, in Hollywood, the notion that 'nobody knows anything' appears to prevail in *Star Wars*. Without the support of the studio but with the occasional guidance from peer directors, George Lucas and his most trusted colleague, Charles Lippincott, maximized simple heuristics. This characterized their efforts to craft a screenplay, redefine the concepts of fan loyalty and build a legacy of licensing, merchandising and franchise sequels that set the platform for calculated blockbusters. With the exception of the budget size – at best, modest and, at worst, paltry, compared to calculated blockbusters that came after – every *Star Wars* original development and production element fit the calculated blockbuster. In the next section, the first



step to building a timeless *Star Wars* brand, the screenplay development, is discussed.

## 5.2 Screenwriting Narrative

This section focuses on the narrative elements Lucas had identified as instrumental to previously successful texts and provides an overview of how he set about replicating these. *Star Wars* has been classified as an action, adventure, and fantasy<sup>6</sup> film (Harmetz, 1977). Lucas, at various times in his oral history interviews with Lippincott, mentioned that his script was inspired by his formative experiences with pop culture, books and movies (Rinzler and Lippincott, 2007, pp. 3, 223, 224). They included *Davy Crockett* (Rinzler and Lippincott, 2007, p. 224), *Flash Gordon* (Rinzler and Lippincott, 2007, p. 93), *The Wizard of Oz*, films of the 1930s through the 1950s featuring heroes cast as swashbucklers and cowboys, the young person's pulp fiction including the *Hardy Boys* and classics, including but not limited to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Faerie Queene*.

This sense of myth was commonplace in literature but for a potent visual medium, Lucas superseded the traditional mythical boundaries that characterized the *Star Trek* television series of the late 1960s and created an unprecedented omnibus frame of cinematic myth (Collins, 1977). In weaving these narrative threads, which did not appear to be as disparate as they might have been at first glance, Lucas had begun assembling a “hyperdiegetic, macro-structure” (Ryan, 1992, p. 373) that would set the commercial platform and the franchise. Lucas was concurrently fascinated with identifying key elements in narratives, which had appealed to wide audiences, with a view to replicating them in his own texts. This challenges the notion that the director is a unique talent. His laborious quest for these disparate elements, as well as integrating as many of

them as possible into a functional narrative, is what, amongst other elements set him apart from other contenders.

Unlike *Jaws* and *The Godfather*, Lucas did not rely on political topicality to create interest. His realm was space, which enforced an immediate level of unreal abstraction, occasionally hard to relate to for audiences (but not necessarily science fiction fans). He invoked moral allegories and metaphors, largely inspired by the texts of others, to encourage his targeted audience to relate to the journey of his characters.<sup>7</sup> The norm is for a professional screenwriter to commit to certain narrative parameters and then submit to a stream of consciousness driven flow (Ross, 2011). Lucas was so committed to integrating the successful ideas of other writers that he had to continuously stop, in order to reconcile and resolve a temporary block in casting the narrative.

As Lucas mentioned in his oral history interviews in Lippincott's book about the film's making, in each draft of the script, he synthesized the ideas from texts and stories with which he was most familiar (Rinzler and Lippincott, 2007, pp. 223-224). It was an unorthodox yet prescient process for developing the franchise, provided the first film proved to be successful or perhaps to take it on another course should it fail. For example, only at the end of production could Lucas finalize the title sequences<sup>8</sup> to ensure it would match the film's opening.

In an interview with Lippincott (December 1975), after roughly two and a half years of work, Lucas expanded on his reason for writing the story. He mentioned his love for both the books and television movie serial about Flash Gordon, which romanticized space adventures for him personally. Once he had completed *American Graffiti*, he said in an interview, "I came to realize that there were very few films being made for young people between the ages of twelve and twenty. When I was that age, practically all the movies were made for that age" (Rinzler and Lippincott, 2007, p. 63). He continued, explaining that both television

and film had exchanged Westerns and pirate stories for dramas about cops and crime. “I decided it would be much more useful for me to make movies that made kids have a fantasy life and feel good, so they could go ahead and have a more productive life (Rinzler and Lippincott, 2007, p. 63). The quote can be interpreted as suggestive of the author’s hubris, in which he considers himself rightly empowered to change the life of “kids”, globally. Of further concern is his comment “it would be much more useful for me”, which could be interpreted as an almost megalomaniacal faith in his ability to manipulate not, in this case only audiences, but far more encompassing, entire demographic segments. Bearing in mind the considerable pseudo-religious following (Brode & Deyneka, 2012) that the text ended up generating<sup>9</sup>, Lucas’ perspective can be understood as a manifestation of a type of *folie de grandeur*, which can only be explained through the use of psychological tools, a topic outside the remit of this thesis.

Lucas wrote the script with a meticulous checklist in mind. He targeted the most active, loyal cinema going demographic, to ensure that the greatest number of people would see his epic. Rubey (1978) wrote, “Lucas says he wanted to make a space fantasy in the genre of Edgar Rice Burroughs rather than Stanley Kubrick's *2001*. He wanted to do a film for ‘kids’ and ‘the kids in all of us’ that would restore ‘the fairy tales and dragons and Tolkien and all the real heroes’ left out of science fiction and films in general since the 50s”. By creating the first blockbuster for kids Lucas’ intricate audience targeting encompassed cross-generational appeal. He deconstructed the process to entice the hard-core sci-fi convention fans first and foremost, with hopes of word of mouth spreading to their peers at school and then their parents. Thus, the primary segment hopefully would be large enough to calculate revenue to make the film profitable.

Lucas was also innovative in character development. His rendering of Luke Skywalker was not only intended to make the story more interesting, but also to create a metaphor for globally relevant themes. Lucas expected that many

viewers had “absorbed the lessons of heroic archetypes because we respond viscerally to certain story patterns [secular and religious] unconsciously” (Rinzler and Lippincott, 2007, p. 31). It was as intricate a synthesis of common themes as possible, which engendered a line of novels and stories for the franchise and its eight other films. The central myth and the rich assemblage of characters reinforced the film’s brand meaning (Brown et al, 2003, p. 26).

There were numerous conceptual changes from one draft to another. In the fourth draft, Lucas added many more details to Luke’s character, particularly the sources of his motivation. In an earlier version, Luke is more assured but in the latest version, Lucas suggests Luke is uncertain about his abilities. In an interview with Lippincott, Lucas explained, “Usually, the hero has come to a decision on his own by observing and realizing the position he’s in and moving forward” (Rinzler and Lippincott, 2007, p. 108). Lucas sought to make the characters and the storylines more empathetic and relatable for audiences. Many years later, Hollywood script specialist Dr. Linda Seger (2011) added: “In American films, sympathetic character are considered essential for a commercially successful film.” Acknowledging that many successful films of the early New Hollywood period were driven by conflicted, anti-heroes<sup>10</sup>, Lucas’ choice was a daring one, based on his accurate reading of the contemporary mood of the time.

His approach to narrative differed from the passionate, artistic commitment reminiscent of his mentor, Coppola, on *The Godfather* (1972). Lucas considered every narrative element as potentially interchangeable to assure box office success.<sup>11</sup> As Lucas prepared to set the fourth draft in motion, he told Lippincott that he was “slowly shaving down the plot so it seems to work within the context of everything I wanted to include.” He added the, “film has been murder,” primarily because “the problem was that there was so much I could include—it was like being in a candy store, and it was hard not to get a stomach-

ache from the whole experience. But there were things I knew I didn't want to have, like exposition. I wanted the story to be very natural. I wanted it to be more of a straight adventure movie rather than something that had such complex technology that most of the film spent dealing with technology" (Rinzler and Lippincott, 2007, p. 253). For external feedback, he turned not to the studio but instead to his peers. Notably, they included Francis Ford Coppola (*The Godfather*), Steven Spielberg (*Jaws*) and Brian De Palma (whose 1976 thriller *Carrie* had become a sleeper blockbuster) amongst others.<sup>12</sup> During a rough-cut preview in February 1977, De Palma zeroed in on the film's opening prologue, which summarized what had occurred in the century before the current story, but he insisted it should recount events immediately before the story begins. Spielberg recalled in an interview with Lippincott that De Palma "inspired the new crawl, which gave the audience some kind of story geography" (Rinzler and Lippincott, 2007, p. 256). Lucas confirmed that "Brian [De Palma] was the one who actually sat down and helped me fix the roll-up, he and Jay Cocks. The next day we rewrote the roll-up; Brian dictated it to Jay. He typed it up and it got rewritten a couple of times after that" (Rinzler and Lippincott, 2007, p. 258). As shown in the chapter about *Grease* (1978), young directors who emerged during the first half of the New Hollywood period enjoyed an informal creative fraternity with strong bonds, even if some, such as De Palma, Spielberg and Coppola, did not attend the University of Southern California film school like the others. But it was not just their contemporary educational experiences that bonded them to each other; these directors had completed their formative development during the first wave of the New Hollywood period. This included a class of young directors who received their first professional assignment through the graces of Roger Corman (Corman & Jerome, 1998), a successful independent filmmaker known for inexpensively made science fiction, horror and teen movie genre productions. Working with Corman, who welcomed the use of avant-garde techniques and

unconventional approaches to screenplay writing, Coppola and other filmmakers including Peter Bogdanovich, Martin Scorsese and Jonathan Demme realised their first projects as directors (Horvath et al., 2004, p. 22).

Lucas resolved any remaining dramatic issues for good in his fourth draft, which he worked on during filming in Tunisia and completed when the crew returned to London. Lucas used the emotional themes to control the “paradoxical essence” of the story brand to ensure continuity in the franchise’s story telling (Brown et al., 2003, p. 28). In *The Confidential Studio Manual*, as discussed in *The Journal of Screenwriting* (Ross, 2011), it is noted that Lucas used virtually every possible story point ever associated with box office success, from mythology to theology.<sup>13</sup> Lucas wrote by the numbers with a strict structure, creating a screenwriting template, which was to be emulated by screenwriting experts, such as Robert McKee and Dr. Linda Seger and has since been copied by thousands of screenwriters. Lucas offered a set of narrative markers that would serve dual purposes. One was box office success and the second, with even greater implications, was the longer-term cultural authority which fans acknowledged, honoured and expanded, in their own creative activities associated with the timeless *Star Wars* mythology.<sup>14</sup> Defying fellow screenwriter Goldman’s aphorism, he proved that his evolving understanding of the filmmaking process, not only provided millions of fans with what they wanted, but could also generate revenues which, over the next forty years, would comprehensively change the functioning of the studio system and significantly improve its financial performance. However, despite the apparent confidence from some studio management, the next section investigates why this did not translate into early concrete studio support to ensure the film’s box office success.

### 5.3 Production

In this section, many challenges Lucas faced in production, especially in adhering to a modest budget as well as the Fox studio's persistent hesitance about the project, are discussed. Lucas received little material support from studio management, with the exception of its head (Alan Ladd, Jr., who appeared to trust Lucas' *modus operandi*). The director controlled the process by using his own funds to finance early elements of the production and resolve major issues concerning the special effects (FX), music, screenplay revisions, casting and character development.

Despite Lucas' *American Graffiti* (1973) having been a major hit for Universal Studios, four years was a long time without a career affirming success in Hollywood. Furthermore, Lucas' previous foray into science fiction with *THX 1138* (1971)'s shortfall did not inspire confidence.<sup>15</sup> Kurtz, the producer, and Lucas learned the studio's enthusiasm would not extend to their science fiction project. In hindsight, the initial refusal made sense – a point Kurtz raised in an interview twenty-five years later (Plume, 2002). The avant-garde nature of science fiction<sup>16</sup> at the time defied neat genre categorisation and formulaic structures.

Alan Ladd, Jr., at Twentieth Century-Fox encountered resistance from the studio board, not only in acquiring the rights to the film, but also at every step of the way to its realisation. Lucas' concerns were well founded. The director regularly consulted with both Spielberg and Coppola, anticipating the studio would only promote his film once they knew it was successful. Lucas concluded that it would be up to him to facilitate the release. In the weeks ahead of the Memorial Day weekend premiere in 1977, Lucas did not see an equivalent promotional campaign to what Universal had launched ahead of the *Jaws* release in 1975 and the one Columbia had started seven months before the release of

Spielberg's *Close Encounters of The Third Kind* in November 1977. The first mention of *Star Wars* in *The New York Times* came on May 1, 1977 and then nothing until just five days before the May 25 release.

At the time, studios such as Fox, which now preferred immediate returns at the box office on their investment<sup>17</sup>, significantly underestimated *Star Wars*. As Lippincott prepared the marketing campaigns, he recognized that Lucas was a cultural entrepreneur whose work fit the objectives of the ascending role of branding in the industry. It was a prescient view, as “roles of building branded content libraries and assembling them under corporate storehouses further imply one more role for cultural intermediaries, that of managing longevity, which we can call curation” (Clarke, 2014; Rinzler and Lippincott, 2007, p. 80). There was a new rationale for vertical integration in the cultural industry. The elements of production, distribution and quality control would govern and direct the ways in which viewers, consumers and fans of *Star Wars* would explore the storytelling in the film with unprecedented depth and connection (Haigh, 1998, pp. 7, 12).

Lucas curated his role as ultimate creative authority, selecting the crew to work on *Star Wars*, based on the work he admired from seeing their films.<sup>18</sup> This also would be Lucas' first film in which the director of photography was someone other than himself. He told Lippincott that he didn't want any of the props to “stand out”: “It'll be the absolute opposite of what all the science-fiction movies are. With every other science fiction movie, you remember what every set looks like, you know exactly the costumes they were wearing—because it all stands out and it all looks like it's been designed. I'm working very hard to keep everything non-symmetrical. Nothing looks like it belongs with anything else.” His design vision paralleled the approach in crafting the story for the script: “You walk into a set and there's lots of different influences, not just one influence. ... I want it to look like one thing came from one part of the galaxy and another thing came from another part of the galaxy” (Rinzler and Lippincott, 2007, p. 118). From a practical



perspective, Lucas acknowledged the budgetary limitations to realise his vision. The initial premise, according to Kurtz, was that the film's budget was pegged at relatively modest levels, to make the film "Roger Corman Style." Kurtz confirmed the original budget proposal was \$8 million and that the film ended up at more than \$11 million.<sup>19</sup>

Fox was intransigent. At one point, when the special effects unit had already started its work and the crew was in England preparing to shoot, Fox's position, according to Pollock<sup>20</sup>, was "no contracts, no approved budgets, no money" (Rinzler & Lippincott, 2007, p. 83). Lucas already invested \$400,000 of his own funds mostly to launch Industrial Light and Magic, of which nothing had yet been reimbursed. In October 1975, Lucas made personal loans to the Stars War Corporation to cover salaries and other expenses. Given that Fox had not sent any binding sign of approval, the loans totalled \$475,368<sup>21</sup> during that fiscal year. Rinzler said that the budget had expanded from \$3 million at the time of the script treatment to "about \$6 million to \$8.2 million; yet strangely and somewhat irrationally—given that at one point the budget had ballooned to \$15 million—Fox's panic ensued after the budget had been brought back down" (Rinzler & Lippincott, 2007, p. 42). Lippincott later clarified the matter, explaining that "George [Lucas] made the comment that it's really a \$15 million movie being made for half its budget" (Rinzler & Lippincott, 2007, p. 83). The Fox executives did not comprehend the film's potential, not just in capital performance, but also in its potential brand appeal to an umbrella market of the widest proportions (Marazi, 2015). On one hand, Lucas and Kurtz had to convince the executives of the commercial potential, yet at the same time not wanting to overplay this, they could retain as many ancillary rights as possible. This perspective was confirmed by the executives relinquishing the sequel rights, as well as a substantial part of those reserved for merchandising. The director's strategic genius is evident. As he realized he had not persuaded Fox executives that his film could reduce investors'

risks, he set up a safety net ensuring that whatever their decisions, he would benefit financially, one way or the other.

Rinzler suggested that Lucas was unaware of the tenuous relationship Ladd had with the board at Twentieth-Century Fox and could do little to dislodge the studio's inertia regarding a film project already two years into the process. In anticipation of the studio's board meeting on the 13th December 1975, Lucas was prepared to take *Star Wars* elsewhere if the studio failed to greenlight the film. Interviewed by Lippincott, Warren Hellman said that Ladd came into the meeting, telling the board, "I'm a believer in this—we've gotta go ahead with this project. Now's the time we really have to get behind this" (Rinzler & Lippincott, 2007, p. 93). Hellmann said that even as the board approved going forward, "[it] never had enthusiasm for the project" (Rinzler & Lippincott, 2007, p. 83). Others, including Pollock and Lippincott, believed that *Star Wars* would have "died" had Ladd not endorsed it. Lippincott, in his own notes, said, "Kubrick's *2001* didn't break even until late 1975—and that was the most successful science fiction film of all time. You had to be crazy to make a science fiction film when we wanted to" (Rinzler & Lippincott, 2007, p. 83). The short-term mindset of a film's profitability seemed intractable, even if the evidence indicated otherwise (Soloveichik, 2013).

Not until the 21<sup>st</sup> of September 1977, nearly four months after the film's release, did the studio take out an advertisement in *Variety* to celebrate the film's tremendous success. In an interview with Charles Higham published 17 July 1977, Ladd explained that he wanted to make *Star Wars* "because it took me back to the old Saturday matinees," he said. "I used to go crazy over Superman and Flash Gordon. When I heard Universal had passed on it, I thought, 'They're crazy!' So, I took an option on it" (Higham, 1977). Higham added in his report that "failures are rare with Mr. Ladd. And perhaps the best proof may be found not in Hollywood, but on Wall Street, where his string of successes has doubled the price of the 20th Century Fox stock." Ladd, the son of the famous actor of the same

name, joined the studio in 1973. Hellmann, one of the studio's eleven board directors, said that in 1973, the studio's best and only source of income was the television series *M\*A\*S\*H* (Charles S. Dubbin, Alan Alda et al., 1972-83), which aired on CBS in 1972. "Essentially Fox was going broke. We were in violation of all the important bank covenants," Hellmann explained. "We were in intense negotiations with Chase, who was the leading bank, and who was being harsh on us" (Rinzler & Lippincott, 2007, p. 93). At that time, *Jaws* had yet to make its appearance and merchandising was not seen as providing more than limited returns on investment. Fox was not the only studio in financial difficulties at that time (Miller and Shamsie, 2009). The rudderless, transitional studio system required a more rigorous, less speculative business model, which the calculated blockbuster, as defined by *Star Wars*, would provide.

Ironically, in the genre of science fiction, Fox benefited from the sequels to the original *Planet of the Apes* (1968) film. When the fifth and final film in the series, *Battle for The Planet of The Apes* (J. Lee Thompson, 1973) opened, Kurtz believed that interest in Lucas' project was sparked. He told Lippincott: "I'm sure there were people there who felt that there were other things that could be done in science fiction that would make money" (Rinzler & Lippincott, 2007, p. 12). Ladd gave the go-ahead for the first phase, which only focused on screenplay development. Hellmann said there was much uncertainty: "In theory Ladd reported to Stanfill, but he also had to bring his productions to the board—and it was always a moronic conversation. We were talking budgets and nobody knew anything about movies" (Rinzler & Lippincott, 2007, p. 13). The observation raises questions about the management style prevalent at Fox during those years and their criteria for the selection of board members. However, the necessary data for greater insight into this is neither available, nor within the research parameters of this thesis.

In his oral history with Lippincott, Kurtz added after the film was made, “We did make a case for the picture on the basis that there's a hard-core science fiction audience, and because it's a low budget picture even if no one came to see it except those science fiction fans, by the time it got to video it would have made its money back. On paper, that looks like a reasonably good argument, since we felt there were enough science fiction fans to probably do that.” The challenge, as described in the next section, was to demonstrate that, indeed, the hard-core audience existed.

Rinzler explained the delay had cornered the studio both from a strategic and tactical sense, especially as Lucas' *American Graffiti* had just crossed the \$100 million gross box office revenue mark. Rinzler added, “Fox also had antagonized the production by refusing to fund key elements of pre-production and by postponing negotiations—to the point where it was now the weaker party” (Rinzler & Lippincott, 2007, p. 121). Lucas echoed the sentiments to Lippincott: “Because the longer they dillydallied, the more our stock went up—and the more it looked like we could make the film somewhere else if we really had to” (Rinzler & Lippincott, 2007, p. 121). Fox had only paid Lucas to write one script but he already had written four by the time of the board's December 1975 approval. Lucas had outmanoeuvred the studio's dysfunctional management structure and leveraged himself into a position of virtual control over the project.

Fox continued to drag its feet when the empowered Lucas decided to call the studio's bluff, as he was just three weeks off the start of principal photography in Tunisia. Kurtz had identified numerous deal breakers including the question of who should pay \$45,000 in legal fees, unsigned agreements outlining the chain of title for the film and numerous details in the production and distribution contract. Lucas told Kurtz that no shooting would begin until all issues were resolved. He told Lippincott: “Because once I'd started the picture, they would've had me. Once you start shooting, you don't have any more leverage. Rinzler said the

negotiations went quickly and “Fox blinked” and “the studio gave in to Lucas’ main demands” (Rinzler & Lippincott, 2007, p. 135). He added: “Pollock signed key papers on behalf of the Star Wars Corporation to help Fox, which agreed to pay the legal fees, and Lucas signed agreements formalizing his directing and writing services, which gave Fox its desperately needed ‘chain of title’” (Rinzler & Lippincott, 2007, p. 135). Lucas had gained full control of the “mothership” for the *Star Wars* enterprise (Mittell, 2014, p. 255). This rare level of simultaneous creative and economic control allowed Lucas to create the film that he envisaged, with the only serious constraints being budgetary. It must be noted that for a director at such an early stage of his career, this was an exceptional achievement, brought about through meticulous Machiavellian planning. Meanwhile, in the other case studies of this thesis, the directors behaved more like employees, in constant fear of being terminated.

Budgeting was also at the heart of the special effects operations, but so were Lucas’ conscious efforts at building the long-term branding infrastructure for the film. Lucas had tapped John Dykstra, who had worked on *2001, Silent Running* and numerous commercials. Dykstra was confident that Lucas’ demands that 350 shots be completed in two years, were reasonable, even though there were 205 shots in *2001*, which was a three-year project. Richard Edlund, a colleague of Dykstra, when interviewed by Lippincott, explained how this could be expedited. “So John arranged to get a studio together in the valley and build the system, which started with a camera that would be able to photograph something repeatedly through programming and motors—that is, once you have the shot programmed, you can repeat that program over and over, as many times as you want, and then correlate information so that the shot can be done on a background for stars or a matte. ... We were hideouts, in a way; we were not known people” (Rinzler & Lippincott, 2007, p.136). This reinforced Lucas as the visible creative governing authority.

Meanwhile, Fox continued to waver. Lucas commented that the studio did not help, when it had taken photos of the models that already had been built and authorized an independent budget estimate from the Van Der Veer special effects company, which tagged the cost at \$7 million. In a further sign the studio executives did not comprehend the process, a fact that Lucas was happy to exploit to secure his position, he explained, “We were saying at that time we would do it for \$2.3 million; but then Twentieth-Century Fox cut it down to \$1.5 million. They just assumed that it would all get done somehow. They just figured that we could do it for a million and a half, and that it was our problem, not theirs—because they didn’t think we could even build the models for a million and a half, *let alone* [his emphasis] all the special effects” (Rinzler & Lippincott, 2007, p. 51). For *2001*, the 205 shots accounted for \$6.5 million out of a total budget of \$10.5 million, and that was in 1967 dollars. Thus, in 1975, few were willing to come aboard, given the extremely limited budget and the studio’s resistance to adding anything. Lucas’ solution was simple: “when it came down to the real crunch; when we needed the half million dollars to get going, because we’d already committed the money, they delayed for about four or five weeks. So, I had to put up the cash” (Rinzler & Lippincott, 2007, p. 51). That investment would be recouped almost immediately once the film opened. In an industry which lives by the axiom of never investing one’s own money in a film (Parks, 2012), Lucas’ gesture signals his absolute commitment and the history of the film’s unprecedented success bears witness to this existential gamble having rewarded him immensely. However, as suggested by the adage that “history is written by the victors”<sup>22</sup> one rarely hears the stories of numerous film investors who went bankrupt as a result of similar financing practices (Balio, 2005). Lucas also achieved near-total control, a result that normally would have been defined by integrating the presence of experienced executives (apart from Lippincott) and delegating to them, being of lesser importance.

In addition to the technical challenges that persisted throughout the making of *Star Wars* (Rinzler & Lippincott, 2007, p. 74) the budget issue remained a contentious point throughout the project. Ladd decided to visit London during filming, concerned about the consistently negative dailies (Clark & Spohr, 2013) that were coming back to the States and worries that costs were escalating (Rinzler & Lippincott, 2007, p. 185). Hellmann commented that others were concerned they would not be able to recoup the film's cost if it was going to be more than \$10 million (Rinzler & Lippincott, 2007, p. 189). Ladd's stock had in the meantime lost its lustre. He had been sharply criticized for championing the 1976 release of *The Blue Bird*, a G-rated fantasy thriller directed by George Cukor and starring Elizabeth Taylor, Jane Fonda and Ava Gardner. The box office was just \$3.5 million for a film that cost more than \$12 million to make.

While Lucas eased Ladd's concerns, there were other delays that threatened to push back the film's Memorial Day release in 1977. ILM encountered numerous disruptions, including the departure of Bob Shepherd, the production supervisor, which occurred right before the major phase of photography was set to begin. Shepherd had previously committed to Spielberg's *Close Encounters of The Third Kind*. (Rinzler & Lippincott, 2007, p. 182). There were computer hardware breakdowns at the least convenient moments, as the effects crew rushed to get the plates out in time so the film crew would not sit idly for a day, which cost \$10,000, and ILM was also holding shots until the following day to ensure they were acceptable (Rinzler & Lippincott, 2007, p. 185). Rinzler summarized what Lucas had suspected about ILM, if he was not on site, things would fall apart and that delegation simply did not work: "It was being run as a research facility rather than a film production unit. The equipment, though fabulous, had taken longer than predicted to build, tests were still being carried out, and the experimental explosions hadn't looked good" (Rinzler & Lippincott, 2007, p. 219). Lucas told ILM not to hold any shots and he hired Richard Chew to

rush a rough-cut edit of the film in time for Thanksgiving 1976 (Rinzler & Lippincott, 2007, p. 221).

Lucas etched his mark even deeper in selecting the composer for the soundtrack, about which he started thinking long before shooting of the film began. Spielberg introduced John Williams, who had composed the soundtrack for *Jaws*, to Lucas. Williams was already one of the busiest Hollywood composers – with prior commitments for Alfred Hitchcock’s *Family Plot* (1976), *Black Sunday* (Mario Bava, 1977) and a commissioned violin concerto (Rinzler & Lippincott, 2007, p. 54). Lucas told Lippincott the choice was easy: “I really knew the kind of sound I wanted. I knew I wanted an old-fashioned, romantic movie score and I knew he was very good with large orchestras.” The quote reaffirms three points about Lucas’ management style: 1) his apparent mastery of all parts of the film making process; 2) his certainty about the necessary components to ensure box office success based on his own meticulous research; and 3) his willingness to counteract accepted cultural norms, such as, the convention of replacing orchestral film music with more contemporary electronic soundtracks.<sup>23</sup>

To summarize, the overarching production challenges always came back to the budget, which was constrained by the studio’s reluctance. This was evident in producing the special effects along with the typical challenges of staying on schedule to meet the original release date. Lucas acted independently, including ‘lending’ personal financial resources and, as with every other aspect of the film’s production, it was Lucas, not the studio, who commanded the project to meet its original deadline. With the exception of Ladd, Twentieth-Century Fox offered virtually no encouragement. The studio management lacked the perspective to see connections and opportunities with related industries that, too, were looking to gain control over the economic dynamics that affected their respective areas of business. These aspects are discussed in the next section.



## 5.4 Marketing and Promotion

This section argues the ground *Star Wars* broke in commodity branding with films and how the foundation of hyperdiegesis (Hills, 2002) set in motion the multifaceted media, merchandising and fan-based economic communities that have sustained the franchise ever since. These dynamics clarified the film's status as a cultural empire with its director maintaining near-infallible control over how its creative and commercial elements should be appropriated by fans, moviegoers, licensees and merchandisers. The final budget for *Star Wars* came to \$11,293,151<sup>24</sup>: \$3 million over the imposed budget but close to one of the earliest projected budgets Kurtz and Lucas had considered. Fox took \$15,000 of Lucas' compensation for directing, as a penalty. Retaining creative control was his advantage. "George not only determined what products to go with but achieved complete creative control on how the artwork looks, how the packaging looks, what ads would be used. Whereas, I firmly believe, under the traditional Hollywood deals that were made prior to this picture, that George would not have had creative control over these deals," Jake Bloom, one of Lucas' attorneys, said in his interview with Lippincott. More succinctly, *Star Wars* established the marketing and branding protocols that every blockbuster has emulated and replicated in one form or another since.

Lucas and Lippincott decided to market the movie to comic book fans, hoping they would not only back the film at the box office, but also engage positive word of mouth. Lippincott negotiated a deal with *Marvel Comics* for a full-colour serial adaptation, created by two of the most respected illustrators in the industry: Roy Thomas and Howard Chaykin. In 1975, Lippincott approached Stan Lee, publisher of *Marvel Comics*, who declined initially, explaining that he wanted to wait until the film was completed (Jenkins, 1977, pp. 81-82). However, Thomas urged Lee to reconsider in 1976, to which Lee agreed, once he discovered that an actor as distinguished as Alec Guinness was participating in the film, it merited

the adaptation (Jenkins, 1977, p. 82). The initial agreement indicated that Lucasfilm would not receive any royalties until sales reached 100,000. The agreement was a win-win proposition for Lee and Lucas. The comic book industry was in a recession due to inflationary costs of newsprint and the declining number of traditional retail outlets (e.g., newsstands and mom-and-pop neighbourhood stores).<sup>25</sup> However, direct marketing tactics, which led to new comic book specialty stores and which prohibited distributors and retailers from returning their unsold merchandise for refunds, also emerged during the 1970s.

The first two issues came out prior to the film's release and the third coincided with the Memorial Day weekend premiere. The royalty terms had to be renegotiated, as sales surpassed 100,000 copies (Jenkins, 1977, p. 186). Bloom observed that the studios under-estimated the importance of the comic fan base, but that Lucas felt it would help in creating a "base of hardcore fandom," adding that "it was a word-of-mouth business" (Jenkins, 1977, p. 186). The only but most significant challenge for Marvel was fresh story material to sustain interest in between releases of sequels, which occurred at three-year intervals in the first phase of the franchise: *The Empire Strikes Back* (Irvin Kershner, 1980) and *Return of the Jedi* (Richard Marquand, 1983). The deal was an early example of the guerrilla marketing strategy that eventually would become a staple for companies with limited resources to launch a marketing campaign.

Bloom's assertion is important. The original film proved suitable for viewers of all ages, especially children, a major overlooked demographic. But *Star Wars* also succeeded in appealing to the broadest cross-section demographics possible, especially in bringing back the teenage segment into the mass audience. Classifying the film for children seems to explain why the studio proceeded gingerly on promoting the film prior to its release. "George Lucas has gone out on a limb.... He has spent \$8 million on a genre where movies are usually done as

cheaply as possible, resulting in shoddiness," Zito wrote in *American Film* at the time (Zito, 1977, pp. 12-13).

The rewards for this strategy were multifaceted. Lucas spread the generosity, giving equity points or percentages of points to his supporters in appreciation. They included Kurtz, his attorneys, and actors Mark Hamill, Alec Guinness, Carrie Fisher, Harrison Ford, and Billy Dee Williams. This made the recipients as shareholders in the film (Rinzler & Lippincott, 2007, pp. 293-294). This was lucrative compensation, resulting in substantial and ongoing payments to Lucas' supporters, for as long as the film generates revenue. Usually "net points," as issued by the studio system, have been described as "monkey points" (Marcus, 1990, p. 545) and, due to the widely acknowledged industry creative accounting practices (Daniels, 2006), rarely result in any payments to those concerned, even if the film generates blockbuster grade revenues.

Likewise, that generosity spread to merchandising efforts. In a 1977, 29 September, article in *The Hollywood Reporter*, details were released about the 21 licensed merchandisers and three product promotion companies, including divisions of Toys R Us and Coca-Cola, the Star Wars Corp. signed to handle products (Barron, 1977). Along with the characters Chewbacca, Darth Vader and Stormtroopers, there were sweepstakes and trading cards placed in 100 million loaves of Wonder Bread (Barron, 1977). The promotions launched just as overseas screenings were set to begin and theatres had made commitments extending through June 1978, more than a year after the film premiered. Kurtz said, "Movie merchandise was really a problematic thing. Occasionally you would have some success, and most of the time you wouldn't, and there never was any real answer for that." However, for *Star Wars*, it turned out to be anything but problematic. Kenner, the toy brand, was poised to sell more than \$100 million of toy action figures by the end of Christmas 1978.

By the end of 2015, the franchise had accrued more than \$20 billion in merchandising revenue, more than quadruple the estimated \$4.4 billion in box office receipts the series has generated. As an added benefit, Lucas and John Williams did just as well with the soundtrack, which went platinum by selling 650,000 copies at \$9 apiece by mid-July in 1977. The merchandise, as scholars such as Jonathan Gray (2010, p. 46) and others have noted, became paratexts – that is, peripheral texts that become just as significant for consumers to make meaning just as they have done in viewing the film. This has fostered individual fans to collect the merchandise and create their own individual displays and miniature museums, as well as engage in fan conventions – all activities that supersede the conventional exhibition venue as a temporary space (Geraghty, 2014, pp. 121-122).

The producers of *Star Wars* initiated the merchandising tie-in process long before the film garnered any significant mention in the Hollywood trade press. Kurtz directed Lippincott, who had been hired for his numerous connections to the comic book industry and to science-fiction fandom, to extend the efforts to the convention circuit. This included the 1976 gathering of WorldCon in Kansas City, Missouri<sup>26</sup>, after shooting had been completed and Lucas and the editors were working on the rough cut. Kurtz did a slide presentation and Hamill accompanied him, along with Lippincott. In a later interview (Plume, 2012), Lippincott recalled, that at the first San Diego Comic-Con event, nine months before the film's release, "we had a little room with a display we had some costumes, some of Ralph McQuarrie's artwork. That was it, basically. That was to get an initial look at what the picture was like ...We were there for three or four days, and walked around the convention talking to people, just to build up word of mouth as much as we could." This helped consumers cultivate an "endlessly-deferred narrative" and gave consumers and fans a space for "transformative nostalgia," where they freely

could develop their own connections to the characters, the intergalactic worlds and stories of the original *Star Wars* films (Geraghty, 2014, pp. 176, 178).

Kurtz and Lippincott organized other appearances at similar gatherings in late 1976 and early 1977, including the release of the comic book in February 1977. In April 1977 came news of the story being adapted into a printed novel. Kurtz, Lippincott, et al did much of the marketing activities without studio support or control. The word-of-mouth also confirmed just how the audience's emotional response to characters would be crucial to the film's success. This included Threepio and Artoo-Detoo (R2-D2)—an intergalactic version of Bud Abbott and Lou Costello, as one *New York Times* reporter referred to the pair of robot characters (Harmetz, 1977). The other nonhuman characters were just as memorable as the fragile team of human heroes – the Jawas and Sand People, as well as Chewbacca, the furry seven-foot-tall Wookiee. For R2-D2, Lucas observed that, “By the time we were halfway through, we had a vocabulary. For certain emotional situations, he used excited whistles. Sighs showed he was distressed or frightened. Eeeks meant he was conveying information” (Harmetz, 1977). Until the first box office numbers arrived, the marketing appeal of such characters may have been modest. However, they became prototypes for action figures, comic book storylines and other fan memorabilia (including appearances at science fiction conventions). Licensed properties augmented the popularity of other adventure and science fiction film franchises, comic books and fan conventions.<sup>27</sup>

Compared to the advance word on *The Godfather* and *Jaws*, the studio's decision to wait until the last possible moment to begin promoting *Star Wars* would appear today as incomprehensible. But it also confirmed the studio's lack of faith. *Star Wars*' successful opening consolidated the summer film season as beginning with Memorial Day weekend. The biggest studio miss though was understanding how the audience might receive the film, as shown in a rejected series of ad concepts.

In 2016, Lippincott shared at his website examples of the studio's initial ad test concepts.<sup>28</sup> The images show the evolution of the ad slogan for the film's posters. The initial slogan was: "If there's a 'good' force out there, is there also an 'evil' one?" Another was, "Somewhere out there it all may be happening right now," which was revised to read, "How many times have you looked up and wondered what was going on?" The fourth in the initial set, which showed no characters but just space in black and white, read plainly, "An age-old story in a strange new place." The second test set of ads was much more elaborate with characters and Lucas' name. One included the tag: "George Lucas, the man who brought you *American Graffiti*, now brings you a world you've never seen before." Another included the line: "A vision of a world never before seen by man." The third set narrowed the focus to the timeless story line with tags such as "First, Buck Rogers. Then, Flash Gordon. Now, Luke Skywalker," and the line "it'll make you feel like a kid again" under the film's title. Another set of ads combined elements from the previous three sets.

Lippincott shared an interoffice memorandum dated 5 April 1977 that summarized the results of the ad test with audiences. The memorandum noted the "low interest" by women to every sample ad. Other ads appealed to men aged 18-25 as a "somewhat ordinary, futuristic adventure story," and other elements "implied a story and special effects no more extraordinary than those associated with *Star Trek*." Lippincott summarized the failed ad tests and explained that the campaign for *Midway* (Jack Smight, 1976), taken in the film about World War II's The Battle of Midway, proved to be the most successful in the *Stars Wars* ad.<sup>29</sup> As in the *Midway* ad, "the cluster is set up in a central pyramid where the stars are the largest, surrounded by the supporting characters, then the minor characters, in descending order," he described. Fans seemed to grasp the film's timeless mythological symbols without much prompting.

Once the final ad versions were approved, the first advertisement in *The New York Times* appeared 15 May 1977, 10 days before the release. A week later, a full-size poster advertisement featuring a still image of a “villainous soldier on the planet Tatooine” appeared. Only as the film’s box office momentum accelerated quickly did the studio increase its ad buys, as the schedule for *The New York Times* showed (See Appendix XI).

As for the industry trades, Fox waited nearly as long. In the 20 April 1977 issue of *Variety*, Fox took out a full-page advertisement, announcing the film would be released in 70-mm and 35-mm stereo optical prints. On the film’s release date (25 May), *Variety* mentioned the film in passing as a list of the major theatrical releases the studio had set for the year. Six days earlier, A.D. Murphy penned *Variety*’s review of the film, which turned out to be an accurate forecast: “The 20<sup>th</sup>-Fox release is also loaded with box office magic, with potent appeal across the entire audience spectrum. Like a breath of fresh air, *Star Wars* sweeps away the cynicism that has in recent years obscured the concepts of valor, dedication and honour. This is the kind of film in which an audience, first entertained, can later walk out feeling good all over” (Murphy, 1977). Murphy identified its key to success as repudiating the cinéma vérité style of filmmaking of those years, beset by anti-heroes and committed to self-reflective and often bleak narratives.<sup>30</sup>

*Star Wars* was a high-risk rejection of the aloof, intellectually cool status quo on many levels. The text had no interest in the realities of daily life. In the grand tradition of mainstream Hollywood movies, it provided an escapist fantasy within a Space Age realm of familiar characters as knights, damsels in distress and heroes. While many insiders were bullish about the film’s prospects ahead of its release, no one could ascertain just how broad and deep the audience reaction would be. Jonathan Kuntz, a film historian at the University of California at Los Angeles, said that a standing rule among studios for many decades had suggested

the summer months between Memorial Day and Labor Day were seen as the weakest period for releases (Coffey, 2015). Many films of the New Hollywood period –including *Easy Rider* and *American Graffiti* – were modest budget projects that were released during the middle of summer. And, then *Jaws*' release in late June of 1975 suggested that Hollywood could reach the younger demographic segments of the movie-going market.

While the studio struggled within the two years prior to the film's 1977 release to comprehend if target audiences would see and endorse *Star Wars*, Lucas and Lippincott had pursued several strategies to coalesce support among the potential base of science fiction fans through conventions and comic book series. Emphasizing guerrilla marketing approaches, Lucas dispatched Lippincott to negotiate a deal with *Marvel Comics*, which struggled to keep comic book fans' interest during an industry recession and support the film's promotional campaign months before its theatrical release. Likewise, the first public view of production stills at a comic book fan convention nine months before the film's release stirred interest among potential audiences seen as the film's best demographics to cultivate a new wave of informal yet loyal creative brand ambassadors.

The key point is that these activities occurred without the studio's sanction. Boosted by evidence of solid comic book sales and fans' expressions of anticipation, Lippincott communicated to the industry how to finesse the messaging to appeal to an audience that was already being primed for the film.

### **5.5 Distribution, Release and Economic Impact**

*Star Wars* was still subject to the platform or cascade method of distribution. Released in only 43 theatres in its first five days, by 15 July, it was in 757 theatres,



and did not cross the 1,000-theatre mark until 5 August 1977, a little more than 10 weeks after its opening. Spielberg's highly anticipated science-fiction film *Close Encounters of The Third Kind* would open in mid-November, in time for the holiday season, but *Star Wars* made easy fare of its competitors, even when it was briefly challenged by films such as the sequel to *The Exorcist* (*The Exorcist II: The Heretic* (John Boorman, 1973).

On the 25<sup>th</sup> of May 1977, Grauman's Chinese Theatre registered the biggest opening day in its 50-year history to that point, taking in \$19,358 at approximately \$4 per ticket, meaning nearly 4,800 came through the turnstiles on opening day (Rinzler & Lippincott, 2007, p. 295). *Star Wars* received a strong second lift, when it made an unprecedented second opening at Mann's Chinese Theatre on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of August 1977 (Plume, 2002). The new wave of screenings included a public event at which C-3PO, R2-D2 and Darth Vader placed their footprints in the theatre's forecourt. By August 19, the first run of *Star Wars* had encompassed 1,096 theatres, and approximately 60 theatres played the film continuously for more than a year. A 27<sup>th</sup> of May 1977 report in *Variety* indicated the opening in New York's major houses set house records at four theatres, with Manhattan's Astor Plaza leading the pack with \$20,322 in an opening day record (tickets typically sold during that time between \$2 and \$4.50 apiece) (*Daily Variety*, 1977). Three other theatres around the country set opening day records, generating a grand total of \$254,989 for the first day.<sup>31</sup> For *Star Wars*, the single biggest marketing advantage came with the long lines outside of theatres.

The film's initial box office success led to strong word-of-mouth. A 22 June 1977 *Variety* report that phone operators in the Los Angeles metropolitan area received an average of 100 calls per hour just for show time information at two local cinemas (Avco and Mann's Chinese) ((Rinzler & Lippincott, 2007, p. 297). A day later, in Chico, California, 500 people had been turned away from the film's premiere at the local El Rey Theatre, which had a capacity of 900. People had

taken their place in line five hours before the screening (Rinzler & Lippincott, 2007, p. 297).

A week later, *Variety* reported that, while the film was knocked out of the top weekly box office slot temporarily by the new releases of *The Deep* and *Exorcist II-The Heretic*, *Star Wars* was fast approaching \$9 million in gross box office venue (*Daily Variety*, 29<sup>th</sup> of June 1977). Four weeks later, *Variety* reported on 27<sup>th</sup> of July 1977 *Star Wars* was back on top of the weekly box office takes, having passed \$18 million in its first eight weeks of release (*Variety*, 27 July 1977). In today's market, where even the most tenuous blockbusters open in 2,000 or 3,000 theatres or more, the small-scale opening of *Star Wars* might seem incredulous, but it was likely that the film could only secure a limited number of theatres at the time of its scheduled release,<sup>32</sup> as numerous theatre owners initially refused to screen the film. While the largest expansion of multiplexes had just begun two years earlier as *Jaws* captivated audiences during the summer of 1975, the available screening venues were still not even close to what today's movie-going audience finds commonplace. Table 5.1 below shows a sample of some of 1977's most widely discussed film releases along with the opening-week number of screening engagements (Jenkins, 1977):

Table 5.1. Opening week engagements for films, Summer 1977.

<i>The Spy Who Loved Me</i>	(200+)
<i>Smokey and The Bandit</i>	(300+)
<i>A Bridge Too Far</i>	(400+)
<i>New York, New York</i>	(400+)
<i>Rollercoaster</i>	(400+)
<i>The Other Side of Midnight</i>	(500+)

<i>Exorcist II: The Heretic</i>	(700+)
<i>Orca</i>	(700+)
<i>The Deep</i>	(800+)

Lippincott (Edwards, 1999) recalled that the limited opening release was a blessing. “If the film was redone today, on the basis of the way movies are released with a couple of thousand prints, it probably would have been unsuccessful. Theatres didn't want the movie,” he explained. “We were lucky to get thirty theatres to open it.” Lippincott also remarked on the prestige of getting booked in a major Hollywood theatre and the difficulty Fox faced in finding such a venue for *Star Wars*. “At that time, Hollywood Boulevard was still very important for opening films. We only got on Hollywood Boulevard because the new Billy Friedkin film [*Sorcerer*] wasn't ready yet. It was supposed to be ready by May 25 but wasn't, and we were given a month in the Chinese. It was the only way we got into Grauman's” (Edwards, 1999). *Star Wars* was one of the last blockbuster films to open in an era where the number of neighbourhood theatres still outstripped the multiplexes in strip malls.

*Star Wars* crossed the \$100 million mark on weekend box office ending 12 August 1977 (which would be approximately \$408 million in today's value). By the end of November 1977, it replaced *Jaws* as the box office champ, earning \$190.8 million in gross box office receipts (\$761.1 million in today's value). A week after its opening, *Variety* noted it was the best start for any film since *Jaws* (*Daily Variety*, 1 June 1977). The *Variety* report suggested that blockbuster films were the only ones capable of drawing people away from their television sets: “First, the b.o. response affirms anew that there are indeed, people ‘out there’, willing to go to a theatre. Every couple of years the business needs such a tonic. And since a hit film seems to encourage further film going, everyone in every

company is just delighted at the 20<sup>th</sup>-Fox success story.” Jack Valenti (Lee, 2007, p. 371), the president of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), told *Daily Variety* in a 22 June 1977 report that “the inter-planetary blockbuster is having the same kind of spinoff effect on attendance felt when “*Jaws*” was salivating in the marketplace.”

What Valenti failed to mention was that it was Lucas, not the studio, who had moved to get the film released in a previously untested timeframe: the weekend leading to Memorial Day. Lucas justified his logic by pointing out that by releasing the film during the end of the school-year term, it would enable word of mouth recommending his film to spread much more rapidly than during the holidays (Lippincott, 2016, Online). Valenti’s remarks emphasized that studios should gravitate toward blockbuster films released during the summer.

*Star Wars* transformed Fox’s financial picture within the shortest possible time. *The New York Times* reported on 2 June 1977 (just a week after the film’s opening) that “Twentieth Century-Fox Film repeated as the most-active issue for a second day as it rose 1¼ to 18¼ after notching a high for the year at 18⅞.” (Vartan, 1977). Likewise, General Cinema, then the largest operator of movie theatres in the U.S., saw its stock rise 3 points to 24 ¼. This move was timed appropriately, as the market had finally recovered from its lows in 1974 September, amidst a weak economy, high unemployment, an energy crisis, and high inflation (Vartan, 1977). This also highlighted the revenue potential of blockbusters, especially to other less synergistic companies such as Coca-Cola, Marvin Davis Co. and News Corporation.

The film’s success encompassed several key points. First, in the absence of support from Fox, Lippincott orchestrated a multi-platform side show that fed the word of mouth among the film’s initial target demographics of fans – namely, science fiction and comic books. Second, at a time when comic book tie-ins to films

were eschewed, the successful launch of the *Marvel Comics* series for *Star Wars* signalled the film's appeal and has been replicated ever since with every fantasy hero story packaged as a blockbuster film. Third, even as the film opened in a limited number of theatres, the priming effects of word of mouth would compel studio executives and distributors to expand the screens for the film. Fourth, the film's special effects also marked a breakthrough in the mindset that adventure films incorporating these elements could be as successful as event releases that featured star talent and epic narratives. *Star Wars* solidified the formation of Industrial Light and Magic (ILM), which Lucas saw as a necessity, given that Fox had disbanded its special effects unit. ILM emboldened others to take video, audio, modelling, and robotic effects to new levels, especially as computers became more sophisticated during the 1980s. Fifth, at the time, Fox's strategy was to shield itself against risks, especially from banking institutions, which as Hellmann explained earlier, were hostile to taking on any further risk. Today, many studios commonly take on banks and financial services entities as initial investment partners for major film projects. If anything, studios finally understood just how profitable and enduring franchises could become.

## **5.6 Audience Reviews and Reception**

In this section, reviews by some of the nation's most widely read critics along with some from smaller newspapers where the film was screened in neighbourhood theatres are considered. Many reviews were published within the film's first month of release. While *The Godfather* and *Jaws* benefited from studio-supported campaigns, few could predict how critics would accept the release of *Star Wars*. The most critical test would come in whether Lucas' faith in word-of-mouth would be enough to sustain the film if it was reviewed negatively.

After a preview screening for critics a month prior to the May 25 opening, *The New York Times* ran a feature package on May 1. One included a review by

Vincent Canby, who prefaced his assessment of *Star Wars* by applying a bifocal lens to the illusory, yet proper spectacle of cinema and how special effects serve to make movies “emotionally liberating.” Prior to calling it “the most elaborate, most expensive, most beautiful movie ever made,” he explained why the film would touch the hearts of those who were fans of ever-popular themes.<sup>33</sup>

Others responded even more enthusiastically. Roger Ebert’s *Chicago Sun-Times* review (1977) called the combination of special effects and “pure narrative” an out-of-body experience. *Variety*’s A.D. Murphy (1977) tagged it as magnificent, crediting Lucas with creating the “biggest possible adventure fantasy.” However, some prominent critics saw otherwise. *The New Yorker*’s Pauline Kael (1977, p. 26) opined that the film had no lyricism or compelling emotional hold. *New York* magazine’s John Simon (1977) wrote, “Strip *Star Wars* of its often striking images and its highfalutin scientific jargon, and you get a story, characters, and dialogue of overwhelming banality.” Perhaps among the most polemical assessments, Stanley Kauffmann (1977), in *The New Republic*, chided the entertainment as suitable only for young adolescent or post-adolescent males in arrested emotional development – “who carry a portable shrine within them of their adolescence, a chalice of a Self that was Better Then, before the world’s affairs or—in any complex way—sex intruded.” Their reviews, many of which were published after critics saw the film in press and industry screenings just prior to its wide release, seemed to justify the studio’s hesitation. Most nationally based critics ignored or were unaware of the grass roots enthusiasm engendered by the sales of the two *Marvel Comics* issues released prior to the film or the reception at the San Diego comic-book convention.

Away from the national press, other critics were generous. A *West Bay Today* critic in San Francisco wrote about the film, which had screened in the neighbourhood Coronet Theatre, “*Star Wars* is really an *Oz* that spans the limitless universe,” an “audience participation movie, with boos for the villains and cheers

for the super heroes. Everything is larger than life. It is, in fact, almost larger than anything” (Brooks, 1977). *The Pacific Sun’s* Sheila Benson (1977) called it a “nearly perfect film,” – “a superb achievement, an elegant meshing of imagination, romance, nostalgia and the best movie magic ever. I can’t imagine anyone hard-hearted enough not to respond to it.” She added that *Star Wars* “has a lot more in common with Howard Pyle, Edgar Rice Burroughs and Rube Goldberg than it does with Isaac Asimov or 2001,” thus offering her own validation of Lucas’ insistence that the film was fantasy, never intended as science fiction. These local reviews stand out because *Star Wars* was screened in many theatres located in neighbourhoods, where word of mouth mattered.

Perhaps the most comprehensive, informative and instructive review came from *The Washington Post’s* Gary Arnold (1977).<sup>34</sup> He opened the review, highlighting the usual comparisons: Lucas’ penchant for swashbucklers and admiration for fiction heroes of the 1930s and 1940s including Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers. Arnold cites the rollup prologue, harkening to the conventions of vintage serialized stories, and awards points to Lucas for bringing “this motif to a spectacular resolution in the climactic scenes, which ricochet from one perilous situation and rip-roaring battle to the next, suggesting the way a typical 12-chapter serial might look if one had the opportunity to cut it down to the action-packed essentials.” Many theatres during the 1930s and 1940s offered short serials, often inexpensively made action and adventure stories, which screened before the main feature film. It was the same genre that would inspire the *Raiders of the Lost Ark* in the 1980s.

Arnold also highlighted the film’s special effects. *Logan’s Run* (1975), a science fiction hit, received Oscars for special effects, along with *King Kong* (John Guillermin, 1976) and he wrote that if those films were honoured, then “no honour under the sun is sufficient to recognize the contribution of people like John Dykstra and John Stears to *Star Wars*.” Arnold added, “The aerial dogfight Dykstra

and [Ben] Stears have helped Lucas perfect as his climactic piece de resistance looks more exciting than its antecedents in live-action war movies.” It is an astute comment, given that Lippincott, as mentioned in an earlier section, believed that *Star Wars*’ successful ad campaign followed the Midway approach.

A 1 January 1978 report in *Variety* indicated that *Star Wars* had accounted for nearly one-tenth of the entire Hollywood market in 1977. The report included that *Star Wars*, however, had represented only about two-thirds of the overall increase in the market over the slump in 1976. That the George Lucas smash was the year’s top film does not alone account for the upturn after the 1976 slump. Specifically, there was a 17 percent surge last year over 1976 – and nearly 13 percent after removing effects of tickets inflation.” This suggests a ripple effect for the industry that was even larger than what occurred for other films released after *Jaws* premiered in 1975.

With the exception of a few critics at smaller newspapers who witnessed the enthusiastic audience response at neighbourhood theatres in their communities, many critics seemed to miss the magnitude or the portent of the marketing empire that had emerged from *Star Wars* or the director’s role in upending the conventional relationship with a studio that was on record for being sceptical. The predominant common factor in many reviews covered is the critics’ ability to identify the same “homages” to other successful texts, which Lucas had painstakingly integrated, but not painstakingly masked. Most reviews, however, were essentially selling notices (a point that the *Washington Post*’s Arnold admitted later). Few cared to deconstruct *Star Wars*’ narrative and emotional depth, as they had done in the decade’s earlier blockbusters: *The Godfather* and *Jaws*. However, even fewer appeared to contemplate fan loyalty to the film’s timeless myth.



## 5.7 Conclusion

*Star Wars*, a defining calculated blockbuster in everything but budget (Schatz, 2013) was written, directed and executive produced by Lucas, a 33-year-old product of the New Hollywood independent filmmaking experience. At the time, he had one sleeper hit film to his credit: *American Graffiti* (1973). That experience marked Lucas, leaving him with a mistrust of studio executives. It also shaped his managerial style, which manifested itself largely through soliciting the advice of a few key trusted colleagues, such as Coppola and Spielberg. It confirmed Lucas' life-long held belief that unless he could substantially control his film, it would fail, not because of the quality of its narrative, but because of a studio's lack of vision. Lucas' endeavours were concentrated on side-stepping the studio cadres and making his case directly to the consumers.

While many have emphasized how his Lucas' lifelong love of adventure heroes shaped *Star Wars*, one must also account for how Lucas sensed an even more powerful, non-historical nostalgia that had been the lifeblood of Hollywood from its earliest days. Lucas' critical experience with *Star Wars* would be instructive for future peers. *Star Wars* added details to the blueprint for a globalised merchandising and commercial tie-in industry and the recent wave of comic book film adaptations as blockbuster films. Ironically, the film's success encouraged the studios to work on the premise of 'pre-sold properties,' in which merchandising drives the film. When Lippincott representing *Star Wars* and *Marvel Comics*, led by Stan Lee, agreed to produce the comic book series, the partnership magnified the leverage on both sides.<sup>35</sup> The relationship did much to set aside uncertainties about science fiction's capacity to "sell" in both cinematic and literary formats.<sup>36</sup>

The legacy is persuasive. *Star Wars* nourished, for better or worse, a geek culture, and one that Lucas did not hesitate to exploit, especially as sole owner of

the creative rights in the *Star Wars* franchise. In creating a universe of stories, in which just about anyone could be invited to participate, Lucas loosened the reins on enforcing the terms of his intellectual property. Many fans, thus, felt encouraged to create their own unauthorized (often amateurish) works in the *Star Wars* realm, as long as they did not do so for profit. *Star Wars* has continued in cosplay and comic-con gatherings, do-it-yourself movie trailers and franchise-based online fiction.

Although the markers have been replicated in many blockbusters, no other filmmaker has enjoyed the same level of control. The multi-national owners and shareholders of the studios have in recent years come close to fully controlling the production process. This extends from owning the publishing companies, which produce best-seller novels to the TV channels and newspapers that promote them and to the theatres and cable companies that disseminate them. Bearing in mind that the lion's share of most studio production budgets is now consequentially spent on the studio's services. That is, the studio pays its subsidiary companies with the funds, little more than the above-the-line fees leaving the studio gates (Wasko, 2003). Thus, there seems little more that these oligopolistic production machines can do to enhance the economic benefits to them.

## Chapter 6

### GREASE

#### 6.1 Introduction

This case study considers the blockbuster markers from a musical, a less linear genre, especially in examining how the roles taken in the artistic and business domain overlapped. Thirteen years after the release of *The Sound of Music* (1965), the most successful Hollywood film adaptation of a Broadway musical ever, *Grease* (1978) solidified second place. Despite the film's 'slapdash production',<sup>1</sup> *Grease* became the highest grossing American musical in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It epitomized the manipulation of nostalgia, which would be reflected in industry practices that also led to another nostalgia-fuelled blockbuster in the 1980s, *Back to The Future*.

In scholarly literature, *Grease* has frequently been studied for its impact on genre analysis<sup>2</sup> within the framework of how nostalgia and historical memory function in cinematic storytelling and its impact on popular culture. However, few scholars have engaged with the film in terms of industry practices related to cinematic artistry and cultural influences, and the ways that these practices are translated into marketing strategies. This might be because *Grease*'s blockbuster status does not signal an original artistic vision. Jameson (1991, p. 17) argues that the disappearance of the modern autonomous self suggests the "emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense." Jameson sees the death of the individual subject and, therefore, personalised style. As a result, all that is left is "blank parody", and it is this aspect of pastiche that makes *Grease*'s throwback to the era of Eisenhower an appealing film. As already reflected in George Lucas' *American Graffiti* (1973) and later in

*Back to the Future* (1985), the case study of *Grease* reveals how nostalgia emerged as a replicable narrative marker.

Though based on a major Broadway musical, the film's budget, unconventional casting decisions and tight production schedule do not indicate what Thomas Schatz calls the 'calculated blockbuster', a film deliberately packaged with the intention of generating enormous box office (Schatz, 1993, p. 9). This chapter makes the case that the greater control protocols, which evolved in the first three case studies explored in this thesis, were able to mitigate the risk in investing in films such as *Grease*. In this way, this model supersedes the significance of Schatz's term for a blockbuster created to generate substantial multi-platform revenues for the studios.

*Grease's* \$6 million budget was relatively modest for the late 1970s. Neither John Travolta<sup>3</sup> nor Olivia Newton-John were established film stars when hired for the production; director Randal Kleiser was inexperienced, having not yet helmed a feature film.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, *Grease's* promotional campaign and merchandise tie-ins situate it within blockbuster trends of the late 1970s. As Brickman (2017, p. 31) points out: "We need to be careful about oversimplifying the blockbuster and the narratives or practices associated with it." Brickman notes that *Grease* does not conform to the action-adventure/science fiction/male-centred format argued to dominate Hollywood's blockbuster output at this time (and beyond) (Brickman, 2017, pp. 31-32). *Grease* was the top-ranked film of 1978 in box office grosses. Furthermore, when adjusted for inflation, it is also considered to be the sixth most profitable film ever made (Nash Information Services, 2017).

This chapter therefore offers a twofold analysis of production and content. Firstly, it examines the creative and executive decision-making process that contributed toward *Grease's* phenomenal success. Secondly, it explores the

contributions – to plot, story, music and characterisation – that emerged from this process and provided the film with its shape and substance. Many accounts from the 1970s focused on producer Allan Carr as a charismatic showman suited to adapting *Grease* from stage to screen (Callahan, 1978, pp. 46-47). Film scholars such as Brickman (2017) and Tropiano (2011) have, however, begun to unravel a deeper network of creative contributions, suggesting a more nuanced collaborative work. This chapter follows by providing an in-depth look at the film's production history. Drawing upon a range of primary sources – trade and mainstream press reports, articles and an extensive exclusive interview conducted with Randal Kleiser – *Grease* is traced from its acquisition and story development to its shooting. In doing so, the complexities of various creative relationships are revealed.

## **6.2 Narrative Acquisition and Adaptation**

The decision-making processes can be understood by investigating the acquisition of *Grease* for a film adaptation by Stigwood and Carr, the translation of the challenges of the musical genre into strengths for the film's success, the hiring of Randal Kleiser as director along with other principals for the creative team, and the process in adapting the Broadway book into a screenplay.

The first documented sign of interest in bringing the stage musical *Grease* to the cinema screen can be traced to a *Variety* report of 30 January 1974. Producer Steve Krantz and animator Ralph Bakshi (known for the X-rated animated film *Fritz the Cat*, 1972) attempted to acquire the film rights to adapt *Grease* into an animated feature (*Variety*, 1974 January 30, p. 3). Two years later, Stigwood and Carr purchased the right, with Carr paying the \$200,000 sum out of his own pocket in monthly instalments.<sup>5</sup> This was not unusual for the producer, known for his extravagant and impulsive behaviour (Schwartz, 2017). After the lacklustre performance of *Doctor Doolittle* (1967) and *Hello, Dolly!* (Gene Kelly, 1969), the idea of adapting any stage musical for the big screen, was not the most

appealing.<sup>6</sup> As David Cook points out, “[t]he musical entered the 1970s with the onerous distinction of having helped more than any other single genre to create the financial crisis of 1969-1971.” (Cook, 2000, p. 209). Bill Butler, cinematographer, recalled in a 1978 piece for the *Cinematographer’s Journal*, “[we] realized that there are a lot of traps in making musicals and that you can go wrong very easily. Musicals have lost favour with the public, mainly because they have been done poorly. You have to avoid giving them something that is poorly constructed, poorly timed and poorly photographed.” As in *The Godfather*, the challenge in *Grease* was to find a way of superseding the genre’s conventional limitations to broaden the appeal to a ‘tentpole’ audience defined less by genre and more by popular characters with which anyone, regardless of demographics or generational interests, could identify. Butler’s point highlights the challenge, as studios, bedevilled by the recession in the early 1970s, had turned to musicals (seeking to emulate the performance of *The Sound of Music* (1965)) or popular hits in rock and pop music as a potential point of appeal for more market certainty (Cook, 2002, p. 52).<sup>7</sup> Pop music propelled the promotional efforts of *American Graffiti* (George Lucas, 1973), *The Lady Sings the Blues* (Sidney J. Furie, 1972) and *A Star Is Born* (Frank Pierson, 1976) in the first phase of New Hollywood. Promotional efforts emphasized a “buy the record, see the film” strategy that expanded through the remainder of the 1970s and well into the 1980s (Doty, 1988). The formula had its precedent twenty years earlier, as Colonel Tom Parker, business manager for Elvis Presley, followed the same approach to push the rock star’s soundtrack albums for the bevy of films he did during the late 1950s and into the mid-1960s (Guralnick, 2012). Nevertheless, it was a risky decision, as musicals translated to the cinematic screen included failures ranging from *Hair*, a United Artists’ release (Milos Forman, 1979), *Thank God It’s Friday* (Robert Klane, 1978) and *The Buddy Holly Story* (Steve Rash, 1978) to one of the worst box office flops of the 1970s, *The Wiz* (Sidney Lumet, 1978).

In 1976, Stigwood and Carr chose newcomer Randal Kleiser as director, a choice that may have confused some industry insiders, but not to those who knew how Stigwood had managed to score some of the decade's biggest music, theatrical and film successes. Notably, Travolta was hired before Kleiser, as the young actor was signed to a three-film deal on Sept. 21, 1976, with the first being *Saturday Night Fever*.<sup>8</sup> "Stigwood actively resisted hiring directors who had already established critical reputations on the basis of their stylistic distinctiveness or their thematic successes<sup>9</sup> in past endeavours" (DeAngelis, 2003). While Stigwood embodied the impresario's best instincts, he had also experienced bankruptcy. With Brian Epstein he had managed NEMS Enterprises, and after Epstein's untimely death in 1967 he established his own business (RSO Records). His musical instincts were impeccable, working with David Bowie and Mick Jagger and then taking on bands such as Cream and The Bee Gees before engaging theatrical productions of musicals such as *Jesus Christ Superstar* (Norman Jewison, 1973) and *Hair* (Milos Forman, 1979).

Stigwood and Carr looked for a facilitator who would capture the synergistic energy of the music and dance performances that have electrified the Broadway stage or the popular disco dance floor. "There's been a lot of conjecture as to why such a relatively untried filmmaker was chosen for such a plum assignment," *Film Comment* suggests in an article on *Grease*. "Someone in the Paramount hierarchy told me that above all, [co-]producer Allan Carr wanted someone who was malleable and could work smoothly with Travolta, the prime ingredient of the package" (Harvey, 1978, p. 15). Carr's presence was essential, as Stigwood was devoting attention to another bigger budgeted and star driven film adaptation based on music – this being *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (Michael Schultz, 1978). The adaptation of The Beatles album commanded triple the production budget allocated for *Grease* and Stigwood had recruited John Lennon and Paul McCartney for the film's music and lyrics, as performed by Peter

Frampton and The Bee Gees. Thus, for *Grease*, Kleiser seemed well suited to filling the role as a facilitator.

Kleiser was roommates with George Lucas during his student days at the University of Southern California (USC).<sup>10</sup> He found initial success when he was signed, by Frank Price, head of Universal Studios television, to a non-exclusive seven-year deal to direct television. He also directed several made-for-television movies, including *The Boy in the Plastic Bubble* (1976) with John Travolta (the future star of *Grease*) and *The Gathering* (1977) with Ed Asner, a prominent television actor known for his role as Lou Grant in the *Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-77). His professional coming-of-age coincided with the rise of the New Hollywood or 'Hollywood Renaissance', a period generally associated with formal and thematic innovation in American cinema (Tzioumakis & Kramer, 2018). Together with his peers at USC, known as the 'Movie Brats' (Biskind, 1998, p. 15), he bucked the trend set by many of the other film schools, which were given to emulating the work of the non-commercial French *Nouvelle Vague*.

Kleiser joined John Milius, Bob Gale, Robert Zemeckis, John Carpenter, George Lucas, (and his mentor Francis Coppola<sup>11</sup>) as well as acolyte Steven Spielberg,<sup>12</sup> to become the most commercially focused and successful graduating class of the USC film school to this day. The group is notable because it cumulatively created some of the most commercially successful films ever made by the studios. What is important is that previously USC had been given the credit for encouraging this commercial mindset, whereas the film school was actually following the general trend set by many of the other film schools, which were given to emulating the work of the non-commercial French *Nouvelle Vague*. Kleiser says the film school's influence was minimal. "All of us at USC Film School in the late Sixties were told we would never get into the industry, so we had no sense of competition. We all helped each other with our student projects" (Kleiser, 2018). (This highlighting an area for further scholarship by management scholars



to provide a greater understanding of the unique success of those USC students, based upon greater cooperation models). Kleiser's comments in 2018 reinforce earlier interviews. When asked if he and Lucas, as college roommates, had a master plan about transforming Hollywood filmmaking, he responded that:

I dreamed of becoming a director. I thought George would make a good production designer, since he was so good at art. All of us at USC in the late Sixties were told that we needed to have contacts in the industry or be related to someone to break in. But the studio system underwent a tremendous change when *Easy Rider* [1969] was released and there was suddenly an audience of young people who wanted films about their age group. The doors opened and we were in the right place at the right time. My USC master's thesis film, *Peegé*, was seen by Universal executives who hired me to begin directing TV shows.<sup>13</sup>

Kleiser's selection for *Grease* surprised some insiders,<sup>14</sup> especially on Broadway and when veterans of the stage musical were asked to join the production. For choreography, Carr and Stigwood engaged Patricia Birch, the original stage version's choreographer. Butler adds that as newcomers, "all three of us [Butler, Kleiser and Birch] listened very closely to what Allan Carr had to say about his vision of what he felt a film musical should be. We were very sensitive to his desire to lend a bit of the old-fashioned Hollywood musical flavour to the movie, and that's the direction we took" (Butler 1978). Butler's comments indicate how Carr's role as producer often blurred the lines into the director's bailiwick. Kleiser had this to say: "Allan's contributions were instrumental in the success of the movie. I think my pushback on certain of his ideas turned out to be the perfect storm to make it work" (Kleiser, 2018).

This evolving creative network of Carr, Butler, Kleiser and Birch was unconventional. Despite the many references to Kleiser being unprepared for the transition from television to cinema, he tried to ensure quietly that the film reflected his vision, despite the constant interference by Carr, the man he referred to as "a gay P.T. Barnum" (Kleiser, 2018). On the broader point of what

represented the biggest transition from television to cinema for Kleiser, he said in a previous interview, “the biggest difference was the scale. I was suddenly working in the Panavision widescreen format. Composing shots was completely different because there was twice as much space to fill. This was a great step forward, especially for a musical where we had so many dancers in certain sequence.”<sup>15</sup> Butler, the cinematographer, took note of the film’s aesthetic challenges from the outset. “Frankly, Allan Carr liked the old-fashioned sharp look so much that we decided that we would give it a go and find out whether or not the public would react to that look again”, Butler wrote in 1978. “I did try other things in the beginning, but none of them seemed to satisfy the memory he had of what musicals used to look like, so it was at his urging that I put that crisp look on film.” Carr had selected individuals to realise his specific vision. This level of control exercised by a producer is unusual and tends to result in the director resigning. However, this is also why control is a marker for blockbuster films.

Carr also bypassed Hollywood’s pool of experienced screenwriters to tap the un-produced Bronte Woodard for the adaptation.<sup>16</sup> It is unclear what made Carr assign the task of writing the *Grease* screenplay to this relative unknown, other than that they were good friends, and after Woodard died of AIDS in 1980, both Kleiser and Carr spoke at his memorial service (Hofler, 2010, p. 217). However, the scribe’s lack of experience soon emerged. The first draft of the *Grease* screenplay submitted in December 1976 was bizarre, as this 2016 *Vanity Fair* magazine report indicates:

Carr’s vision included Danny Zuko as a busboy and gas-station attendant (doing a song called ‘Gas Pump Jockey’); Paul Lynde (at that time best known as Uncle Arthur on television’s *Bewitched*) as the Rydell High principal; Detroit Tigers star Mark ‘The Bird’ Fidrych as the school baseball hero; Donny Osmond as Teen Angel; and the Beach Boys doing the show-stopping garage production number, ‘Greased Lightnin’.’ There was even a scene with Lynde dressed as Carmen Miranda.

This same article references “Carr’s vision”, reflected in the fact that although Woodard was credited for writing the screenplay, Carr awarded himself the writing credit for the adaptation (IMDb.com). After many iterations, the familiar contours fell into place in the final draft of the script.<sup>17</sup> Kleiser (2018) believed the script changes contributed to the film’s success: “We made the movie more accessible to a wide audience, toning down some of the raunchy parts. It’s amazing how much remains, though.” These include several drive-in theatre shots where a teen boy is kissing his girlfriend while fondling her breasts and another in which the couple is having sex in the back seat of the car. There are numerous references to virginity in the song ‘Look At Me, I’m Sandra Dee’ and ‘Greased Lightning’ contains numerous sexually charged lyrics referencing orgasms.

### **6.3 Music Adaptation**

This section discusses the significant changes to the music, in its adaptation from Broadway to screen, and how they served the larger promotional purpose of reinforcing the nostalgic appeal and marketing tie-ins for *Grease*. Of note was the addition of songs to the film not found in the stage version. These included ‘Sandy’, with music by Louis St. Louis, and lyrics by Scott J. Simon, who was also known as ‘Screamin’ Scott Simon from the music group Sha-Na-Na, which appeared in the film as Johnny Casino & The Gamblers. John Farrar, Olivia Newton-John’s music producer and songwriter, wrote ‘You’re the One That I Want’ and ‘Hopelessly Devoted to You’, which became hit singles. The latter song fulfilled a contractual obligation for the young Australian singer to have a solo in the film. Barry Gibb’s theme song, ‘Grease’, performed by Frankie Valli and featured in the animated opening credits sequence, sparked the greatest controversy. Kleiser believed that Gibb’s music and lyrics contradicted the sunny optimism of the film’s cast and the title song. Forty years later, Kleiser (2018) seems to have made his peace with being overruled in this matter: “The lyrics didn’t match the film, but I’m thrilled

that I was outvoted. The title song was a huge hit and I'm happy it was used." The song topped the U.S. charts for two weeks in late summer 1978.

As rock musical theatre, while *Grease* incorporated the sounds typically associated with rock music in its score, its composition style was more invested in Broadway tradition. Formed in 1969, Sha-Na-Na thrived as it parodied the greaser and rock 'n' roll culture of the 1950s, led by Jon Bauman, a/k/a Bowzer, the self-appointed authority on this particular period. In a 1978 interview with *People* magazine, Bauman did not restrain his criticism of 1970s icons of the 1950s' nostalgia wave – calling Henry Winkler's Fonz from *Happy Days* 'a lightweight' and Travolta's Danny in *Grease* "an absolute nothing", adding that the film's script was a "weak nothing" (Wiseman, 1978). Prior to *Grease*'s release, *Sha-Na-Na* (1977-1981), the group's variety series was a hit in television syndication and had just been renewed for a second season in 136 cities. Along with the band's brief appearance in *Grease*, Sha-Na-Na recorded six tracks on the film's soundtrack, which rose to the top Billboard chart spot, overtaking *Some Girls* from the Rolling Stones. Bauman proclaimed, "Sha-Na-Na was unquestionably the stimulus for the entire '50s craze" (Wiseman, 1978).

While Bauman was a purist in preserving a specific nostalgic conceptualization of the 1950s, accurate representations were not an essential element for a Hollywood blockbuster.<sup>18</sup> Jameson (1991, p. 288) argues that the nostalgia film is "mortgaged to music", suggesting that the music of the era helped define the film. Similarly, Grainge (2010, p. 195) notes that "the ways in which history is reconfigured in the retro film, and retextualised through music, are complex, involving an affective address that marks out the pastness in the retro film as stylish or 'cool', hence the particular appeal of retro objects to youth or style-driven markets." This is evident in *Grease*, which incorporates immediately recognizable songs that would drive viewers of the film to their nearby music store to purchase the soundtrack. To wit: the album was certified by the

Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) in 1984, as having had 8 million copies shipped to retailers.<sup>19</sup>

Kleiser (2018) explained why he engaged with the theme of nostalgia in *Grease*. “*Grease* is definitely a surreal and idealized view of the 50s. My roommate in college was George Lucas, writer/director of *American Graffiti*. We both grew up as kids in that era and it influenced us in our films.” While Broadway plumbed the creative possibilities of nostalgia-themed musicals, signs of nostalgia were appearing in other media platforms. The appeal of nostalgia culture was fortified by the success of various television based in the 1950s as well as other periods, such as *Happy Days* (Jerry Paris et al 1974-84) for the 1950s, *The Waltons* (Harry Harris et al., 1971-81) for the 1930s and 1940s and *Little House on the Prairie* (Michael Landon et al., 1974-83) for the 1800s (Rymysza-Pawlowska, 2014). *Life* magazine (1972, June 16, pp. 38-46) dedicated an issue to ‘The Nifty Fifties,’ while *Newsweek* (1972, October 1972, pp. 78-82) did a special section in an issue titled, “Yearning for the Fifties: The Good Old Days.” In *The New York Times*, Lingeman (1973, p. 24) explained the revival of the Fifties because the public had become tired of protest songs and music, and many were disenchanted that rock music had strayed from its classic roots.

The film adaptation of *Grease* amplified the homage to rock ‘n’ roll but it also smoothed the rough edges of the original narrative and characters, making the principals appealing pop art renditions. At the same time, the film avoided becoming too lightweight through the emotional dramas, relationships and characters’ battles over self-identity that populate the narrative. The adaptation process thus saw *Grease*’s content and themes undergo radical transformation, as the musical moved from its gritty original staging in Chicago to its 1978 summer release as a blockbuster film. The original musical transformed the popular perception of the 1950s as a stable, idyllic era into a disturbing storm that would roil society’s waters with protests for civil rights and against the Vietnam War;

however, as a film, *Grease* became a deft example of product differentiation by engendering and emphasizing nostalgia and a sanitized, even utopian, vision of the 1950s.

#### **6.4 Production**

Kleiser's sense of "amused fondness" was also evident in the casting. The primary sources available on this case study are often problematic, because they contain recollections of events that took place forty years ago. For instance, there are conflicting recollections regarding the hiring of Olivia Newton-John. Traditionally, producers are involved in selecting the lead bankable talent (i.e., actors whose value to distributors will ensure the financing and theatrical grade release of a film) and leave the director to make casting decisions for the other roles (Wardle, 2002, p. 19). In *Grease*, evidence suggests that Carr was heavily involved with the entire casting process.

Stigwood and Carr, the producers, as well as director Kleiser looked for young actors whose stars were rising fast. The original Broadway show featured many actors who enjoyed successful career paths in both television and film, including John Travolta, Barry Bostwick, Richard Gere, Peter Gallagher, Treat Williams, Patrick Swayze, Marilu Henner, and Adrienne Barbeau. Travolta was an early choice for Danny, but only after Henry Winkler, who starred as Fonzie in the *Happy Days* television sitcom, rejected the role.<sup>20</sup> Travolta, who was ten years younger than Winkler, was acclaimed for his role as Vinnie Barbarino in the ABC-TV sitcom *Welcome Back Kotter* (Bob LaHendro et al., 1975-1979) and his role in the made-for-television movie *The Boy in The Plastic Bubble* (1976, and directed by Kleiser), followed by his strong performance in *Saturday Night Fever* (John Badham, 1977).<sup>21</sup> Travolta, in a 1978 interview, said that "I had seen it [*Grease*] in the Eden Theatre in New York and desperately wanted to be in it and I had my

agent set up and ... three years after... I was 18, and I asked if I could get an audition for *Grease* and I did. For the National Road Company. I was called back about five times.”<sup>22</sup> For the film, Travolta originally thought it would be good to go back to the book<sup>23</sup> of the original musical but then realized the film version was “really the correct thing to do”. In the stage version, he played the character of Doody, a relatively minor role cast as an innocent, naïve student. Travolta explained, “I always wanted to play Danny, but I wasn't old enough yet, in the play to do that” (*Grease* DVD, 2006). Butler (1978) recalls Kleiser’s explanation: “John Travolta was automatically in, so everything was built around him. We made it into more of a love story between Danny and Sandy rather than an ensemble piece, which the play is, because we have two stars to work with.”

The female lead role was initially offered to Susan Dey, known for her role in the hit ABC-TV sitcom *The Partridge Family* (Richard Kinnon, 1970-74) (about a widow and her children performing as a touring band). *The Los Angeles Times* reported on January 29, 1979 (p. B-2) that Marie Osmond, also a popular musician during the 1970s with members of her Mormon family, rejected the offer to play Sandy because of her religious upbringing. Contrary to these reports on casting for Sandy, Kleiser (2018) says today, “Olivia was always our first choice. As far as I know, the part was never offered to anyone else.”<sup>24</sup> However, most accounts suggest it was Carr who made the decision. As Jim Watters explained in a *New York Times* article of 1978: “Newton-John was only offered the part after producer Allan Carr was charmed by her at a dinner party thrown by singer Helen Reddy and told the film’s screenwriter that night to make Sandy Australian.” (Watters, 1978 June 11). In the 2016 *Vanity Fair* article, Watters’ version is repeated. Newton-John hesitated because her film debut in *Toomorrow* (Val Guest, 1970) a sci-fi comedy musical produced in the UK, was disastrous. The film was pulled from the screens just after one week.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, Carr did not demur, even as Newton-John insisted that she could not do an American accent and that being six

years older than Travolta could hamper the effect of believable on-screen chemistry. Carr addressed her concerns by rewriting the female lead part of Sandy as an Australian exchange student and agreeing to her request for a screen test, to ensure that she and Travolta were compatible on screen, and he instructed Bill Butler, cinematographer, to use lenses to soften her visage (Callahan, 2016). Carr's role as a producer was driven more by an Icarus grade hubris than by pragmatism and defined by absolute control and little interest in teamwork. To make such a consequential decision, in one evening, without consulting the director or studio, based on an encounter at a dinner party, is not the accepted film industry norm. Newton-John, 28 at the time, had begun appearing regularly in the U.S. charts with songs such as 'Please Mr. Please', 'Come On Over', 'Every Face Tells A Story' and 'Sam'. Despite her laudable track record as a singer, she could not be counted on as a box office asset, a point she herself tried unsuccessfully to make in not agreeing immediately to Carr's offer. Recalling Kleiser's response that Newton-John always was the first choice suggests several explanations. He was left out of the process, has faulty recollection, the reported interest of other actors was public relations hype or he is ensuring that his legacy is remembered in the most favourable light possible, even if this involves revising history.

In a 2006 interview featured in the *Rockin' Rydell High* DVD package, Kleiser describes the relationships on set as free of any conflict. In the author's interview with him in 2018, he refused to address issues about the authority for final decisions during production. As a conflict-free workplace, especially a film set, is virtually unheard of, this would concern any researcher trying to establish a complete and accurate understanding of *Grease's* production history. The director (2006) remembered that, "for Olivia Newton-John we had to change the character of Sandy into an Australian, which I found amusing because it confirms all those clichés you hear about Hollywood taking what was such a success on



Broadway and completely turning it around. Actually, in this case I think it's going to help the story because on stage Sandy was so bland, Olivia adds another dimension to it." Admittedly, in an industry famously known for its capacity for public relations spin, this could be a director's narrative making the best of being landed overnight with a 28-year-old, non-professional Australian actor (to play the role of a Californian teenager) without his consent.

Similar questions arise in other casting decisions. Jeff Conaway, 26 at the time, was a New York University graduate who studied dance with American choreographer Martha Graham and acting with Olympia Dukakis. He had taken the lead role in the Broadway version while finishing his college studies. For the film, he was cast as Kenickie Murdock, of the T-Birds, a performance that led to a major role as cab driver Bobby Wheeler on the hit sitcom *Taxi*, which premiered on ABC-TV in the fall after the *Grease's* 1978 release. Featured in a 2006 interview in the *Rockin' Rydell High Edition* DVD edition package, Conaway (who died in 2011) said, "I played Danny, originally, then they asked me to stay on as understudy for the nine roles. And the only role I never played was Kenickie." Kleiser added in a 1978 interview (also featured on the film's 2006 DVD package) also featured in the *Rockin' Rydell* edition, "He knew the play really well, and became like an equal to John, in a way." However, Kleiser's assertion is rebutted in one fact, as it is Kenickie in the stage version who sings 'Greased Lightnin', one of the film's most extravagant production numbers. Kleiser contradicts his earlier statement, again in the same interview included in the *Rockin' Rydell* DVD edition, about the two actors being equal: "[B]ecause we had John Travolta and he was such a big star we switched it [*Greased Lightnin'*] over to John, and this happened several times to Jeff, unfortunately, because he was no longer playing Danny and I think it must have been, you know, difficult for him."

The challenge was selecting young actors who could rise to the film's comedic demands and would also be convincing as 17-year-old students, even

though most were well into their twenties. Steven Ford (21 at the time, was the son of U.S. President Gerald Ford) whose good looks and acting career put him on the covers of many magazines during the mid-1970s. He was originally picked to play Tom Chisum, a high school football player who is also trying to date Sandy. Kleiser (2018) remembered that: "Ford left after participating in a rehearsal. I don't know if he was nervous or not interested in continuing. He was gone the next day." The role went instead to Lorenzo Lamas, the son of actors Fernando Lamas and Arlene Dahl. Meanwhile, Stockard Channing, 33 at the time, was tapped to play Rizzo, as opposed to first choice Lucie Arnaz, 26 at the time, whose mother Lucille Ball either took exception to her daughter having to audition, or to the slightly sordid role, and did not allow her to test for it.<sup>26</sup> Kleiser's recollection (2018) differs somewhat: "Lucie says that never happened. I don't remember it either." Didi Conn was 26, when cast in the part of Frenchy and almost stole the movie with the 'Beauty School Dropout' song. The casting of actors older than the characters they play is a common Hollywood practice, but it also served a practical purpose in *Grease* to have experienced professionals who could operate with a tight rehearsal and shooting schedule.

Fortifying the film's nostalgic vibe were stars of 1950s film and television including Eve Arden, Sid Caesar and Joan Blondell. Kleiser, just barely more than thirty at the time, described the generational differences as a director in working with the older actors. Harvey (1978, pp. 14-16), quoting Kleiser, wrote,

With the seasoned professionals, it's more of a business relationship, while with the newcomers there's a kind of 'putting-on-a-show' atmosphere. Since I'm close to their age, they don't ask me what to do, they show me what they have in mind, they've already worked out their routines-it's more of a group effort. I just kind of mould what they have come up with. In a way they're freer than the veterans, and don't have any qualms about it-they haven't been taught that the director is sacred.

Quiet and reserved in contrast to Carr's flamboyance, Kleiser was often overshadowed by the producer. Stockard Channing told Harvey (1978, p. 15) in a *Film Comment* interview that "I think Randal's [Kleiser] basic calmness has been an incredible anchor for everybody around here. He lets people give him an enormous input-there's no ego involved. The only problem for me as an actor, is that on a production of this size, I miss the intimacy of working one on one with a director, which Randal isn't really able to do here." Harvey described Kleiser's "remarkable sangfroid", and noted that he had worked previously with Travolta, which helped soothe apprehensions about his lack of experience as a feature film director.

On the other hand, Harvey (1978, p. 16) also commented that "[w]ith his subdued, self-effacing manner, Kleiser emphatically doesn't fit any Central Casting notions of a Born Authority Figure; if he resembles anyone, it would be an unassuming third Bridges brother. There was a lot of conjecture as to why such a relatively untried filmmaker was chosen for such a plum assignment." In Kleiser's defence, a more experienced, less pragmatic director likely would not have survived the production. Kleiser (2018) said in his most recent interview that "Allan [Carr] wasn't on the set most of the time. The actors had seen my USC Master's thesis *Peege* and trusted me." Kleiser had an astute, mature understanding of the personalities and power plays at hand and had realized that a confrontational style would not work in his favour with Carr. Furthermore, the quote indicates that he understood that his true advocates were the actors.

Harvey mentioned in his first-hand account (1978, p. 16) that Kleiser had assured him that he had a harmonious working relationship with Carr. Harvey added, "Carr deigned not to talk to me, or any of the other journalists assembled that day, about Randal Kleiser, the ideal role of the producer, or anything else; however, Kleiser must have been as surprised as I when in mid-afternoon, Carr descended on the set, ordered all civilians off post-haste, and huddled with his

team, presumably to find out why in hell ‘Beauty School Dropout’ was taking so long to shoot.” Insiders believed that this intervention was staged in front of the press to amplify Carr’s publicity profile. As the next section indicates, the production process, which included a five-week rehearsal schedule, was according to the available information, harmonious with little or no controversy.

As a production experience, *Grease* was a highly cooperative venture, with Kleiser encouraging numerous people to assist. However, this is not an ideal setup for a director who must make rapid decisions to bring a film in on time and budget. Film sets tend not to be democracies, but work best as benevolent (or, at least benign) dictatorships (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1998). There was also the question of *who*, ultimately, got to call *what* shots. In the running commentary that Kleiser and Birch provided throughout the film, made available in the *Rockin’ Rydell High Edition* DVD, it becomes evident that Kleiser’s role was often subjugated to Carr’s preferences. One was the opening animated sequence, created by John Wilson. Birch acknowledged it was a “romantic version of life in high school and life on vacation”, which she doubted resembled life on Chicago’s east side, in which the musical version takes place. The film amplified nostalgia (Elsaesser, King & Horwath, 2004) by picking familiar icons of American settings, including the high school, drive-in theatre, lover’s lane, soda shop, high school girl’s bedroom (Frenchie’s) and Thunder Road. With the exception of the beach (after all, the film was set in Southern California and shot on location in Los Angeles), *Grease* was not much different from the Milwaukee, Wisconsin setting of the top-rated sitcom in the U.S. at the time, *Happy Days*, which, of course, was set in the 1950s.

Birch’s influence prevailed in many instances. She recalled that the “*Grease* producers had been out to Chicago and had seen it in the basement there and they decided they wanted the rights to this and decided they’d like me to choreograph” (*Grease* DVD, 2006). Kleiser, who had no experience with musicals, affirmed Birch’s role, adding, “she was my guideline to what worked and didn’t

about the play.” Butler explained, “Pat Birch was very, very quick in adapting the dance numbers to a camera's perspective and came up with ways of showing the dancing and the movement that would preserve the energy of the stage play.” The comments by Kleiser and Birch also are featured on the film's 2006 DVD package.

Kleiser explained that while he kept Birch's original choreography for 'Greased Lightnin' he also wanted to “take it to another level and that's why we came up with this fantasy section.” Yet, Butler and Birch took the reins in making the fantasy interlude work with the song. “In a musical if you're dancing or singing, and you suddenly change to dialog, you don't want to leave the people behind”, Butler explained. “So, if you motivate the transition from one to the other, you bring the audience along with you. And when they were working on the car, that transition was so smooth, you hardly realized that you had moved from the workshop into a fantasy.”

In the *Rockin' Rydell High* edition commentary, Kleiser suggests that he was in the director's chair to ensure that Carr's extravagant, classic musical style vision was being realized, with the aid of Birch and Butler. This also goes towards explaining Kleiser's dismissive comments about the film, some years after it was released (addressed later in the chapter). Kleiser is diplomatic but frequently nonspecific: “So we added that to give it, like, a little bit of a spark that wasn't in the play. The same music, same song, but just giving it more of a movie look.” Meanwhile, Birch talked about going for “a kind of big Paramount experience”, explaining how she decided to use a whole high school football field for staging *We Go Together*. Butler added, “that gave Pat Birch really more freedom because it was wide open spaces, and a lot of carnival activity around it for her to play with.” Birch's description, recounted on the 2006 DVD feature addition, is worth nothing:

Why *Grease* works so well as a film: People feel they're not just itinerant dancers flopping in there. They're the high school. The dancers in *Grease* are the heart of the high school. ... I took two of ... Like, a guy and a girl, of what I call D1 through 20. They would teach 30 more kids the Madison, whatever the step was that we were doing. They had incredible sense of competition, that the group they were teaching. ... Ours is gonna be the best group, and they're gonna out-dance the other group.

Primary sources interviews and reports of the time indicate that Birch settled into the Hollywood environment smoothly with barely any controversy and that the production process was relatively free of problems or artistic issues for her. "For me the hardest part of the movie was staying true to what I felt *Grease* was really about", Birch said in the 2006 DVD commentary. "It was about a pretty tough high school ... and I want to keep the high school grittiness in it". Conceding that "it got a little sugar coated here and there", she nevertheless concluded that, "I think we did."

Meanwhile, Kleiser's response (2018) seems cryptic: "Pat and Bill and I got along great and were inspired by some of Allan's ideas, and pushed back on others." The key to this perhaps being Birch's comment: "...staying true to what I felt *Grease* was really about." The norm in the film industry is that the only vision to be realised on a set is that of the director, not of the screenwriter or anyone else. The producer realizes his or her vision by hiring a director who represents a shared vision. As several scholars who have examined the career paths of film directors noted, "the word 'producer' has various meanings in Hollywood, but a producer typically does not run the project" (Kose, Ravid & Sunder, 2017). Only five weeks of rehearsals were scheduled for the production, which might have been a challenge for other projects. But Kleiser, on the 2006 DVD package, explained the cast worked so well together because many had done the play on Broadway, "so they knew the characters and they knew where the laughs were."

Routine production tasks also afforded clever promotional tactics. In the summer of 1977 two months into the shooting schedule, forty-two teenagers

selected from a national contest received a vacation to Los Angeles with expenses covered to be the background extras in a scene filmed at Venice High School. Kleiser (2018) recalls, "Allan told me the day before to find a place to put the contest winners in the picture. They explode out of the school before the carnival sequence." Notable here is that the producer gave the director only one day to place the forty-two teenagers, creating obvious issues with his shooting schedule for that day.

Venice High School served as the film's fictional Rydell High School while classroom shots were done at Huntington High School in downtown Los Angeles, which was located next to a pork processing plant. Many of the "makeout" point scenes were filmed on Mulholland Drive near the current home of the Skirball Cultural Centre. Bubble gum was omnipresent, as the cast chewed an estimated 5,000 pieces of the candy each day during the shoot. The film's closing scene with the school carnival was shot at John Marshall High School. Pickwick Drive-in Theatre in Burbank, which closed in 1989, was another Los Angeles location. Pickwick, which accommodated 800 cars in its heyday, was familiar to many directors because of its proximity to Burbank Studios, which housed Walt Disney Co., Columbia Pictures and Warner Bros. Filming was concluded on 14 September 1977 with many of the fantasy scenes and production numbers filmed on Paramount's soundstages.

The budget came in at \$6 million, a surprisingly low figure for a film that Carr preordained as a potential blockbuster. In terms of production costs for major Hollywood musicals made and released during 1978 and 1979, *Grease* came in at the low end. Other musicals with which some Hollywood studios had hoped to replicate *Grease's* box office success, incurred higher production budgets with each film tracking an underwhelming box office performance relative to anticipation: *The Wiz* (Universal Pictures and Motown Productions, budget: \$24 million; gross box office: \$21,049,053), *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*

(Universal Pictures and RSO Records, budget: \$18 million; gross box office: \$20,378,470) and *Hair* (United Artists and CIP Filmproduktion GmbH, budget: \$11 million; gross box office: \$15,284,643). With the average film budget in 1977 being about \$5 million, the budget size confounded the usual definition of the calculated blockbuster.<sup>27</sup>

Kleiser's pragmatic perspective (2018) is deadpan: "It was quite a low budget, but a lot bigger than the TV movies I had worked on." Kleiser's television background was important, and he capably brought the picture in faster and for less money. He (2018) adds, "I don't think *Grease* would have been any better with more money." By current standards, the inflation adjusted production budget of \$23.2 million would still be modest, at best.<sup>28</sup> However, with an optimal cast, good locations and a generous production schedule, unlike special effects based films, there is no component that would have substantially benefited from spending more money on it to increase *Grease's* chances for success.

In conclusion, this analysis of the production process confirms several factors: 1) Carr's management style defined the on-set power structure, with the three main principals (Kleiser, Butler and Birch) being given precise instructions on realising his vision. 2) Although he allowed them the creative leeway to interpret his wishes, Carr's control of the process was absolute. 3) Notwithstanding, Kleiser solicited a more participatory directing style by welcoming suggestions from all. The key teamwork, however, took place between and among Kleiser, Butler and Birch. Credible specifics on the manner of their frequent interactions and any insight into notions of decision-making hierarchy are scarce.<sup>29</sup> 4) Carr's methods reflect the more authoritarian, keys-to-success focused, approach to film production identified in the previous case studies and are validated by the film's superlative commercial success.

## **6.5 Marketing and Promotion**



This section outlines the promotional campaign that Stigwood and Carr, who believed that *Grease* could become the first musical since *The Sound of Music* to become the year-end box office champion.<sup>30</sup> *Grease* as a film depended upon the audiences' reading of the contemporary social, cultural and ideological trends and discourses associated with the stage version of the musical and the extent to which they could be transmitted convincingly when adapted from one medium to another. That is, the audience for the film is really the off-screen consumer who is seduced, serenaded and captivated by the overall machine of marketing, stars, songs and the idealized image of the Fifties.<sup>31</sup>

While *Grease* encapsulated the film musical blockbuster in its most successful formulation, its commercial impact was enhanced by the success of *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) and *Tommy* (Ken Russell, 1975), both Stigwood productions, and not so ironically the fact that both shows mixed elements of idealized nostalgia with the dystopic elements in their stories.<sup>32</sup> Stigwood's track record in exploiting market opportunities through the combination of musical and cinematic platforms greatly enhanced *Grease's* prospects. His successes with *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973), *Tommy* (1975) and *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) proved that there was a growing demand for musical films. Unlike the classical conception of cinematic film scores that served ancillary purposes in amplifying the visual impact of film, the soundtrack served a major marketing role in this expanding market.

While non-diegetic uses of pop music in films had generally been relegated to opening and closing credits, many prescient music publishers before the 1970s glimpsed their cross-platform promotional potential. Major music stars, for example, performed pop songs featured as themes in the James Bond franchise, including Tom Jones (*Thunderball*, (Terence Young, 1965), Nancy Sinatra (*You Only Live Twice*, (Lewis Gilbert, 1967) and Paul McCartney (*Live and Let Die*, (Guy

Hamilton, 1967). Henry Mancini's *Pink Panther Theme* (composed for the 1963 film and which was nominated for the 1964 Academy Award for Best Original Score) was featured on a top-selling soundtrack album. When it was released in 1964 as a single, it reached the Top 10 on the U.S. *Billboard* adult contemporary chart and won three Grammy Awards. Mancini's success invited a different perspective from the studios about film music's marketability (Smith, 2000):

During the late 1950s, when virtually all of Hollywood's major studios began buying or starting up their own record subsidiaries, film music underwent a major transformation in terms of its form and function. With film music emerging as an important site for industry diversification and cross-promotion, producers hoped that the circulation of film titles via records, radio and retail displays would give their product greater name recognition and bring more people into theatres. In return, a successful film usually generated additional revenues for the studio's record and music-publishing subsidiaries by spawning a hit single or hit album.

One of those tie-ins included a thirty-second commercial for the stage version of *Grease* at the end of the picture, which was agreed to with Ken Waissman and Maxine Fox, producers of *Grease's* stage version.

A *Box Office* report on 29 May 1978 (p. 4), one week before *Grease's* world premiere and two and a half weeks prior to its national release, indicated that Paramount Pictures would set new heights in its traditionally extravagant premiere party for a film debut. The film's premiere at Grauman's Chinese Theatre included a parade with a school bus leading cars and celebrities to the soundstage, complete with high school marching bands, cheerleaders, and guests attired in "Rydell High chic." Kleiser (2018) remembers Carr's Barnum-like aura as the catalyst behind this extravagant show. The film's top stars drove Travolta's vintage 1955 Thunderbird. Performers from the soundtrack, including Frankie Valli, Frankie Avalon and Sha Na Na, also appeared. Kleiser (2018) recalls, "John and Oliva showed up in costumes from the film. Allan's idea." Travolta was the centerpiece of the promotional campaign, along with Newton-John. Ads

proclaimed the title track, “Grease is The Word”, with the stars taking the dance floor alone to perform a dance scene from the movie. Arthur Knight noted that Travolta’s ubiquitous presence was intended to replicate the pop culture status of Marlon Brando, James Dean and Elvis Presley from the 1950s (Knight, 1978 June 6). Travolta’s new star status enhanced by his recent award-winning performance in *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) was the focus of constant attention and fully exploited by the producers. Even promotional material highlighting Newton-John emphasized the overwhelming presence of the film’s male lead. Her sensuality in combination with Newton-John’s “youthful innocence” did, however, underscore her character’s transformation at the end of the film.

Days before the premiere, a *Variety* report (31 May 1978, p. 6) contained details suggesting that Paramount had reconsidered its release schedule for *Grease*, which originally was slated for a 12-week test run at four Chicago theatres. Paramount had been behind the successful release of *The Godfather* (1972) and had since had ample opportunity to learn from the success of other blockbuster films, but it seems incongruous that the studio wanted to go safely with a limited platform release, rather than the type of saturation release that had worked so well for this business model. Though there is little verifiable information available on the corporate decision-making process in this case, executives likely did want to play it safe. Paramount cited the long-running success of Travolta’s other major film, *Saturday Night Fever*, as the reason for delaying its premiere (*Billboard*, 9 September 1978, p. 58), a point Kleiser (2018) does not recall hearing about, when interviewed recently. Likewise, the studio (*Variety*, 31 May 1978, p. 6) shuffled the release of other films so as not to interfere with or disrupt the anticipated momentum of *Grease*, including Warren Beatty’s *Heaven Can Wait* (Warren Beatty, Buck Henry, 1978).

Yet, there were no signs that the studio was hedging its bets on what it saw as a certain box office winner. Seven months before the premiere, *Variety* carried

a news brief on 16 November 1977 announcing that Paramount had begun booking the film in theatres with “steep terms<sup>33</sup>,” including an 11-week minimum engagement and a \$100,000 guarantee in advance for each house (*Variety*, 16 November 1977, p. 17). On 22 March 1978, according to a *Variety* report, still roughly three months before *Grease*’s release date, Paramount added its first product tie-in – a short musical film about Lynyrd Skynyrd, which was presented by Pepsi-Cola. Paramount had agreed to a \$2.5 million promotional tie-in campaign with Pepsi. However, Frank Mancuso, studio vice president at the time, insisted that the studio not use the Lynyrd Skynyrd featurette to promote Pepsi. Mancuso added that he was opposed to “screen advertising in any form.” But that information may not have been communicated to the set design crew for the film. Carr, who had orchestrated the Pepsi deal, was angry that the Coca-Cola logo was visible in the film’s first scene at the fictional Frosty Restaurant. He insisted that the logo be blacked out in the final print (Erickson, 1999).

Another scene featured a cooler marked with the Coca-Cola logo. In an interview many years later, Kleiser, the director, explained, “Carr had made a promotional deal with Pepsi for tie-ins when the movie was released, but neglected to tell the set decorator. It wasn’t until he saw dailies that he was aware the set had been filled with Coke products. He went ballistic.” The options were to reshoot the scenes without the offending products or use special effects to obscure the logos. This was accomplished with an optical printer, where a grey or blurred box is projected onto a film clip to produce a combined image. Only the first scene was alterable and the other was left untouched. “That was impossible to cover with 1978 technology,” Kleiser said. “We just had to hope that Pepsi didn’t complain. They didn’t.”

In the summer roundup of new Hollywood releases published in *Screen International* (1978), Bilbow (p. 17) succinctly summarized *Grease*’s prospects. “Business prediction: Very good to very good indeed as a flash in the pan, album

linked, hit and run, had sold exploitation promotion.” Citing the star power and the song duet that scored on the charts, Bilbow panned the attempt at compelling nostalgia. “It has spurious nostalgic appeal but little life of its own except as a star vehicle for John Travolta and Olivia Newton-John. It may not mark the end of the album linked smasheroos, but could well prove to be the end of the beginning.”

Bilbow’s assessment hardly mattered. Stigwood and Carr had capitalized maximally on Travolta’s rising star and the show’s long-running Broadway success. A *Time* magazine summary of the 1978 summer releases tagged *Grease* as the “safest bet” for success. The verdict was that “film makers have discovered that kids are the ones who fill the movie theater, and they love rock music and fantasy.”<sup>34</sup> Kleiser, interviewed by *Time*, cited the film’s technological aspects for creating a “’70s look at the ‘50s. ...Stylistically, the actors will break into song – that’s old – but we are using all the ‘70s film techniques we can muster, like split-screens and high-powered sound” (Wyatt, 1994, p. 4).

None of this counted as much as the three elements Stigwood leveraged to masterful effect in promoting *Grease*: Travolta, Newton-John, and the music. Surprisingly, the film’s trailer barely mentions that it was adapted from one of Broadway’s most successful musicals ever (save for a single line in the voiceover). The trailer is almost completely devoted to Travolta and Olivia Newton-John, who are referenced by name nine times in two minutes. The film’s title is mentioned three times, almost as an afterthought to the prime marquee presence of Travolta and Newton-John.

Meanwhile, two prominent supporting cast members, Stockard Channing (Rizzo) and Jeff Conaway (Kenickie) are featured in a short clip but are never acknowledged in the trailer. No other characters are featured or named in the trailer. The other intriguing text highlighted in the trailer is a nod to the classic tradition of Hollywood musicals. The voiceover in the trailer proclaims, “The movie filled with more song, more dance, more of everything that makes a great

musical unforgettable.” Even in the trailer, the Fifties nostalgic appeal has a distinct 1970s flavour, closer to the contrived 1950s appeal of the contemporary hit television series *Happy Days* than to the more sincerely nostalgic *American Graffiti* (1973).

In conclusion, the promotional process revealed a learning curve from not only other recent exploitations of the genre, but also other genres. The dissemination of the soundtrack in the pre-MTV age, was visionary and it generated significant revenue. Of particular interest was the juxtaposition of the approaches of the lead producer Carr and the executives at Paramount studios. The former acted with imperious conviction while the latter, despite committing to the film as a blockbuster seven months ahead of its release and making a number of synergistic promotional preparations, were too risk averse to commit to a full immediate saturation release, as they opted instead for a 12-week test-run at four Chicago theatres (Variety, 31 May 1978, p. 6).

### **6.6 Box Office: Financial/Economic Impact**

This section investigates why audiences immediately gave *Grease* their vote of confidence at the box office. *Grease* opened on the 18<sup>th</sup> of June 1978, on 862 screens (IMDb.com). Once out of the gate, the film sprinted quickly to the top summer spot at the box office, taking 71.5 percent of the average first-week business in all major markets and earning a total of \$8,941,747, the equivalent of \$33,828,192 in 2017 dollars. By the end of its theatrical run it had earned a gross of \$159,978,870 (the equivalent of: \$600,622,510 in 2017). It has since enjoyed two re-issues giving it a cumulative US box office gross of \$188,755,690. Just one month after its opening, *Grease* grossed nearly \$58.5 million with screenings in 954 theatres throughout the U.S. and Canada. The first month summary was “solid”, as a *BoxOffice* magazine article indicated with the following totals: In New York City “Grease” grossed \$7,143,209 at 76 theatres, easily topping the \$1-

million mark, week after week. The story was the same in other top markets: Los Angeles, 13 theatres, \$1,694,244; Chicago, where the musical premiered on stage, 12 theatres, \$2,283,944 during the same period (Box Office, 28 August 1978, p. 16).

The reasons for the success appear to be more nebulous. Travolta's name was unquestionably a draw, but what of teenage audiences that spent the summer watching the movie four, six or even eight times?<sup>35</sup> In the summer of 1978, various Hollywood observers discussed *Grease* and their comments appeared in an early 1979 issue of *Film Comment*. They questioned whether Travolta's star performance could explain the film's success: "Clearly John Travolta was as important to *Grease* as was Jack Nicholson to *Cuckoo's Nest* or Sylvester Stallone to *Rocky* (John J. Avildsen, 1976), but the fourteen-year-olds who saw *Grease* eight or ten times were not seeing an actor *tout seul* (alone) but a film *complet*. *Grease*, not Travolta, was the word" (Byron, 1979).

Another popular explanation challenged the suggestion that Carr ingeniously produced a successful merging of 1950s nostalgia for older demographics with a suburban-cum-disco milieu for younger audiences. The argument could be made that Carr in fact traded in the older audience for a more intense devotion from the younger. He didn't merge the two modes; instead, he turned one into the other. Thus, in *Grease*, it is the outsiders who are heroes and the clean-cut guys who are the "creeps." This strategy also made *Grease* an answer to the Beach Party movies of the early Sixties: leather-jacketed Harvey Lembeck, a figure of derision, became John Travolta, the hero. This is the only significant change, however; in *Grease*, as in the Avalon-Funicello series, all adults are in the creep category (Byron, 1979). This attempt to capitalize on the ever-ongoing, inter-generational warfare as depicted in so many texts, notably in *Rebel Without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955), highlighted the plight of teenagers with a host of adolescent issues. They saw themselves as outsiders, able to relate to the defying

heroes of *Grease* and, in some instances, enjoyed re-engaging with the film numerous times.

The New Hollywood era was defined by the Nouvelle Vague and other intellectual and experimental types of filmmaking, driven by the output of the more established film schools in the United States and Europe. In contrast, the more commercially focused output of these film school graduates who chose to defy the teaching of the University of Southern California were considered uninspiring (Biskind, 1999). The impetus of the creative DNA behind *Grease* at no stage suggested an interest in redefining filmmaking. Its genesis was shaped by the desire of its creators to manufacture commercially successful entertainment. Their primary goal was to connect with their target demographic and entertain it. Coming after Woodstock, Vietnam and Watergate, the commercial mindset of *Grease*, did, as indicated by some reviews highlighted in the next section, raise some eyebrows amongst intellectual circles. It is also worth noting the pervasive extent to which this generation of filmmakers (to include Spielberg, Lucas, Zemeckis, Kleiser and others) changed studio filmmaking, and the coinciding resentment other film industry professionals were to exhibit (Shone, 2004).

The biggest box office winner in 1978 did not translate into the same treasured industry respect that followed the decade's earliest blockbuster, *The Godfather* (1972). Nevertheless, the *Grease* franchise grew enormously from its summer 1978 release. Paralleling the film's box office impact, four singles from the film soundtrack landed in the *Billboard* Top 10. Fourteen million copies of the soundtrack sold within the year after the film's release and it remains among the 10 best-selling soundtracks of all time. Meanwhile, more than 125,000 productions of the stage musical have been licensed around the world. The film's cultural enterprise was embedded for decades.



There are two epiphanies to be taken from this enormous box office success, and these relate to Stigwood's visionary capacity as one of the 1970s' most successful entertainment entrepreneurs. Although there is little evidence to shed light on the working relationship between Stigwood and Carr, Stigwood cared little about distinctions between high-brow and low-brow entertainment consumers. To wit: the idea of rock opera (e.g., *Tommy* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*) in Stigwood's frame of creative appeal translated to an overarching audience of happy, gratified consumers of entertainment. More broadly, it was his role as a music producer with a record label to showcase the songs that enjoyed a lasting cultural legacy. It was a potent demonstration of the cross-platform potential that would be tested in subsequent blockbusters. The film's success withstood some of the most lopsidedly negative criticism levied against any of the 1970's blockbuster films, which is discussed in the next section.

### 6.7 Critics' Reviews

Compared with other blockbusters, *Grease* generated a relatively larger share of negative, if not brutal, criticism. Of the major newspaper and magazine critics, only Vincent Canby at *The New York Times* praised the film, noting early in his 16 June 1978 review (p. C-10) that he had never seen the original stage version:

Somewhat in the manner of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* [1977], which recalls the science-fiction films of the 50's in a manner more elegant and more benign than anything that was ever made then, *Grease* is a multi-million dollar evocation of the B-picture quickies that Sam Katzman used to turn out in the 50's (*Don't Knock The Rock*, 1957) and that American International carried to the sea in the 1960's (*Beach Party*, 1963).

Canby's endorsement led the way to a 1978 advertisement that appeared in *Variety* highlighting pull quotes from various positive reviews. The ad quoted Canby: "GREASE IS THE BEST MOVIE MUSICAL WE'VE HAD IN YEARS." (*Variety*, 26 July 1978, p. 22). The ad applies an intriguing edit, as Canby's original review

reads “Because there haven’t been that many movie musicals recently, it doesn’t mean much to say that *Grease* is the best we’ve had in many years.” Canby closes his review by addressing the nostalgic element that other critics savaged as trivializing in their assessments, writing, “I’m also afraid that people who (like me) have no special fondness for the 50’s might be put off by the film’s time and place.” He qualified his comment by adding, “Let me emphasize, then, that *Grease* stands outside the traditions it mimics. Its sensibility is not tied to the past but to a free-wheeling, well informed, high-spirited present.”

In contrast, high-profile critics in *The Washington Post*, *Film Comment*, *Time* and *The Los Angeles Times* wrote negative reviews that provided editorial fodder for trade publications such as *Variety*, who mocked these critical judgments as they reported the weekly box office performance. *Grease* convincingly proved the adage that “all publicity is good publicity” and, in the film’s specific case, favourable word-of-mouth quickly balanced out the negative reviews. In *Grease*’s case, budget was hardly a consequential factor as it was one of the less costly blockbusters to make: “The most oft-cited flaws are the lack of a central, organizing presence and a clumsiness in visual design. Conforming to a logic that situates the role of the director as empowered auteur with full creative control over the final product, the target of critical invective consequently and unsurprisingly becomes Randal Kleiser.”<sup>36</sup> However, star power – exemplified in Travolta and Newton-John – may have proven to be a stronger factor than with other blockbusters produced during the 1970s, as many critics seemed to suggest that these actors and their fellow cast members over-performed expectations.

The takeaway from negative criticism about *Grease* was the question of the film’s fidelity to the historic portrayal of the 1950’s and the comparisons with the stage version. While both versions championed parodies of the stereotypes and offered spectacles of music and dance, many critics compared both versions by concluding that the stage version was more accurate than the adaptation. In *The*

*Village Voice*, critic Terry Curtis Fox succinctly summarized the trajectory of *Grease* from its original stage version in Chicago to its Broadway adaptation and, finally to its cinematic representation – first, “a show about Us,” then, “a show about them,” and then, “about All of Us.” No one expected *Grease*, even with so many nostalgic elements, to be a representative documentary of the 1950s, as the creators had never intended it to be such. The experience of *Grease* validates George Lucas’ concerns regarding the release of *Star Wars*, in preferring to make his case directly to potential consumers of his content by generating positive word of mouth among the audiences.

## **6.8 Conclusion**

As the latest case study of the 1970’s in this thesis, *Grease* was selected as testing ground to see whether many of the same institutional markers to success which saw *The Godfather* (1972), *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars* (1977) through to box office success were also used in this different genre and thus validated the evolution of a replicable calculated blockbuster template which mitigated risk in film investment. *Grease’s* production process was unlike most studio projects. Producers Carr and Stigwood hired an inexperienced screenwriter (Bronte Woodard), with the same criteria applying to the hiring of director Randal Kleiser, for his first feature film. The combination of Kleiser, Woodard, Butler and Birch provided the producers with the talent they needed on set, as well as the malleability to execute their wishes.

The film succeeded because of the strong leadership and vision provided by Carr and the ability of Kleiser, Butler and Birch to work as a team. The soundtrack was created by some of the leading music industry talent of the time including Robert Stigwood, the Bee Gees and Olivia Newton John.<sup>37</sup> Above all, Carr had a talent as a visionary promoter to shape an appealing representation of the

1950s and embed its kitsch as a populist rendition targeting the audience demographics of the late 1970s better than its much darker musical version.

*Grease* was a film less committed to reflecting the 1950s and more to becoming the quintessential escapist blockbuster of the 1970s (Tropiano, 2011, pp. 8-9). In the Hollywood mindset of the 1970s, buoyed by the successful formula of nostalgia as entertainment, (which gained prominence in television and Broadway), *Grease* was the ideal film property shaped by elements of wishful thinking, facilitated by selective memory through nostalgia, and a particular fondness for the 1950s as an imagined sense of order, unity, stability, and prosperity.

The findings from the research address a controversial belief amongst some scholars, such as Meehan (1984, pp. 216-225) and Smythe (1977, pp. 1-27), that “the media manufactured only one commodity, and that would be the audience”. This suggests that audiences were manipulated for the purpose of generating revenue for advertisers as well as sales of retail branded goods, for example. The evidence outlined in this chapter prompts a rethinking of these observations on the following grounds. 1) Product placement in filmed text continues to evolve in its development as a specific business model (it was far from being fully developed, especially in 1978), as product in video, unless branded (e.g., recognizable via logos), is not identifiable to audiences. Companies able to make product interactive to consumers were only beginning to make a measurable impact that ties in directly to the practice (Ross, 2017). 2) The value of on-screen advertising in cinemas is negligible, though the value increases exponentially when the text is eventually broadcast on television. 3) By the time a text is shown on television most of the product in it (e.g., clothing fashion), is outdated and will generate few sales. 4) Evidence suggests the “media,” far from the believed purpose of “manufacturing audiences,” goes to incredible lengths to find out what audiences want, in order to provide them with entertainment which

the greatest number of people will see as enticing. This includes test screenings (Epstein, 2005), shooting multiple endings and firing actors halfway through productions (because their performance is deemed not to be entertaining). 5) Content creators (before the age of video), generated most of their revenue via ticket sales, as well as the sale of broadcast rights to television networks. The only evidence of any possible manipulation has been found in the realm of sales/marketing/distribution where case studies have revealed instances of promotional advertising using misleading trailers or print advertising. But are these any more misleading than the sales and marketing efforts for a considerable variety of products in the global marketplace? And are most discerning consumers not able to see through the hyperbole? No metrics have been found yet to support arguments that studios try to coerce consumers, but there is plenty of evidence that they will go to extreme lengths to identify what will entice consumers to part with their money.<sup>38</sup> Wasko and Meehan (2013) do, however, highlight a lacuna in the extant research pointing to a lack of insight into structures of power. Media companies exist to generate revenue (Prag & Casavant, 1994) for their shareholders and executives<sup>39</sup>, but little insight is available into the internal operations of these companies and the way they use the power they are granted or they generate, to reach that goal (Ross, 2011).

To summarize, *Grease* encompassed nearly every calculated blockbuster marker, with the notable exception of a large production budget. As with several other case studies in this thesis, the film was cast with actors known not primarily for their mainstream box office appeal but for their emerging careers in television, Broadway and other entertainment work. The film also incorporated virtually every feature associated with blockbuster narratives, including animation and fantasy sequences.

In conclusion, *Grease* achieved a trifecta unique for the blockbuster business model. The cast was an ensemble that could mobilize its current

celebrity fame from the worlds of popular music, television and film. Not so ironically, *Grease* solved a problem that had vexed Hollywood executives since the 1950s. Tens of millions of consumers had quickly embraced television as their primary source of entertainment. Also, the demographic shifts triggered by the Baby Boomer generation brought unprecedented numbers of teens into the mix – the dynamic fan base for the wave of new rock musicians. It would be another 24 years before another Hollywood adaptation of a Broadway musical came close to matching the success of *Grease – Chicago* (Rob Marshall, 2002), which received six Academy Awards, for Best Art Direction, Cinematography, Editing, Sound, Costume Design, Supporting Actress, and Best Picture. While *Grease* may not have enjoyed similar accolades, but it demonstrated the significant entertainment value of an empathetic, relatable, nostalgia driven narrative, supported by a captivating soundtrack and the star power of Travolta.

## Chapter 7

### BACK TO THE FUTURE

#### 7.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to assess the extent to which *Back to The Future* (1985), as the last case study, benefited from and complimented the evolution of the markers and the prior evolution of decision making as it related to the Blockbuster Business Model. This film, along with its franchise sequels, constitutes one of the most comprehensive representations of American pop culture in a composite story arc that covers six decades. Details about the film – from the initial attempts to secure studio commitment to the project, through its tremendous reception at the box office – as well as the relationships among involved senior studio executives, shareholders and, most significantly, the consumers of entertainment, all shed light on the evolution of the filmmaking process that ended the New Hollywood era and launched for good, the blockbuster era. The chapter extends existing work within the field on institutional markers of the blockbuster.

*When Back to The Future* was released in theatres on 3 July 1985 it quickly became a significant phenomenon of American popular culture,<sup>1</sup> which would endure through more than 30 years after its premiere. The movie, written by Robert Zemeckis and Bob Gale, directed by Zemeckis, and produced by Steven Spielberg, Frank Marshall, and Kathleen Kennedy, was the biggest Hollywood money-maker of 1985, even surpassing *Rambo*. Made on a \$19 million budget, the film had staying power, by continuing to run in specific theatrical locations for six months or more, a phenomenon seen just three years earlier with the release of *E.T.* (Steven Spielberg, 1982). With its two sequels, *The Back to The Future*

franchise trilogy ranks among the top 15 of all time (based on its total domestic or international gross box office revenue, when adjusted for inflation).

*Back to The Future* comprised many elements of other science fiction blockbusters (notably, *Star Wars* and *E.T.*). These included comedy, action, romance, suspense, fantasy and special effects, along with soundtracks that were financially successful on their own. However, *Back to The Future's* plot lines also incorporated many nostalgic elements (reminiscent of *American Graffiti* (1973) and *Grease* (1978) harkening to the 1950s. The teen hero attracted the young audience, and the theme of reconciliation between past and present, child and adults, attracted the parent demographic. Most critics loved it, taken in by the charm and sentiment of the ingenious script, which was nominated for an Academy Award (another unprecedented achievement for a science fiction film). Zemeckis (2003) described the film as a “comedy adventure science fiction time travel love story.” Murphy, however, challenged this, suggesting the film incorporated many of the same elements that James Thorburn defined as essential to the Eighties Teen Movie. The genre was unchanged even after Marty’s time travel to 1955 occurred (e.g., with the teen protagonist now with the 1955 version of his father, George, busy pursuing romantic – and sexual – ambitions) (Murphy, 2010, p. 133).<sup>2</sup> According to Murphy, the time periods and the teen protagonist portrayals did broaden the commercial<sup>3</sup> appeal of the typical Eighties Teen Movie, in ways that were not applied to some of the most successful teen genre films of the 1980s. The films included *The Breakfast Club* (John Hughes, 1985), *Pretty in Pink* (Howard Deutch, 1986) and *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* (John Hughes, 1986). Thus, it did not validate Zemeckis’ suggestions of having literally reinvented the genre.<sup>4</sup>

Sorcha Ní Fhlainn (2010) characterized the film as a “multi-genre narrative on American culture,” a notable choice of descriptive language suggesting it is narrative more than genre, which defines Hollywood’s commercial



texts. Murphy (2010) contends the film stands out for its acerbic social critique of life in American suburbia. This reflects on how these former thriving communities in the 1950's, have deteriorated: "Hill Valley's town center is not the only dilapidated section of the community, as Lyon Estates, and The McFly home itself, are untidy, neglected and decidedly trashy: the ideal architectural corollary to the slovenly, blue collar and un-ambitious nuclear family to which Marty reluctantly belongs" (Murphy, 2010, p. 50). This observation affirms Ní Fhlainn's claim that, as referenced in numerous left wing texts (Dwyer, 2015, p 10), the Reagan inspired ideology of the time suggested that this collective downturn was less for economic reasons than for undoing the social and moral fabric of 1980's U.S. society, as a delayed response to the social upheavals launched in the 1960's (Murphy, 2010, p. 50).

*Back to The Future* gave a potent but delightfully light-hearted combination of bittersweet nostalgia and an optimistic view of the future. A good indicator of how well it has endured in pop culture came in *Future Day* (Dalton, 2015) (the day the main character arrives in the future in the immediate sequel to the original film). *Future Day* became a social media event on 21 October 2015, paying tribute to the original film's 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary. This reminds of a comment by Randal Kleiser, about his generation of uniquely successful University of Southern California film school graduates: "We were just trying to entertain" (Kleiser, 2018).

Zemeckis and Gale committed to a successful form of comedy, which juxtaposes relatable, real-life situations, reminiscent in tone to the situation comedy *Family Ties* (Sam Weisman et al., 1982-89), in which their first-choice lead actor Michael J. Fox starred). The type of comedy has been repeated on many occasions. This includes the television sitcom *Roseanne* (Gail Mancuso et al., 1988-1997), which adds weight to the following: "Although American prime time entertainment... to varying degrees reflects the tastes and concerns most

prevalent amongst its audience... The blue-collar situation comedy achieves a... setting that viewers recognize as similar to the fabric of their own lives" (Mayerle, 1991).

Much like *Star Wars* (1977), *Back to the Future's* success depended to a significant degree on its ritualistic, celebratory, therapeutic aspects: A "clean" family film which attracted all ages and encouraged audience participation (spontaneous clapping and cheering) and repeat viewings (many fans returning and bringing friends or family) (Wittenberg, 2006). Above all, most critics and audiences saw it as outrageous fun (Corliss, 1 July 1985):

So, the child of 1985 must teach his parents (the children of 1955) how to be cool, successful and loved. When they learn it -- when the Earth Angel meets Johnny Do-Gooder -- the picture packs a wonderful wallop. But *Back to the Future* goes further: this white '80s teenager must teach black '50s musicians the finer points of rock 'n' roll. Outrageous! After a thunderous heavy-metal riff, Marty stares at his dumbfounded audience and shrugs, "I guess you guys aren't ready for that yet. But your kids are gonna love it." You bet, Marty. You and your whole movie. Now and for 30 years to come", even going so far as to predict its durability over many decades to come, as well as the production of two successful sequels.

In the next section, the genesis of this populist franchise is examined and how the film's key creative principals overcame persistent refusals, rejections and scepticism about the film's prospects.

## **7.2 Production**

The aim of this section is to demonstrate how the production was less determined by creative decisions than by risk mitigating ones. The learning curve for markers of blockbuster films already had been accomplished but studio executives were also moving to regain control over areas that they had ceded temporarily to successful directors and producers in the prior decade. Individuals have always strived to change the way Hollywood operates with middling degrees of success

(e.g., Charlie Chaplin, Orson Welles). However, when several people come together, who not only share the same goals as filmmakers, but also support each other, then they become a movement.

According to Konow (2015), Zemeckis, director and screenwriter, and Gale, screenwriter, connected at the University of Southern California's film school in 1971, joining their colleagues, as mentioned in the earlier case studies (*Star Wars* and *Grease*). These filmmakers were interested in more populist narratives and in entertaining large audiences (S. Ross, 1999) rather than re-defining what they deemed to be an art form for the few. "The two Bobs grew up loving big Hollywood entertainment like *The Great Escape* (John Sturges, 1963), as well as lowbrow fare like the *Three Stooges* (George Cahan, 1949) and Jerry Lewis movies" (Konow, 2017). That experience formed their tastes at an early age, encouraging them to pursue a brand of filmmaking more given to creating an emotional, visceral, entertaining experience rather than a more elitist, intellectual one (Stead, 2013). According to a 2003 interview with an industry trade journalist (Holleran), Gale traced the genesis of the film:

The summer of 1980 when *Used Cars* opened and I found my father's high school yearbook. He'd been president of his graduating class. I thought about the president of my graduating class, who was someone I'd never have anything to do with, and I started thinking... What would have happened if I'd gone to high school with my dad—would I have had anything to do with him or not? So that could be something that was a time travel movie. So, when I got back to L.A., I told Bob about this, and he was excited and he said "yeah, I wonder if your mom was at the same high school" and it just started snowballing from there.

This provides one of the few documented insights into the creative process behind the making of a blockbuster film and the free-form, talent-driven way in which the narrative emerged. But since then the script writing process has become much more controlled (as mentioned in the *Star Wars* case study). By 1981, when the first draft of the *Back to The Future* (1985) screenplay was submitted to Columbia

studios, a precedent already had been set by the films discussed in previous chapters (*The Godfather*, *Jaws*, *Star Wars* and *Grease*) as well as by several other calculated blockbusters released between 1966 and 1985. Clusters of evidence (e.g., screenplay adaptations (Goldman, 2012) from popular literary original sources, casting, promotional tie-ins, director's creative reputation) pointed to distinct commonalities in these financially successful (Walls, 2005) films that could be reproduced.<sup>5</sup>

In *Back to The Future*, despite the script's quality and potential for further adaptation,<sup>6</sup> it was poorly received and turned down more than forty times. What is not clear is whether the rejections were because of Zemeckis insisting on directing and the script was merely used as an excuse to pass. Or, whether the script would have been produced more rapidly if the two writers had agreed to sell it to a studio, for someone with a track record as director. After Columbia passed on the project several other executives suggested that the scribes take it to Walt Disney Studios which they eventually did, only to be told by one of their senior executives: "Are you guys out of your minds? You can't make a movie like this here. This is Disney, and you're giving us a movie about incest!" (Konow, 2015). Gale said in a published interview, "The script is something that is always changing. And what seems like a good idea one day, you wake up the next and might think like it's not such a good idea. Or more likely, you have a great idea and the next day or the next week, you come up with an even better idea" (Zemeckis, 1985). This is common with many creative endeavours, where writers, painters and musicians might often be inclined to revise their work ad infinitum (Ross, 2011).

The list of film releases at the time suggests that the studio system prioritised the box office generating track record of filmmakers when deciding on projects to approve. With Zemeckis and Gale, both of their previous projects – *1941* (Steven Spielberg, 1979) and *Used Cars* (Robert Zemeckis, 1980) – had been

financial flops, despite receiving rave reviews and the support of Steven Spielberg who was prepared to work with the *Back to The Future* script. However, Zemeckis originally turned down Spielberg because he did not want industry colleagues to have the impression that he was working in the industry solely because of Spielberg's support. The veracity of this statement is admittedly dubious. It is virtually unheard of for a filmmaker to turn down making a project in Hollywood when the rare opportunity arises. The subtext here could be Zemeckis creating a positive spin on not wanting to work with Spielberg, known for his tight reins of control. Zemeckis eventually realised that unless they managed to secure a hit movie under their belts, the chances of getting *Back to The Future*, or any other scripts made, were marginal (Konow, 2015).

Three years passed until Michael Douglas who, according to Konow, had been a fan of *Used Cars* (1980), lobbied hard for Zemeckis to direct his project, the successful *Romancing the Stone* (Robert Zemeckis, 1984).<sup>7</sup> By that time Spielberg had also established himself as a much bigger brand name in the industry, after his phenomenally successful film *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982). Zemeckis and Gale decided to return to Spielberg on their own terms. Immediately afterward, *Back to The Future* was set up at Spielberg's production company, Amblin. However, when Steven Spielberg "executive produces" (read: 'stands over director's shoulder') a movie as he did *Back to The Future*, the result is a movie that culls from movie watching" (Harvey, 1986). This refers to an observation made many times over the years about the so-called "movie-brats" (Petrie & Stoneman, 2014) (e.g., Spielberg, Milius, Kleiser, Zemeckis) that, because of their youth and lack of life experience, most of their on-screen observations referred to other films and not to real life experiences.

But it was perhaps Spielberg's own experience as a young maverick with much to prove that provided the behind-the-scenes guiding hand. This included the momentous cast change that would secure *Back to The Future's* path to

success. After several weeks of reviewing the dailies footage with Spielberg, Zemeckis and Gale met with studio chief Sid Sheinberg to approve the change. While Sheinberg approved the switch in late 1984, he instructed the director to proceed as normal until after the first of the New Year (1985) before making the transition. As Caseen Gaines' book (2015) about the making of the *Back to The Future* trilogy noted,

Zemeckis got the approval to move forward with transitioning away from one lead actor to the other. Few people knew it at the time, but the actor was soon to be given severance and sent on his way. That evening, Stoltz shot a scene in the sequence before lightning strikes the clock tower. ...

The next day, production moved to the Puente Hills Mall, the large shopping centre in the City of Industry, located in the San Gabriel Valley region of Los Angeles County, which served as the location for the fictional Twin Pines Mall. The cast and crew were scheduled to shoot the scene with the time machine's first temporal displacement, where Doc sends his dog Einstein one minute into the future. The pageant continued, with the crew continuing to accumulate largely irrelevant footage of Stoltz, unknowingly practicing for Fox's turn at the take, as unit photographer Ralph Nelson snapped photographs that would remain under lock and key for decades to follow.

Production manager Dennis Jones filled out a report on each shooting day with codes listed to represent how each actor's time was spent on that particular day and whether or not he or she was needed back at a subsequent time. On January 10, in the column for Stoltz, Jones wrote the letter *F* in black ballpoint. In this case, it stood for finished, but a number of other words could certainly have stood in its place, *fired* among the gentlest.

In January 1985, the full production team – including Zemeckis, Gale, Spielberg and his colleagues Neil Canton, Kathleen Kennedy and Frank Marshall – was present on set to make the announcement in two phases. As Gaines recounted,

Robert Zemeckis broke the news to Stoltz himself as Spielberg waited in the wings. Bob Gale spoke with Crispin Glover, who was cast as George McFly, and Thomas F. Wilson, who played bully Biff Tannen, while Neil

Canton was responsible for talking to Christopher Lloyd and Lea Thompson. Frank Marshall and Kathleen Kennedy called Eric Stoltz's agents.

The formal announcement came during the late-night "lunch break," around 10:30 p.m. After Zemeckis dismissed Stoltz from the set, the cast and crew were assembled. The full production team of the director, Bob Gale, Neil Canton, Kathleen Kennedy, Frank Marshall, and Steven Spielberg were present, an unusual show of force that tipped everyone off that something serious was imminent.

Gaines added that Zemeckis had gauged the reactions of the cast and crew to see how everyone handled the news. He was relieved that while no one was visibly gladdened, everyone also seemed not to be worried or fearful, as he might have anticipated. He finished his remarks, adding "So it's only good news and *good* news [emphasis added]." This highly unusual change underscored how filmmakers were aware of the high financial stakes involved. Stoltz was, at the time, an actor with a respected body of more dramatic work<sup>8</sup> than Fox,<sup>9</sup> who was in the highly rated situation comedy in American television *Family Ties* (1982-89). It was not the quality of Stoltz's work or his professionalism, but according to Mell, he was seen as too serious for the role.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the decision to fire Stoltz at such a late stage, at great financial cost to the production, emphasises Spielberg and Zemeckis' primary and absolute commitment to ensuring another financial hit to bolster their career portfolios.<sup>11</sup>

The change in lead actors is worth exploring from a perspective of managerial control. Some organisational management scholars have examined leadership styles in terms of the power of transference. In Hollywood, the dynamics of paternal transference appears to be most relevant. As Michael Maccoby noted in a 2004 journal article of the *Harvard Business Review*, they tend to show themselves in paternalistic settings—presiding over large meetings or smiling on videotapes—where the message is invariably reassuring, upbeat, hopeful. Even when times are bad, these leaders assure their followers that the

downturn is temporary. The message is always the same: “Trust me to steer you through these troubled waters.”<sup>12</sup> That certainly applies to Gaines’ description of the decision to replace Stoltz with Fox and how it was handled and communicated to the cast and crew, once the studio executives approved it. Spielberg’s presence on the set underscores paternal transference as the teacher with strict and unquestioned authority (Maccoby, 2004). Coppola, on the other hand, also controlled paternal transference but in ways significantly different to Spielberg. Coppola, less concerned with cultivating protégés and more concerned with imprinting his own highly stylized aesthetic on the films he directed, focused more on creating a family dynamic with the cast and crew and serving as the compassionate *pater familias* figure.

By 1984, the new corporate mindset dominating the studios understood the markers of blockbusters. Hence, explaining the initial lack of success of Gale and Zemeckis in attracting concrete interest in their project encompasses several reasons. Foremost, there is Zemeckis’ lack of financial track record as a director, but possibly that is tied to the fact that the script was not – unlike many blockbusters – based on a previously successful book, play or musical. Furthermore, the role of “Godfather” or “Guarantor” should be investigated in depth by scholars. For instance, how many films were produced because the likes of Coppola stepped in to act in that role? Or, in the case of Zemeckis, Michael Douglas and, eventually, Spielberg stepping in to set *Back to the Future* up as part of his production company’s (Amblin) deal with Universal Studios?

One already knew that the more conservative, family-fare driven Walt Disney Studios had an issue with the theme of incest (which is explored in the *Back to the Future* storyline) and rejected the script because of it (Konow, 2015). Zemeckis had proved his entertainment credentials in helming the successful *Romancing The Stone* and followed his instincts accordingly with one of Hollywood’s most successful directors at the time, whose position of industry



power was in its prime. Just as Coppola had found the right balance in presenting the Corleone family of *The Godfather* as a signature element in adult drama, Zemeckis and Gale had struck similar effect in the Eighties Teen Movie genre. The best proof came when *Back to the Future* was referenced by President Ronald Reagan in his State of the Union address of 4 February 1986 as exemplifying family values, which happened to represent right-wing political sentiments and the conservative movement in the U.S. at the time.

### **7.3 Distribution and Revenue Impact**

This section focuses on the evolved release strategy of Universal studios, which had moved from the word of mouth driven cascade release model of the early 1970s to a saturation one, supported by substantial television-based advertising. The objective was to secure the studio's investment as rapidly as possible and enhance its cash flow.

When *Back to the Future* opened on 3 July 1985, its distribution encompassed more than 1,200 screens, nearly tripling the number of those opening *Jaws* (1975) a decade earlier<sup>13</sup>. The film's performance at the top of the box office standings was among the strongest of recent blockbusters.<sup>14</sup> The film became the box office leader for eight consecutive weekends, only exceeded at the time by *Beverly Hills Cop* (Martin Brest, 1984), released in the summer of 1984, and *Tootsie* (Sydney Pollack, 1982), both of which registered 13 consecutive weekends as the top box office draw. *Back to the Future's* position at the top of the box office rankings was broken with the release of *National Lampoon's Vacation* (Harold Ramis, 1985), starring Chevy Chase who had risen to fame as a comic on the *Saturday Night Live* late-night television variety show, in August of 1985 (Holleran, 2003).

However, *Back to the Future* regained the top spot in the following weekend and continued for three more weeks before dropping out of first place. The film grossed nearly \$384 million in worldwide distribution,<sup>15</sup> with \$210.61 million in North America. It was the top grossing release of 1985, a year when it became more apparent than ever that studios and producers targeted the calendar year of film releases in two primary seasons – summer and the end-of-the-year winter holidays. Studios simultaneously adjusted their opening release dates to ensure that the commercially weaker films would not under-perform<sup>16</sup> against potentially stronger titles.<sup>17</sup> Many studio practitioners have challenged this tactic. The consensus suggests that the studios compete against each other, armed with as many of the most commercial titles (blockbusters) as they can manage, with the objective of out-performing other releases at the crucial weekend theatrical opening and subsequent periods. A studio would only reduce its output, or cede a prime release date to a competitor, if it had a potentially weaker title, which then could not compete against an anticipated juggernaut. To quote veteran producer Adam Leipzig (2018) (*The Way Back* (Peter Weir, 2010), *Titus* (Julie Taymor, 1999): “There is a lot of competition for good release dates. Studios decrease production to concentrate their resources on fewer titles, not to decrease competition with other studios.” The industry’s hesitation and general disdain for full transparency on its numbers and box office traffic data, as well as release and distribution pattern data, impede the full-fledged analysis of Hollywood’s business practices and the underlying ethics.<sup>18</sup>

When asked: “To what extent do the studios “co-operate” when vying for a specific release date for their movies?” the following veteran studio producers had this to say:

Pen Densham (2018) (*The Last Full Measure* (2018), *Backdraft* (1991): Like most complex things there is not one answer... We do know that the studios watch the progress on each movie that the competition has and try and find weekends that don't compete. Years back we saw wall charts at

one or two studios, with the layout of potential openings, as the marketing team tried to figure out tactics. I don't think they have an organized process to share information. I am sure friends do favours and enemies don't get warnings.

J. Todd Harris (2018) (*The Kids are All Right* (2010), *Bottle Shock* (2008): There is an ecosystem in the studio distribution world where behemoths don't want to get in each other's way so big dates [such as major holidays] are all apportioned well in advance and then jockeying takes place. Cannibalization is good for no one!

Peter Saphier (2018) (*Scarface* (1983): It's an intense competition for the most attractive release dates. The only time there is "cooperation" is when a studio knows that a competitor is unbeatable on a given date, and therefore decides to move aside to allow the big guy to control the weekend and following week. ... Release strategy is all about avoiding an embarrassing opening and finding the right moment of release to maximize grosses... Decreasing competition makes no sense at all. There is always a dance for the best release dates - during late spring/summer and the holiday season - but competing good films will all find their audiences.

There is a peculiar game theory application here, as Hollywood studio executives hope audiences will be more encouraged to watch their films as early as possible during a film's release.

In an interview with *Box Office Mojo*, an industry source connected to the Internet Movie Database (IMDb.com), Gale noted that the film's box office performance during the summer of 1985 after its release was "extraordinary." He compared the 1985 release to contemporary distribution patterns where major blockbusters are released on approximately two and a half times the total of 1,200 screens that welcomed the release of *Back to the Future*. "Our second weekend was higher than our first weekend, which is indicative of great word of mouth," Gale explained (Holleran, 2003).

Gale's observation is notable. However, it does not account for, according to the National Association of Theatre Owners, the fact that there were 22,679

screens in the United States in 1987 (the data for 1985 is not available) while there were 40,393 in 2017. Proportionally, as a percentage of available screens, there is not much difference between the two releases. A blockbuster today will be released in more than 4,000 screens. The current champion, as of March 2018, is *Despicable Me 3* (Kyle Balda, Pierre Coffin, 2017) which opened on 4,535 screens, or 11.22 percent of the available screens at that time.<sup>19</sup> In comparison, *Back to the Future* (1985) opened on approximately 5.29 percent of the available screens.<sup>20</sup>

For MCA, the parent company of Universal Studios, *Back to the Future's* box office success helped the company's filmed theatrical operations recover from its weakest revenue performance of the five years prior to its release. For 1985, MCA reported gross filmed theatrical revenues of \$314.8 million, up from 1984's low point by more than 52 percent but still well below 1982 and 1983 figures of \$542.5 million and \$348.6 million, respectively.<sup>21</sup> For Universal Studios, *Back to the Future's* leading performance at the box office during 1985 was augmented by the successes of *Mask* (Peter Bogdanovich, 1985), *The Breakfast Club*, *Fletch* (Michael Ritchie, 1985) and *Out of Africa* (Sydney Pollack, 1985), a film that would earn seven Academy Awards out of eleven nominations, including honours as Best Picture and Best Director.

The film's success was also cited as among the major factors in the filmed entertainment division's increase of \$84 million over the prior year in operating income. But it was still 11 percent below the 1983 figure, which represented the enduring box office success of *ET: The Extra-Terrestrial* film's release from 1982. In terms of its stock price per share, 1985 proved to be the strongest of the first half of the decade for MCA, with its end of the year stock price at \$48 ½, way above the 1984 price (\$26 7/8) and nearly 60 percent higher than its previous high mark (\$30 1/8 in 1983).

#### 7.4 Critics' Reviews on Nostalgia

This section provides an overview of reviews to determine if they reflected consumer sentiments and affected box office performance. Many reviewers of *Back to The Future* commented on formulating a representative definition of nostalgia, and why it was deemed a commercially effective tool by the studios in their quest for blockbuster revenues. Again, as with *Grease*, no one was looking for a verified history lesson in *Back to The Future*. Zemeckis, Gale and Spielberg had persuaded studio executives that audiences want to believe in an idealized childhood by selecting to remember the positive aspects.

Those not born in the 1950s did not really have a critical point for contrast. Nostalgia was also intertwined with the time travel concept. Time travel films had become a prominent niche in Hollywood film releases since the late 1970s, including *Time After Time* (Nicholas Meyer, 1979), *Somewhere in Time* (Jeannot Szwarc, 1980), *The Final Countdown* (Don Taylor, 1980), *Time Bandits* (Terry Gilliam, 1981), *Timerider* (William Dear, 1983), *Twilight Zone: The Movie* (Joe Dante, John Landis et al., 1983), *The Philadelphia Experiment* (Stewart Raffill, 1984), *The Terminator* (James Cameron, 1984), *Trancers* (Charles Band, 1985, an imitation of *The Terminator*), *Back to the Future* (1985), *My Science Project* (Jonathan R. Betuel, 1985), the made-for-television movies *The Blue Yonder* (Mark Rosman, 1986) and *Outlaws* (Phil Bondelli et al., 1986-87), and, after *Back to The Future's* 1985 release, *Peggy Sue Got Married* (Francis Ford Coppola 1986), *Flight of the Navigator* (Randal Kleiser, 1986), and *Star Trek IV* (Leonard Nimoy, 1987). According to Wachhorst (1984, p. 340), "time travel has only recently become a frequent cinematic theme, having increased by more than fifty percent relative to the rise in total science-fiction films during the past decade." Time-travel films rarely attempt a vision of the future, and when they do, as in *The Terminator*, the future is dystopian<sup>22</sup>. During the same period (1979-87), in other science fiction

films without a time-travel premise, the future is almost always a negative extrapolation from the present: overcrowded, decayed, bureaucratic and soulless, repressive, and either on the verge of destruction or post-apocalyptic. Franklin (1983) summarized the negative Hollywood vision of the future from 1970-82:

The picture hasn't changed much in the past five years, and the *Star Trek* movies remain about the only optimistic cinematic vision of the future, which may account in large measure for their enormous popularity. It also helps to account for the success of *Back to the Future*, which attempts to reassure us that, in the words of the movie, 'the future is in your hands.'

This suggests a different perspective about *Back to The Future's* context than those evident in right-wing critiques. *Back to The Future's* story celebrated timelessness, for some observers, within a hopeful romantic context. As Ní Fhlainn (2015) noted, *Back to the Future* has been read by scholars as an update of Wells' scientific romance for the 1980s generation. Zemeckis cited both Wells' *The Time Machine* (1896) and *A Christmas Carol*, the always popular classic novella by Charles Dickens (1843), as iconic time travel stories.<sup>23</sup> Whether it is the Victorian future of class divide turned evolutionary nightmare or the Reaganite creation of an idyllic 1950s realised through 1980s hyper-economic individualism," Ní Fhlainn (2015) wrote, "central to these visions of time travel is the fear that time travel, for all of its promises and wonder, permits a terrifying glimpse at humanity's erasure from existence." Shales (1986) noted that, from 1979-85, most time-travel movies failed at the box office. "The only one to hit it really big was *Back to the Future*, a phrase that almost sums up the Eighties, and that's partly because the movie made time travel a joke, a gag, a hoot," he added. Shales' comment is borne out by how the film shows the ways in which media are constructed and then dismantled to reflect an altered reality, such as with photographs or newspaper headlines. The film sits at the cusp of two eras, where digital technologies soon would give its users precisely the opportunity to alter their identities and realities through video and photographic imagery.

*Back to the Future* was distributed a decade after nostalgia enchanted Hollywood studio executives, producers and filmmakers (the catalyst likely being George Lucas' *American Graffiti*<sup>24</sup> in 1973) not only for its aesthetic possibilities but, more importantly, its commercial strategic impact. This empowered marketing<sup>25</sup> professionals to strengthen the branding leverage of cultural memory in nostalgia's most optimistic tones. As Hoskins (2001) explained,

Fundamental to the process of both individual and collective memories is that they are increasingly mediated. In this way, our understanding of the past is 'manufactured' rather than remembered. At the same time, our sense of collective memory or history is also much more of an electronically mediated one, or, rather, reconstructed, from the ever more manipulable global image banks of television and film.

As successful blockbuster films of the 1970s<sup>26</sup> leveraged the emotional, sentimental and seductive aspects of nostalgia, even the previously sceptical subject of time travel could be plied in a film such as *Back to The Future*. Executives acknowledged that if, indeed, the film succeeded at the box office and had garnered satisfying praise from reviewers, the nostalgic aspects could be recycled and rebooted in franchise sequels.

Likewise, critics echoed the fondness for nostalgia. Janet Maslin at *The New York Times* (3 July 1985) wrote, "One of the most appealing things about "*Back to the Future*" is its way of putting nostalgia gently in perspective. Like Marty, Mr. Zemeckis takes a bemused but unsentimental view of times gone by. And he seems no less fascinated by the future, which is understandable." Maslin takes no issue with historical accuracy and it is the narrative that drives crowds through the cinema turnstiles and not a claim to historical accuracy. *The Hollywood Reporter* (29 June 2015) added, "[T]his is at heart a gentler, less noisy endeavor than most Spielberg enterprises, brimming with fond nostalgia and people with the same sort of goofy supporting characters as past." Ironically, Zemeckis initially fought against Spielberg's larger-than-life presence in his role as executive

producer. Yet, for Zemeckis and Spielberg, a character-driven film, connecting with audiences not via action-based scenes, but a light-hearted nostalgic narrative, led to box office gold. Perhaps Spielberg was influenced by the success of his friend Lucas' *American Graffiti* (1973).

For *Back to The Future*, Zemeckis and Gale always settled on 1955 as the year for the 30-year leap in the story line.<sup>27</sup> Noting 1955 was pivotal in rock 'n' roll's development, Gale incorporated that into the screenplay to indicate Marty McFly had brought the musical genre to the 1950s (i.e., McFly's guitar performance at Hill Valley High School). Stephen Matterson explained that events post-1955, however, contravene the characterization of the decade as stable, innocent and untroubled. There were civil rights protests, the rise of Beat Generation poets, and the battle for desegregating schools after the landmark U.S. Supreme Court 1954 decision of *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education*. Matterson concluded that Zemeckis and Gale "consciously avoid[ed] the post-1955 landscape," emphasizing "this innocence is a kind of shared illusion essential for the sustainability of the film's vision" (Matterson, 2010, p. 65).

However, some critics superseded the view of the film's clean, homespun middlebrow tones. In discussing the film's status as "quintessential comedy," intended to rectify "ridiculous social behavior," Ruud (1991, p. 127) criticized the film as yet another example of "frantic grasping for the teenage market," in which teenagers of the 1980s are portrayed as wiser, more adept at dealing with emotional issues and problems burdening the adults. "The ultimate message of the film becomes not only that teenagers know more than anyone else today," Ruud wrote, "but rather that teenagers of the 80's know more than anybody else that has ever lived – the past can be disregarded and conveniently changed to fit the modern adolescent's view of the way things should be." This dynamic was endlessly repeated in youth-oriented movies and television shows, including



*Risky Business* (Paul Brickman, 1983), *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986), *Home Alone* (Chris Columbus, 1990) and *Problem Child* (Dennis, Dugan, 1990).

Pauline Kael (29 July 1985, pp. 57-58) echoed Ruud's characterization of the film as "quintessential comedy," particularly in how it evokes the "victory of the young over the old." This became a narrative core for subsequent films with popular rising young stars. Shone said the film, in glorifying a teenage hero, epitomized American cinema's condition of "arrested development," not unlike the growing number of situation comedy series on television, where articulate, precocious, worldly children, often prevailed in the battle of wits and wisdom with their parents (Shone, 2004). This is, ironically, how Michael J. Fox made his mark (*Family Ties*, 1982-1989). But, Shone adds that Hollywood's concern was not tied to critics who wondered aloud about the cultural value of films with teenage heroes, as much as it was about whether or not teenage audiences were willing to support such films. Shone (2004, p. 155) explained,

These days, the studios have woken up to the fact that the last thing that a sixteen-year-old wants is a film that makes overt acknowledgement of his tender age. He doesn't go to the movies to see an image of himself in blue-and-red spandex, slicing across the Manhattan skyline. He wants to watch what he imagines the adults are all watching: bitching movies about killer robots and superheroes and two-hundred-foot lizards. The adults aren't, of course, watching those movies.

Richard Corliss, *Time* magazine movie critic (6 July 1985), said the choice of 1955 for the narrative was perfect because it coincided with the rising popularity of rock 'n' roll and television, and their youth appeal. "By now, the revolution is complete. So, the child of 1985 must teach his parents (the children of 1955) how to be cool, successful and loved," Corliss wrote. Adam Smith, of *Empire* magazine (24 August 1985), wrote the film represented, "a manipulative critique of the 1980s through the prism of an airbrushed version of the 1950s that owes more to George Lucas' *American Graffiti* than the turmoil of the decade itself." Whatever

definition of “culture”<sup>28</sup> the scholar prefers to use, with *Back to the Future*, the studios confirmed their commitment to a singular conveniently manufactured culture.

It seems inappropriate to apply cultural norms to these prominent films – the creators of which clearly prioritised commercial elements over everything else. Does *Grease* (1978) make a cultural statement about the 1950’s? It does, but not a historically accurate one. The same applies to *Back to the Future* (1985). Both represent an idealised myth to provide audiences with more enjoyable entertainment. Therefore, why criticize a text for not providing, what it never intended to provide?

The unique cross-generational appeal of *Back to The Future* is a classic example of the Eighties Teen Movie genre. Murphy (2010, p. 135) is intrigued by the awareness that “if such powerful images of rebellion against adults and adult institutions help to define a particular youth culture in a given era,” then one must consider why many critics saw the film as engaging with a “conservative demagoguery.” Reiterating the film’s fidelity to the Eighties Teen Movie genre elements, Murphy (2010, pp. 137-138) explained,

Class-consciousness and family issues are often features of the ETM but, for the most part, they are manifest in storylines concerned with the theme of love and/or an attraction between teens that are from opposite sides of the track... In the case of *Back to The Future*, Marty and his girlfriend, Jennifer, embody everything the audience of an ETM has come to expect from nice middle-class teen protagonists but when our hero comes home for dinner it is like we have entered some terrible parallel universe, where everything is topsy-turvy and somehow Marty McFly belongs to ‘white trash.’

Murphy added this comment on the newfound affluence many suburban families enjoyed in the 1950s and the problems that arose subsequently because many were “ill-equipped” to handle, or manage responsibly and soberly, the outputs of

consumer convenience and luxuries. The 17-year-old Marty represents the hero's resolve to overcome the "nightmare of biological determination and, more specific, the fear that failure is hereditary" (Murphy, 2010, p. 142). The fact that the young protagonist controls his destiny drives what Murphy saw the film's popularity as a story of optimism and reassurance. She added that the filmmakers astutely avoided casting the end of the film in terms of the affluence the McFly family enjoyed. Instead, they preferred a more modest representation over an earlier script version showing the family enjoying great economic success (Murphy, 2010, p. 147), for the sake of audience's believability.

*Back to The Future* demonstrates the reciprocity of contemporary image-making, which cuts across all time lines. Audience members see video images of the present (Dr. Brown's 1985 experiment) rerun in the past, as well as images of the past (*The Honeymooners*) (Frank Satenstein, 1955-56) rerun in the present. *Back to The Future* is a populist text, funny because it is grounded in the broad humour of television sitcoms and classic Hollywood "screwball comedy" (Wittenberg, 2006). This was emphasized by the decision to fire the film's original lead actor, Eric Stoltz: "A serious dramatic actor, who would often misunderstand the story's humour."<sup>29</sup> The task was completed by replacing him with the lead actor from one of the most successful television situation comedies of the time. Accordingly, Harlan Ellison despised *Back to The Future*, complaining that, "the lofty time paradox possibilities are reduced to the imbecile level of sitcom" (Ellison, 2015, p. 88). This precisely is the point. By taking "lofty" themes and making them accessible to Everyman via humour, an inclusive text is created, rather than a highbrow, elitist, exclusive one. According to Lafrance (2013), Ellison believed that critics should review films based on their "background, knowledge, sophistication and – most of all – affection." Therefore, a critic should also be willing to "savagely savage that which is inept, dishonest, historically-corrupt, pretentious... (or) that which lies to the trusting audience." Few critics – or, even

most of the media's leading opinion writers or columnists – ever bother to tell their audiences how they define their critical mission.

For example, Kael, who had started as a critic writing for niche journals geared toward a highbrow audience, eschewed formalism and did not temper her idiosyncratic boldness when she became a film critic for *The New Yorker* magazine. Wary of the prospects of *Back to The Future* rising to cult status, Kael (1989, p. 12) disparaged the appropriation of nostalgia in the film as a cultural and social negative. “I’m not crazy about movies with kids as the heroes – especially bland, clean-cut, nice kids like Marty... Steven Spielberg under whose aegis the picture was made, says, ‘*Back to The Future* is the greatest *Leave it to Beaver* episode ever produced.’ That’s what’s the matter with it. I don’t watch *Leave it to Beaver* reruns, and when I go to the movies, I don’t want to see a glorified *Leave it to Beaver*”. But she saved her most pointed critique for the appropriation of nostalgia as an objective: “Actually, this movie ... represents a culmination of the fifties’ appeal to the youth market. Teen-age tastes now dominate mainstream moviemaking, and that’s where Zemeckis and Gale are working. (The movie is their fantasy about becoming mediocre – i.e. successful.)” She expressed her hope that “moviemakers and their designers would stop using old *Life* magazines for their images of the American past. Hill Valley in 1955 has no pop glint, no vitality; the town is embalmed.” Kael’s point is worth considering. Nostalgia becomes a complex, multipurpose phenomenon in *Back to The Future* where the response or reaction to advanced technologies also encompasses a yearning to escape from a crisis and return to an earlier period with the wondrous hope of correcting contemporary problems.

Unless seen as purely an intellectual exercise in deconstruction of meaning, many of these reviews contain plot points that are potential spoilers for audiences. This challenges the contention that potential consumers read reviews to decide whether or not to see a film. A movie consumer typically searches for

recommendations from someone they see as sharing their tastes. Yet few, if any, of these critics seem to put themselves in the audience's position. Kael, with her repeated use of "I" when indicating her perspective, makes it clear that she is writing for herself and that anybody who does not share her taste is obviously "mediocre" at best. Although this is outside the research parameters of this thesis, such elitist, dismissive and manipulative behaviour is a reason why film practitioners traditionally avoid and disparage critics and scholars, when it comes to understanding their work more clearly, which is, to reiterate an earlier Kleiser quote, the purpose is purely to entertain.

This also coincides with how to properly characterize the hero's role in the film (*Marty McFly*), a point many scholars have taken up in their own analyses. Bartlett (2015) focuses on the film's narrative treatment of the ordinary world trope, as described by Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), which was influenced by Jung's conceptualization of the myth about the hero's journey.<sup>30</sup> Bartlett writes, "It's certainly an idealised representation of the 1950s – the sort of clean-cut, whitewashed take that *Pleasantville* (directed by Gary Ross, 1998) would later satirise. But there is surprisingly little deconstruction of this mythical America." This assessment differs from the work of reception studies' scholars who have suggested the film and other similar Hollywood releases, frame nostalgia as a positive yearning for less uncomplicated times and circumstances (Symmons, 2016). In *Back to The Future*, Bartlett sees nostalgia as an expression of mourning – the sadness of not having become the person who rises to his or her potential. "We see characters rewrite themselves (or be rewritten by another character's actions)." Thus, the fantasy element is handled conservatively from the perspective of how much creative risk a filmmaker might be willing to encumber.

The mythical hero story template is often replicated in cinematic narrative structures nowadays by screenwriters keen to maximize their chances of securing

a sale. However, this template becomes predictable even if the faces, clothes and the historical period represented by the characters and the story are changed. These elements are reinforced with advertising on television (as in the 1980's) and now on digital platforms such as YouTube, Twitter and Facebook. As critics scrutinised the film for how nostalgia and time travel were handled, they also raised longer-term questions about the commodification and industrialisation of nostalgia as a packaged theme in Hollywood films.

As the franchise model gained currency, many film critics expressed their disdain for the lack of original ideas in Hollywood but that criticism, even as obvious as it might appear to some, has only limited value. Better are critiques about how these films have primed audiences for nostalgia and how their respective sequels also evoke the memories of the original film, thereby persuading audiences to buy tickets and experience anew what attracted them to the characters and stories in the first place. It opened the doors for the most astute Hollywood marketers to exploit the movie-going memories of the audiences, which made the original a box office success.

## **7.5 Conclusion**

The aim of this chapter was to summarise *Back to the Future*, highlighting the institutional changes in the corporate mindset, specifically geared towards integrating risk reducing and revenue maximising keys to success. The *Back to the Future* trilogy is among the most successful Hollywood movie franchises ever produced. Its accomplishments are underscored not only by its initial waves of financial success at the box office, but also by its ongoing significant value as a capital asset.<sup>31</sup>

The film encompassed virtually every marker that defines a calculated blockbuster. Although the scale of its budget, even when adjusted for inflation, is less than many of today's blockbuster releases, it had the largest production

outlays among the five case studies considered in this thesis. It combined features of two of the most popular genres of the 1980s – Eighties Teen Movies and science fiction/fantasy. As with *Star Wars*, the director and producer wrote an original screenplay that would become the genesis for successful franchised sequels, highlighting a popular hero protagonist who survives stylised conflicts and is supported by a variety of special effects. In creative development and casting, the principals were endorsed and supported by an executive producer who had also become one of New Hollywood’s most successful directors for making record-setting blockbuster films. The combination of a fantasy-driven science fiction tale with special effects produced numerous opportunities for product placements featuring some of the most popular consumer product brands as well as toys, posters, comics, soundtrack and theme-park rides that would highlight the creative brand of the film’s story and ensure continuous revenue generation over many years to come.

By the time of *Back to The Future*’s production, the film industry executives had learned to regain control reminiscent to that of the studio model. Thus, they continued dutifully to put out an assembly line of films that included blockbusters, which would appeal to an even larger dependable audience than what was possible under the old studio system (Hesmondhalgh, 2002, p. 68). “With each passing season,” as cited by Thompson (1988), Michael Mahen, an industry analyst, noted “the pattern of grosses more closely resembles the way Hollywood used to look at the old studio system: a few blockbusters and a lot of pictures performing in the middle range.” Mahen adds the industry apparently accepts the belief that “one-third of your movies will pay for the rest, hence the reliance on megahits. You can accept that some pictures will be hits, some will be flops” (c.f. Thompson, 1988).

*Back to The Future* defines how a blockbuster film can leverage nostalgia that consumers relate to and enjoy, as a way of identifying with a seemingly

ordinary character (in extraordinary circumstances) such as Marty McFly, who becomes the hero in a fantasy story with time travel as its primary element (Paice, 1981). Gary Cross, author of a 2000 book about commercialism in America, synthesized scholarly work by sociologists and anthropologists to make the case that consumers use goods (including films) to express their identities and participate socially in their family, friends and larger communities. This also manifested opportunities for studios to maximize the inputs of product placement (further strengthened by incorporating them into a film). As Cross (2000, p. 49) explained:

The understanding of self in society through goods has provided, on balance, a more dynamic and popular, while less destructive, ideology of public life than most political belief systems in the 20th century. The taste, feel, and comfort of manufactured objects designed to maximize physical satisfaction and to identify pleasure and excitement, created new understandings of personal freedom.<sup>32</sup>

*Back to The Future* celebrated American prosperity and a return of optimism championed by an American president who was determined to reverse the pessimistic, inward-looking tone of the prior decade. *Back to the Future* also was a triumph of populism made by a group of creators who were protégés of one of Hollywood's most successful directors and executive producers of popular entertainment (and whose success was not measured by awards or critical distinction). In *Star Wars* or *Jaws*, both films had experienced so many difficulties throughout the production process that studio executives worried their theatrical releases could potentially be disastrous at the box office and in reviews by mainstream media critics. This was also reflected in the way many wrote about these respective films.

However, *Back to the Future* had a relatively unproblematic production experience. In the hands of Spielberg and his protégés, the mid-production replacement of the lead actor (Michael Fox stepping in for Eric Stoltz) was hardly



a crisis. It became the basis for an effective promotional public relations campaign that generated broad positive anticipation for the film's release<sup>33</sup> during the Independence Day holiday period (July 3-4) in 1985. In contrast, Coppola, credited as a director of successful blockbusters in the 1970s, experienced a different – and disappointing -- result in the 1980s. He made two films that encompassed the elements of a potential blockbuster with artistic impact and both incorporated 1950s nostalgia. The source material for the adaptations were popular and critically acclaimed novels, including S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*, which sold more than 14 million copies. He recruited a cast of young talent who had attracted attention as The Brat Pack in the mid-1980s. Coppola may have been the ironic victim of a curse he had inflicted earlier in his career when he took a pulp fiction novel of dubious literary merit and adapted it into one of the greatest cinematic achievements of Hollywood history. Nevertheless, both films from the 1980's – *The Outsiders*<sup>34</sup> and *Rumble Fish* – have become beloved cult classics.

*Back to the Future* endures because it is a relatable, feel-good, fantasy film encompassing an intriguing combination of two periods, with characters and story lines that clearly portray the conflicts between good and bad. To its more recent viewers, the film not only presents a view of what some envisioned 1955 to be. It also conveys what many in 1985 were thinking about 1955 and their own literal and symbolic connections to their own present day (1985) socially, politically and culturally. It may be the most significant blockbuster representation of the material realities not only of Hollywood but also of our collective selves.

The making of *Back to the Future* was also an apex in Hollywood's fully-fledged embrace of pop culture nostalgia as the creative base for films that first became apparent in the surprising box office performance of *American Graffiti* (1973) and later in the intense popularity of *Grease's* translation from stage to

screen in 1978. It was not only the most financially successful Eighties Teen Movie made, but also underscored that the dependable audience for a blockbuster movie could encompass all ages and demographics. Every tool in the blockbuster business model success arsenal was used and finessed, based on the experiences of trial and error. When combined with the talent, instinct and experience of key participants such as Spielberg<sup>35</sup>, Kennedy<sup>36</sup> and Marshall<sup>37</sup>, three of the most successful producers to have worked in Hollywood, the chances of success and a considerable financial risk reduction were both significantly enhanced, effectively challenging the much lauded dictum: “Nobody knows anything” (Goldman, 1983, 2012).

It also emerges as the quintessential example of Pokorny and Sedgwick’s contention<sup>38</sup> about the Hollywood business and industry that “somebody in the film business must know something.” Ultimately, the whole trilogy of *Back to the Future* became an ironic, nostalgic obsession in its own right; a celebration of sentimentalism that has inextricably linked the audience at the time of its release, to its older, even more sentimental and nostalgic self of today.

## CONCLUSION

Just as the early studio era pioneers set the stakes for the agglomeration that became Hollywood (Scott 2005), the entrepreneurs behind the early blockbuster set the stakes for the agglomeration that became the franchise era of filmmaking, led notably by *Star Wars* and *Back to The Future*. The blockbuster entrepreneurs, inspired by the brief, intense period of creative independence marking The New Hollywood era beginning in the mid-1960s, reactivated an innovative system that had become inert, in part due to the conditions persisting long after the studios had to abide the requirements of the Paramount Decree of 1948 and the entrenchment of television's popularity. These conditions pushed entrepreneurs to explore dormant opportunities for upgrading the model to the calculated blockbuster. Bolstered in part by new technologies for enhancing story-telling effects that would appeal to younger demographics that historically had been deemphasised, the individual entrepreneurs were in the ideal position to advance the techniques, industry and the place for a blockbuster agglomeration. As the entrepreneurs adapted to unique production circumstances in making these early blockbusters, they cultivated and amassed the resources they needed to realize their creative vision and build a coherent system for this class of filmmaking. The key criterion is less innovation and more opportunity. The entrepreneurial filmmakers knew and supported each other, often from their days in school before they established their professional reputations. This dynamic served them well, as they cultivated and nourished the new industry clusters that supported the creative and business cultures validating the investment in blockbuster filmmaking.

Specifically, the innovation of institutional markers essential for blockbuster films opened the analysis to consider contingencies in the industry's prevailing business model and to identify opportunities (along with then unforeseen limitations) associated with the focus on blockbuster films. Historically, Hollywood's institutional nature and how it has evolved

encompasses two forms of power (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983, p. 157): “the power to set premises, to define the norms and standards, which shape and channel behavior” and “the point of critical intervention at which elites can define appropriate models of organisational structure and policy which then go unquestioned for years to come.” I have argued that Goldman’s aphorism is based upon faulty assumptions that have been interpreted erroneously. As the five case studies indicate in summa, studios learned, especially from the risk-taking experiences of entrepreneurial directors and producers, to evolve and achieve greater certainty in decisions, within the context of franchising, merchandising, integrated marketing and distribution opportunities. So, if the question is whether or not most films become profitable for their studios, then the evidence strongly supports the work of Sedgwick and Pokorny (1998, 2001, 2010; with Miskell, 2018), Soloveichik (2013), Cones (2007) and others.<sup>1</sup>

With Goldman’s postulation discarded, conclusive statements are offered to answer the two central research questions of the thesis:

1. Between 1966 and 1985, how did entrepreneurial directors and producers facilitate the transition in New Hollywood to the Blockbuster Business Model by standardising a set of blockbuster markers?
2. How did entrepreneurial directors and producers reframe the promise of radical, independent-led innovation in the New Hollywood period that led to a new wave of institutional control in the era of the calculated blockbuster franchise system?

The blockbuster business model has been honed to reduce the risks in film investment and increase its profitability. Historically, industry media, observers and scholars have focused almost exclusively on a film’s U.S. box office performance, rarely including credible metrics for the increasingly important foreign territories. Those box office figures have been estimated based on sample numbers that do not fully represent a film’s specific

performance in all regions of the country. To shift the focus from a preponderance of box office numbers, the analysis was structured upon institutional markers (identified in the following paragraph) involved with development, production and distribution, as well as elements that comprised the narrative for each blockbuster. The list was most prominently adapted from Epstein's (2006) criteria-specific definition for blockbusters. Acknowledging the intersecting dynamics of historical institutionalism and entrepreneurial responses to conditions of creative and environmental uncertainty, newly added institutional markers were locus of control for the directors vis-à-vis studios and the roles taken in the artistic and business domains, individually or collectively, representing the producer, director and screenwriter.

The markers for the business model, as studied in this thesis, are scale of production budget, saturation booking of theatres, scope of advertising campaign, visual effects, audience research, source of adaptation or original creative material, use of star and celebrity talent, film reviews, impact on stock price value and annual financial report and then markers of narrative development for blockbuster status. These markers of narrative development are broken down further into nature of specific source material for screenplay development; the presence of a child or teen protagonist; genre classification of fantasy, fairy tale and/or science fiction; presence of PG-13 friendly relationships; characters, toys for merchandising and licensing; stylized conflict (non-real; no gore, blood); open ending with hero prevailing (to set up sequel franchising options), and use of animation, special effects and consumer-generated image (CGI) technology.

The extent to which all or nearly all of these markers are present in the case studies best defines the blockbuster films. Among the blockbuster narrative markers, for example, that have become most prevalent are those in stylized violence and combat and the fatherly, patriarchal mentoring of a young hero. The combined array of blockbuster narrative elements has

institutionalised the sequel franchise as perhaps the most important sector of film industry financing. Now, nearly every blockbuster is guaranteed to make money. In summary, these markers and narrative elements constitute the historical institutional guide for minimizing and controlling the risks of investments in development, production and marketing and promotion. They also signal how studios have learned to position the film for a successful release where revenue streams extend beyond the initial box office release phase and consolidate the profitable returns on investment in a long-tailed economic phenomenon.

The application of blockbuster narrative markers joined with new visual effects technology, diversified advertising platforms and the emergence of audience research coordinated by the industry group (NRG) mitigated the risks, assuring that any blockbuster release (after the 1980 financially ruinous release of *Heaven's Gate*) would be poised to make money. As each case study described, directors, producers and studio executives developed new revenue streams, including international markets, theme parks, ancillary screening venues, home entertainment options, franchising and merchandise licensing and literary and theatrical adaptations and supplemental creative properties.

Profitability in the industry historically has been a central issue of control. During the New Hollywood period, which challenged the film industry to become sensitized toward new macro-environmental factors, independent directors, producers and other creative entrepreneurs (e.g., that of author and screenplay writer) took on new combinations of roles in development and production. They were free to experiment not just in developing narrative markers for making successful films but they also sought to make their legacy durable through those markers for franchising, merchandising and licensing. They legitimized themselves (e.g., as directors, as producers, as directors and producers, and, in one case, as director, producer and screenwriter) as self-appointed curators of a film's specific cultural brand of fandom. Hollywood remains a conservative and homogeneous industry in structure, participation

and organizational culture and protocol. However, the blockbuster signalled an incremental adaptation, not a makeover of the industry's key goals, objects and industry expectations. Hollywood's inherent conservatism inevitably would lead to the studios, especially after the mid-1980s when the major media conglomerates grew enormous, to reclaim historically institutionalised control in both the artistic and business domains (and their roles) that had been ceded temporarily to individuals in the 1970s.

In the recession-bound early 1970s, some Hollywood institutional principals cautiously took the lead. Paramount Studios initially hesitated to proceed with *The Godfather* after *The Brotherhood* (1968), a film that resembled *The Godfather* in many ways and featured a distinguished director and one of the industry's most bankable actors at the time, failed at the box office. Francis Ford Coppola, *The Godfather* director, embodied the bricoleur, resolving character and narrative gaps and strengthening the screenplay. Meanwhile, the film's studio producers and executives effectively handled the crises that threatened to derail the production, as civic groups of Italian Americans protested over disparaging references to the Mafia and concerns about ethnic stereotyping. By the time of the film's release, there were no controversies to siphon the interest *The Godfather* had created.

It is the only film in the set of five case studies that garnered any major Academy Awards. Unlike the four other films, while *The Godfather* met the expectations of many blockbuster markers, it did not reflect all of the narrative elements for blockbusters. The film set a new standard in adult drama genre, and in the long-tail phenomenon as a commercial and cultural success. *The Godfather* inspired a genre of films about the Italian mafia (certainly an example of how precedent-setting success can be institutionalised for decades after), at least 430 since its 1972 release. But only one, *Goodfellas* (Martin Scorsese, 1990), managed to approach the original in artistic success (one Academy Award) and its 2000 acceptance into the National Film Registry. While *Goodfellas'* production budget came in slightly above *The Godfather's*

costs in comparison, its box office take was less than 20 percent of *The Godfather's* corresponding gross revenue.

The timing of *The Godfather's* release was auspicious during an industry-wide recession where studios jointly reported losses of \$500 million a time (an extraordinary sum when translated to present-day value) and an estimated 40 percent of filmmakers who were unemployed. The film accounted for approximately 10 percent of the gross box office revenues that year and, in its wake, box office numbers recovered in the following year, most notably the blockbuster performance of *The Exorcist* (1973). Nearly a year after *The Godfather's* premiere, *Variety* reported that while aggregate box office numbers were significantly up over the previous annual period, the ratio of the revenue was concentrated in the top 25 films of the list, a trend that remained constant from previous economic cycles. Coppola set the path for the decade's most successful blockbuster 'auteurs', an elite group of creative entrepreneurs that understood the same role distinctions that certified *The Godfather's* artistic and commercial success.

*Jaws* (1975) reinforced the dual effectiveness of institutional control in the business domain (for purposes of stability), presided over by producers Richard Zanuck and David Brown, and the artistic domain, dominated by director Steven Spielberg and screenplay writer Carl Gottlieb (for the purposes of entrepreneur-driven change). *Jaws* confirmed the blockbuster markers analysed in this thesis and the narrative, with the exception of not including a main plot highlighting a child or teen protagonist. It satisfied the defining characteristics of a calculated blockbuster with merchandising and licensing potential. While *Jaws* experienced its own serious production challenges and occasional setbacks, just as in *The Godfather* (albeit of a different nature), the publicity value of the news was leveraged for its positive outcome and promotional uses in piquing audience curiosity.



*Jaws'* distribution pattern, occurring when neighbourhood theatres still dominated the market, turned out to be prescient, given the forthcoming expansion on multi-theatre complexes that would become common by the end of the 1970s. The early advance word from critics and test screenings indicated the film was strong enough to consider how the film's popularity could be lengthened to endure the entire summer. Universal Studios scaled back the number of theatres from its original saturation booking for the premiere and then added screens, especially after the 15-day point when the film already had recouped all of its initial production and promotional costs as well as any budget overruns. To heighten the anticipation, prime-time television was saturated with teaser commercials that ran frequently for three nights in one week. The ad campaign put television on an equal footing with newspapers, which typically had received the greatest share of promotional dollars for a new film. However, the television campaign for 'front loading' audiences was not unprecedented, as evidenced by the regional success of *Billy Jack*, a 1971 independent film by Tom Laughlin (along with its sequels), and *Death Wish*, a 1974 film directed by Michael Winner, starring Charles Bronson. *Jaws'* phenomenal success was hardly accidental, as it confirmed earlier experimental practices taken up by producers and directors more vulnerable to risk than those involved with *Jaws*.

Likewise, *Jaws* followed *The Godfather's* path in becoming a long-tail cultural phenomenon with economic benefits. Its resilience is remarkable considering the voluminous examples of blockbusters with much higher budgets, later generation technical effects, saturated marketing campaigns and more extensive merchandising and licensing opportunities that followed. As in *The Godfather*, audiences empathized with the characters of complex humanity in *Jaws*, regardless of their eccentricities, flaws, shortcomings or doubts. As a contemporary cultural reference point, *Jaws* remains as popular as *The Godfather*.

Some might argue that *Star Wars* is a convincing example for Goldman's aphorism. Twentieth Century Fox studio executives were not confident about the film's prospects and they expressed their scepticism by keeping tight reins on the production budget and refusing to invest money in advertising up until the film's release date. However, despite the limitations imposed by the studio, *Star Wars* set the stage as a calculated blockbuster. Officially, the role combinations observed in *The Godfather* and *Jaws* were in effect with *Star Wars*, with Gary Kurtz as producer and Lucas as director and screenwriter. However, as studio confidence never seemed to materialize before the film's premiere, Lucas' entrepreneurial role grew, as he gained cultural authority over the business and artistic domains. Assisted by Charles Lippincott, the highest-ranking marketing executive for Lucas' production company, Lucas strengthened his position with final approval rights over the development of numerous creative properties including a Marvel Comics series, fan fiction and science-fiction and cosplay conventions. Lucas' role transformation would be even more evident in the most immediate sequels that followed where he reconfigured his role as screenwriter and producer and then in later sequels, he would merge the roles wholly as producer, director and screenwriter. The closest comparison would be Peter Jackson, who fulfilled all three roles in adapting *The Lord of the Rings* (2001), (2002), (2003) trilogy based on J.R.R. Tolkien's books.

As *Star Wars* became a massive cultural enterprise comprising cottage industries of merchandising, licensing and fan-inspired legacy, Lucas set forth with the 1977 original to consolidate his authority over all franchise domains. He legitimized his economic position of control through his charismatic appeal as an auteur, fortified by the fans' overwhelming approval of the film. Here, Lucas would be closer to Spielberg's paternal mentoring style than to Coppola's bricoleur approach, as the *Star Wars* director looked upon those who honoured the brand legacy as a properly inherited cultural artefact. While the details of Lucas' efforts in drafting the screenplay have been discussed,

Lucas' reputation for 'fast-and-frugal' decisions strengthened his prestige for promotional impact. An efficient, rapid-pace editor, he pioneered the use of visual effects and computer graphics in production and for bringing in skilled technicians for soundtrack and sound design (Ankeny, 2003). These characteristics strengthened his position in the business and artistic domains, and it would become one that would not be compromised, even if fans voiced their displeasure (as they frequently did) over the direction that the core narrative took in several sequels to the original. This consolidated Lucas' intellectual property rights over the long-term and imposed strict controls over the content and style of cultural items produced by fans.

The key to success in Lucas' career is without doubt his control over his projects. Lucas was part of a fraternity of directors – all of whom had become associated with the decade's most successful films. They completed their college studies in filmmaking at the same time and, of all the sources Lucas sought for advice on *Star Wars*, he accepted the recommendations of his artistic peers. Meanwhile, Fox studio personnel demonstrated just how little grasp they had on fans of science fiction who were also part of the target age demographic being chased by studios throughout the 1970s. Lippincott, as Lucas' proxy, used the intelligence they gathered from science-fiction conventions and the success of the *Marvel Comics* series to sharpen promotions that would motivate the word-of-mouth campaign to fill the theatres that summer and establish a merchandising empire. Lucas epitomizes the value of "integrated histories" in comprehending the "endogenous process" that Miskell (2018) cites as crucial to understanding the legitimisation of the blockbuster model in an historical context.

As for mitigating risks in advertising and promotion, these measures substituted effectively, as compared to *The Godfather*, *Jaws* and *Grease*, which were adapted from best-selling creative properties. And, on a global measure that dwarfs the scope of the cultural legacies associated with the other four films of this thesis, *Star Wars* as an experiment confirmed the long-tail value

of the calculated blockbuster. It also foreshadowed a changing of the guard for how roles are distinguished and merged between the business and artistic domains of film development and production.

The calculated blockbuster continued to evolve with *Back to The Future*, the last and most recent of the five films considered in this thesis. Its success spawned a trilogy and the franchise was as successful as *The Godfather* trilogy and the long-running *Star Wars* franchise. As for the role combinations in the artistic and business domains, *Back to the Future* closely followed the patterns of *The Godfather* and *Jaws* in some respects and the deviations observed in *Grease* and *Star Wars* in others. While the producers were Bob Gale (who also co-authored the screenplay with director Robert Zemeckis) and Neil Canton, it was Spielberg, the executive producer (including colleagues from his other blockbusters: Kathleen Kennedy and Frank Marshall), who proved to become the film's most momentous supporters and strategic decision-makers. First, after Zemeckis and Gale had been turned down at least 40 times by studios, it was Spielberg who brought the project to his Amblin Entertainment Studios. Second, Spielberg groomed the path for the film's biggest mid-production switch with the lead going from Eric Stoltz, one of the actors then known as part of Hollywood's Brat Pack, to Michael J. Fox, the star of one of prime-time television's most successful sitcoms at the time. Fox always had been the top choice to take the lead role, but executives did not pursue it, believing it would be difficult to have the young actor break or change his contractual obligations with the television series.

Of the five films studied, *Grease* (1978) provided more outliers than its peers in comparison, regarding the combining of roles. There was no doubt about the business domain strengths in the film's producers, Allan Carr and Robert Stigwood but, in terms of the artistic domain, they hired a director who had significant television credits but no major film studio experience or track record (Randal Kleiser) as well as an inexperienced screenwriter (Bronte Woodard). However, Carr persistently overlapped both domains where the

director's role (Kleiser) became what could be best described as being a team member in the artistic domain, fortified by the presence of veteran cinematographer Bill Butler and choreographer Patricia Birch, who had worked on the Broadway version of the musical upon which the film was based.

Carr's roles in *Grease* differed significantly from those observed in the other blockbusters. Carr imitated the producer-impresarios of earlier periods but he also read current audience trends accurately. The success of the Broadway musical (which was not highlighted in most of the film's advertising campaign) indicated the late 1970s' audience appeal for nostalgia of the late 1950s, the period in which *Grease* was set. Capitalizing upon the theatrical version's most popular songs, Carr and Stigwood, as producers, recruited the best-known music industry talent for a top-selling soundtrack that fused the sound of the late 1950s with the late 1970s.

In the genre of Hollywood musicals, *Grease* succeeded as blockbuster escapism that no other musical had been able to achieve since the 1965 release of *The Sound of Music*, also adapted from a record-setting Broadway musical. However, while *The Sound of Music* was produced on an \$8.2 million budget, *Grease* was made on a budget of roughly 40 percent of its predecessor (when figures are adjusted for inflation to make direct comparisons). Of the musical adaptations released in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *Grease* was the most financially successful and was made for the smallest production budget. But, in every other marker or narrative element used for this thesis analysis, *Grease* satisfied its requirement.

While nostalgia is not considered an essential narrative marker for a blockbuster, it was manifested in four of the five film case studies. Two, in particular, stand out in the analysis because they address how nostalgia was leveraged for promotional, merchandising and licensing opportunities. For example, *Grease's* form of nostalgia infused the 1970s sounds and

personalities with practically identical sentiments of pop idol popularity that dominated the 1950s' rock music scene. This was the foundation of *Grease's* effective packaging for promoting the film without letting concerns about selective memory regarding the 1950s interfere with the audience's enjoyment. For the film's representation of nostalgia, Carr and Stigwood anticipated that bringing in newcomers for the key artistic roles of director and screenwriter allowed them to sustain control over the film's creative development.

*Grease* also solved a problem that had befuddled Hollywood studio executives for at least a generation. In the aftermath of the Paramount Decree of 1948, as television's access and popularity grew, many Hollywood actors, directors and producers participated in programming on the new medium. The perplexities and paradoxes of television's popularity was one factor in how the New Hollywood period emerged. One aspect was resolved when *Jaws'* prime-time television advertising campaign proved successful. Another aspect was resolved, as *Grease* cast actors, including many Hollywood stars who had found fame in television. That included casting John Travolta, already the star of a successful television sitcom and with widely acclaimed appearances in made-for-television movies. In fusing the celebrity aspects of music, film and television, *Grease* motivated studio executives to change their thinking about dealing with the rivalry of television as an entertainment medium. That would continue in 1985, as the lead character in *Back to The Future* ultimately went to the young star of a hit television series instead of an actor who was a member of Hollywood's film Brat Pack.

The element of nostalgia also served a strategic marketing purpose. Compared to *Back to The Future* (1985), another film with the 1950s as a main narrative setting, product placement in *Grease* was limited. And, even its appearance was awkward, as last-minute optical effects were added to scrub a Coca-Cola in a scene because its chief rival Pepsi was a major film promotional sponsor. Today, even many independent filmmakers and

producers, already working on a tight budget, will exchange product placement in a film for donated consumer goods. *Grease's* most important product, however, turned out to be a best-selling soundtrack with several top-ranked singles.

Nostalgia served *Back to The Future's* long-term success better than *Grease* in one major aspect: creating a platform for a successful franchise. *Back to the Future's* success also cemented its place as a cultural asset as well as a perpetual capital asset. In addition to being named to numerous best-of lists it also joined other films highlighted in case studies in this thesis, as being selected for preservation in the National Film Registry. Its thirtieth anniversary in 2015 was a cultural event, which also coincided with the first sequel's time setting for its plot. Its licensing extended to an animated series, an amusement park attraction, video and mobile app games and a forthcoming musical with the book written by the original screenplay authors. As Lucas had accomplished in his screenplay for *Star Wars*, Zemeckis and Gales managed to fuse genres, selecting two of the most financially successful categories of the films at the time: Eighties Teen Movies and science-fiction inspired fantasy.

They also finessed the challenges of nostalgia as an appealing element for contemporary audiences, perhaps more successfully than in *Grease*. The 1950s not only serves the plot elements of the film's time travel story but it also justifies an extensive use of product placement as essential counterpoint to those scenes set in the contemporary time (the middle 1980s, in this instance). It is a shrewd opportunity to build upon the film's ancillary efforts for merchandising and promotional tie-ins. *Back to The Future* demonstrates just how the idea of product placement had evolved from its comparatively primitive use in *Grease*. If there is any uncertainty to be mentioned, it is perhaps just how much the film overperformed its expectations, which subsequently strengthened its word-of-mouth impact for promotional purposes. The film, for example, was cited in President Reagan's 1986 State of

the Union address before the U.S. Congress, the rare gift of a third-person endorsement that becomes a part of history.

The success of *Back to the Future* had persuaded the studios in calculating the blockbuster model's potential and from that point the studios morphed into media companies with global marketing power. Therefore, the limited scope of prior metric-based conclusions, contingent on the US box office performance of select films that failed to recoup their costs in a first wave release, became less relevant to our understanding of a business model, where less than 50 percent of its revenues would be derived from theatres. These media conglomerates are oligopolistic behemoths worth billions of dollars and the blockbuster business model came to epitomize the factual realities of Hollywood's status quo.

Future research will have to redress the persistent lack of direct communication between scholars and industry practitioners that lead to incomplete, inaccurate, non-representative analyses. Hollywood's institutional dynamics complicated the New Hollywood challenges of offering a solution to a recession and a long-term decline in movie attendance. However, the players in each of the five case studies confronted the inertia of business as usual. They exemplified the possibilities of "novel strategic action within institutions .... when actors [organisational as opposed to on-screen talent] are constrained by those institutions" and how they exploited "micro-institutional conditions ... in their strategic responses to legitimacy crises" (van Dijk et al, 2011, p. 1485). In interviews conducted with industry practitioners for this thesis, including studio executives, directors and other key creative figures for the analysed films, many commented that research about Hollywood's business and economic practices does not represent the actual experience. They do not acknowledge the terminology or vocabulary cited in the research, which they believe does not reflect how they communicate as industry peers. One example is the reference of the National Research Group (NRG), which is virtually absent from any relevant search of



the academic research on Hollywood, especially during the blockbuster era. Since the NRG was established more than four decades ago (incidentally, after the release date of four of the five films analysed in this thesis), it is the source of industry intelligence that studios rely on most heavily, especially in marketing and promotion as well as scheduling releases of films. The fact that studios rely so extensively on NRG reports and data almost single-handedly dismantles the notion that studios operate in an intelligence-blind environment. To discuss the economic implications or business decisions behind a Hollywood film (as approximately nine out of every ten bear an NRG imprint) without considering NRG's input is impossible to articulate satisfactorily. Hence, this reiterates the need to remediate the context of relevant research observations, most notably by including data and material about the NRG's role in the decision-making process and the consequences thereof.<sup>2</sup>

There are limitations in this thesis. The analysis encompassed five purposefully selected case studies to demonstrate that, contrary to Goldman, there were clear objectives that controlled the decisions made regarding the development, production and promotion of each film. With each film, details are gathered for the markers identified above that eventually become a de facto manual for directors, producers, studio executives, screenplay writers, etc., for how to produce a successful blockbuster. These details become part of evaluating the development cycle so that decision makers can hone the strategies and tactics to achieve their objective. These case studies were selected purposefully for how they represent the role-taking for controls in both the business and artistic domains. There were other blockbusters during the period that could be subjected to a similar analysis. These would include *Love Story* (Arthur Hiller, 1970), *What's up Doc* (Peter Bogdanovich, 1972), *The Sting* (1973), *The Exorcist* (1973), *E.T* (1982) and *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Steven Spielberg, 1984). And, then there were films that were intended to become blockbusters but instead became spectacular failures: *The*

*Wiz* (1980) and *Heaven's Gate* (1980). However, in this context the proper question is not whether specific films and their producers make a profit but whether the studios make a profit. It should be remembered that in discussing Hollywood business and economy, the terms 'profit,' 'money' and 'revenue' are not interchangeable, as they represent different meanings. The point is that many calculated blockbuster films, given sufficient time and after the deduction of production and acquisition costs, make a profit for the studios. This observation accounts for the studio's production funds, which the studio pays its wholly owned ancillaries (e.g., television networks, marketing and distribution departments, etc.) and itself, up to and including the value that the production negatives of the film add to the value of the studio's library (incidentally, every studio's greatest asset).

This distinction is best described in the example of Hollywood's most famous blockbuster failure. In a 1985 post-mortem about *Heaven's Gate*, Steven Bach (1985) wrote,

Put another way, it means that by charging overhead, the studio gets to pocket \$750,000 before the filmmaker sees a penny. This is widely (though not wholly accurately) viewed as pure gravy by producers because every studio facility or property used by the production, from sound stages to arc lights to typewriters to thumbtacks, is charged to the picture anyway, so that the overhead charge is, from the producer's point of view, at best an override and at worst legalized larceny.

The failure of *Heaven's Gate* rattled the industry wisdom on how roles should be distinguished and combined in controlling the business and artistic domains. As Biskind (1998) quoted Coppola, "Now, here we are, twenty years after *Heaven's Gate*. Directors don't have much power anymore, the executives make unheard of amounts of money, and budgets are more out of control than they ever were. And there hasn't been a classic in ten years." Coppola's statement is a dramatic sweeping generalization though. Among the films from the 1990s selected for the National Film Registry, include critically acclaimed examples: *Goodfellas* (1990), *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme,

1991), *A League of Their Own* (Penny Marshall, 1992), *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993), *The Shawshank Redemption* (Frank Darabont, 1994), *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994) and *L. A. Confidential* (Curtis Hanson, 1997), to name a few.

Cones (2007) summarized his own thesis: “[T]he film business as conducted by the insider-controlled major studio distributor is pretty much risk-free. That is why most of the so-called major studio/distributors have survived for so long in what is perceived to be such a risky business.” The enigmatic basis of Goldman’s aphorism has served a useful purpose for analysts who have noted that a reason justifying it is that the quality of data the industry provides either is incomplete or is lumped into a broad category where it becomes nearly impossible to distil. This is a point Epstein (2005) has made frequently. He reported that every studio sends a precise quarterly report about every revenue stream to Worldwide Market Research, a subsidiary of the Motion Picture Association. Epstein explained the data are combined into an “All Media Revenue Report” sent confidentially to a small circle of executives, following legal considerations that the MPA, “as the studios’ trade organization ... [it] presumably can circulate such secret data without running afoul of antitrust laws.” While few know of the regular report’s existence, Epstein’s reporting underscores that any attempt to explain the internal drivers for the blockbuster business model will not reflect industry realities by relying on data that admittedly are incomplete and not reported in such a detailed level as to pinpoint relevant factors.

Thus, in the interim, it becomes worthwhile to expand on the comprehensive nature of qualitative case study analysis, initially by encompassing definitive markers of blockbusters and the elements that constitute their narrative. And, then there is the value of oral history and first-person interviews with producers, directors, studio executives and insiders, and others to round out the portrait. In the interim, others can begin to address

the legal questions and strategies to bring about the publication of industry detail in expanded form.

With budgets necessitating investments of more than \$400 million to replicate the *Star Wars* business model<sup>3</sup>, it remains to be seen if the legacy will not be the metrics that make it impossible for studios to recoup their costs, even by exploiting the numerous tie-in platforms. The multi-national owners and shareholders of the studios have in recent years come close to controlling the entire production process. This extends from owning the publishing companies that produce best-seller novels, to the television channels and newspapers that promote them and to the theatres and cable companies that disseminate them. There seems little more that these marginally competitive oligopolistic production machines can do to enhance their economic benefits. Issues of control have been exhausted and are now being replaced with inter-studio cannibalization – for example, in the form of Walt Disney Studios acquiring the venerable Twentieth Century Fox.

The onslaught of highly profitable gaming companies such as Ubisoft and Nintendo, dynamic content providers and platform creators such as Youtube, Netflix and Amazon, should warn the Hollywood studios that unless its dominant blockbuster driven business model keeps evolving in order to continue being financially viable and managing to stay relevant to changing user consumption patterns, they risk becoming a footnote in our voracious obsession as entertainment consumers.

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# Appendices

<b>Appendix I</b>	<b>Blockbuster Markers: <i>The Godfather</i></b>
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APPENDIX I BLOCKBUSTER MARKERS	FILM: THE GODFATHER
SCALE OF COST	\$6.5 (2019 adjusted value: \$39.7 million)
SATURATION BOOKING	5 theatres for March 1972 premiere; 316 nationally, end of March, 1972; 372, as of April 16, 1972;
SCOPE OF ADVERTISING CAMPAIGN	Newspaper advertising campaign traditional. Other elements: Souvenir shops offered Mafia-style fedoras. Godfather Game sales predicted a million sets sold by year end. In 1972, the album stood at No. 21 (peak) in the Billboard 200 charts. Fawcett Publications printed a million and a half more paperback copies of the original book, bringing the total press runs to 10,054,000.
VISUAL EFFECTS	Lighting was darkened in cinematography; two sets of prints were made (lighter for drive-in theatres; darker for traditional movie houses)
AUDIENCE RESEARCH	Most focused effort was on alleviating concerns about ethnic stereotypes and representations, resolved in meetings with the Italian American Civil Rights League.
SOURCE OF ADAPTATION	Mario Puzo's 1969 novel of the same name: The book made the top of <i>The New York Times'</i> bestsellers' list and remained there for four and a half months
STAR AND CELEBRITY TALENT	Marlon Brando (Paramount Studio wanted Laurence Olivier, Ernest Borgnine, Richard

	Conte, Anthony Quinn, Carlo Ponti, or Danny Thomas to play Don Corleone.)
<b>BLOCKBUSTER NARRATIVE ELEMENTS</b>	
SPECIFIC SOURCE MATERIAL	Puzo's <i>The Godfather</i> novel (1969); Puzo was screenplay writer with Coppola receiving credit.
CHILD OR TEEN PROTAGONIST	None
FANTASY, FAIRY TALE, SCIENCE FICTION	None
PG-13 FRIENDLY RELATIONSHIPS	None
CHARACTERS, TOYS FOR MERCHANDISING, LICENSING	Fedoras, as worn by <i>The Godfather</i> (old and young); <i>The Godfather Game</i> .
STYLIZED CONFLICT (NON-REAL; NO GORE, BLOOD)	Blood, violence shown uncensored (death of Sonny Corleone; severed horse head with blood stains on sheets; stabbing and garroting with blood; numerous execution slayings with bodies collapsed in blood; strangulation): One stylized scene is death of Apollonia (Michael Corleone's Italian wife) where no visual violence is seen.
OPEN ENDING WITH HERO PREVAILING	Anti-hero journey: The new Godfather gathers with his capos and door shuts leaving his wife outside.
ANIMATION, SPECIAL EFFECTS, CGI TECHNOLOGY	Victims hot-wired for squibs; car explosion in Italy carried out by demolition expert.

NOTE: Categorical identifiers as adapted from Epstein, Edward Jay.

*The Big Picture: Money and Power in Hollywood*. Random House Incorporated, 2006.

<b>APPENDIX II BLOCKBUSTER MARKERS</b>	<b>FILM: JAWS</b>
SCALE OF COST	\$7 million (2018 adjusted value: \$32.8 million)
SATURATION BOOKING	464 for premiere: 950+ screens by 15 August 1975, representing largest simultaneous distribution of a film in motion picture history at the time
SCOPE OF ADVERTISING CAMPAIGN	\$1 million television campaign in week prior to opening: Series of 25 ads of 30 seconds each aired nightly during prime time on three nights for the nation's three major television networks (ABC, CBS and NBC) at the time. (2018 adjusted value: \$4.7 million)
VISUAL EFFECTS	Animatronics shark
AUDIENCE RESEARCH	Special effects and mechanical shark, provided the core content of many months of well-placed news features prior to release, in public relations campaign.
SOURCE OF ADAPTATION	Peter Benchley, <i>Jaws</i> , novel
STAR AND CELEBRITY TALENT	Richard Dreyfuss was cast in his first lead role for a U.S. film. Robert Shaw was veteran actor and Roy Scheider had played prominent roles in major 1970s films.
<b>BLOCKBUSTER NARRATIVE ELEMENTS</b>	
SPECIFIC SOURCE MATERIAL	Novel by Peter Benchley. Rights purchased for \$250,000 and 10 percent net profits.
CHILD OR TEEN PROTAGONIST	Not pertinent for this film
FANTASY, FAIRY TALE, SCIENCE FICTION	Horror thriller with science fiction element about monstrous size of shark

PG-13 FRIENDLY RELATIONSHIPS	Considered highly mature for a PG rating: brief female nudity, sexual, drug and alcohol references.
CHARACTERS, TOYS FOR MERCHANDISING, LICENSING	Shark: wall plaques, posters, postcards, beach towels and T-shirts, plastic tumblers, plastic fins and shark-shaped pool inflatable devices, shark's tooth necklaces and the soundtrack album. The Ideal Toy Company released a game in which the player had to use a hook to fish out items from the shark's mouth before the jaws closed.
STYLIZED CONFLICT (NON-REAL; NO GORE, BLOOD)	Images of severed head, body in shark's mouth with blood spilling into water; boy attacked while swimming with blood clouding the water almost immediately; exploded shark
OPEN ENDING WITH HERO PREVAILING	Conclusive climax with two heroes exploding shark
ANIMATION, SPECIAL EFFECTS, CGI TECHNOLOGY	Mechanical shark

NOTE: Categorical identifiers as adapted from Epstein, Edward Jay.

*The Big Picture: Money and Power in Hollywood*. Random House Incorporated, 2006.

<b>APPENDIX III BLOCKBUSTER MARKERS</b>	<b>FILM: STAR WARS</b>
SCALE OF COST	\$11,293,151 (2018 adjusted value: \$47M)
SATURATION BOOKING	43 theatres at opening (25 May 1977); 757, 15 July 1977; 1,000 (5 August 1977)
SCOPE OF ADVERTISING CAMPAIGN	Newspaper ads appeared for the first time 10 days prior to film's opening; Marvel Comics released two issues of comic book series within 90 days prior to opening; Word-of-mouth campaign augmented by appearance at San Diego Comic-Con September 1976
VISUAL EFFECTS	365 shots with \$2.5 million budget: Galaxy shots and space combat battles influenced and replicated by 10-minute reel of 16-mm footage that Lucas edited from Battle of Britain (1969); other World War II dogfight movies
AUDIENCE RESEARCH	San Diego Comic-Con (September, 1976); advance sales of two issues from new Marvel Comics series about Star Wars (February-May, 1977)
SOURCE OF ADAPTATION	Original script by Lucas culled from fantasy and literary adventures, comic books and radio/television series considered important to director's cultural upbringing
STAR AND CELEBRITY TALENT	No star talent with exception of Alec Guinness, Academy Award winning English actor (Obi-Wan Kenobi).
<b>BLOCKBUSTER NARRATIVE ELEMENTS</b>	

SPECIFIC SOURCE MATERIAL	Davy Crockett, Flash Gordon , The Wizard of Oz, films of the 1930s through the 1950s featuring heroes cast as swashbucklers and cowboys, the young person's pulp fiction including the Hardy Boys and classics, including but not limited to Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and The Faerie Queene.
CHILD OR TEEN PROTAGONIST	Luke Skywalker and Princess Leia
FANTASY, FAIRY TALE, SCIENCE FICTION	All elements present
PG-13 FRIENDLY RELATIONSHIPS	Princess Leia falls in love with Han Solo, the smuggler
CHARACTERS, TOYS FOR MERCHANDISING, LICENSING	Principal leads, starships (Millennium Falcon, X-Wing), R2-D2, Chewbacca, Ewoks, Jedi Knights, Darth Vader, Obi-Wan Kenobi
STYLIZED CONFLICT (NON-REAL; NO GORE, BLOOD)	Space battles portray violent combat but no visible blood; bodies struck down by laser fire; strangulation of a minor character by Darth Vader but no dismemberment shown. Burned corpses.
OPEN ENDING WITH HERO PREVAILING	Hero is instructed to "use the Force" by Obi-Wan Kenobi in finale on his way to becoming a Jedi Knight
ANIMATION, SPECIAL EFFECTS, CGI TECHNOLOGY	Space combat battles featuring Star Destroyer, Millennium Falcon, X-Wing

NOTES:

PG-13 rating did not exist until 1984.

Categorical identifiers as adapted from Epstein, Edward Jay.

*The Big Picture: Money and Power in Hollywood*. Random House Incorporated, 2006.



<b>APPENDIX IV BLOCKBUSTER MARKERS</b>	<b>FILM: GREASE</b>
SCALE OF COST	\$6 million (2018 adjusted value: \$23.2M)
SATURATION BOOKING	862 screens at opening: 11-week minimum engagement commitments
SCOPE OF ADVERTISING CAMPAIGN	Pepsi tie-in deal \$2.5 million (2018 adjusted value: \$9.7 M)
VISUAL EFFECTS	Opening animated sequence with title song 'Grease'
AUDIENCE RESEARCH	12-week test run at four Chicago theatres
SOURCE OF ADAPTATION	<i>Grease</i> , created in Chicago in 1971. Went to Broadway in 1972, with 3,388 performances when it closed in 1980.
STAR AND CELEBRITY TALENT	No established box office stars at time of casting; television stars from 1950s and musicians of the time)*
<b>BLOCKBUSTER NARRATIVE ELEMENTS</b>	
SPECIFIC SOURCE MATERIAL	Broadway version of <i>Grease</i> musical (1972)
CHILD OR TEEN PROTAGONIST	Characters are high school students
FANTASY, FAIRY TALE, SCIENCE FICTION	The song <i>Beauty School Dropout</i> features the fantasy character of Teen Angel, the guardian angel for one of the film's supporting characters
PG-13 FRIENDLY RELATIONSHIPS	MPAA rating PG-13 for sexual content including references, teen smoking and drinking, and language
CHARACTERS, TOYS FOR MERCHANDISING, LICENSING	Soundtrack included songs written specifically for film
STYLIZED CONFLICT (NON-REAL; NO GORE, BLOOD)	Thunder Road drag race scene
OPEN ENDING WITH HERO PREVAILING	Sandy transforms herself into image to fit into Danny's gang circle (which flips the convention of 1950s teenage films where main character is transformed into wholesome character)
ANIMATION, SPECIAL EFFECTS, CGI TECHNOLOGY	The film opens with an animated three-and-a-half prologue in a yearbook style featuring film's characters and cast

\*When cast for *Grease*, John Travolta was completing production for *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) and the film had yet to be released. Olivia Newton-John was a well-known pop star, especially outside of the U.S., but had yet to be a part of a film with a significant box office performance.

NOTE: Categorical identifiers as adapted from Epstein, Edward Jay. *The Big Picture: Money and Power in Hollywood*. Random House Incorporated, 2006.

APPENDIX V BLOCKBUSTER MARKERS	FILM: BACK TO THE FUTURE
SCALE OF COST	\$19 million (2018 adjusted value: \$44.5 M)
SATURATION BOOKING	1,200+ screens (5.29 percent of available screens in 1985)
SCOPE OF ADVERTISING CAMPAIGN	Tied to opening during 1985 Independence Day holiday. Product placement included DeLorean, Texaco, Pepsi, Toyota, Budweiser, Miller Brewing
VISUAL EFFECTS	30 visual effects shots: prominent lightning strike. time-traveling DeLorean switch into flight mode
AUDIENCE RESEARCH	Contrary to director's assertion, test audiences responded positively to main character's performance of Chuck Berry song's <i>Johnny B. Goode</i> , which remained in film, despite it created paradox for the story's time travel rules (the song was composed three years later after 1955, where it is featured in the film).
SOURCE OF ADAPTATION	Original screenplay by Robert Zemeckis, director; Bob Gale, credited with developing original story idea (rejected 40+ times before being acquired)
STAR AND CELEBRITY TALENT	Eric Stoltz, considered part of the 1980's Rat Pack actors, was fired in mid-production and replaced by Michael J. Fox, making his leading role debut in a Hollywood feature while a leading cast

	member of hit television series <i>Family Ties</i> .
<b>BLOCKBUSTER NARRATIVE ELEMENTS</b>	
SPECIFIC SOURCE MATERIAL	Original: nostalgia, fantasy, science fiction
CHILD OR TEEN PROTAGONIST	Quintessential Eighties Teen Movie genre: Marty McFly is a teen, youngest child.
FANTASY, FAIRY TALE, SCIENCE FICTION	Time travel, aided by eccentric scientist. In 1985, main character alienated from family, returns to 1955, and back to 1985. his family in changed circumstances
PG-13 FRIENDLY RELATIONSHIPS	Main character has girlfriend. No overt sexuality portrayed.
CHARACTERS, TOYS FOR MERCHANDISING, LICENSING	Clocktower coins, DeLorean model car, comics, soundtrack album
STYLIZED CONFLICT (NON-REAL; NO GORE, BLOOD)	Bully fights but no evidence of blood or bruises is visible
OPEN ENDING WITH HERO PREVAILING	Main character returns to 1985 with his family successful, happy and improved; ending suggests next adventure
ANIMATION, SPECIAL EFFECTS, CGI TECHNOLOGY	Flying car (one-fifth scale to actual DeLorean size), hoverboard, lightning strikes, makeup to age actors for different times, actor appears double in a scene.

NOTE: Categorical identifiers as adapted from Epstein, Edward Jay. *The Big Picture: Money and Power in Hollywood*. Random House Incorporated, 2006.

**VI Memorandum from Lew Wasserman to  
Peter Saphier re. Jaws by Peter Benchley**



**INTEROFFICE MEMORANDUM •**  
FORM 2022

DATE	▶	April 16, 1973
TO	▶	Lew R. Wasserman
FROM	▶	Peter Saphier
SUBJECT	▶	JAWS by Peter Benchley
COPIES	▶	Jennings Lang

This is the novel manuscript that Jennings spoke to you about today. I have given a copy to Jennings to read and, based on what the agent has indicated to me, I suspect that the substantial interest in the property around town will eventuate in a deal by mid-week.

I found the novel to be very exciting and one which suggests an enormously commercial film. It could possibly be something that Alfred Hitchcock would be interested in.

The agent is not yet prepared to make a quote.

PS:mcb  
Enc.

## VII Advertising Run in *The New York Times* for *Star Wars* (1977)

May 25	(1/3-page poster ad)
May 27	(full page)
May 29	(smaller)
June 1	(tiny)
June 3	(small)
June 5	(small)
June 8	(tiny)
June 10	(small)
June 12	(small)
June 15	(tiny)
June 18	(1/3 page)
June 19	(tiny)
June 21	(Note: Ads which ran in the same edition for <i>The Deep</i> and <i>Close Encounters</i> (still months away for their release were much bigger and more positive endorsements)
June 22, 23	(tiny)
June 24	(1/3 page)
June 25	(1/8 of page)
June 26	(1/6 page)
June 30	(minute)
July 1	(1/3 page listing the cinemas)
July 8	(1/3 page listing the cinemas)
July 10	(1/5)
July 13	(1/12 page)
July 22	(full page)
August 3	(full page)
August 5	(1/4 page)
September 2	(full page)

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## Introduction

<sup>1</sup> Release dates refer to U.S. premieres.

<sup>2</sup> Goldman, who died in 2018, is considered one of the industry's most widely known screenwriters, especially outside of the industry. His screenplay for *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* solidified a new cowboy buddy genre, for which he won his first Academy Award. He also won an Oscar for *All the President's Men* (1976). Notably, he turned down the opportunity to adapt Mario Puzo's novel for *The Godfather*. His 1983 memoir is entitled *Adventures in the Screen Trade* (1983), whose title is a pun on that for Dylan Thomas' short story anthology *Adventures in The Skin Trade*.

<sup>3</sup> De Vany, Arthur, *How extreme uncertainty shapes the film industry*. New York: Routledge. 2004.

<sup>4</sup> For example: Walls, W. D. (2005). Modeling movie success when 'nobody knows anything': Conditional stable-distribution analysis of film returns. *Journal of Cultural Economics*, 29(3), 177-190; Cunningham, S. D. and Silver, J. (2012). Online film distribution: Its history and global complexion. In *Digital disruption: Cinema moves online* (pp. 33-66). St. Andrews Film Studies: University of St. Andrews; McKenzie, J. (2013). Predicting box office with and without markets: Do internet users know anything? *Information Economics and Policy*, 25(2), 70-80.

<sup>5</sup> Kirkpatrick, D. (2018 November 7, interview) "We used them pretty much every night of the year for audience research previews. They also did a quarterly report that all the studios collectively funded. As I remember each of the studios ponied up \$200,000 for the quarterly report. It was all about demographics and the shifting marketplace." Co-founder of MIT Center for Future Storytelling, Kirkpatrick has been president of Paramount Pictures, production chief of Walt Disney Studios and author.

<sup>6</sup> Kirkpatrick, interview. Anticipated release schedules were funnelled through the National Research Group (NRG), which was founded in 1978 as the blockbuster era gained momentum. He explained, "Generally, the release dates changed all of the time, usually related to production issues, but, yes, studios did try not to trip all over each other by releasing films on

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the same date that would directly affect their take. That being said, my observation was that the big fish declared itself 'I will release *Jaws* on the 4th of July,' and then everyone else worked around that for self-preservation. If there were detailed metrics that went with that decision, I don't know of that."

<sup>7</sup> Gladwell, M. (2006 October 16). The formula: What if you built a machine to predict hit movies? *The New Yorker*. Lewis, J. (2013). Following the money in America's sunniest company town: some notes on the political economy of the Hollywood blockbuster. In *Movie blockbusters* (pp. 73-83). Routledge. Marich, R. (2005). *Marketing to moviegoers: A handbook of strategies used by major studios and independents*. Focal Press.

<sup>8</sup> "In the late '70s, I had a passion project - a book - I wanted to buy, so at the Wednesday meeting, I made the pitch to the 15 or so execs around the table, with Ned Tanen at the head. I got nowhere. So, the following Wednesday I brought it up again, this time, really passionately. No go again. So, the third Wednesday I got on my feet and walked around the table and wouldn't shut up about the book. Finally, Ned said, 'Peter meet me in my office after this meeting.' So, in Ned's office, I opened my mouth again, and his response interrupting me was 'Jesus, Peter, if you want that book so badly, buy the [expletive] thing.' So, I went to Viking, made an offer, only to learn that Bob Redford was coming in the next day to meet the president of Viking about that book. He got it for ONE HALF what I offered, and I had James Bridges to do the adaptation and direct, with Jerry Weintraub producing. It was *Ordinary People* and it got the Best Picture Oscar....Bottom line, at the time story was everything." Saphier, P. (31 October 2018). Interview by email.

<sup>9</sup> "George Lucas was a film student at the time *Star Wars* was conceived; Bob Zemeckis and Michael J Fox were not the stars that *Back to the Future* made them, so it was a combination of talent and luck that made these films wildly successful." Craig, T. (1 November 2018). Interview by email.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Saphier (2018) recalled that, "John Ptak, an agent at William Morris [one of the preeminent talent agencies] at the time, brokered my deal in 1983 to leave Universal Studios and assume the head of motion pictures post at a new studio called Taft Entertainment. Similarly, in terms of sourcing future talent deals at the studios, there was (and still is) a constant flow of agents and managers to studio executive positions."

## Chapter 1

<sup>1</sup> For example, as pointed out by Soloveichik (2013), one of the most valuable assets of any studio is its film library, which generates millions of dollars in revenue annually. Even a 50-year-old film will have a value which it will add to the worth of that library. Case in hand, the much derided *Waterworld* (1995) considered one of the biggest financial flops of all time, broke into profit 20 years later. Also see Fair play for *Waterworld*. (16 August 2015). *Hollywood Elsewhere*. Retrieved from <http://hollywood-elsewhere.com/2015/08/fair-play-waterworld/>

<sup>2</sup> Sedgwick & Pokorny, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Inflation adjusted in descending order of box office revenue gross. Retrieved from <http://www.filmsite.org/boxoffice.html>

<sup>4</sup> Theatre attendance and box-office revenues declined, but admission prices soared. Receipts did not decline nearly as sharply as the number of admissions because of the very rapid rise in prices. See Crandall, R. W. (1975). *Antitrust Bull*, 20, 49.

<sup>5</sup> The use of the word is a reflection on the quality of the scholarship as well as on the unique database that the scholars derived from the unabridged Eddie Mannix (MGM), C.J. Trevlin (RKO) and William Schaefer (Warner Bros.) ledgers. (These ledgers were previously incompletely presented by Glancy (1992, 1995) and Jewell (1994)). They include data on each movie, its release date, budget, distributor rentals, and the profits generated for each MGM and RKO movie.

<sup>6</sup> See Taylor, A. J. P. (1965) *English History 1914-1945*. Oxford Paperbacks, 313.

<sup>7</sup> Problematic in the Studio Era when actors were simply assigned to specific productions without much of a choice due to being under contract

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<sup>8</sup> *Jaws* opened 20 June 1975 on 409 screens in the United States building up to a total of 675, whereas *X-Men (2011)* opened on 3,641 screens.

<sup>9</sup> Not all movies packaged as blockbusters are released as such if test screenings etc. indicate an inferior product. For instance, *Heaven's Gate (1980)* opened on two screens. However, the majority still enjoy a wide release as it is often too late to cancel screens, as these are booked months in advance.

<sup>10</sup> According to Sedgwick (email correspondence with author), a wide release of, say, 3,641 screens is a saturation release. For instance, in 2011 there were 5,697 cinema sites in the U.S. This would mean that the movie would be featured in 64 percent of them. See <http://www.natoonline.org/statisticssites.htm>

<sup>11</sup> There were 40,837 screens in 2018. See <http://www.natoonline.org/data/us-movie-screens/>. And, 5,803 cinema sites. See <http://www.natoonline.org/data/us-cinema-sites/>

<sup>12</sup> Some movies with high production costs are downgraded to a standard or sub-par theatrical release after poor test screenings.

<sup>13</sup> Epstein observes that the high incidence of success resulting from the studios' publicity campaigns for blockbusters has led to the latter recycling these elements into endless sequels that become proprietary franchises from which they earn most of their profits.

<sup>14</sup> As determined by production budget, pre-emptive saturation theatre booking, expensive television advertising campaigns etc.

<sup>15</sup> [https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0005573/bio?ref\\_=nm\\_ov\\_bio\\_sm](https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0005573/bio?ref_=nm_ov_bio_sm)

<sup>16</sup> "In its first week, a movie with a star will have about twenty percent more screens than a movie without a star. By its fifth week a movie with a star will have nearly twice as many theatres as a movie without a star. And by the tenth week nearly three times as many" (De Vany & Walls, 1999).

<sup>17</sup> "In this respect, the adage that it is all about combining the right star with the right cast still appears to hold. An implication for studio executives is that betting solely on one A-list star is not necessarily the best strategy; they need to consider each star in light of the other cast members that have signed on to the project" (Elberse, 2007).

<sup>18</sup> "Commercial success and artistic recognition of motion picture projects. ... They constitute the main incentive for financiers to invest in a movie upstream," she explained, "and for U.S. moviegoers to buy a cinema ticket. Results also confirm the key role of producers as behind-the-scenes resources assemblers and coordinators." (Hadida, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> Jöckel & Döbler, 2006.

<sup>20</sup> Siminoski, T. (1974). The 'Billy Jack' phenomenon: Filmmaking with independence and control. *The Velvet Light Trap*, 13, 36.

<sup>21</sup> "From 1972 through 1974 the proportion of the average film's ad budget paid to newspapers dropped from 58 percent to 44 percent, while the amount paid to television in the same period jumped dramatically from 15 percent to 42 percent" (Wyatt, 1998).

<sup>22</sup> In the study examining the short lifespan and rapidly decaying patterns of revenue and exhibition of newly released films (Krider et al, 2005), it was recommended that studios "should consider spending more money on advertising after the opening week than they currently do (or in general, increasing post-release marketing effort aimed at pulling viewers into theatres). This alternative strategy appears to be particularly relevant to the extent that subsequent sales of videos, video games, and other products are driven by the number of people who see the movie in a theatre."

<sup>23</sup> Prince, 2002.

<sup>24</sup> Evidence is not conclusive about this statement and therefore using the word "gambled" instead of "knew" seems more appropriate.

<sup>25</sup> One of the more conventional studies in focusing on the challenges of separating out the prediction and influence effects that Reinstein and Snyder cited was Eliashberg, J. and Shugan. S. M. (1997). Film critics: Influencers or predictors?" *Journal of Marketing*, 61, 68-78. Meanwhile, Reinstein and Snyder (2005) noted, "Reviews that come during a movie's opening weekend can influence box office revenue for the remainder of the opening weekend; such reviews have both an influence and a prediction effect. Reviews that come after a movie's



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opening weekend cannot influence opening weekend revenue; such reviews have only a prediction effect.”

<sup>26</sup> Reinstein & Snyder, 2005. Hadida (2009) noted that “if movies with positive reviews tend to be of high quality, then which of their reviews or intrinsic value is responsible for high attendance?”

<sup>27</sup> King (2007) acknowledged the concerns about methodology: “The use of a complete set of films from only one year is open to the criticism that other years might be different, but it avoids the problem of potential selection bias in the choice of films and the difficulty of making price adjustments to reflect the major economic and technological changes that have affected the film industry in recent years.”

## Chapter 2

<sup>1</sup> Craig, C. S., Greene, W. H., and Douglas, S. P. (2005 Winter). Culture matters: Consumer acceptance of U.S. films in foreign markets. *Journal of International Marketing*, 13(4), 80-103.

<sup>2</sup> See *Library basics: Primary and secondary sources*. Bowling Green State University Libraries. <http://libguides.bgsu.edu/c.php?g=227153&p=1505675>

## Chapter 3

<sup>1</sup> Adamczark, M. (2012). Multiplexes as the Limes of “Global Hollywood. In Zahrádka, P. and Sedláková, R. (Eds.), *New perspectives on consumer culture theory and research* (pp. 91-117). Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholarship Publishing.

<sup>2</sup> *The Godfather* sequel was not approved because of the genre but because of the narrative’s success. Having said that, for instance, several clones of *Dances with Wolves* (1990) were made because of the success of the genre.

<sup>3</sup> At a Friday night screening in New York’s east side, Gagi observed the audience in the theatre murmuring satisfyingly and loudly enough every time an enemy of the Corleone family was killed.

<sup>4</sup> From a cinematic perspective, this frustration, impotence and refusal to support the status quo, was arguably at its apex in Sidney Lumet’s *Network* (1976).

<sup>5</sup> Maas, P. (1968). *The Valachi Papers*. G. P. Putnam & Sons. It also was turned into a film of the same name (Columbia Pictures), directed by Terence Young, released less than eight months after *The Godfather* film. For Kefauver background, see <http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/investigations/Kefauver.htm>

<sup>6</sup> The poster for the film featured two men, without specific context about their relationship, kissing each other, an image in 1968 that would not have been accepted comfortably by mainstream audiences. See:

[https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0062760/?ref=fn\\_al\\_tt\\_2](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0062760/?ref=fn_al_tt_2)

<sup>7</sup> A question which must be asked, but which cannot be answered, is whether this narrative change of direction from the aforementioned “defeatist attitude” to something more empowering, set the tone for the overwhelmingly positive reception of the much more optimistic narrative of *Star Wars* (1977),

<sup>8</sup> One could speculate that this relatable narrative is what encouraged George Lucas to painstakingly craft his screenplay for *Star Wars* (1977).

<sup>9</sup> <http://unsworth.unet.brandeis.edu/courses/bestsellers/search.cgi?title=The+Godfather>

<sup>10</sup> Asimow, M. and Mader, S. (2004). *Law and popular culture: A Course Book*. Vol. 8. Peter Lang,

<sup>11</sup> See Trotsky, S. M. (Ed.) (1994). *Contemporary Authors - New Revision Series, Vol. 42..* Gale Research Inc.: Detroit, Michigan, 366-371.

<sup>12</sup> In 1971 he had shared the Academy Award for best screenplay based on factual material for *Patton* (1970): [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0066206/awards?ref=tt\\_awd](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0066206/awards?ref=tt_awd)

<sup>13</sup> Kolker, R. (2015). *Film, form, and culture: Fourth Edition*. Routledge.

<sup>14</sup> Heller, K. (29 November 2016). Al Pacino was nearly fired from ‘The Godfather.’ The rest is history. *The Washington Post*.

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Retrieved from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/al-pacino-was-nearly-fired-from-the-godfather-the-rest-is-history/2016/11/29/9e3f6ac6-aa86-11e6-977a-1030f822fc35\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.27df9d025ec6](https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/al-pacino-was-nearly-fired-from-the-godfather-the-rest-is-history/2016/11/29/9e3f6ac6-aa86-11e6-977a-1030f822fc35_story.html?utm_term=.27df9d025ec6)

<sup>15</sup> It could simultaneously be argued that Coppola thrives on the pressures created by this same system and is obviously more than adept in handling it to his advantage.

<sup>16</sup> Audiences might like to believe they are getting value for money used to purchase tickets. More likely the theatre owners were at least edgy and perhaps displeased as they could not turn over as many houses per screening day.

<sup>17</sup> In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Hollywood studios regularly release films they believe to be strong Academy Award contenders closer to the end of the calendar year.

<sup>18</sup> Life-styles for waiting in line to see 'Godfather.' (16 April 1972). *The Los Angeles Times*.

<sup>19</sup> According to Sedgwick (2009), "saturation releasing" simply means that the film is available to audiences in a greater number of locations.

<sup>20</sup> Paglia, C. (8 May 1997). At home with Mario Puzo: It all comes back to family. *The New York Times*.

<sup>21</sup> Shanken, M. (September/October 2003). The Godfather speaks: Francis Ford Coppola, the director of the iconic Godfather series, reveals secrets about the making of the epic saga. *Cigar Aficionado*.

Retrieved from [http://www.cigaraficionado.com/webfeatures/show/id/The-Godfather-Speaks\\_6147](http://www.cigaraficionado.com/webfeatures/show/id/The-Godfather-Speaks_6147).

## Chapter 4

<sup>1</sup> Mario Puzo only received \$80,000 for the film rights to *The Godfather* in January 1969. Lebo, H. (1997). *The Godfather Legacy*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 6.

<sup>2</sup> Gottlieb (2018) notes that "net points can be worth millions if a film has few or no gross point participants. *Police Academy* (1984) and *Clueless* (1995) made huge money for their profit participants, regardless of 'definition of profits.'"

<sup>3</sup> The plagiarized reference, according to Gottlieb, came from Helm, T. (1963). *Shark!*. Collier Books, 86.

<sup>4</sup> Ryles, Scott, et al. Predicting risk and return for a portfolio of entertainment projects. U.S. Patent Application No. 11/359,636.

<sup>5</sup> Gottlieb (2018) responded, "'For better or worse, *Jaws* seems to be firmly placed (by fans and critics alike) as a 'horror' movie. I prefer to think of it as a heroic adventure, 'men against the sea,' with a really GREAT antagonist."

<sup>6</sup> IMDB relies on crowd-sourced ratings data so likely it ends up being an average of a very large sample versus a small number of critics. Of course, it is not randomized but its crowd sourcing reflects an interest in film among dedicated fans and consumers. Also, see, Olney, A. M. (2012). Predicting film genres with implicit ideals. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 3,565. Retrieved from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3573840/>

<sup>7</sup> Named by the crew after Spielberg's attorney Bruce Ramer, who was apparently amused and flattered by the association. Gottlieb, C. (2010). *Jaws Log: Expanded Edition*. S.I.: Newmarket.

<sup>8</sup> Gottlieb (2018) reiterates what happened after the Universal Studios visited the on-location set to assess if concerns about production snags were resolvable: "There was a delegation of executives, but they went home satisfied we were doing the best we could under difficult circumstances. Steven and I, like the entire company, put our heads down and concentrated on doing the work, 'just doing our job,' and putting the requirements of the film ahead of personal angst and artistic ego."

<sup>9</sup> Regarding Dreyfuss, his prominence had yet to be established. He appeared in *American Graffiti* (1973), an ensemble piece, and *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1974), in which he had a starring role, had not yet been released when he was cast for *Jaws*.

<sup>10</sup> Gottlieb (2018) recalls: "Everyone was flying by the seat of his or her pants, and luckily everyone got it right."

<sup>11</sup> In conversation with Alex Ross (June 2006).

<sup>12</sup> The Rolex advertisement appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*. 21 November 1975.

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<sup>13</sup> *Variety* only takes a small sample size of box office performance at select theatres; it does not cover all the theatres in which films are released simultaneously. In this case it was reporting on about 10 percent of screens.

<sup>14</sup> Asked when it was evident that Universal Studios was fully behind the film, Gottlieb (2018) recalls, "When they started marketing Jaws tee shirts and lunch boxes and pool toys."

<sup>15</sup> This suggests no stone was left unturned in the studios' quest for box office success, arguably at the expense of the director's artistic vision.

<sup>16</sup> Gottlieb (2018) recalls, "I personally heard Wasserman say that a line around the block was the best word-of-mouth."

<sup>17</sup> Gottlieb (2018) reinforced the point: "'David Brown and his partner, Helen Gurley, knew publishing, and through their combined connections in the trade, Brown got a first look at a lot of product. To his credit, he saw the value in the galley proofs of Benchley's novel."

<sup>18</sup> Gottlieb (2018) reiterated earlier comments about the producers "gaming the system" to keep the novel on the best-sellers list. "They did spend surreptitiously to bolster the book's appearance of success," he explained, adding, "nonetheless, the book was a popular read, a perfect 'summer beach book,' as that term is understood in the publishing trade.

<sup>19</sup> Singer, M. (11 May 2012). Charles Champlin on criticism, in an excerpt from 'Conversations at the American Film Institute with great moviemakers. *IndieWire.com*. Retrieved from <https://www.indiewire.com/2012/05/charles-champlin-on-criticism-in-an-excerpt-from-conversations-at-the-american-film-institute-with-great-moviemakers-129904/>.

## Chapter 5

<sup>1</sup> Countering the suggestions of Twentieth Century Fox executives who believed that summer films should be released after schools across the country had closed for the holidays in June.

<sup>2</sup> For a further discussion, see Hills, Matt (2003). *Star Wars in fandom, film theory, and the museum*. In *Movie Blockbusters* (pp. 178-189). New York: Routledge.

<sup>3</sup> Arguably the most comprehensive and well documented textual case study of a screenwriter, going to remarkable lengths, to reduce the risk of his screenplay not performing at the box office.

<sup>4</sup> The evidence strongly suggests that Lucas, who was the force behind the word-of-mouth campaign, saw this as his primary, if not only, key to success, as Twentieth Century Fox was initially not prepared to support the film adequately.

<sup>5</sup> Per his interaction with Coppola and Spielberg, Lucas was aware of the importance of using a text with an established fan base. According to Krämer, he tried to acquire the rights to *Flash Gordon*, but deemed them too expensive. With no other available texts providing him with the needed textual certainty, he decided to write his own screenplay. Peter Krämer (2018, December 30). Email.

<sup>6</sup> Cooray Smith, James (2017, 25 May). Starting Star Wars: How George Lucas came to create a galaxy. *New Statesman*.

Retrieved from [www.newstatesman.com/culture/film/2017/05/starting-star-wars-how-george-lucas-came-create-galaxy](http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/film/2017/05/starting-star-wars-how-george-lucas-came-create-galaxy)

<sup>7</sup> Scruton, Roger (2017). *The ring of truth: The wisdom of Wagner's Ring of the Nibelung*. The Overlook Press.

<sup>8</sup> Inspired by the Flash Gordon TV series: Thorgak (2011 September 15). *Star Flash Gordon Wars* - [Video]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qnOL8Fx3Tvc>

<sup>9</sup> Clarke, Ben (2007). Freedom of speech and criticism of religion: What are the limits. *eLaw J*, 14, 94.

<sup>10</sup> *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *The Graduate* (1967), *Easy Rider* (1969) and *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) being just a few of the many.

<sup>11</sup> A key to success reflected in the latter two case studies.

<sup>12</sup> Lucas met Coppola for the first time in 1968, when Coppola was Hired by Warner Brothers to direct the film version of the Broadway musical *Finian's Rainbow*. From there, Lucas and Coppola formed American Zoetrope in San Francisco, as opposed to Los Angeles.

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<sup>13</sup> Some have suggested Lucas was creating an appealing proto-religion to address the millions of adherents of the burgeoning New Age movement in the 1970s. See Satin, M. I. (1978). *New Age politics: Healing self and society: The emerging new alternative to Marxism and liberalism*. Whitecap Books: with Fairweather Press.

<sup>14</sup> Further research is needed to explore the cultural opportunity costs of this.

<sup>15</sup> IMDB estimates the production budget to have been \$777,000 and that the film underperformed at the USBO, earning \$2,437,000. Additional sources of revenue have not been documented for public. [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0066434/?ref=nm\\_flmg\\_wr\\_143](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0066434/?ref=nm_flmg_wr_143)

<sup>16</sup> For example: *Planet of the Apes* (1968), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *Rollerball* (1975) and *Logan's Run* (1976).

<sup>17</sup> Historically the studios had preferred a cautious cascade release of films in select markets, allowing their initial box office performance and any generated word of mouth to dictate the trajectory of the release. One of the accompanying discoveries of the early 1970's blockbusters was that a saturation release would provide the studios with a much quicker return on their investment and free up screens for other films, greatly accelerating the life-cycle of the evolving business model.

<sup>18</sup> Harrison Ford had been in *American Graffiti* but had not made enough of an impression so, at the time, he was working as a carpenter and as a casting session reader for *Star Wars* until Lucas decided he was simply the best for the job. Before *Carrie*, Carrie Fisher had only had a minor role in *Shampoo* and Mark Hamill was a television series actor with a non-starring, recurring role.

<sup>19</sup> Kurtz, in a 2002 interview, said, "I would say a regular comedy of that time probably cost about \$20-\$22 [million]. Depends on, above one, cast costs of course and a more expensive action-adventure picture with visual effects would probably be anywhere from \$25 to \$35 [million]. That would be considered expensive. So, \$10 [million] would be a real bargain as far as they're concerned, for an effects picture."

<sup>20</sup> Tom Pollock was George Lucas' lawyer who negotiated with Twentieth Century Fox on his behalf. He went on to become one of the key figures in Hollywood by acting as the Vice Chairman of MCA/Universal Studios, its leading film executive, between 1986 and 1995. Thompson, A. (1992). Beyond-the-pale riders. *Film Comment* 28, 4, 52.

<sup>21</sup> \$1,974,518 in 2019.

<sup>22</sup> Often attributed to Winston Churchill, but also conceptually to the German philosopher Walter Benjamin.

<sup>23</sup> Hubbert, J. (2003). Whatever happened to great movie music?: Cinéma-vérité and Hollywood film music of the early 1970s." *American Music*, pp. 180-213.

<sup>24</sup> Inflation adjusted value to 2019= \$46,907,948.

<sup>25</sup> Jim Shooter, editor-in-chief of *Marvel Comics* at the time, recalls that the comic books likely saved the publisher during an industry recession. "*Star Wars* the movie stayed in theatres forever, it seemed. Not since the Beatles had I seen a cultural phenomenon of such power. The comics sold and sold and sold. We reprinted the adaptation in every possible format. They all sold and sold and sold. In the most conservative terms, it is inarguable that the success of the *Star Wars* comics was a significant factor in Marvel's survival through a couple of very difficult years, 1977 and 1978." (2011) Retrieved from <http://jimshooter.com/2011/07/roy-thomas-saved-marve.html/>

<sup>26</sup> Lucas identified this demographic as the entry point for promoting his film, in the hope that it would generate the needed word of mouth to activate the studio's publicity machine. He is also on record as having speculated that they might be the only ones to ever go and see *Star Wars*.

<sup>27</sup> In the 1980s, Marvel Comics produced series for *Battlestar Galactica*, *G.I. Joe*, *Indiana Jones*, and *Transformers* along with adaptations of *Dark Crystal*, *Labyrinth*, and *Dune*.

<sup>28</sup> Lippincott, Charles. "Failed Star Wars Ad Concepts." 27 April 2016. <http://therealcharleslippincott.blogspot.com/2016/04/failed-star-wars-ad-concepts.html>

<sup>29</sup> Despite mixed reviews from critics, *Midway* was among the top 10 box office performers in 1976, earning more than \$43 million that year.

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<sup>30</sup> Representative filmmakers would be: Louis Malle, John Cassavetes, Martin Scorsese and Stanley Kubrick.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Evidence suggests that cinemas before 1979 mainly consisted of large screens with as many as 900 seats. With the advent of multiplexes and the carving up of the same exhibition space into a number of smaller screens, the ability to play to full houses increased as the number of actual (smaller) screens exponentially increased.

<sup>33</sup> All of these having been targeted by Lucas as proven keys to narrative success.

<sup>34</sup> Arnold reviewed for *The Washington Post* until 1985 and then joined the staff at *The Washington Times*, where he reviewed from 1989 to 2009. Interviewed by the Post in 2005 for a retrospective on his reviewing careers, he said he stood by his initial assessment of the film: “‘It’s clearly what is known in the trade (or was) as a selling notice but I don’t believe I oversold the nature of the fun to be had.” A native Californian, he added: “Lucas is a year younger than I, and I doubt if there was much difference between his boyhood movie going in Modesto and mine in Alameda and San Leandro.” He was glad to look back and see that he credited Alec Guinness with lending heft to the film; he regrets he didn’t cite the dynamic score by John Williams or the design work by illustrator Ralph McQuarrie.”

<sup>35</sup> The first edition of the comic books, although dated “July 1977” was offered for sale on the 12<sup>th</sup> of April of that year. Factoring in the limited release of the film starting on 30 May 1977, it is inconceivable that the latter significantly affected the performance of the text. <https://www.comics.org>

<sup>36</sup> This is based on the critical narrative differentiation between previous dystopian science-fiction texts, such as *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *Logan’s Run* (1976) etc. and the much more optimistic, myth-driven, upbeat themes of *Star Wars*.

## Chapter 6

<sup>1</sup> Callahan, M. (26 January 2016). How Grease beat the odds and became the biggest movie musical of the 20th century. *Vanity Fair*.

Retrieved from [www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2016/01/grease-movie-musical-john-travolta-olivia-newton-john](http://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2016/01/grease-movie-musical-john-travolta-olivia-newton-john).

<sup>2</sup> The following are excellent sources on the American musical on Broadway stages and cinematic scenes in terms of genre classification: Altman, R. (1987). *The American film musical*. Bloomington: Indiana University Publisher. Jones, J. B. (2003). *Our musicals, ourselves: A social history of the American musical theatre*. Hanover: Brandeis University Publisher. Schatz, T. (1981). *Hollywood genres: Formulas, filmmaking, and the studio system*. New York: Random House. Wyatt, J. (1998). From roadshowing to saturation release: Majors, independents, and marketing/distribution innovations. In *The new American cinema* (pp. 64-86). Jon Lewis (Ed.). Durham: Duke University Publisher.

<sup>3</sup> When *Grease* was released, Travolta was already a major star, as evidenced by the release of *Saturday Night Fever* in 1977. But when he was signed to the *Grease* film role, he was known primarily as the 22-year-old star of the ABC-TV sitcom *Welcome Back Kotter*.

<sup>4</sup> The director recalled that at first he was not enthusiastic about doing *Grease*. He thought it worked wonderfully on stage but was not thrilled about its film possibilities. But he said that the producer Allan Carr, convinced him that the film would make it. See Selinger, J. (30 October 1977). Director goes home again. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/1977/10/30/archives/new-jersey-weekly-director-goes-home-again.html>

<sup>5</sup> The first mention of the project was noted in *Box Office* magazine, 23 February 1976, announcing the deal between Stigwood and Carr, who already was a creative consultant to RSO (Robert Stigwood Organisation) on previous films such as *Tommy*.

<sup>6</sup> Reminiscent of the widespread opposition to *Star Wars* (1977) on the grounds that science-fiction movies did not perform at the box office.

<sup>7</sup> Also see Lear, L.: <https://www.questia.com/magazine/1P3-1307207881/robert-altman-s-innovative-sound-techniques>.

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<sup>8</sup> As per *Box Office*, 4 October 1976, "Travolta is signed for three films by Stigwood: Ralph Kaminsky."

<sup>9</sup> The chapter will dispute extant explanations for the hiring of Kleiser and argue that this was done mainly because the director, as a neophyte, would be easier to control.

<sup>10</sup> Upon graduating they also became flat mates in the Laurel Canyon section of Los Angeles.

<sup>11</sup> Graduated with a degree in drama from Hofstra University and did graduate work at University of California-Los Angeles in filmmaking.

<sup>12</sup> Attended California State University Long Beach, (because he did not have the grades to get into USC), but did not graduate.

<sup>13</sup> See <https://cinema.usc.edu/news/article.cfm?id=15269>, [http://www.fromscripttodvd.com/randall\\_kleiser.htm](http://www.fromscripttodvd.com/randall_kleiser.htm):

<sup>14</sup> The first mention of Kleiser as director, replacing John Alvidsen occurs in *Variety* on 4 March 1977. The article also references the script being developed by Woodard.

<sup>15</sup> See [http://www.fromscripttodvd.com/randall\\_kleiser.htm](http://www.fromscripttodvd.com/randall_kleiser.htm)

<sup>16</sup> As per *Variety* on 27 October 1976, Howard Rosenman and Renee Missel signed Woodard to adapt the novel *Heartbreak Hotel* by Anne Rivers Siddons for Universal with Peter Saphier as Universal vice-president.

<sup>17</sup> Symmons, T. (2016) *The New Hollywood historical film*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 159-194.

<sup>18</sup> A critique also leveled at *Back to the Future* (1985) for its historically inaccurate rendition of the 1950's.

<sup>19</sup> The exact numbers of albums sold remains unconfirmed because, for an inexplicable reason, neither the RIAA nor Universal Music Enterprises would say why the album's certification had not been updated since 1984. In figures from Nielsen SoundScan from 1991 to the present, the *Grease* album sold at least 5.3 million copies, in sixth place behind soundtracks for *The Bodyguard* (1992), *Titanic* (1997), *The Lion King* (1994), *O Brother, Where Art Thou* (2000) and *City of Angels* (1998), according to *Billboard* magazine. There is a gap in *Grease* album sales from 7 November 1984, the album's last certification and 1 March 1991, when Nielsen SoundScan began tracking album sales. Soundscan, Nielsen. "State of the industry." Nielsen Soundscan Report. National Association of Recording Merchandisers (2007).

<sup>20</sup> Winkler regrets turning down grease role. (2007). *Cinema Blend*. Retrieved from <https://www.cinemablend.com/pop/Winkler-Regrets-Turning-Down-Grease-Role-7880.html>. During a televised interview, Travolta mentioned that he hoped that Winkler would take the role of Kenickie. See <https://www.msn.com/en-us/music/gallery/john-travolta-wanted-henry-winkler-in-grease/vp-AAyHURz>

<sup>21</sup> By the time Travolta arrived on the *Grease* set he had already become an iconic blockbuster star with *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) returning \$94,213,184 at the US box office alone, on an estimated production budget of \$3 million.

<sup>22</sup> *Grease: Rockin' Rydell High School Edition* (2006). DVD. Paramount Studios.

<sup>23</sup> Vernacular for script in musical theatre.

<sup>24</sup> It should be noted that Kleiser's recall contradicts with the facts of the record, as indicated in the text.

<sup>25</sup> In a March 1971 edition of the British music magazine, *NME*, Newton-John commented 'Our film died a death and it was all a bit of a shambles. But it was a good experience.' Tobler, J. (1992). *NME Rock 'N' Roll Years* (1st ed.). London: Reed International Books Ltd, p. 224.

<sup>26</sup> According to IMDb.com: Lucie Arnaz was the first choice for the role of Rizzo. She was allegedly dropped from consideration when her mother, Lucille Ball, called Paramount and said, 'I used to own that studio! My daughter's not doing a screen test!' <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0077631/trivia>

<sup>27</sup> The average film budget by 1978 was about \$5 million – increasing dramatically to \$11 million by 1980 due to inflation and rising costs. <http://www.filmsite.org/70sintro.html>

<sup>28</sup> No data can be found on the prints and advertising (P&A), costs that were occurred for the movie and which could have been substantial.

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<sup>29</sup> A frequent obstacle to scholars seeking a better understanding of on-set managerial dynamics is that the industry has a long tradition of whitewashing all conflicted interactions, with the majority of relevant interviews consisting of scripted spin, confirming that the experience of working with others on a film was: "The best in the best of all possible worlds".

<sup>30</sup> See <https://www.the-numbers.com/box-office-records/domestic/all-movies/cumulative/released-in-1978>

<sup>31</sup> Echoing Meehan's validation of Smythe's observation (1977) that: "Media manufactured only one commodity, and that would be the audience."

<sup>32</sup> See Symmons, T. (2016). *The New Hollywood historical film: 1967-78*. Springer, p. 175. [Stigwood] explained in a 1978 Newsweek article (Rock tycoon. 1978 July 31. *Newsweek*, p. 41).

<sup>33</sup> Schatz, T. (1999). *Boom and bust: American cinema in the 1940s*. Vol. 6. University of California Press.

<sup>34</sup> The yellow brick road back to profit. (23 January 1978). *Time*, pp. 80-81.

<sup>35</sup> Kleiser (2018) responded: "Over the years, many have told me that when they channel surf and come across it they are hooked again and watch it to the end."

<sup>36</sup> One critic (Frank Rich) suggests that "camera work is film school simple, and movement within shots does not even reach the levels we are accustomed to in TV, whence Kleiser sprang or, more properly, stumbled." In his scathing review of the film, John Simon observes that "Randal Kleiser's direction succeeds in making proliferation look lackluster, and frenzy, routine; see Dog-day distemper. 21 July 1978. *National Review*, p. 908.

<sup>37</sup> Stigwood's credo was to promote the hell out of his pictures via soundtrack releases over the radio. But it was Carr who hired Olivia Newton-John overnight via the Helen Reddy dinner party.

<sup>38</sup> Kleiser (2018) offered this on the question about studios consciously manipulating their audiences: "If the studio thinks the public won't go for a film, by testing it or by just instinct, they will pull these bait and switch techniques. If they believe in the picture, they'll treat it in a classier more accurate way."

<sup>39</sup> Kleiser (2018) offered the following about the NRG data research efforts: "Focus groups drive directors mad. Mall goers suddenly become critics. Everyone has an opinion, just as everyone has a certain anatomy. One moron can force a director to lose a line or sequence when the studio gets nervous."

## Chapter 7

<sup>1</sup> The analytical focus revolves around the merits of and gaps in Hesmondhalgh's Cultural Industries approach. See Hesmondhalgh, D. (2002). *The cultural industries*. SAGE Publications, Ltd., 33.

<sup>2</sup> See also Thorburn, J. (1998). *Eighties teen movies - Nostalgia, thy name Is Judd Nelson*. Retrieved from <http://www.80s.com/saveferris/essays/thorburn.txt>

<sup>3</sup> See Hesmondhalgh, *The cultural industries*. 240.

<sup>4</sup> Wittenberg, D. (2006). Oedipus multiplex, or, the subject as a time travel film: two readings of Back to the Future. *Discourse*, 28(2), 51-77.

"All of these characters are updates of stock figures from older subgenres of science fiction adventure: the smart but impetuous boy hero, the family members whose influence the hero must outgrow (or grow to understand anew), the older but still young-at-heart scientist-mentor, the idealized and therefore characterless love interest, and finally, the un-killable but ultimately ineffective nemesis - here, Biff Tannen (Thomas F. Wilson), who appears throughout the film and its sequels in various incarnations."

<sup>5</sup> Significantly challenging the veracity of William Goldman's "nobody knows anything" school of thought and its assertion that the risk element in film manufacture cannot be decreased and revenue not enhanced, that the financial success or failure of a film is predominantly a game of chance.

<sup>6</sup> It eventually would launch one of the most successful franchises of all time with earnings of \$418 million, not adjusted for inflation. See <http://www.filmsite.org/series-boxoffice.html>

7 The film generated \$76,572,238 at the U.S. box office. Retrieved from <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=romancingthestone.htm>

8 See Stoltz, E. *IMDb.com*. Retrieved from [http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000655/?ref\\_=nv\\_sr\\_6](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000655/?ref_=nv_sr_6)

9 See Fox, M. *IMDb.com*. Retrieved from [http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000150/?ref\\_=nv\\_sr\\_1](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000150/?ref_=nv_sr_1)

10 Mell, E. (2005). *Casting might-have-beens: A film by film directory of actors considered for roles given to others*. McFarland.

11 A conviction shared by the directors of all five case studies in this thesis.

12 Maccoby, M. (2004). Why people follow the leader: The power of transference. *Harvard Business Review*, 82(9), 76-85. He explores the issue further (2007): *The leaders we need: And what makes us follow*. Harvard Business Press.

13 This provides additional confirmation that the studios were learning by example, in that a rapid saturation release was now seen as the optimal release mode to maximize returns. It also meant shorter and increasingly widespread advertising campaigns.

14 *Star Wars, Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back* (1980): grossed \$209 million (domestic); *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) grossed \$242 million (domestic); *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) grossed \$435,110,554 (domestic); *Star Wars: Episode VI - Return of the Jedi* (1983) grossed: \$309,125,409 (domestic); *Ghostbusters* (1984) grossed: \$238,632,124 (domestic); *Back to the Future* (1985), grossed : \$210,609,762 (domestic). *IMDb.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.imdb.com>

15 The inflation-adjusted equivalent of \$873,585,724 in 2019.

16 "Our analysis and examples illustrate that by utilizing the game theoretic strategies of credible commitment, signalling, tacit coordination and knowing when to concede, studios can improve their competitive position and increase their payoffs." Pour-Moezzi, P (13 June 2010). Studio wars. The game theory of movie release dates. *Berkeley Education*.

17 Einav, L. (2002). "Seasonality and competition in time: An empirical analysis of release date decisions in the U.S. motion picture industry. Retrieved from <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/99e6/b8f84d77af4cd93acc7cea9aaefcd08d70ee.pdf>

18 As defined by the Federal Trade Commission: Retrieved <https://www.ftc.gov/enforcement/anticompetitive-practices>

19 This data also seriously refutes the many critics of the so-called "saturation release" protocols, as well as issues of "control" and "manipulation" raised by film studies scholars. How can the presence of a text on less than 11.22 percent of all available screens in the US be in any way seen as monopolistic or manipulative?

20 Movies with the widest openings at the box office. *Box Office Mojo*. Retrieved from [www.boxofficemojo.com/alltime/widest.htm?page=WIDEST](http://www.boxofficemojo.com/alltime/widest.htm?page=WIDEST).

21 Regarding how MCA and Universal Studios addressed the matter of ever-rising costs of productions for theatrical releases, the following was noted in MCA's 1985 annual report: "The amount of revenues derived from a theatrical film is a result of the commercial acceptance by the public and cannot be projected on the basis of production costs expended. The Company has attempted to minimize the risks inherent in the film business by producing and investing in a broad range of product, while closely monitoring the cost of individual films. The Company's long-term Pay TV agreements with several major Pay TV services assure substantial revenues for theatrical films produced which, in addition to the fast-growing videocassette market, significantly reduce the risk of investment in theatrical production."

22 Though the *Terminator* franchise was an obvious success story, the filmmakers behind *Back to the Future* clearly selected the contrasting, more upbeat, softer angle on the theme that had worked for Lucas in *Star Wars*.

23 Zemeckis also directed an adaptation of *A Christmas Carol* in 2009 and has frequently cited Frank Capra's film *It's a Wonderful Life* (Capra) as a time travel narrative, which directly influenced the second act of *Back to the Future Part II* (Zemeckis).



- <sup>24</sup> “Now considered to be a prelude to the blockbuster era, with its associated values of commercialism and conservatism”. Dwyer, M. (2015). *Back to the Fifties: Nostalgia, Hollywood film, and popular music of the Seventies and Eighties*. Oxford University Press, 15
- <sup>25</sup> Hesmondhalgh notes, “One important example of the increasing importance of marketing is the increasing intensity of efforts to use market research as a means of controlling risk.” He cites Wyatt’s research on the marketing of high concept films. See Hesmondhalgh. *The cultural industries*, 157. Wyatt, J. (1994). *High concept: Movies and marketing in Hollywood*. University of Texas Press.
- <sup>26</sup> Deters, M. (1993). *Raiders of the Lost Ark and the Hollywood tradition: nostalgia, parody, and postmodernism*. (Unpublished master’s thesis). Eastern Illinois University.
- <sup>27</sup> Zemeckis and Gale explained this in the video commentary about the making of the film, which accompanied the 2002 release in DVD format of *Back to The Future*.
- <sup>28</sup> A classic summary of how the term ‘culture’ is used is found in Kroeber, A. L. and Kluckhohn, C. (1952). Culture: A critical review of concepts and definitions. Papers. Peabody Museum of Archaeology & Ethnology, Harvard University.
- <sup>29</sup> Robert Zemeckis discusses Eric Stoltz in *Back to the Future*. (29 September 2015). *Slashfilm.com* Retrieved from <http://www.slashfilm.com/robert-zemeckis-discusses-eric-stoltz-in-back-to-the-future/>
- <sup>30</sup> Campbell, J. (1949). *The Hero with a thousand faces*. Princeton. Princeton University Press, 23. Also see Bartlett, M. (2015). The future is now: revisiting the present in *Back to the Future*. *Screen Education*, 79, 16-25.
- <sup>31</sup> Surprisingly, even though it was the top box office revenue generator for 1985, the first *Back to the Future* film, according to *Box Office Mojo* tracking figures, took more time than any other blockbuster in Hollywood history to reach the \$200-million mark
- <sup>32</sup> Meehan, E. (1991). Holy commodity fetish, Batman!: The political economy of a commercial intertext, 49.
- <sup>33</sup> Reflecting the strategic turn-around of the largely disastrous production narrative of *Jaws* into an enticing one, that drew massive audiences to the cinemas.
- <sup>34</sup> According to *IMDb.com* *The Outsiders* ironically included in its cast a number of actors who were to define their generation and beyond: Tom Cruise, Matt Dillon, Patrick Swayze and Rob Lowe. The budget of the film is estimated to have been \$10,000,000 and the film is estimated to have earned \$25,600,000 at the U.S. box office. Bearing in mind that this does not include revenue generated in foreign territories, as well as ancillaries (Home Video, Cable, Airplanes etc.) this did not define it as a flop. But when factoring in the various elements associated with comprehensive revenue generation, which included the sales figures of the novel of the same title, it was a disappointment. Retrieved from [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0086066/?ref\\_=nv\\_sr\\_1](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0086066/?ref_=nv_sr_1)
- <sup>35</sup> Steven Spielberg. *IMDb.com*. Retrieved from [http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000229/?ref\\_=ttfc\\_fc\\_cr6#producer](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000229/?ref_=ttfc_fc_cr6#producer)
- <sup>36</sup> Kathleen Kennedy. *IMDb.com*. Retrieved from [http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0005086/?ref\\_=ttfc\\_fc\\_cr4](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0005086/?ref_=ttfc_fc_cr4)
- <sup>37</sup> Frank Marshall. *IMDb.com*. Retrieved from [http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0550881/?ref\\_=ttfc\\_fc\\_cr5](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0550881/?ref_=ttfc_fc_cr5)
- <sup>38</sup> Pokorny, M. and Sedgwick, J. (2010). Profitability trends in Hollywood, 1929 to 1999: somebody must know something. *The Economic History Review*, 63(1), 56-84.

## Conclusion

<sup>1</sup> Leipzig, A. (3 November 2018, interview). “For 100 years, the studio business model worked. That’s why the studios existed for so many decades. It was a portfolio business model, where most films were singles or doubles, a few lost money, and there may be one or two home runs in a year. That model worked UNTIL [his emphasis added] Amazon, Google, Netflix, and Apple appeared and changed the model to one that favors companies that own audiences instead of companies that own content, which is why Disney was able to buy Fox. Look for Paramount and Sony to be absorbed by larger entities, too.”

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<sup>2</sup> “In my day, NRG was very powerful. We used them pretty much every night of the year for audience research previews. They also did a quarterly report that all the studios collectively funded. As I remember each of the studios ponied up \$200,000 for the quarterly report - It was all about demographics and the shifting marketplace. Joe Farrell was the kingmaker but he has passed on. They also owned a Cray computer which constantly analysed data”. Kirkpatrick, D. (7 November 2018, interview). Kirkpatrick is former president of production at Paramount Studios.

<sup>3</sup> This observation is admittedly one based on the absolute paucity of reliable, empirically sound data (as suggested in the methodology chapter) and will not be validated until the studios decide to release such to scholars. Until such a day, the possibility of ongoing, pervasive, across the board manufactured budget inflation and its concomitant correlation (from the perspective of audiences) - a manipulation which infers that the size of a budget is directly associated with the quality of the entertainment - must be borne in mind.

The End.