

# Defending Goliath: Hollywood and the Art of the Blockbuster

Manohla Dargis  
(2007)

Summertime and the viewing is lousy and noisy and deedle-dee dumb, or so the received wisdom has it. It is our season of stupidity, summertime, that interminable stretch when adults surrender the nation's theaters to hordes of popcorn-chugging, sugar-jonesing, under-age nose-pickers for whom the cinematic experience means nothing more than recycled big, bigger, biggest bangs. It is the season of mass distraction, of the tent pole, the event movie, the blockbuster.

Blockbuster is really just descriptive, but it often carries with it a down-market whiff, as do many pop-cultural products that come with eye-catching price tags and seem precision-tooled for young audiences. Critics, including, yes, yours truly, often use blockbuster as easy (too easy) shorthand for overinflated productions that rely more on special effects than words and characters, and that distract rather than engage the audience. At its most reductive the negative spin on blockbusters is that they signal the death of cinema art and mark the triumph of the corporate bottom line, of marketing strategies, product placements and opening-weekend returns. And here you thought you were just watching Tobey Maguire run around in a unitard.

But just because a movie blows stuff up doesn't mean it automatically stinks. A good blockbuster, like the recent Bond flick "Casino Royale," takes you places you might never otherwise go and shows you things you could never do. It brings you into new worlds, offers you new attractions. It takes hold of your body, making you quiver with anxiety, joy, laughter, relief. When great blockbusters sweep you up and away—I'm thinking about watching "The Matrix" for the first time with a few hundred other enraptured souls—they usher you into a realm of

FYI

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communal pleasure. In a culture of entertainment niches, they remind you of what going to the movies can still be like.

They also remind you that without the human factor a blockbuster is nothing but a big empty box. Blockbusters that endure strike a balance between the spectacular and the ineffably human, whether it's Peter O'Toole framed against the never-ending desert in "Lawrence of Arabia" or Keanu Reeves coming down to earth in "The Matrix" as he realizes that he knows kung fu. It's the epic story of America refracted through one family in the "Godfather" films. It's a mechanical shark and Robert Shaw remembering the U.S.S. Indianapolis in "Jaws." It's Tom Cruise hanging by a thread in "Mission: Impossible" and Christian Bale standing amid a cloud of bats in "Batman Begins." It's Leonardo DiCaprio's wild eyes in "Titanic" and Kirsten Dunst's sad ones in "Spider-Man."

Blockbuster usually describes products sold in enormous quantities, like movies, but also theater productions, museum shows, hit songs, books and even pharmaceuticals. The word probably originated with the powerful bombs that the British Royal Air Force used to decimate German cities during World War II, the so-called blockbusters. It soon entered the vernacular, appearing in advertisements before the end of the war, and as a clue in a 1950 crossword

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Beyond Words. John Ruskiewicz, Anderson & Fried. N.Y.: Longman, 2009. Pearson  
Cultural Texts for Reading and Writing.

puzzle in this newspaper (46 across). In the early 1950s the heavyweight champion Rocky Marciano was known as the Brockton Blockbuster, after the city where he was born, and the word blockbuster routinely appeared in articles about the Hollywood vogue for super-size entertainments.

These days highbrows dismiss movie blockbusters because they are often based in fantasy rather than reality, which is generally a bad thing unless the fantasy comes with a literary pedigree like "The Lord of the Rings." Blockbusters tend to be made for adolescents instead of adults, which is also a bad thing because youngsters are untrustworthy cultural consumers. (One exception: blockbusters based on children's books that also appeal to adults, like the Harry Potter cycle.) Blockbusters based on comics are invariably questionable unless they are called graphic novels and then not always. Blockbusters that open on thousands of screens are also considered dubious because anything that appeals to a wide audience is inherently suspect. I'm joking, but not really.

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In recent years it has become axiomatic that the 1970s special-effects-laden blockbusters "Jaws" and "Star Wars" helped bring an end to New Hollywood's flirtation with creative freedom (think of "Nashville"), ushering in the era of juvenile diversions like "Raiders of the Lost Ark." Never mind that "Jaws" is a good movie, far better at least for some than "Nashville." As Martin Scorsese says in "Easy Riders, Raging Bulls," Peter Biskind's history of 1970s American cinema: "'Star Wars' was in. Spielberg was in. We were finished." Well, not exactly, as suggested by the little gold statue presented to Mr. Scorsese in February by Steven Spielberg, George Lucas and Francis Ford Coppola, whose 1972 blockbuster "The Godfather," also happens to be a masterpiece.

The movie industry has been in the business of big—big stars, big stories, big productions, big screens and big returns—about as long as it's been a business. And as long as the movies have told stories, they have used spectacle to sell those stories. In the silent era motion-picture producers employed spectacle to help distinguish the new medium from that of the theater, creating what were essentially protoblockbusters. In the 1950s the faltering movie industry went into the business of the supercolossus, delivering epic-size stories on ever-widening big screens in part to distinguish itself from that small-screen menace called television. Much has changed about the movies in the decades since, but not so the uses of pyrotechnics, sweeping landscapes and all manner of cinematic awesomeness.

Nowadays the armies of sword-brandishing soldiers may be largely computer generated, as in "300," but film spectacle works more or less the same now as it did in 1912 when the Italian epic "Quo Vadis?" hit screens with a cast of literally thousands and extreme action in the form of a chariot race. That film's pageantry, its gladiators and sacrificed Christians earned an enthusiastic thumb's up from the sculptor Auguste Rodin, who declared it "a masterpiece." (Everyone really is a critic.) The Italians were among the first in the film-spectacle business, but the Americans soon jumped in with costly productions like D. W. Griffith's benighted masterpiece, "The Birth of a Nation," which dramatically advanced the art.

Spectacle didn't just enthrall audiences; it was instrumental to the very development of feature filmmaking, as directors learned how to make longer-running entertainments. Not that spectacle and narrative always mesh, then or now. In 1923 an anonymous critic for *The New York Times* wrote that Cecil B. DeMille's "Ten Commandments" was divided into two sections, "the spectacle and the melodrama," that might as well have been directed by two different men. The critic's admiration for the spectacle ("done with meticulous precision") tempered the larger criticism. ("It would have

needed an unusually perfect modern drama to stand up in comparison.”) Somewhere the producer Jerry Bruckheimer is shaking his head, wondering why he can’t catch a similar break with today’s reviewers.

Yet if audiences dig spectacle, critics often view it with suspicion, as sneers about the modern blockbuster suggest. The negative rap on blockbusters is partly due to the literary bent of a lot of critics, who privilege words over images and tend to review screenplays, or what’s left of them, rather than the amalgamation of sights and sounds in front of them. But the sneers also suggest an underlying and familiar contamination anxiety. In the 1980s “Top Gun” wasn’t just a glib divertissement; it was evidence that MTV had infected the movies like a deadly virus. In the same grim light “300” isn’t just a shell of a movie; it’s proof that the movies have

been infiltrated by an outside force, namely video games.

The threats have changed over the years—from television to music videos, comic books, digital technologies and so on—yet what has remained constant is the idea that the movies are under siege. But if the movies have taught us anything it is that they are brilliant adapters. They mutate and shift, stretch and adjust, and they neutralize those threats the way an organism absorbs nutrients, by assimilating them. We call some of these movie mutations comic-book flicks and compare still others to music videos, sometimes with a sigh, sometimes with a smile. We complain about car chases and forget that D. W. Griffith was among the first to put pedal to the metal on screen. And we condemn blockbusters for, if we’re lucky, doing the very thing we say we want from the movies: giving us a reason to watch.

### CONSIDER

- 1 How does the first paragraph of Dargis’s essay get your attention? Do you find yourself in any way offended by it or excluded from her intended audience?
- 2 How well does Dargis define the blockbuster film? Could you list a dozen films from the past several summers that fit into this category?
- 3 Dargis presents herself as a serious critic. Are you surprised when her argument turns to defend the blockbuster experience? What kinds of evidence does she offer to defend big summer movies?
- 4 What cultural contexts does Dargis explain for first understanding the term *blockbuster* and then for appreciating the history of the genre? Is the information new or surprising to you? Is it relevant to her claim?
- 5 Dargis in part structures her argument by imagining a cultural divide, with serious or elite critics of films on one side and ordinary viewers who like big movies on the other. Examine the way she uses this device throughout the essay. Does she stack the deck in favor of one side or the other? With which group do you identify?

### COMPOSE

- 6 Can you identify another type of text that, like the action or superhero film, is typically unappreciated or disliked by the cultural elites—perhaps a genre you enjoy yourself? Write in its defense, as Dargis does for blockbuster movies. Take the time to research your subject.