

MOVIES

and

Modern America

By RICHARD H. PELLIS

American films draw audiences because their lives are reflected in Hollywood's dramatic stories of love and loss.

What is a "typical" American movie? People throughout the world are sure they know. A characteristic American film, they insist, has flamboyant special effects and a sumptuous decor, each a reflection of America's nearly mythic affluence. Furthermore, American movies revel in fast-paced action and a celebration of individual ingenuity embodied in the heroics of an impeccably dressed, permanently youthful Hollywood star. And they feature love stories that lead, inevitably if often implausibly, to happy endings.

Yet over the past 15 years, for every high-tech, stunt-filled *Mission Impossible*, there are serious and even disturbing films such as *American Beauty* and *The Hours*. For every conventional Hollywood blockbuster apparently designed to appeal to the predilections of 12-year-old boys, there have been complex and sophisticated movies such as *Traffic*, *Shakespeare in Love*,

Magnolia and *About Schmidt* that are consciously made for grown-ups. What is therefore remarkable about contemporary American movies is their diversity, their effort to explore the social and psychological dimensions of life in modern America, and their ability to combine entertainment with artistry.

***Titanic* and the Myths About American Popular Culture**

Nevertheless, the stereotypes about Hollywood films are deeply ingrained. In 1998, while I was a visiting professor in Germany, I often gave lectures at various places in Europe on American movies. The reactions of my audiences were often the same. If, for example, I spoke to secondary school teachers in Brussels, Berlin or Barcelona, I would ask how many had seen *Titanic*. Half the teachers in the room would raise their hands, reluctantly. They would then look around to see if others were joining them in this confessional. Their embarrassment at having surrendered to yet another Hollywood seduction was palpable.

When I asked them why they saw the movie, they usually said that they wanted to understand better the tastes, however vulgar, of their students or their own children. Or that they were

1. *The Graduate*, starring Dustin Hoffman and Anne Bancroft, was among the 1960s movies that appealed to young adults disillusioned with a more innocent view of life.

2. *The Godfather*, starring Al Pacino and Marlon Brando, offered a melancholic view of American life in the 1970s. It was commercially successful and artistically appealing.

3. *Driving Miss Daisy*, starring Morgan Freeman and Jessica Tandy, was a quiet film of the 1980s that savored the triumphs and insights of ordinary people.

4. *Frances McDormand in Fargo*, an unconventional, character-driven movie of the 1990s.



A Conversation with Geoffrey Gilmore

By MICHAEL J. BANDLER

For 10 days each January, the small winter sports community of Park City, Utah, is transformed into one of the most vital spots on the landscape of American movies. The Sundance Film Festival unfolding there serves as a bellwether of what is transpiring, creatively, in independent filmmaking in the United States—that is, films made by independent producers outside the Hollywood studio system. Since 1990, as co-director and director of film programming, Geoffrey Gilmore has been responsible for film selection and the structure of the annual Sundance event.

From your vantage point, what are the most exciting developments in American movies today?

There is a whole new generation of directors who are doing movies on both sides of the line—independent, low-budget productions and major studio films. The idea that these two sectors would never meet was talked about at the beginning of the 1990s, but you can't say that anymore, not with directors like Todd Haynes (*Far From Heaven*) or Alexander Payne (*Sideways*) on the scene. Of course, there still are differences, not the least of which is that the average cost of a studio film is approaching \$60 million, plus another \$30 million for marketing and distribution, while the independent world has considerably lower budgets.

But creatively speaking, you do have a blurring of lines, don't you?

Major studios, by their very nature, are commercially driven. If a pro-

ject has a commercial aesthetic to it that also allows for creativity in direction, performance and writing, that's fine. But the studios would rather be on a much more predictable course as to what works and what does not.

You asked about the biggest change recently. There are a whole range of films being distributed theatrically that in the 1980s or even the early 1990s would not have been distributed at all. Some 250 studio films are produced each year, and another 350 or so independent/European art films are distributed. Also, you have more films independently directed by women—like Allison Anders, Nicole Holofcener, Rebecca Miller and Lisa Cholodenko. And there are more works by people of color. There's always been a black-genre cinema that existed under the radar, and it is now completely visible, with people like Gina Prince-Bythewood, John Singleton and the Hudlin brothers. There are Latino writer-directors like Robert Rodriguez and Gregory Nava. Recently, there was a world premiere of *Better Luck Tomorrow*, a film that came out of Sundance by an Asian-American filmmaker named Justin Lin.

This isn't a marginal achievement; it's very significant, and, in some ways, it's only in its initial stages. The independent sector represents less than 10 percent of the total box office. But it has infused Hollywood with remarkable talent.

What is a significant challenge facing young filmmakers and the industry as a whole?

You could say that the good news is the number of films being made,

curious to see what all the pandemonium was about, all the marketing and publicity and hype on behalf of a \$200 million adolescent fantasy. Not one of the teachers would admit that they went to see *Titanic* because they had heard it was good, maybe even a work of art.

The teachers did not know it, but they had internalized the criticisms of American mass culture, and especially of American movies, that have persisted for nearly a century. Since the 1920s, people both in the United States and abroad have been told that Hollywood's products are "bad" for them. According to the defenders of high culture, American movies are brash, superficial, inane and infantile. Worst of all, they are commercial. Like everything else in American life, movies are regarded as just another item available for consumption, perpetually for sale, a commodity to be advertised and merchandised, no different from detergents and

washing machines.

No wonder, then, that the teachers felt guilty at having gone to see *Titanic*. No wonder, too, that they acted as if they'd been temporarily slumming. They had not been bewitched by Leonardo DiCaprio, not them. They knew the film was preposterous. The very mention of the movie got a laugh from the audience; it was a guaranteed punch line with audiences everywhere. Indeed, it is this laughter that enables people to enjoy America's movies without suffering any pangs of conscience about wasting their time on such trivia.

American Movies in the 1960s and 1970s

Despite these century-long preconceptions about Hollywood movies, we should recall that—not so long ago—the films people the world over cared and argued about, that seemed to speak directly to their personal or social dilemmas, came

from the United States. From the late 1960s until the end of the 1970s, American filmmaking underwent an extraordinary renaissance. In few other periods were American directors so influential or their movies so central in shaping the experience and values of audiences everywhere.

One reason for this renaissance was that, with the advent of the counterculture, the major Hollywood studios were no longer certain about what sorts of movies would make money or about what the new, young audiences who came of age in the 1960s wanted. So the studios were willing, for a brief time, to let anyone with an idea make a movie. They turned over Hollywood to a group of gifted and often eccentric directors (Robert Altman, Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, Woody Allen) who wanted to make European-style movies: films that were mostly character studies, without conventional plots

and the bad news is the number of films being made. Distribution is a bottleneck, and I think it will be even more of an issue as the number of films produced increases and the democratization of film production continues. Today, using a good consumer-level camera and a final-cut pro program on a computer, you can make a movie with the level of production quality of a lot of things that are being bought.

A second major transition has been the “corporatization” of media. Today, almost all of Hollywood’s major studios are part of media multinationals. So you’re dealing with companies whose existence doesn’t necessarily depend on whether they do well producing films out of Hollywood, but on their other revenue streams, like cable channels or book and music publishing companies.

Do the creative giants of the past still dominate, or has a new generation truly taken hold?

The creative giants, the generation that came along in the 1970s, still have an enormous power—the Coppolas, the Scorseses, the Spielbergs. But their dominance isn’t singular. You have a very different economic situation in Hollywood now as far as how films are financed and budgeted. Four directors have come out of Sundance in the last two years who are now stepping up to direct \$100 million movies.

Do you see the economic downturn having ominous overtones for independent filmmaking?

The sources of funding that 20 years of stock market increases helped fund—the enormous amount of foreign sales and video-support work—are not going to be there anymore.

Is that going to stop a young adult with a camera and a dream from making movies?

No. It means that instead of an independent film being made for \$5 million, it may have to be made for \$1 million. And then it’s a question of whether or not that kid can get his or her film seen.



DOUGLAS C. PIZAC © AP/WIDEWORLD

Geoffrey Gilmore (right), who runs the annual Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah, chats in January with actor Daniel Craig at the premiere of his movie, Layer Cake.

To sum up, then, looking forward?

We’ve barely begun to see the impact of digital cinematography and digital filmmaking, and we can expect a lot of visual experimentation and stylization. From a broader perspective, though, the world has been introduced to a kind of independent production that cannot be labeled either as “art movie” or “studio film.” That opens up a whole range of possibilities for storytelling and writer-driven films that promise a diversity of content.

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CHRIS PIZELLO © AP/WIDEWORLD

or linear narratives, and with lots of stylistic experimentation.

Beginning in 1967, with Arthur Penn’s *Bonnie and Clyde*, the Americans released a flood of improvisational and autobiographical movies, many of them appealing especially to college students and young adults who were disaffected by the war in Vietnam and disillusioned with what had once been called, in a more innocent age, the American Dream. The movies included Mike Nichols’ *The Graduate*; Sam Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch*; Dennis Hopper’s *Easy Rider*; Peter Bogdanovich’s *The Last Picture Show*; Bob Rafelson’s *Five Easy Pieces*; Coppola’s *The Godfather* (parts I and II), *The Conversation*, and *Apocalypse Now*; George Lucas’

Tom Cruise (right) chats with anti-war activist Ron Kovic, the disabled Vietnam War veteran the actor portrayed in the 1989 film, Born on the Fourth of July.

American Graffiti and *Star Wars*; Spielberg’s *Jaws* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*; Altman’s *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* and *Nashville*; Scorsese’s *Mean Streets* and *Taxi Driver*; Alan Pakula’s *All the President’s Men*; Woody Allen’s *Annie Hall* and *Manhattan*; Bob Fosse’s *Cabaret* and *All That Jazz*; and the most wrenching film of the 1970s, Michael Cimino’s *The Deer Hunter*.

These movies offered a vision of an America drenched in loneliness, conspiracy and corruption, psychic injury and death. Yet despite their melancholy view of American life, the films themselves were made with wit and exceptional exuberance, reinforced by the vitality of a new and distinctly un-Hollywood-like generation of stars—Warren Beatty, Dustin Hoffman, Robert De Niro, Al Pacino, Jack Nicholson, Gene Hackman, Faye Dunaway, Jill Clayburgh, Meryl Streep.



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Hollywood and the End of the Cold War

During the 1980s, much of this cinematic inventiveness seemed to vanish. Yet even in a decade when people in Washington and on Wall Street allegedly yearned to be masters of the universe, the most memorable films were not the Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger special-effects extravaganzas. They were instead the inexpensive, quieter films like *The Verdict* and *Driving Miss Daisy*—movies that savored the unexpected insights and triumphs of otherwise ordinary people, and that offered an antidote to the clichés about America’s adoration of wealth and global power.

Despite Vietnam and the generational and cultural upheavals of the 1960s, American life was still shadowed during these years by the grimness of the Cold War. But at least the United States and the Soviet Union understood the rules of the diplomatic and ideological game; neither country was willing to embark on international adventures that might threaten the other’s sense of national security. All this changed with the end of the Cold War in 1989. The United States was now the planet’s sole superpower. Yet paradoxically, Americans found themselves living in a world of even greater moral uncertainties and political dangers—a world where terrorists respected no national boundaries or ethical restraints.

Contemporary American Movies

So having left the familiar parameters of the Cold War behind, Americans after 1989 could be equally moved by films with very different preoccupations. Two trends in American filmmaking were conspicuous, both inspired by the cinematic past. One was a passion (on the part of youthful directors like Quentin Tarantino, Steven Soderbergh, Joel and Ethan Coen, and Cameron Crowe) to replicate the unconventional, character-

1. Steven Spielberg’s 1977 movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* was a special effects landmark but also an intense character study and social commentary.

2. *The Blues Brothers*, starring John Belushi (right) and Dan Aykroyd (center) was a quirky, dark comedy that celebrated American music in 1982.

3. Kevin Spacey (seated), shown with Frank Whaley in *Swimming with Sharks*, is part of a fresh generation of actors who do not conform to the classic notion of a Hollywood star.

4. John Travolta, Rene Russo and Danny DeVito starred in the 1995 film *Get Shorty*, a unique blend of dark humor, violence and Hollywood insider jokes.

5. Brooke Shields (left) plays a documentary filmmaker in James Toback’s 2000 film *Black and White*, which deals with issues such as interracial sex, mixing of racial and social classes and bisexuality. Also seen in the photograph are (from right) Method Man, Kim Matulova and Eddie Kaye Thomas.



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Kim Basinger gives husband Alec Baldwin an affectionate touch after she won the Oscar for Best Supporting Actress for her performance in *L.A. Confidential* in 1998.

driven, movies of the 1960s and 1970s. This aspiration was exemplified in such films as *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*, *Pulp Fiction*, *The Usual Suspects*, *Fargo*, *L.A. Confidential*, *High Fidelity* and *The Royal Tenenbaums*. Thus, in its multiple narratives and sardonic dissection of American show business, Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia* was reminiscent of Altman's *Nashville*, while Rob Marshall's *Chicago* was structured exactly like Bob Fosse's *Cabaret*, with the events on stage mirroring the events in "real" life. In addition, American directors sought to resurrect the tradition, inherited from the 1960s, of the stylistically impressive, elliptical and nightmarish excursions into the world of tortured souls—an effort reflected in *Seven*, *Fight Club*, *Mulholland Drive*, *A Beautiful Mind* and *Insomnia*.

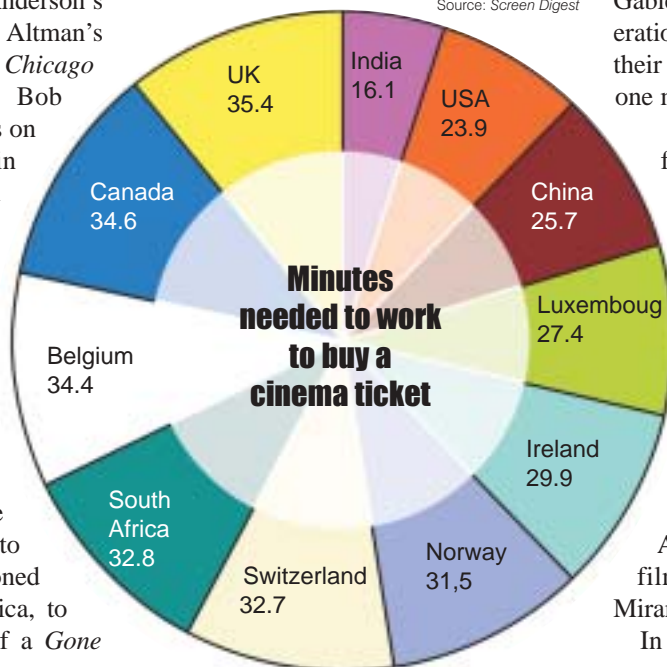
The other trend seemed more atavistic: the longing to return to the epic themes and old-fashioned storytelling of an earlier America, to rekindle the moral certitudes of a *Gone*

With the Wind or a *Casablanca*. No two films were more devoted to this project than James Cameron's *Titanic* and Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*—each brilliantly made, both filled with trust in a better future after all the hard lessons of life were absorbed.

But for all their indebtedness to the cinema of the 1960s and 1970s, American movies of the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century portrayed a society that the filmmakers and audiences of the counterculture and the antiwar movement would not have recognized. Near the end of *Bonnie and Clyde*, Bonnie asks Clyde how he would live his life differently. Clyde responds by saying he'd rob banks in a different state from the one he lives in. The audience shares in, and possibly smiles at, the ironic disjunction between the question and the reply. There is no hope here, only an anticipation of doom. In contrast, *Pulp Fiction* and *Titanic*—otherwise antithetical in their subjects and emotions—both strain for faith and re-emphasize the typically American notion that individuals can transform their lives.

Films of the past 15 years also introduced to their audiences a fresh generation of actors who were less emblematic of an unorthodox America than were the actors who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s. Nonetheless, Kevin Spacey, Russell

Source: Screen Digest



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Crowe, Brad Pitt, John Cusack, Matt Damon, Edward Norton, Frances McDormand, Gwyneth Paltrow and Julianne Moore—none of whom conforms to the classic notion of a Hollywood star—have given performances as vivid and as idiosyncratic as their illustrious predecessors. Unlike the iconic stars of Hollywood's classic era, who always seemed to be playing themselves—stars like Cary Grant, John Wayne, Gary Cooper, Clark Gable, Elizabeth Taylor—the current generation of American actors disappear into their roles, playing parts that differ from one movie to the next.

Most of their movies, although financed by Hollywood, are exceedingly offbeat, a testament to the variety of American filmmaking. One important reason for this eclecticism is the impact of smaller, semi-independent studios—like Sony Pictures Classics and DreamWorks—that specialize in producing or distributing avant-garde movies. No studio head has been more influential or more successful in promoting innovative American as well as foreign-language films than Harvey Weinstein of Miramax.

In many ways, Weinstein is the crucial



Above: DreamWorks SKG founders (from left) David Geffen, Jeffrey Katzenberg and Steven Spielberg share a laugh during a groundbreaking ceremony at their studio's new site in Los Angeles in 1995.

Above right: Gordon Parks (seated right) produced, wrote and directed *The Learning Tree*, a 1968 film about a black boy growing up in the 1920s, based on his own novel.



link between the movies of the 1960s and those of the past 15 years. Weinstein grew up in the 1960s, idolizing the films of François Truffaut, Federico Fellini, Scorsese, Altman and Coppola. When Weinstein launched Miramax in 1979, he wanted to produce the sort of challenging films he had adored in his youth. Which is precisely what he has done. Miramax has been responsible for bringing to the United States foreign films such as *The Crying Game*, *Cinema Paradiso*, *Il Postino*, *Life Is Beautiful* and *Like Water for Chocolate*, all of which made money despite the presumption abroad that Americans will only pay to see blockbuster movies made in Hollywood. But Weinstein has also supplied both the funds and sometimes the inspiration for many of the finest American films of recent years: *The English Patient*, *Shakespeare in Love*, *In the Bedroom*, and Scorsese's long-time

project, *Gangs of New York*.

Still, no matter how important the convictions and contributions of particular producers, directors or actors have been, what contemporary American movies have most in common with the films of the 1960s and 1970s is a seriousness of artistic purpose combined with an urge to enthrall the audience. These twin ambitions are by no means uniquely American. Wherever they have come from, the greatest directors have always recognized the intimate relationship between entertainment and art.

So while American movies are undeniably commercial enterprises, there is no inherent contradiction between the desire to make a profit on a film and the yearning to create a work that is original and provocative. Indeed, it may well be that the market-driven impulse to establish an emotional connection with moviegoers has served as a stimulant for art. Hence, some of the most unforgettable American films of the past 40 years, from *The Godfather* to *The Hours*, have been both commercially successful and artistically compelling.

The Universality of American Movies

Yet in the end, what makes modern American films most "American" is their refusal to browbeat an audience

with a social message. American movies have customarily focused on human relationships and private feelings, not on the problems of a particular time and place. They tell tales about romance, intrigue, success and failure, moral conflicts and survival. This approach to filmmaking reflects, in part, the traditional American faith in the centrality of the individual.

But American or not, such intensely personal dilemmas are what people everywhere wrestle with. So Europeans, Asians and Latin Americans have flocked to modern American movies not because these films glorify America's political institutions or its economic values, but because audiences—no matter where they live—can see some part of their own lives reflected in Hollywood's dramatic stories of love and loss. As a result, like so many people all over the world in the 20th century, foreign moviegoers might at present disapprove of some of America's policies while embracing its culture as in some sense their own. □

About the Author: Richard H. Pells is a professor of history at the University of Texas, Austin. His books include *Not Like Us: How Europeans Have Loved, Hated, and Transformed American Culture Since World War II*.