The Rise of the Comic Book Movie

Looking at the hit movies released by Hollywood over the past 20 years, one is struck by the large number of them that are based on comic books (aka "graphic novels"). X-Men, Spiderman, Batman, Iron Man, Superman, the Transformers ... why? Whether you find these movies interesting or puerile, entertaining or boring, it's an interesting question.

The answer seems to lie in some major changes both in the film industry and in society at large. Let's begin with the film industry.[[1]](#footnote-1) It's important to remember that this is a business like most, aimed at making money by providing a service or product for a market. Nothing has changed in this regard in over a hundred years of American cinema. But during the first half of Hollywood history, up to about 1950, Hollywood studios were vertically integrated companies, with a business model tied to that structure. That is, the studios produced movies internally, choosing actors, writers, directors, and so forth from employees under contract; the studios then distributed their product to theaters they often owned. The vast majority of their capitalization was actually in real estate. And from the 1920s until the 1950s, there were five major studios, built up in several cases from mergers along the way: Loews (MGM); Paramount; Warner Brothers; Fox (Twentieth Century Fox); and the short-lived RKO.

Their general business model, which I call the buffet model, was to produce a continuous flow of movies of all genres: westerns, thrillers, mysteries, "women/s movies," comedies, and so forth. They also put out a lot of shorts—brief documentaries, cartoons, and the like. The idea was to target all kinds of audiences, having different kinds of tastes, and keep their theaters filled. Remember, they earned money directly from ticket sales and concessions. In this they succeeded. In 1925, over 300 films were released—in a nation dramatically smaller in population than it is today. Between 1930 and 1940, the time of the Great Depression, the figure was over 350 a year, i.e., about a movie a day. Production dropped during the war, to a low of 225 in 1945, but rebounded to over 250 by 1950.

During the ensuing 25 years, however, production of new films dropped linearly, hitting about 100 in 1975 and staying fairly constant until rather recently. During this decade the number has averaged about 190 per year. One of the biggest factors in all this was the 1948 Paramount decision by the U.S. Supreme Court, which viewed the major studios as an oligopoly, that is, a small group of businesses exercising monopoly control of a market, and ruled that henceforth they could not control exhibition as well as production and distribution. Studios could produce flicks and peddle them to theaters, but not own or run the theaters. The Great Hollywood Divorce did not end the studios, of course; but by depriving them of their reliable source of income—the exhibition side—it forced them to change their business model. They had to focus on making money from the production side, from the widespread rental of their films to the now independent theaters.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The new way of doing business was what I call the blockbuster model. The idea was no longer to produce a large number of movies, most making modest profit by appealing to audiences of different tastes as the movies circulated to theaters across the country over a two year period. No, it was now was to produce fewer movies and keep aiming them at a mass audience, releasing them simultaneously at theaters nationwide, hoping for huge revenues from a successful competition with TV. In the '60s it was movies such as ""The Sound of Music"; in the '70s, "The Godfather," ""The Poseidon Adventure," and especially "Star Wars."

As the blockbuster model developed into its "Star Wars" phase, it involved not just producing a big hit in theaters (with lots of sequels) but also retaining merchandise tied to the hit. "Star Wars" earned more from merchandise sales than from ticket sales. The 1989 "Batman" earned four times as much from its merchandise as from tickets. Merchandise used to be just T-shirts and other branded items; it now includes video games and a great variety of other stuff. Now, the audience most likely to go to a theater is often a younger one, from early teens to twenty-somethings. This is, not coincidentally, the age group most likely to buy film merchandise; it is a rare 50-year-old who is brave enough to wear a Batman T-shirt.

Here we have come to the social change. During the past few decades, the amount of reading—especially of literature—that is done by elementary and secondary students has dropped significantly. There are several interconnected reasons for this, involving the decline of the family and the mediocrity of the public schools, which have dropout rates of roughly one-quarter for white students and one-half for black and Latino students. It's no surprise that reading has suffered. And of course, TV viewing has risen since the 1960s. A recent study reports that the average student spends 12 hours a week watching TV, and only one hour reading[[3]](#footnote-3). Studios produce most of their fare for a young American audience that has a declining exposure to and appreciation of literature.

To appeal to this audience, the studios turn to the material that young people spend their leisure time on. This naturally includes comic books, video games (hence movies such as the "Lara Croft, Tomb Raider" series), and TV shows (hence the "Charlie's Angels" movies, and the current ""Simpsons" and "X- Files" films). The studios are doing exactly what their business model and their understanding of their target market dictates: trying to come up with blockbusters that appeal to a mass audience with a high number of nonreaders in it.

Where the studios see literature that does have a popular following, they are happy to produce movies based on it. "The Lord of the Rings" and “The Chronicles of Narnia" come to mind here, as does perhaps "Harry Potter." When Ang Lee produced "Sense and Sensibility," and it was a surprise hit, other Jane Austen books became flicks as well.

But for the foreseeable future, you will see American studios continue to produce movies based on pop culture of the lowest level of literacy. The economics of the industry and the quality of American education pretty much dictate it. And it's worth noting that both these things were in turn pretty much dictated by government.

This is not to say that pop culture movies are all we will have from now on. To begin with, there are an increasing number of independent films that occasionally make it into wide distribution (such as Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ"), and even when they receive only limited distribution, they can be rented for home viewing rather quickly. DVD sales and rentals have been a godsend for independent films.

Also, there has been a rapid spread of cinematic technology abroad. Gone are the days of grainy art flicks with low production values. What foreign producers now create has all the cinematic quality of American flicks, but often with more depth and diversity.

We are seeing the globalization of the film industry, and thank God for it, for in America, we can expect little but comic book films for the foreseeable future.

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1. The sketch I give here is filled out by Richard Maltby, "Hollywood Cinema/" Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 2003. The figures I cite when discussing the change in the Hollywood business model come from that source. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ironically, the Court's ruling didn’t help the theaters. Their number dropped by over half from 1947 to 1963. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Sandra Hofferty and John Sandberg, "How American Children Spend Their Free Time," in *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 63 May 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)