

## That's all, folks

**Big movies now cost \$100m and that figure is going up. How can the studios afford it? They can't. Film-maker John Boorman on an industry facing meltdown**

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When I was a child in the London blitz, a blockbuster was a massive bomb that could knock out a neighbourhood. The blockbuster movie, now utterly dominant and crushing better films, is set to destroy the Hollywood studios; the monster is turning on its makers. The blockbuster now costs so much to make and market that no one can afford them any more.

The American military, able to crush every opponent, is in danger of bankrupting the US. Is there an inherent flaw in a system whereby everything gets bigger and bigger until it collapses under its own weight?

Until the 1980s, movies opened in a handful of cinemas, one in each major city. There they would sit for a few weeks then roll out gradually as word of mouth created demand. Then they started advertising on national TV. It was so expensive that to make it worthwhile the movie had to be available at "a theatre near everyone". Radically, they opened with 1,000 prints, then 2,000, 3,000 and eventually 4,000. Five million dollars for prints alone. Costs escalate each year. Marketing a picture can run to \$30-40m, as they swamp the multiplexes in attempts to squeeze out the opposition. Between 25% and 30% of a blockbuster's box office will be taken in the first weekend.

Certain basic elements are required to manufacture one of these: an A-list star (\$20m) who will lend the picture instant recognition; spectacle and action, but no real violence or sexuality since the film has to achieve a PG rating (an R rating cuts the take by 30%); digital effects where the bar is raised with every picture. Industrial Light and Magic needed \$40m to make the creature in Hulk.

Dolby stereo and huge amplification in the cinemas give audiences an experience comparable to a rock concert. Typically the music will be almost incessant and costs several million dollars. A hundred million dollars is now the norm for a blockbuster and going up every year.

The studios can no longer afford them but must go on making them. More and more they swallow their pride and split costs with a rival studio. Massive German tax shelter money has kept them afloat for the last several years, but is running out. With stakes this high, they try to buy guarantees: subject matter that the audience can instantly relate to, sequels, films based on TV series that the audience watched as kids, or stars in a storyline that copies last year's big hit.

In my memoir, *Adventures of a Suburban Boy*, I describe how *Deliverance* was made. Warners hired me to write a script. I submitted it. They said, OK, if you can cast it and make it for a price, go ahead. How naive that sounds by today's standards.

Today, I would have received pages of detailed notes from a number of studio executives. I would have been obliged to hone the script down to a simple direct storyline that is clear and undemanding, and eradicate any eccentricity or quirkiness.

When the script satisfied their requirements, the studio would send it out to a star. If the star passed, the studio's response would be to hire a new writer. Further rejections by two or three stars and the project would be dropped.

If they found a star who was interested, the title, cast and storyline would then be test-marketed, asking people in the street if they would go to see such a film - four men canoeing a river and one gets buggered. Only with positive results would the studio go forward. Clearly, there is no place for originality in this method. In fact originality is anathema. How can you ask people if they want to see a film that they cannot relate to another film?

To this end, script gurus like Robert McKee have brainwashed a generation of screenwriters into constructing scenarios along rigid lines: introduction of characters, statement of conflict, development of narrative, division into three acts, carefully placed climaxes, conclusion. This contributes to the sameness of movies, and feeds into audience expectations of comfortable patterns and makes them uneasy if a film diverges from that formula. Little by little movies become more and more similar to each other, with marginal variations. One can imagine them evolving like No theatre into a form where only an audience inured to them can discern any differences. "Those Rocky movies," someone asked, "how do you tell them apart?" "It's easy," said his companion "they're numbered."

Ang Lee said of his experience of making *Hulk* that the blockbuster requires not talent but endurance. The nervous studio executives exert relentless daily pressure over every aspect of their investment. The other day a studio fired the cameraman on a big picture. The director was not consulted.

The studio will insist that every scene is shot in such a way that it can be malleable to editing, because when the picture is put together it will be test-marketed. Audiences will tell the makers what bits they don't like. These will be recut or cut out or reshot. The audience is asked to rate the movie as excellent, very good, good, fair, poor. To be successful, a film must achieve over 80% in the top two categories. If it falls short, recutting and reshooting will continue until it does. During this process, any remaining fragments of originality that have slipped through the net will be ruthlessly expunged.

Putting all their money into blockbusters, the major studios are making fewer films, down from 20-24 to 10-12 per year. Whereas films are traditionally developed by directors who work with writers and designers to shape a project to the point where it can be shot, the blockbuster is built by the studio.

They manufacture the script, decide on cast and budget. Only then will the studio audition directors. With fewer films being made, the competition is intense. More and more, directors will arrive with a visual presentation, often quite elaborate, with scenes from other movies or animated storyboards. With many directors vying for the first Harry Potter movie, Warners elected to assign it to the applicant who had made the most movies that had grossed over \$100m. The winner was Chris Columbus, famous for Home Alone.

Those of us excluded from this elite, or lacking the stomach for film-making of this order, are increasingly relegated to the mean streets of the independent film, the arthouse ghetto of low budgets and deferred fees.

The independent film has to squeeze into margins and corners not occupied by the bullying blockbusters. The finance is cobbled together from co-productions, tax shelters, territorial pre-sales and, if you are lucky, as I was with my film *Truth*, money from the Film Council (I won £2m on the lottery without buying a ticket).

It took 18 lawyers to reconcile the contracts of all the participants. During those long weeks as I waited in South Africa with my cast and crew, the picture teetered on the verge of collapse. A feature of independent films is that most of them fall apart, often days before they are due to start shooting, and, even sadder, sometimes a week or two after they have begun.

Legal fees were one of the biggest items in my budget. Everyone who puts in a bit of money, or introduces you to an investor, demands to be an executive producer. I ended up with 6 producers and 5 executive producers and 2 associate producers. Billy Wilder was once asked: "What is an associate producer?" "Anybody," he replied, "who's prepared to associate with a producer." When it comes to showing the picture to them, their lawyers, accountants and assistants, is there a screening room big enough?

But once the tortuous process of patching the picture together is accomplished, you make the movie without the advice and intercession of studio executives. Here originality is not penalised, an individual vision is allowed, ideas are tolerated, and the final vindication comes at the Academy awards, which have increasingly become an independent film festival. Somehow we stay alive, we limp along as we wait for the blockbuster to reach critical mass and implode. In the rubble and ruins of Hollywood, we will emerge to baffle and bemuse that pre-programmed audience.