Blockbusters

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BLOCKBUSTERS

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INTRODUCTION

The word "blockbuster" originated in the Second World War as the nickname of a particularly large bomb (1,000 pounds or heavier) of the type used in the Allies' aerial carpet bombing of military and civilian targets in Nazi Germany. It came to be used analogically in the postwar period, from about

1950 onwards, to refer to particularly expensive and potentially highly profitable American motion pictures (and subsequently novels, stage and television productions, and other cultural forms). Its original connotations were specifically commercial rather than aesthetic – it carried the implication that the film so described was a powerful weapon in the 1950s' struggle for dominance of the leisure and entertainment market, in which the cinema's traditional lead was being eroded by competitive forms and pursuits, most notably broadcast network television. However, the common association between high production values (the conspicuous expenditure of a big budget) and commercial success (actual or potential) meant that specific aesthetic features came to be identified with the blockbuster, such as exceptional length, a large scale, and various types of spectacle. While the blockbuster is primarily an economic rather than a generic category, it has historically been characterised by certain particular genres: the biblical or historical epic, the action-adventure film, westerns and war films, science fiction and fantasy, some musicals, and even a number of comedies. The blockbuster has also typically been associated with certain distribution and exhibition patterns: initially limited-release roadshowing, more recently mass-release saturation booking accompanied by intensive media advertising and promotion. Academic studies of the blockbuster (as opposed to those of its various component genres) have tended to concentrate on the modern period, from the mid-1970s, since when "Hollywood" and "blockbuster" have become virtually synonymous, though scholarship is beginning to extend its coverage backward, not only to the 1950s and 1960s but to films of the silent and "classical" studio periods, before the term blockbuster was coined but when films of the type associated with it came to be produced on a regular basis. There have also been some studies of epics and other large-scale films originating from European and non-Western sources, though the greatest volume of scholarship remains, inevitably, dominated by a concern with Hollywood as the world's most highly capitalised and globally penetrative film industry.

GENERAL OVERVIEWS

In seeking to describe and analyze blockbusters, writers in both academic and journalistic fields have used a number of different indicators, both economic and aesthetic, to identify the relevant films. They have tended to focus on the most commercially successful films in Hollywood's history, as is the case, for example, with Bart 2006, Hall 2002, and Sanders 2009, or the most costly, as with Hall and Neale 2010. All these texts range across a number of different genres and a very broad historical period in trying to account for patterns of production and consumption (a general context for which is provided by Izod 1988). Krämer 2005a, Krämer 2005b (cited under *Contemporary Hollywood*), and Shone 2004 concentrate instead on more recent decades, the period associated with "New Hollywood" (as it is variously defined and understood) and its particular emphasis on the "high concept" blockbuster of the type developed by Spielberg, Lucas, and others.

Bart, Peter, *Boffo! How I Learned to Love the Blockbuster and Fear the Bomb.* New York: Hyperion/Miramax Books, 2006.

One of the more interesting journalistic accounts, with twenty-seven case studies of milestone hits, including stage and television productions. Written by the executive editor of *Variety*, and drawing extensively upon the files of that publication.

Hall, Sheldon, "Tall Revenue Features: The Genealogy of the Modern Blockbuster." *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, ed. Steve Neale. London: British Film Institute, 2002, 11-26.

Concise general introduction to the Hollywood blockbuster, written by the present author, relating contemporary trends to their historical antecedents. The anthology also contains a wide range of articles on recent generic developments in American cinema.

Hall, Sheldon, and Neale, Steve, *Epics, Spectacles, and Blockbusters: A Hollywood History.* Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010.

The most comprehensive monograph to date on the Hollywood tradition of large-scale, big-budget super-productions. Ranging widely across a number of genres, the book spans the entire history of commercial cinema in the United States and also gives extensive coverage to distribution, exhibition and technological developments.

Izod, John, *Hollywood and the Box Office, 1895-1986*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988.

Compact survey history of the American film industry's commercial fortunes, mostly taken from secondary sources and now in need of updating, but accessible for neophytes.

Krämer, Peter, "Big Pictures: Studying Contemporary Hollywood Cinema through Its Greatest Hits." *Screen Methods: Comparative Readings in Film Studies*, ed. Jacqueline Furby and Karen Randell. London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2005a.

Articulates a methodology for analysing popular cinema based on the most popular films. The method is demonstrated at greater length in Krämer 2005b (cited under *Contemporary Hollywood*).

Sanders, John, "The Blockbuster." *The Film Genre Book*. Leighton Buzzard: Auteur Publishing, 2009, 387-457.

Makes the case for the blockbuster to be considered as a genre in its own right, with nine examples ranging from *Spider-Man 2* (2004) to *Bambi* (1942). The other six sections of the book include a number of other films which might have been eligible for the same category. Useful as a starting point for undergraduate or pre-university discussion.

Shone, Tom, *Blockbuster: How Hollywood Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Summer.* London and New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004.

Slick, somewhat facetious journalistic history of Hollywood since 1975, lacking the rigour of more scholarly studies, but an accessible starting point for younger and less sophisticated students.

ANTHOLOGIES

The very diversity of blockbusters as a phenomenon seems to have deterred the publication of more than a handful of general anthologies on the subject, Stringer 2003 being the sole scholarly collection announcing itself as such. Nevertheless, despite their overt concern with action movies in particular (arguably the archetypal form of the contemporary blockbuster), both Arroyo 2000 and Tasker 2004 contain a more varied set of articles than their titles might suggest.

Arroyo, José, ed. *Action/Spectacle Cinema: A* Sight and Sound *Reader.* London: British Film Institute, 2000.

>Collection of short articles and reviews from the British Film Institute's house journal in the 1990s. Sections devoted to Arnold Schwarzenegger, John Woo, comic-book and "ride" movies, "neo-noir," and serial-killer films, as well as to broader theoretical commentaries on action cinema.

Stringer, Julian, ed. *Movie Blockbusters.* New York and London: Routledge, 2003.

>Wide-ranging collection of mostly original articles, along with a reprinting of Schatz 1993 (cited under *Contemporary Hollywood*), covering historical, industrial, economic, and aesthetic matters. Mainly concerned with Hollywood, though the final section includes chapters on East Asian, New Zealand, Argentine, and Hindi films.

Tasker, Yvonne, ed. *Action and Adventure Cinema.* New York and London: Routledge, 2004.

>Compendious anthology of two dozen mostly original pieces. Sections devoted to film history, aesthetics, gender, nation and ethnicity, and authorship. Genres discussed include silent melodrama, epics, science fiction, war films, thrillers, and westerns. The focus is mainly American, though there are chapters on Hong Kong, Greek, Italian, and Japanese films.

TEXTBOOKS

Most of the large number of survey histories and anthologies which have been published in recent years include mention, more or less detailed, of the tradition of big-budget, spectacular super-productions in America and elsewhere. Thompson and Bordwell 2010 is perhaps the best of these for its comprehensive coverage of world cinema and its specific attention to aesthetic qualities as well as socio-political and industrial issues.

Thompson, Kristin, and Bordwell, David, *Film History: An Introduction.* 3rd ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010.

>A single-volume history of world cinema, encompassing industrial, technological and aesthetic developments, distribution, and exhibition, with coverage of silent American and European spectacles, postwar and contemporary Hollywood blockbusters, and other national cinemas.

Superbly illustrated, mostly with frame enlargements from the many films cited as examples of general trends.

BIBLIOGRAPHIES

The historical and generic diversity of the blockbuster tends to mean that reading lists of pertinent material can be found in a wide range of sources, including those cited under *General Overviews* and other sections herein. Perhaps the single most useful guide to further reading on the various genres encompassed by the blockbuster is contained in Grant 2003, whose selection of key readings also includes a number of specifically relevant texts.

Grant, Barry Keith, ed. *Film Genre Reader III*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003.
    The most comprehensive anthology of articles (mostly reprinted) on all aspects of genre also contains the most extensive bibliography on the subject, with titles grouped thematically. There are reading lists for action and adventure films, disaster films, epics, musicals, science fiction, war films, and westerns, among other genres.

SILENT CINEMA AND STAGE SPECTACLES

Silent film melodrama derived in part from popular theatrical traditions developed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, an influence discussed at length in Brewster and Jacobs 1997 and Vardac 1987 (the influence of "legitimate" theatre is discussed in Uricchio and Pearson 1993). The large-scale costume epics made in Italy and France also inspired the burgeoning American cinema, which, as it became increasingly industrialised, frequently turned to the production of lavish spectacles, often distributed and exhibited on a roadshow basis. Bowser 1990 provides a context for this in the early history of the American feature film; Brownlow 1992 celebrates its full flowering in the 1920s, partly through interviews with its surviving creators and participants.

Bowser, Eileen, "The Feature Film." *The Transformation of Cinema, 1907-1915.* History of the American Cinema. New York: Scribner's, 1990, 191-215.
    Discussion of the advent of the American-made long-form "feature" film and the special distribution and exhibition practices (roadshowing) associated with it.

Brewster, Ben, and Jacobs, Lea, *Theatre to Cinema: Stage Pictorialism and the Early Feature Film.* Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
    Detailed analysis of the ways in which American and European films adapted the pictorial (spectacular) stage tradition to the specific demands of the cinema. Sections devoted to the tableau, acting, and staging. Extensively illustrated, mainly with frame enlargements.

Brownlow, Kevin, *The Parade's Gone By....* Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1992.

Classic history of silent Hollywood, largely based on interviews conducted by the author with actors, directors, and other witnesses. Chapters devoted to key directors (Griffith, DeMille, William Wellman, et al.), epic productions (*Robin Hood*, *Ben-Hur*), and European films. Lavishly illustrated with production stills. Originally published in 1968.

Uricchio, William, and Pearson, Roberta E., *Reframing Culture: The Case of the Vitagraph Quality Films.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

History and analysis of early multi-reel features produced by a major American company, with chapters devoted to literary, historical, and biblical subject matter.

Vardac, A. Nicholas, *Stage to Screen: Theatrical Origins of Early Film: David Garrick to D.W. Griffith.* New York: Da Capo Press, 1987.

Pioneering account, first published in 1949, of the indebtedness of early American and European films to theatrical traditions of melodrama and spectacle (see also Mayer 2009, cited under *Key Films and Filmmakers*).

POSTWAR HOLLYWOOD AND THE ROADSHOW

Both the term and the concept of the blockbuster entered film-industry parlance in the early 1950s, becoming all but ubiquitous by the time widescreen and stereo sound processes were successfully introduced in late 1952. Although large-scale films were produced in significant numbers in the 1930s and 1940s, it was the first full postwar decade that gave particular impetus to big-budget films and specialised distribution and exhibition practices as a differentiated form of competition against rival entertainments. Casper 2007 and Langford 2010 are useful general histories of the period (the latter continuing to the present day). Balio 1987, Dunne 1985, and Silverman 1988 provide illuminating insight into two major corporations (United Artists and Twentieth Century-Fox), each in their way representative of an era of transition and turmoil. Houston 1957 and Lincoln 1976 offer contrasting contemporary views of the industry from either side of the Atlantic. Houston and Gillett 1963 looks more specifically at the roadshow blockbuster, then at the peak of its commercial influence.

Balio, Tino. *United Artists: The Company That Changed the Film Industry.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987.

The reorganized United Artists launched in 1951 inaugurated a new way for major corporations to do business with filmmakers. Balio's sequel to his 1976 volume *United Artists: The Company Built by the Stars*, likewise based on primary documents, includes chapters on "Making Them Big" and "Selling Them Big."

Casper, Drew, *Postwar Hollywood, 1946-1962.* Malden, Massachusetts, and Oxford: Blackwell, 2007.

Comprehensive if sometimes sketchy overview, with sections devoted to the impact of new technologies and popular genres including "Adventure" and "Historical Spectacle." Covers a shorter period than Langford 2010, but in less depth.

Dunne, John Gregory, *The Studio.* New York: Limelight Editions, 1985.

> Vividly impressionistic portrait by a leading screenwriter of Hollywood in the mid-1960s, focused on the increasingly troubled Twentieth Century-Fox. Usefully read in conjunction with Silverman 1988.

Houston, Penelope, "Hollywood in the Age of Television." *Sight and Sound* 26:4 (Spring 1957), 175-9.

> The editor of the BFI house journal reports on the condition of the contemporary American film industry. More astringent than Lincoln 1955, as might be expected from the source.

Houston, Penelope, and Gillett, John, "The Theory and Practice of Blockbusting." *Sight and Sound* 32.2 (Spring 1963), 68-74.

> Important contemporary study of the roadshow blockbuster. Critical, sceptical, but not entirely unsympathetic what the authors see as the better examples of the form.

Langford, Barry, *Post-Classical Hollywood: Film Industry, Style and Ideology since 1945.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010.

> Compact history of Hollywood since World War Two, periodized into three phases with case studies of milestone years at decade-long intervals. Key films are identified as "The Biggest, the Best" of each year (respectively the top earner and the Oscar-winner for Best Picture).

Lincoln, Freeman, "The Comeback of the Movies." *The American Film Industry*, ed. Tino Balio. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976, 371-86.

> Reprinted from *Fortune* magazine (February 1955), this journalistic survey offers an optimistic picture of the industry at a point of transition, as business seemed to be improving in the wake of new technologies and new production, distribution, and exhibition policies.

Silverman, Stephen M., *The Fox That Got Away: The Last Days of the Zanuck Dynasty at Twentieth Century-Fox.* Secaucus, New Jersey: Lyle Stuart, 1988.

> Incisive journalistic study of a major corporation on the point of collapse in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Particularly insightful on the studio's attempts to reproduce the success of its major hit of the decade, *The Sound of Music* (1965).

CONTEMPORARY HOLLYWOOD

As several writers have pointed out, there have been a number of "new" Hollywoods since the late 1940s, but for most purposes the modern or contemporary era can be said to date from the mid-1970s. The release of *Jaws* (1975) is generally agreed to be a defining moment, though not all scholars concur on the extent to which it marked a radical shift in industry economics (see, for example, Hall and Neale 2010: 209-12, cited under *General Overviews*). In any event, the dominance of the blockbuster is taken to be one of the key features of the current industrial formation,

as for example with King 2002 and the various contributors to Lewis 1998, McDonald and Wasko 2008, Neale and Smith 1998, and Williams and Hammond 2006. Krämer 2005b traces trends in the patterns of box-office successes from 1967 to 1977. Cook 2000 examines most of the key blockbusters from the 1970s, while Schatz's 1993 overview particularly cites the examples of Jaws, Star Wars (1977), and Batman (1989).

Cook, David A., "Manufacturing the Blockbuster: 'The Newest Art Form of the Twentieth Century.'" *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979.* History of the American Cinema. New York: Scribner's, 2000, 25-65.
> Summary of the impact made by the key blockbusters of the 1970s, with details of their marketing and box-office performance, concluding with a passage on notable big-budget flops. Useful explanations of the notions of "pre-selling," "high concept," and synergy.

King, Geoff, *New Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction.* London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002.
> Two of the seven chapters in this synoptic study are concerned specifically with the blockbuster; others discuss the Hollywood "renaissance," authorship, genre, stars, and the relationship between cinema and home viewing. See King 2000 (cited under *Reading the Blockbuster*) for more elaborate treatment of his ideas on blockbusters.

Krämer, Peter, *The New Hollywood: from* Bonnie and Clyde *to* Star Wars. London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2005b.
> Despite its comparative brevity, this history provides valuable insights into the contrasts between the roadshow era, the modern era, and the period of transition between them, and into the socio-cultural context of Hollywood's shifting relationship with its audiences.

Lewis, Jon, ed. *The New American Cinema*. Durham, North Carolina, and London: Duke University Press, 1998, 64-86.
> The four articles which comprise the first section of this anthology are particularly relevant to the blockbuster. See especially Justin Wyatt on distribution practices (64-86) and Lewis on "Money Matters: Hollywood in the Corporate Era" (87-121).

McDonald, Paul, and Wasko, Janet. eds. *The Contemporary Hollywood Film Industry.* Malden, Massachusetts, and Oxford: Blackwell, 2008.
> More up-to-date than Neale and Smith 1998, and more focused on specfically economic issues. Contains a useful section on Hollywood's principal foreign markets.

Neale, Steve, and Smith, Murray, eds. *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema.* New York and London: Routledge, 1998.

Important collection of original essays by leading scholars, with sections devoted to historiography, economics, aesthetics, and audiences. Several contributors consider the role of the blockbuster in marking the advent of the "new" Hollywood.

Schatz, Thomas, "The New Hollywood." *Film Theory Goes to the Movies,* eds. Jim Collins, Hilary Radner and Ava Preacher Collins. New York and London: Routledge, 1993, 8-36.

> The most influential, and frequently reprinted, short account of the transformation of the American film industry through the blockbuster in the 1970s.

Williams, Linda Ruth, and Hammond, Michael, eds. *Contemporary American Cinema.* Maidenhead and New York: Open University/McGraw-Hill, 2006.

> Weighty, comprehensive multi-authored historical survey of Hollywood since the 1960s, with three of the twenty-one chapters devoted to the blockbuster, including one on the roadshow era. Useful case studies of individual films and filmmakers.

DISTRIBUTION, EXHIBITION AND MARKETING

From the earliest roadshows onwards, blockbusters have been characterised as much by their release patterns and promotional campaigns as by their aesthetic features and production statistics. Distribution and exhibition strategies since the late 1970s have overwhelmingly favoured "instant" or mass releases with attendant intensive advertising, though there are many antecedents in earlier eras which have not often been acknowledged. Beaupré 1986 is a compact explanation of various distribution practices. Wyatt 1994 analyzes the driving force of marketing behind the "high concept" film. Bart 2000 and Hayes and Bing 2004 both examine a representative summer season (1998 and 2003 respectively). For a historical overview which contains detailed discussion of distribution ands exhibition, see also Hall and Neale 2010 (cited under *General Overviews*).

Bart, Peter, *The Gross: The Hits, the Flops – the Summer That Ate Hollywood.* New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2000.

> Case study by a leading trade-paper journalist of the state of the industry during the summer season of 1998, which saw the release of *Armageddon*, *Godzilla*, and *Saving Private Ryan*. Useful to compare with the account of the 2003 summer season in Hayes and Bing 2004.

Beaupré, Lee, "How to Distribute a Film." *The Hollywood Film Industry*, ed. Paul Kerr. London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986, 185-203.

> First published in *Film Comment* 13.4 (July-August 1977) and written by a *Variety* reporter under commission from Francis Ford Coppola, this is a clear and concise introduction to 1970s' distribution practices, which makes detailed reference to *Jaws*.

Hayes, Dade, and Bing, Jonathan, *Open Wide: How Hollywood Box Office Became a National Obsession.* New York: Hyperion/Miramax Books, 2004.

Two journalists trace the commercial careers of three films released in the summer of 2003 – *Legally Blonde 2: Red, White & Blonde*, *Sinbad: Legend of the Seven Seas*, and *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* – while looking back at earlier eras for points of comparison.

Wyatt, Justin, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994.

Excellent scholarly study of the relationship between production and promotion in the 1970s and 1980s, and the extent to which the former is increasingly driven by the latter.

ECONOMICS, ANCILLARIES AND GLOBALIZATION

Hollywood has always been conscious of the economic value of overseas markets, but these took on particular importance in the post-World War Two era with the shrinkage of the domestic market and the urgent need to overcome protectionist trade barriers. Today's industry operates in a global marketplace, in which foreign revenues frequently exceed those from the United States and Canada. Globalization is explored at length by Acland 2003, Grainge 2008, Grant and Woods 2004, and Miller, et al. 2005, while Phillips 1982 looks particularly at the international dimensions of the blockbuster. Non-theatrical, or ancillary, revenues similarly now dwarf the income studios receive from theatres, as television, home video, and the internet account for an increasing proportion of the movie business. In all these spheres, the blockbuster functions as a key asset for its stimulation of diverse sources of income. The studies by Epstein 2005, Wasko 2003, and Waterman 2005 provide the economic context for all these developments.

Acland, Charles R., *Screen Traffic: Movies, Multiplexes, and Global Culture.* Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2003.

Study of the "internationalization" of cinema and video, especially in the late 1980s and 1990s, with particular attention to exhibition spaces and delivery systems.

Epstein, Edward Jay, *The Big Picture: Money and Power in Hollywood.* New York: Random House, 2005.

An economist surveys modern Hollywood. Aimed at a popular readership and the historical material is not always reliable, but there are many detailed examples of contemporary business practice.

Grainge, Paul, *Brand Hollywood: Selling Entertainment in a Global Media Age.* New York and London: Routledge, 2008.

Studio logos are discussed as an instance of product branding, with the *Matrix*, Harry Potter, and *Lord of the Rings* films cited as examples of franchise marketing.

Grant, Peter S., and Wood, Chris, *Blockbusters and Trade Wars: Popular Culture in a Globalized World.* Vancouver and Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 2004.

A Canadian lawyer and media journalist analyze the manufacture and worldwide marketing of popular culture, including the cinema.

Miller, Toby, Govil, Nitin, McMurria, John, Maxwell, Richard, and Wang, Ting, *Global Hollywood 2.* London: British Film Institute, 2005.

An analysis and explanation of Hollywood's domination of the world film market, updating and expanding Miller et al., *Global Hollywood* (London: British Film Institute, 2001).

Phillips, Joseph D., "Film Conglomerate Blockbusters: International Appeal and Product Homogenization." *The American Movie Industry: The Business of Motion Pictures*, ed. Gorham Kindem. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982, 325-35.

Revised from an article originally published in 1975, this argues that blockbusters – notably the then-current cycle of disaster movies – enable American corporations to dominate the international marketplace, as only they are in a position to produce such high-demand, capital-intensive products (see also Elsaesser 2001, cited under *Reading the Blockbuster*).

Wasko, Janet, *How Hollywood Works.* London: Sage Publications, 2003.

Financially oriented study of the American film industry by a leading economic historian.

Waterman, David, *Hollywood's Road to Riches.* Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Harvard University Press, 2005.

Wide-ranging study of industry economics since the1950s. Aimed at a popular as well as an academic readership, with plentiful statistics and tables.

READING THE BLOCKBUSTER

Refusing a purely economic-industrial perspective, a number of scholars have examined blockbusters using approaches which include formalism, reception study, ideological analysis, and gender theory. This has often tended to involve an understanding of the blockbuster as exemplary of various aspects of contemporary Hollywood cinema, as fir example with Elsaesser 2001, King 2000, and Wood 2003. Accordingly, they feature prominently in anthologies such as Buckland 2009 and Collins, et al., 1993 (cited under *Contemporary Hollywood*). Several writers have also taken blockbusters as test cases used to validate or refute academic approaches to film analysis generally (Elsaesser with Buckland 2002 and Barker with Austin 2000, respectively).

Barker, Martin, with Austin, Thomas, *From* Antz *to* Titanic*: Reinventing Film Analysis.* London: Pluto Press, 2000.

Taking a sceptical attitude to scholarly practices of "reading" and finding meaning in films, this book attempts a more descriptive approach rooted in actual or probable audience response. Aside from the films mentioned in the title, case studies include *Deep Impact* (1998) and *Starship Troopers* (1997).

Buckland, Warren, ed. *Film Theory and Contemporary Hollywood Movies.* New York and London: Routledge, 2009.

> Anthology of original articles by leading scholars, applying a range of contemporary film theory to recent American movies, including *Titanic.*

Elsaesser, Thomas, "The Blockbuster: Everything Connects, but Not Everything Goes." *The End of Cinema As We Know It: American Film in the Nineties*, ed. Jon Lewis. New York: New York University Press, 2001, 11-22.

> Argues that the blockbuster is not only the archetypal commodity form of contemporary cinema, allowing Hollywood to dominate the global marketplace and squeeze out competition, but also for its organization of the spectator's experience of time and temporality.

Elsaesser, Thomas, and Buckland, Warren, *Studying Contemporary American Film: A Guide to Movie Analysis.* London: Arnold, 2002.

> A range of theoretical approaches are illustrated and explained through their application to recent popular movies, including *Die Hard* (1988) and *Jurassic Park* (1993).

King, Geoff, *Spectacular Narratives: Hollywood in the Age of the Blockbuster.* London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2000.

> The major attempt to theorise the aesthetic and ideological characteristics of the modern action-oriented blockbuster, with chapters on frontier mythology, special effects, space-fiction, war, and disaster films. Essential reading.

Lovell, Alan, and Sergi, Gianluca, *Cinema Entertainment: Essays on Audiences, Films and Film Makers.* Maidenhead and New York: Open University Press/McGraw-Hill, 2009.

> Like Barker and Austin 2000, this takes a populist, audience-oriented (and industry-oriented) approach to the discussion of Hollywood cinema, questioning traditional academic approaches. Includes chapters on *The Dark Knight* (2008) and Steven Spielberg.

Wood, Robin, "Papering the Cracks: Fantasy and Ideology in the Age of Reagan." *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan ...and Beyond.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2003, 144-67.

> Like Britton 1986 (cited under *Key Films and Filmmakers: Steven Spielberg*), an assault on the reactionary character of American cinema in the 1980s, particularly as represented by the films of Steven Spielberg (especially *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial*, 1982) and George Lucas (especially the *Star Wars* saga), with *Blade Runner* (1982) offered as a partial counter-current. First published as *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, 1986.

SPECTACLE, SPECIAL EFFECTS AND TECHNOLOGY

If one of the defining features of the blockbuster is its high cost, the proof of that cost is the presence within the film of various types of spectacle, produced by the marshalling of economic and technological resources to produce a self-conscious display of scale, extravagance, excess, or prodigious expenditure. This has led to an ongoing critical debate over the extent to which narrative and spectacle are opposed or capable of integration, mutually supportive or fighting for the viewer's attention (see Wood 2002 and Bordwell 2006, cited under *Action-Adventure Films*). The nature of cinematic spectacle (which may also, of course, extend from the visual to auditory properties through the conspicuous use of sound, discussed by Sergi 2004) varies according to the generic makeup of each film, and also according to the range of technologies available. High-cost films have frequently been used to launch new technological devices and processes, from color and synchronised sound to widescreen formats (Belton 1992; Belton, et al., 2010) and special effects (Pierson 2002; Rickitt 2007), which may have accounted for a significant proportion of their financial outlay. Such attributes have in turn been used to advertise and promote these and other films at a range of budgetary levels, further reinforcing the close relationship between aesthetics and economics in the blockbuster.

Belton, John, *Widescreen Cinema.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992.
> The standard account of the history, technology, and aesthetics of widescreen formats, by the most prolific writer on the subject. An essential resource.

Belton, John, Hall, Sheldon, and Neale, Steve, eds. *Widescreen Worldwide.* New Barnet: John Libbey Publishing, 2010.
> Twelve original articles on various aspects of widescreen cinema, mostly on the 1950s, with an international scope.

Pierson, Michele, *Special Effects: Still in Search of Wonder.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.
> History, theory, and analysis of visual special effects, with particular emphasis on computer-generated imagery (CGI) in recent films but noting the origins of cinematic spectacle in nineteenth-century traditions of magic and illusionism.

Rickitt, Richard, *Special Effects: The History and Technique.* New York: Billboard Books, 2007.
> More substantial than its (admittedly hefty) coffee-table appearance might suggest, with detailed explanation, history, and analysis of numerous special-effects techniques. Superbly and extensively illustrated, with case studies and profiles of key artists and technicians.

Sergi, Gianluca, *The Dolby Era: Film Sound in Contemporary Hollywood.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004.
> One of the few scholars concerned with contemporary film sound, Sergi here combines a technical and historical account of the development of Dolby's various stereo systems and

interviews with the technicians responsible with "suggestions" for practical analysis and theorisation of their use.

Wood, Aylish, "Timespaces in Spectacular Cinema: Crossing the Great Divide of Spectacle versus Narrative." *Screen* 43.4 (Winter 2002), 370-86.

> Discussion of the relationship between narrative and spectacle in terms of the construction of time and space in such films as *The Matrix* (1999) and *The Perfect Storm* (2000), and the spectator's positioning in relation to them.

ACTION-ADVENTURE FILMS

Like the blockbuster itself, with which it sometimes (especially in popular discourse) appears to have become synonymous, the action-adventure film is a cross-generic phenomenon, encompassing as it does a number of forms including the disaster film, the epic, the war film, and the western. As Neale 2001 points out, action-adventure thus points to the hybrid nature of many popular narratives (discussed also in Langford 2005, Sobchack 1988, and Welsh 2000). Insofar as they can be isolated, the "action film" has tended to be seen as a characteristic product of Hollywood since the 1970s (Bordwell 2006; Higgins 2008; Lichtenfeld 2004), whereas "adventure" points to a wider, ultimately pre-cinematic tradition (see *Epics and Historical Films*). Among the key antecedents of the modern action movie are the stage melodrama (whose influence is discussed in Higgins 2008), the James Bond series (Chapman 2007), and the disaster film (Keane 2001).

Bordwell, David, "A Certain Amount of Plot: Tentpoles, Locomotives, Blockbusters, Megapictures, and the Action Movie." *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies.* Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2006, 104-14.

> This chapter culminates a longer argument about the persistence of "classical" storytelling traditions in the modern era. Bordwell argues that, for all its apparent emphasis on spectacle for its own sake, the American action film still constructs plots and characters more cohesive and complex than they need to be.

Chapman, James, *Licence to Thrill: A Cultural History of the James Bond Films.* 2nd Ed. London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007.

> Chronological contextual account of the longest-running and arguably most successful action-adventure series in contemporary cinema, linking each of the films both to popular literary traditions and to the socio-political background of production and reception.

Higgins, Scott, "Suspenseful Situations: Melodramatic Narrative and the Contemporary Action Film." *Cinema Journal* 47.2 (Winter 2008), 74-96.

> Revisionist account which suggests that, rather than spectacle and narrative being opposing categories in the modern action cinema, they should be regarded as interdependent and the

genre as rooted in the modular narrative structures of stage melodrama, which revolved around "situations" of threat, peril, a race against time, and so on.

Keane, Stephen, *Disaster Movies: The Cinema of Catastrophe.* London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2001.
> History and analysis of the genre, especially from the 1970s' cycle onwards. Accessible enough for classroom use with a range of student levels.

Langford, Barry, "The Action Blockbuster." *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005, 233-56.
> The contemporary action-adventure film is discussed in relation to earlier cinematic and literary traditions.

Neale, Steve, "Action-Adventure." *Genre and Hollywood.* New York and London: Routledge, 2001, 52-60.
> As in Langford 2005 the action-adventure films is assessed for its multivalent ideological significance, especially with regard to the representation of masculinity (see *Gender and Action-Adventure*). Reprinted in Tasker, Yvonne, ed. *Action and Adventure Cinema.* New York and London: Routledge, 2004, 71-83. Neale also discusses "Epics and Spectacles," 85-92.

Lichtenfeld, Eric, *Action Speaks Louder: Violence, Spectacle, and the American Action Movie.* Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2004.
> Nuanced, sympathetic aesthetic analysis of contemporary action cinema, including cop thrillers, war films, science fiction, and superhero films.

Sobchack, Thomas, "The Adventure Film." *Handbook of American Film Genres*, ed. Wes D. Gehring. New York: Greenwood Press, 1988, 9-24.
> This short overview identifies adventure as a cross-generic category which encompasses swashbucklers, war films, jungle films, and disaster films, with *Star Wars* (1977) noted as a version of "Arthurian romance."

Welsh, James M., "Action Films: the Serious, the Ironic, and the Postmodern." *Film Genre 2000*, ed. Wheeler Winston Dixon. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000.
> Taxonomy of the contemporary genre, more hostile towards its object than other writers such as Higgins 2008.

EPICS AND HISTORICAL FILMS

Until recently the historical epic had inspired relatively little in the way of scholarly writing, despite its centrality to the blockbuster until the 1970s (Babington and Evans 1993 being a rare exception).

However, since the release of *Gladiator* in 2000 there has been a veritable explosion of such work, especially material discussing the Roman epic. Though most academic studies have taken the representation of history itself as their primary concern, or the discussion of theology, some writers have particularly located the epic form in relation to the history of the film industry and to the blockbuster generally. Eldridge 2006 focuses on Hollywood in the 1950s, Richards 2008 on the 1950s and 1960s, and Russell 2007 on the 1990s and early 2000s. Burgoyne 2011 and Santas 2008 have a more eclectic and international range. Wood 1989 and Sobchack 2003 explore aspects of the relationship between epic form, and the construction of historicity.

Babington, Bruce, and Evans, Peter William, *Biblical Epics: Sacred Narrative in the Hollywood Cinema.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993.
> Groundbreaking study, which establishes a theoretical framework for analysing the epic in general and the biblical film in particular. Sections devoted to the Old Testament epic, the Christ film, and the Roman/Christian cycle.

Burgoyne, Robert, ed. *The Epic Film in World Culture.* New York and London: Routledge, 2011.
> Eclectic collection of original articles with an international range, including chapters on European, Asian, and New Zealand cinemas as well as on classical and contemporary Hollywood films.

Eldridge, David, *Hollywood's History Films.* London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006.
> Exceptionally thorough study of American historical films (including epics, westerns, and war films) in the 1950s, drawing extensively on copious primary documentation.

Richards, Jeffrey, *Hollywood's Ancient Worlds.* New York and London: Continuum, 2008.
> Survey of the biblical, Roman, Greek, and medieval epic, focusing on Hollywood in the 1950s and 1960s. Impressionistic and evaluative, drawing largely on secondary sources and press review clippings, but accessible for undergraduate use.

Russell, James, *The Historical Epic and Contemporary Hollywood: from* Dances with Wolves *to* Gladiator. New York and London: Continuum, 2007.
> Study of the epic revival in the 1990s and 2000s, with an introductory chapter on its antecedents in the roadshow era. Six case studies also include *Schindler's List* (1993), *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), *The Prince of Egypt* (1998), and *The Passion of the Christ* (2004).

Santas, Constantine, *The Epic in Film: from Myth to Blockbuster.* Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008.

Wide-ranging theorisation and critical defence of the film epic in all its forms, including discussion of women-centered, comic, and modern-day epics, as well as the "anti-epic." Short sub-sections in each chapter discuss selected examples.

Sobchack, Vivian, "'Surge and Splendor': A Phenomenology of the Hollywood Epic." In Grant 2003, 296-323.

Densely written theorisation of how the epic's rhetoric of scale, extravagance, and plenitude serves as a mimetic embodiment of "historicality," or the magnitude of historical process. For more advanced students, but an important resource nevertheless. First published in Representations 29 (Winter 1990), 24-49.

Wood, Michael, "Shake the Superflux." *America in the Movies; or "Santa Maria, it had slipped my mind!"* New York: Columbia University Press, 1989, 165-88. reprinted

Considers the epic as analogous to Hollywood as a whole, and its propensity for spectacular display a self-conscious demonstration of the industry's capacity to mount such monumental indulgences. Examples discussed include *The Ten Commandments* (1956). More accessible as a way in to talking about spectacle with students than Sobchack 1990. First published London: Secker & Warburg, 1975.

GENDER AND ACTION-ADVENTURE

A good deal of the critical discussion of films in the various action-adventure traditions has centred on the representation of gender, and in particular on the spectacle of masculinity and the male body. The founding text of this line of analysis, Neale 1983, adapted the approach taken to the representation of women in Laura Mulvey's seminal "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16.3 (Autumn 1975), to examine the ways in which men, too, could be constructed as "to-be-looked-at" and in which physical display in scenes of action and violence often carried a displaced erotic charge. As well as the epic (discussed by Neale and by Cohan 1997 and Hunt 1993), subsequent writers have examined genres including the cop thriller, war film, and martial arts film (Gallagher 2006; Tasker 1993) for their configuration of both male and female characters and stars, often relating the carnality of action-adventure scenarios to the political concerns of the day (Jeffords 1994). Cohan and Hark 1993 is an eclectic anthology which ranges across a number of genres.

Cohan, Steven, *Masked Men: Masculinity and the Movies in the 50s.* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997.

Study of male representation in 1950s' Hollywood, including discussion of a range of stars and genres. The chapter "The Body in the Blockbuster," 122-63, contains a detailed analysis of the use of Charlton Heston and Yul Brynner in *The Ten Commandments* (1956).

Cohan, Steven, and Hark, Ina Rae, *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema.* New York and London: Routledge, 1993.

An anthology of mostly original articles, along with a reprinting of Neale 1983 (see below). Hark, "Animals or Romans: Looking at Masculinity in *Spartacus*," 151-72, and Part IV on "Muscular Masculinities" (including articles by Jeffords and Tasker) are especially relevant.

Gallagher, Mark, *Action Figures: Men, Action Films, and Contemporary Adventure Narratives.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

Study of male representation in the action-adventure film since the 1960s, with discussion of Hong Kong martial arts films as well as war films, thrillers, science fiction, etc. A useful complement to Lichtenfeld 2007 (cited under *Action-Adventure Films*).

Hunt, Leon, "What Are Big Boys Made Of?: *Spartacus, El Cid* and the Male Epic." *You Tarzan: Masculinity, Movies and Men*, eds. Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumim. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1993, 65-83.

The articles in this original collection are generally less substantial than those in Cohan and Hark 1993, but Hunt's piece raises provocative questions in regard to the epic, with insights which are not confined to the two films mentioned in the title.

Jeffords, Susan, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era.* New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994.

Less sympathetic to its subject than Tasker 1993, but nevertheless an influential account of the interface between action cinema and socio-political context in 1980s' America.

Neale, Steve, "Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on Men and Mainstream Cinema." *Screen* 24.6 (November-December 1983), 2-16.

Seminal article on male representation, expanding on ideas adumbrated in Neale's *Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1980). An essential starting point, with examples including Charlton Heston in *El Cid* (1961). Reprinted in Cohan and Hark 1993, 9-20.

Tasker, Yvonne, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema.* New York and London: Routledge, 1993.

Robust defence of the ideological ambivalence of gendered images in action films, particularly in the superficially conservative 1980s. Includes discussion of both male and female representation, as well as of sexuality and race.

KEY FILMS AND FILMMAKERS

For their frequent involvement in expensive, large-scale pictures and for their record of extraordinary commercial success, the names of certain filmmakers are regularly invoked in the discussion of blockbusters. Some of these figures, like D.W. Griffith and Cecil B. DeMille, were pioneers in the industry and the art form, setting benchmarks of cost, production logistics, artistic achievement, and box-office earnings for their own and future generations. More recent filmmakers such as Steven

Spielberg, George Lucas, and James Cameron have been involved with many films notable for their technological advancements and for the extent to which audiences worldwide have voiced their approval in record numbers. Certain films – such as *Gone with the Wind*, *Star Wars*, and *Titanic* – have proven so overwhelmingly popular that they have taken on the status of cultural touchstones or sociological phenomena which require explanation beyond recourse to the standard frameworks of marketing and demographics. The key figures and films listed here have generated a particular volume of critical comment, much of it of a superficial or vacuous nature, or for reasons which do not directly concern us here. These citations have been chosen for their relevance to the immediate project, and therefore generally omit biographies, "making-of" books, and fan-oriented publications.

D.W. Griffith and *The Birth of a Nation*

Griffith's career included many large-scale roadshow productions and he exemplifies the "director manager" figure of the silent era, before the advent of the fully developed studio system. However, one of his films has attracted by far the greatest amount of critical attention of any silent epic. *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) is often cited as the "first" blockbuster; it was certainly the longest, most ambitious, most expensive, and most commercially successful American film produced to its time. Much of the commentary on it understandably concerns its inflammatory depiction of race and the post-Civil War Reconstruction. Yet its aesthetic qualities and its watershed status in the history of the American cinema (whether from an aesthetic perspective or a commercial one) need to be acknowledged and addressed too. The readings cited here do not ignore the political issues regarding the film, but they also deal with these other questions and locate the film in relation to its theatrical heritage as well as its contemporary social moment. Lang 1994 and Silva 1971 provide valuable primary documents as well as critical commentaries. Mayer 2009 locates Griffith's work in the popular stage tradition he inherited and adapted to the cinema, and which remains evident throughout his work and that of his contemporaries. Simmon 1993 is a fine auteurist study, and Stokes 2008 and Usai 2004 represent the current state of Griffith scholarship in relation to *Nation*.

Lang, Robert, ed. The Birth of a Nation: *D.W. Griffith, Director.* New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994.

> The complete, annotated continuity script along with much contextualizing matter, including contemporary and retrospective articles and reviews. Some overlap with Silva 1971, but more up to date.

Mayer, David, *Stagestruck Filmmaker: D.W. Griffith and the American Theatre.* Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009.

> Study of the origins of Griffith's style in the nineteenth-century stage. Usefully read in conjunction with Vardac 1987 (cited under *Silent Cinema and Stage Spectacles*).

Silva, Fred, ed. *Focus on* The Birth of a Nation. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1971.

Includes twenty contemporary (1915-16) articles and reviews and six retrospective commentaries, mostly from the 1960s, among them pieces by Andrew Sarris and Thomas Cripps. Out of print, but still a useful complement to Lang 1994.

Simmon, Scott, The Films of D.W. Griffith. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
Selective critical study which includes incisive chapters on both The Birth of a Nation and Intolerance (1916).

Stokes, Melvyn, *D.W. Griffith's* The Birth of a Nation: *A History of "The Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time."* Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.
Case history of the film's conception, production, reception, and influence.

Usai, Paolo Cherchi, ed. *The Griffith Project, Vol. 8: Films Produced in 1914-15.* London: British Film Institute, 2004.
Part of an ambitious series of volumes providing scholarly discussion of every one of the director's films.

Cecil B. DeMille

No director is more readily associated with the epic than DeMille, though the volume of serious criticisms on his work remains surprisingly small. Aside from several excellent biographies (not cited here, though DeMille 1960 remains an essential resource) and entries in works concerned more generally with various aspects of American cinema (see the relevant chapter of Brownlow 1992, cited under *Silent Cinema and Stage Spectacles*), there has been relatively little sustained analysis of his films. During his lifetime, despite the esteem with which he was held in the industry, DeMille was not often taken seriously by critics, especially in Anglo-Saxon circles. For the different approaches taken by a contemporary French and British critic to *Samson and Delilah* (1949), see Doniol-Valcroze 1951 and Harcourt-Smith 1951. More recently academic scholars have turned their attention to DeMille's silent work, notably Higashi 1994 beand Maltby 1990. Birchard 2004 provides. See also Wood 1975 in *Epics and Historical Films* and Cohan 1997 in *Gender and Action-Adventure* for discussion of *The Ten Commandments* (1956).

Birchard, Robert S., *Cecil B. DeMille's Hollywood.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004.
Chronological career history based on primary sources, with details of the production and reception of each of the director's works from *The Squaw Man* (1914) to *The Ten Commandments* (1956), along with a wealth of financial data.

DeMille, Cecil B., The Autobiography of Cecil B. DeMille. Ed. Donald Hayne. London: W.H. Allen, 1960.

Inevitably self-serving but nonetheless illuminating memoir, useful as a complement to the various modern biographies and career studies such as Birchard 2004.

Doniol-Valcroze, Jacques, "Samson, Cecil and Delilah." Trans. Martin Trapp and George Lellis. *Wide Angle* 11.4 (October 1989), 32-41.)

An early manifestation of French auteurism, focused on Samson and Delilah as an instance of DeMille's directiorial style. First published in Cahiers du Cinéma 5, 1951.

Harcourt-Smith, Simon, "The Siegfried of Sex." *Sight and Sound* 19.10 (February 1951), 410-2, 424.

A British critic's half-impressed, half-contemptuous "appreciation" of Samson and Delilah, described as "one of the year's worst films," and of DeMille's cinema generally. A marked contrast with Doniol-Valcroze 1989.

Higashi, Sumiko, *Cecil B. DeMille and American Film Culture: The Silent Era.* Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1994.

The major study of DeMille's silent work, including chapters on "Self-Theatricalization in Victorian Pictorial Dramaturgy" and "The Spectacle of the Lower East Side" as well as on the epics *Joan the Woman* (1916) and *The Ten Commandments* (1923).

Maltby, Richard, "*The King of Kings* and the Czar of All the Rushes: the Propriety of the Christ Story." *Screen* 31.2 (Summer 1990), 188-213.

Excellent case study of the genesis and censorship career of DeMille's 1927 life of Christ.

David O. Selznick and *Gone with the Wind*

On its initial release *Gone with the Wind* (1939) was the longest and most expensive film yet made; it is still the most successful in terms of total box-office admissions. If the film has an auteur it is undoubtedly the producer, David O. Selznick, who after serving as an executive at several studios, where he established a reputation for making prestige pictures based on best-selling literary properties, became one of Hollywood's most successful independents. There are several fine biographical accounts of Selznick's career and more production histories have been written for *Gone with the Wind* than for any other film. It has also, like *The Birth of a Nation*, frequently been discussed in the context of racial representation and the myths of the American Civil War. The citations here focus on Selznick's role in the production and on the film's wider cultural significance. Behlmer 1989 and Vertrees 1997 demonstrates the full extent of Selznick's creative involvement. Harwell 1992 assembles a range of commentaries on the film and its literary source, while Haskell 2009 is an impressionistic revaluation of them. Higgins 2007 and Brown 2008 consider aspects of the film's visual style.

Behlmer, Rudy, ed. *Memo from David O. Selznick.* Los Angeles: Samuel French, 1989.

Invaluable collection of primary documents, amply demonstrating Selznick's hands-on approach to every aspect of film production.

Brown, Tom, "Spectacle/Gender/History: the Case of *Gone with the Wind*." Screen 49.2 (Summer 2008), 157-78.
A rare critical analysis of the film which does not focus on questions of race, but considers instead its use of visual spectacle and the "historical gaze."

Harwell, Richard, ed. Gone with the Wind *as Book and Film.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992.
Comprehensive collection of contemporary and retrospective commentaries, with an extensive bibliography of further readings.

Haskell, Molly, *Frankly, My Dear:* Gone with the Wind *Revisited.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009.
Avowedly personal yet scholarly history and critique of both film and novel from an insightful feminist critic.

Higgins, Scott, *Harnessing the Technicolor Rainbow: Color Design in the 1930s.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007.
History and analysis of the early use of three-strip Technicolor, including a brilliant analysis of *Gone with the Wind*'s color palette (172-207).

Vertrees, Alan David, *Selznick's Vision:* Gone with the Wind *and Hollywood Filmmaking.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997.
Provocative thesis on the producer's creative relationship with his key collaborators, especially the production designer William Cameron Menzies.

The Sound of Music

The biggest commercial success of the postwar roadshow era, *The Sound of Music* (1965) represented something of an embarrassment for many of its initial reviewers, who were dismayed by the film's seemingly anodyne sentimentality. It also proved somewhat of an ambivalent boon to the film industry, whose attempts to emulate its popularity with more big-budget musicals and other family-friendly entertainment contributed to the state of near-bankruptcy which engulfed Hollywood at the end of the 1960s. However, the rise in studies of the musical since the 1970s has led a number of critics to reclaim the film for scholarly interest. Hischak 2004 and Farmer 2010 respectively situate it in relation to the Broadway adaptation and the spectacular roadshow musical, while Dyer 1976-1977 and Kemp 2000 direct attention to its politics, sexual and otherwise.

Dyer, Richard, "*The Sound of Music.*" *Only Entertainment.* London and New York: Routledge, 1992, 45-59..

> Perhaps the first serious analysis of the film not to patronize it, this article offers a cultural reading" concerned with its political implications while also addressing the narrative function of the songs. Originally published in *Movie* 23, Winter 1976-1977.

Farmer, Brett, "The Singing Sixties: Rethinking the Julie Andrews Roadshow Musical." *The Sound of Musicals*, ed. Steven Cohan. London: British Film Institute/Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, 114-27.

> Sympathetically revisionist account of the film in the context of the 1960s' cycle of big-budget musicals, with particular attention paid to Julie Andrews' other vehicles of the period.

Hischak, Thomas S., *Through the Screen Door: What Happened to the Broadway Musical When It Went to Hollywood.* Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2004.

> Despite its impressionistic and sometimes hostile critical judgments, a useful history of musical stage adaptations, filled with concise background information.

Kemp, Peter, "How Do You Solve a 'Problem' like Maria von Poppins?" *Musicals: Hollywood and Beyond*, ed. Bill Marshall and Robyn Stilwell. Exeter and Portland, Oregon: Intellect, 2000, 55-61.

> Feminist analysis of the sexual politics of *The Sound of Music* and *Mary Poppins* (1964), focusing on Andrews' star persona.

Steven Spielberg

As every schoolchild knows, Steven Spielberg's commercial track record is second to none. He has been associated with more breakout box-office hits than any other filmmaker, and indeed is often credited with having created the modern blockbuster with the success of *Jaws* (1975). Whatever the merits of the latter claim, Spielberg has exercised a decisive influence over the direction taken by the American film industry, for good or ill. Which of the latter options is felt to be the case defines each writer's view of his achievement. For Britton 1986, Spielberg exemplifies the reactionary, retrogressive character of much recent Hollywood cinema. But for Buckland 2006 and Morris 2007 his narrative and stylistic skills represent considerable formal sophistication and a degree of cinematic self-reflexivity which belie their apparent simple-mindedness. Between the 1988 and 2000 editions of his book on New Hollywood auteurs, Kolker 1998 and Kolker 2000's chapters on Spielberg register a shift in interest from ideology to style, and this instability in critical accounts in itself suggests that the director's work may be complex than is generally recognised.

Britton, Andrew, "Blissing Out: The Politics of Reaganite Entertainment." *Movie* 31/32 (Winter 1986), 1-42.

Thoroughgoing critique of the reactionary character of Hollywood cinema in the 1980s, embracing a large number of films but reserving particular ire for Spielberg's.

Buckland, Warren, *Directed by Steven Spielberg: Poetics of the Contemporary Hollywood Blockbuster.* New York and London: Continuum, 2006.
Neo-formalist critical analysis, identifying the stylistic marks of Spielberg's authorship.

Kolker, Robert Phillip, "In the Patriarch's Bosom: Steven Spielberg and the Politics of Recuperation." *A Cinema of Loneliness: Penn, Kubrick, Scorsese, Spielberg, Altman.* Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, 237-302.
Ideological analysis of Spielberg's body of work, particularly concerned to penetrate the power of the films' capacity for emotional manipulation.

Kolker, Robert Phillip, "Of Dinosaurs and Ships: Steven Spielberg, Large Things, and the Digital Mise-en-Scène" in *A Cinema of Loneliness: Penn, Stone, Kubrick, Scorsese, Spielberg, Altman.* Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, 247-328.
The third edition of Kolker's study of key American filmmakers, the second to feature a chapter on Spielberg, produces a significant shift of emphasis from the preceding version.

Morris, Nigel, *The Cinema of Steven Spielberg: Empire of Light.* London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2007.
One of the few serious, sustained critical interpretations of the director's body of work.

Morris, Nigel, ed. *New Review of Film and Television* 7.1 (March 2009).
Special issue devoted to Spielberg.

Star Wars

While it is undoubtedly *the* seminal blockbuster to have shaped contemporary Hollywood, *Star Wars* (1977) has generated relatively little in the way of appreciative academic criticism. Books and articles aimed at popular consumption have detailed its production and release, or the faux mythology which underpins its deliberately nostalgic narrative, while a myriad of promotional and fan-based publications have contributed to the industry that the "franchise" itself constitutes. Scholarly writing on the film, its sequels and prequels has, however, tended to be of two broad kinds. One, represented by Biskind 1990, Rosenbaum 1977, and Rubey 1985, as well as by Britton 1986 (in *Steven Spielberg*) and Wood 2003 (in *Reading the Blockbuster*) focuses on the arguably reactionary, certainly incoherent political subtext(s) of the saga, generally finding it to be characteristic of the pervasive conservatism of American society and culture since the late 1970s. The other, more approving kind, including Brooker 2002, Hills 2003, and Krämer 2004, addresses the creative uses made of the saga by the fan culture, which the writers use to question the accusations of ideological culpability made by

more hostile commentators. Attempts to discuss *Star Wars* in aesthetic terms, such as Brooker 2009, or George Lucas as an auteur have been less forthcoming.

Biskind, Peter, "Blockbuster: The Last Crusade." *Seeing through Movies*, ed. Mark Crispin Miller. New York: Pantheon Books, 1990, 112-49.

> Critical analysis of both the Star Wars and Indiana Jones series as symptomatic of Reagan-era conservatism.

Brooker, Will, *Using the Force: Creativity, Community and* Star Wars *Fans.* New York: Continuum, 2002.

> Extended study of the fan culture surrounding the franchise.

Brooker, Will, *Star Wars.* BFI Film Classics. London: British Film Institute/Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

> Rare attempt at a critical reading of the film in aesthetic terms, focusing on Lucas's formative influences and their manifestation.

Hills, Matt, "*Star Wars* in Fandom, Film Theory, and the Museum: The Cultural Status of the Cult Blockbuster." In Stringer, Julian, ed. *Movie Blockbusters.* New York and London: Routledge, 2003, 178-89.

> Discussion of the ways in which the film's cultural value has been variously asserted and contested by different groups.

Krämer, Peter, "'It's aimed at kids – the kid in everybody': George Lucas, *Star Wars* and Children's Entertainment." In Tasker, Yvonne, ed. *Action and Adventure Cinema.* New York and London: Routledge, 2004, 358-70.

> Concise history and analysis of the "evolution" and reception of the franchise, referring mainly to the original film and The Phantom Menace (1999). First published in *Scope: An Online Journal of Film Studies*, December 2001.

Rosenbaum, Jonathan, "The Solitary Pleasures of *Star Wars.*" *Movies as Politics.* Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1997, 105-9.

> Contemporary review article, critiquing the ideological implications of the film's escapist aesthetic. First published in *Sight and Sound* 46.4, Autumn 1977.

Rubey, Dan, "*Star Wars*: 'Not So Long Ago, Not So Far Away'." *Jump Cut: Hollywood, Politics and Counter-Cinema*, ed. Peter Steven. Toronto: Between the Lines, 1985, 83-105.

> Like Rosenbaum 1997, this review article unpicks the aesthetic fabric of the film to reveal its cultural origins and political implications. First published in *Jump Cut* 18, 1978.

James Cameron and *Titanic*

Bridging the categories of box-office blockbuster and prestige picture in a way few recent films have, *Titanic* (1997) is both a love story and a disaster film, an action adventure and a historical epic, a man's picture and a woman's picture. Such multiple points of appeal help account for its enormous worldwide success. Critics have nevertheless often felt the need to be defensive in writing about it, as with Lubin 1999, and there have been few serious auteurist studies of its writer-director, Keller 2006 being an exception; Parisi 1998 is a substantial journalistic study. Cameron nevertheless seems on the point of taking over Spielberg's mantle as hitmaker par excellence, as evidenced particularly by *Titanic*'s successor *Avatar* (2009), though to date most scholarly writing on his films has focused on the sexual politics of *Aliens* (1986) and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991). As regards the collections devoted to *Titanic*, Bergfelder and Street 2004 is partly concerned with wider traditions depicting the ship's sinking, while Sandler and Studlar 1999 is addressed more specifically to the cultural impact of Cameron's film.

Bergfelder, Tim, and Street, Sarah, eds. *The Titanic in Myth and Memory: Representations in Visual and Literary Culture.* London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004.
> Anthology of twenty mostly original articles, divided into three sections covering contextual material and prior adaptations as well as Cameron's film.

Keller, Alexandra, *James Cameron.* London and New York: Routledge, 2006.
> Cameron is defined as a postmodern "blockbuster auteur" and the two main chapters discuss his work in relation to "Gender, Genre, Technology and Class" and "Cinema as Reflexive Vision Machine."

Lubin, David M., *Titanic.* BFI Modern Classics. London: British Film Institute, 1999.
> Slightly defensive analysis, written by a professor of art history, focusing on the political and thematic issues raised by the film.

Parisi, Paula, Titanic *and the Making of James Cameron: The Inside Story of the Three-Year Adventure That Rewrote Motion Picture History.* New York: Newmarket Press, 1998.
> Written by a journalist with direct access to Cameron, but more than just a hagiographic puff piece.

Sandler, Kevin S., and Studlar, Gaylyn, eds. Titanic: *Anatomy of a Blockbuster.* New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1999.
> Substantial collection, including articles on critical reception and media coverage, music and synergy, fandom, sexuality, history, and "cross-class romance."

The Lord of the Rings

Arguably the most ambitious production of the twenty-first century thus far, Peter Jackson's three-part, nine-hour, three-hundred-million-dollar adaptation of J.R.R. Tolkien's fantasy cycle (*The*

Fellowship of the Ring, 2001; *The Two Towers*, 2002; *The Return of the King*, 2003) has attracted an unusual amount of scholarly attention, as well as reviving academic interest in its source material. The four major book-length studies of the films published to date include three edited collections (Margolis, et al., 2008; Mathijs 2006; Mathijs and Pomerance 2006) whose contributors divide their attention between industry matters and the cultural significance of the trilogy's popular reception (unlike with *Titanic*, there seems as yet to have been no backlash against its success and critics do not feel obliged to defend or apologise for registering their approval). Thompson 2007 is a sustained case study by a leading scholar and sets a benchmark for such enterprises.

Margolis, Harriet, Cubitt, Sean, King, Barry, and Jutel, Thierry, eds. *Studying the Event Film:* The Lord of the Rings. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008.
> Seven sections, each with a "dossier" of contextualizing materials, include discussion of production, marketing, reception, stardom, synergy, "Creative Industries," and "Reading for Meaning."

Mathijs, Ernest, ed. The Lord of the Rings: *Popular Culture in a Global Context.* London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2006.
> Anthology of original articles, divided into three sections covering "Political Economy and Commercial Contexts," "Public Reception," and "Ancillary Contexts."

Mathijs, Ernest, and Pomerance, Murray, ed. *From Hobbits to Hollywood: Essays on Peter Jackson's* Lord of the Rings. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006.
> Eighteen articles offering a range of critical approaches on diverse subjects, including Sean Cubitt on "Eco-Catastrophe, Technology and Bio-Security," Sarah Kosloff on "The Lord of the Rings as Melodrama," and Tom Gunning on "Special effects and the Technology of Artificial Bodies."

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