CHAPTER TWELVE

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Big Pictures: Studying Contemporary Hollywood Cinema through its Greatest Hits

Peter Krämer

Out of the darkness lights emerge, and moving through the water in a tiny submersible, treasure hunter Brock Lovett approaches the giant wreck of the Titanic (shown in documentary footage of the actual ship resting on the bottom of the ocean). Filming himself with a video camera, Lovett speaks an obviously rehearsed, disingenuous line: 'It still gets me every time to see the sad ruin of the great ship.' He disguises his search for a priceless diamond on the Titanic with false sentiment. Yet 101-year-old survivor Rose Calvert is genuinely and visibly shaken by her encounter with items recovered from the wreck, most notably a nude drawing of herself wearing the diamond Lovett is looking for. She is eager to tell him the story of the diamond, the drawing and the night the Titanic sank, because the memories of the fateful voyage she undertook on the ship 84 years before still haunt her. In particular, she cannot, and does not want to, let go of the memory of the young artist, Jack Dawson, whom she fell in love with on that voyage, who saved her life when the ship went down, and who slowly froze to death in the water while holding her hand. After Rose has told her story, it becomes clear that it is meant to pay homage to Jack: 'I've never spoken of him until now, not to anyone … But now you all know there was a man named Jack Dawson, and that he saved me … I don't even have a picture of him. He exists now only in my memory.' Of course, through Rose telling her story and the cinema screen bringing it to life in a long flashback, Jack also exists from then on in the memory of her audience: Brock Lovett and the others on the screen as well as the millions in the movie theatres. And while Rose does not have a picture of him, the cinema audience has: it is called *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997). In response to Rose's enormous sense of loss, then, Jack has been resurrected, and the ship whose wreck we saw at the beginning has been resurrected too, albeit only temporarily and imaginarily, through the power of cinema.

By the end of the film's long run in American movie theatres, which started in December 1997, *Titanic*'s tale of loss and cinematic resurrection had taken over the top position in *Variety*'s list of all-time top grossing movies in the US with revenues of $601m (see appendix 1). Far behind in second place, with a $461m gross, came *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977) the very film that, upon its initial record-breaking

release, had first inspired *Titanic*'s writer-director James Cameron to commit himself to filmmaking as a career: 'I was really upset when I saw *Star Wars*. That was the movie that I wanted to make. After seeing that movie I got very determined' (quoted in Heard 1997: 9–10). The most direct source of inspiration for Cameron appears to have been *Star Wars*' groundbreaking special effects, which increased the power of filmmakers to translate their imagination into film: 'I saw that all the things I had been seeing in my head all along could now be done' (quoted in Shapiro 2000: 55). However, it is important to note that the *Star Wars* trilogy also tells a story of loss and cinematic resurrection. Teenage orphan (or so it seems) Luke Skywalker embarks on his big adventure after the original loss of his parents is replayed through, and compounded by, the death of his aunt and uncle, who had taken care of him. In the course of his adventure, his two mentors (Obi-Wan and Yoda) die as well. Yet by gaining access to the mysterious power of the Force, Luke is able not only to defeat the Evil Emperor, who is ultimately responsible for all his losses, but also to redeem his own father who had gone over to the Dark Side. At the very end of the trilogy, Anakin Skywalker as well as Obi-Wan and Yoda all appear to Luke – and only to him – as spirits. In fact, they appear as superimposed images on the screen, that is, as projections within the film which is being projected on the screen. Thus it is once again the power of cinema that, in response to Luke's experience of loss, brings loved ones back to life.

Going beyond the rather obvious fact that both *Star Wars* and *Titanic* have epic scope and share an obsession with exciting physical action and awesome audiovisual spectacle, then, there are important narrative, thematic and personal connections between Hollywood's two biggest hits. To what extent do such connections extend to the major hits Hollywood produced inbetween *Star Wars* and *Titanic*, and indeed since *Titanic*? What might these connections tell us about the ways in which the film industry and its audiences have operated since 1977? And how does this recent period fit into longer-term developments in American cinema? More fundamentally, what is the rationale for studying the films that made the most money at the box office? And what do these films have to tell us about the power of cinema?

The importance of hit

It is a truism that Hollywood is in the business of making money, and the trade press as well as much reporting about cinema in newspapers and film magazines, on television and the Internet pays close attention to the amounts of money films earn at the American box office as well as their chart rankings, and, to a lesser extent, to the costs of movie production and marketing and the profits or losses generated by a movie's release. Oddly enough, academic writing about contemporary American cinema by and large keeps its distance from budgetary and box-office information on individual films, from annual and all-time movie charts. A vast amount of film academic writing is concerned with the critical interpretation (and mostly negative evaluation) of individual films or groups of films, and while much of this writing conceives of its object of study as 'popular cinema', it is rarely interested in the question whether particular films did well or badly at the box office. Another dominant strand in the writing about contemporary American cinema deals with the

workings of the film industry, and while company profits and losses are central to such economic analysis, individual films or groups of films are only mentioned in passing, as examples for the general operations of these companies, rather than as important objects of study in their own right.

These are general tendencies in academic writing, and, of course, there are very important exceptions, most notably Scribner's authoritative *History of American Cinema* series (see Cook 2000, Prince 2000 and Monaco 2001; see also Garncarz 1994 and Sedgwick 2000). In fact, such exceptions have been multiplying in recent years. One of the reasons for the increasing academic interest in hit movies is the recognition that, whatever complexities there are in conceptualising 'the popular', commercial success surely is an important factor. Notwithstanding considerations of other media outlets for films (about which more below) and the fact that not all films are given the same chances in the marketplace, at a very basic level a film that grosses more money than another is, de facto, more popular, that is more people have bought tickets for it. What is more, despite all the complexities of the operations of today's multinational and multi-media conglomerates, it is widely acknowledged that they are basically hit-driven. A few of their products generate a substantial share of their revenues and profits (for an in-depth case study of Disney and *The Lion King* (Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff, 1994) see Krämer 2000).

Let us take a closer look at the audience reach and economic success of *Titanic*. The film grossed $601m at the domestic box office, $113m in 1997 and $488m in 1998 (*Variety* 1999: 62, 64). For simplicity's sake, the following calculations will assume that all $601m were generated in 1998. The total box-office revenues in North America in 1998 were $6.95 billion, which gives *Titanic* a market share of just under 9 per cent for the year (Moser 2000: 8). This means that of the more than 500 films which were released into American movie theatres in 1998, this one film generated almost every eleventh dollar spent on tickets in those theatres (Moser 2000: 11). At an average ticket price in the US of $4.69 (Moser 2000: 9), the number of tickets sold for *Titanic* is about 128m, which is the equivalent of almost half of the American population (an estimated 265m according to James Moser (1998: 16)). In fact, fewer people than this went to see *Titanic* because its most ardent fans bought several tickets, watching the film again and again. Nevertheless, it is an impressive figure indeed, especially in the light of the fact that in 1998 27 per cent of Americans aged 12 and over never went to the cinema at all, and another 12 per cent were infrequent moviegoers (about once a year) (Moser 2000: 10). It is reasonable to assume that *Titanic* could only achieve its enormous success because many infrequent moviegoers chose *Titanic* for their one cinema outing in 1998. We can therefore say that for up to 40 per cent of the population (over the age of 11) cinemagoing in 1998 meant *Titanic* or it meant nothing at all. Not only do Hollywood's megahits make enormous profits for the industry, they also pretty much constitute the cinematic experience for a substantial segment of the population.

However, it is well known that films generate most revenues and reach the majority of their audience outside American movie theatres – in foreign theatrical markets and on video and DVD as well as cable and broadcast television – and also that huge revenues are generated through tie-in products. How did *Titanic* fare in these respects? To begin with, *Titanic*'s revenues from foreign cinemas were more than twice as high as those in the US, a staggering $1.23 billion, $1.21 billion

of which were earned in 1998 (Anon. 1999: 36). This made up 18 per cent of the foreign box-office receipts for films released by the major studios in 1998 (Woods 1999: 9). Furthermore, *Titanic* was the top-selling video in the US, and also, for example, in the UK in 1998, as well as one of the ten bestselling DVDs in the US in 1999 (*Variety* 1999: 362–3; *Variety* 2000: 381). Finally, the book about the making of the film, *James Cameron's Titanic*, was one of the biggest bestsellers of 1998 in the US, and the year's two top-selling albums were both related to the film: the *Titanic* soundtrack at number one followed by Celine Dion's *Let's Talk About Love* which featured the song 'My Heart Will Go On' from *Titanic* (*Variety* 1999: 324, 366).

In some respects (the immensity of its domestic and foreign theatrical income, for example), *Titanic*'s level of success is unprecedented; in others, however, it is fairly typical of the commercial performance of the major hits since 1977: success at the North American box office is typically followed by success in foreign markets and on video and DVD, and by massive sales of various kinds of tie-in products (in most cases primarily toys and video games rather than making-of books and records). Yet the impact of Hollywood's biggest hits goes further than that: since the film industry (much like other culture industries) largely operates through a process of imitation and combination, and audiences tend to select films which promise familiar stories and attractions, megahits such as *Star Wars* and *Titanic* can have a huge impact on cinema culture as a whole.

Periods in Hollywood history

There is little doubt that *Star Wars* constitutes a turning point in American film history; it is a film which was expressive of, and in turn contributed to, a reorientation of executives, filmmakers and audiences, in particular in terms of their conception of what a big movie event is supposed to be like. Many of the top hits in the decade before *Star Wars* were, in one way or another, of a fairly adult nature due to their themes, their form and style, and/or their graphic depictions of sex and violence (see appendix 2; on the year 1967 as another historical turning point see Krämer 1998a: 297–9; see also Krämer 2005). In sharp contrast, the biggest hits of the two decades after *Star Wars* are, on the whole – like *Star Wars* – family-friendly. Among the top 25 of 1977–97 (see appendix 1) there are two *Star Wars* sequels and several spin-offs of key *Star Wars* elements: a revamped Han Solo figure inhabiting the world of archaeology, mythology and political intrigue in the *Indiana Jones* films; the opening shot of the huge starship entering at the top of the frame and the climactic attack on the Death Star restaged in *Independence Day* (Roland Emmerich, 1996); and an elaboration of the cantina scene into a movie in *Men in Black* (Barry Sonnenfeld, 1997). There are also numerous references to *Star Wars* in, for example, *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (Steven Spielberg, 1982) and *Toy Story* (John Lasseter, 1995). Most of these films share fundamental narrative and thematic similarities. Indeed, following the example of *Star Wars*, almost all of them can be characterised as 'family-adventure movies', in terms of their central concern with the spectacular adventures of familial or quasi-familial groups, their multiple address of children and their parents as well as teenagers and young adults, and their release in the run-up to, or during, the summer or Christmas holidays (see Krämer 1998b).

Furthermore, it is worth pointing out that *Star Wars* also marks a change in terms of personnel. While it is true that both George Lucas and Steven Spielberg (the two top filmmakers of the period since 1977) had hits before 1977, none of the other top hitmakers from the earlier period could repeat their success after *Star Wars*. The two decades after *Star Wars* are dominated by Lucas (five films in the top 25, most of them as producer), *Star Wars* 'fan' James Cameron (two films), Lucas collaborator Spielberg (five films as director, another three as producer), the Spielberg protegés Robert Zemeckis (two films) and Chris Columbus (two films), Disney's animation division under the supervision of future Spielberg collaborator Jeffrey Katzenberg (two films), Pixar's animation division under former Disney and Lucasfilm employee John Lasseter, and, amongst writers of scripts and/or source novels, Spielberg collaborator Michael Crichton (three films). The Lucas-Spielberg-Disney nexus clearly dominates from 1977 to 1997.

Since 1997, this domination has by no means decreased, and the influence of *Star Wars* has arguably become more pronounced than ever. The top ten for the years 1997–2002 (see appendix 3) include two *Star Wars* sequels, two *Harry Potter* movies directed by Chris Columbus, and the Katzenberg production *Shrek* (Andrew Adamson and Vicky Jenson, 2002). The *Harry Potter* movies re-tell the *Star Wars* tale of an orphaned boy-wizard in training, and the two *Lord of the Rings* (Peter Jackson, 2001, 2002) films, which can also be found in the top ten, adapt one of the source texts of Lucas' science fiction saga.

The examination of Hollywood's breakaway hits, then, suggests that the twenty-five years since 1977 are a distinct and coherent (and not yet concluded) period in American film history. Further aspects of the period's distinctiveness are revealed when its biggest hits are compared to those of the decades before 1967 (Finler 2003: 356–9). Historical epics, biblical epics, musicals and animated films dominate, many of them vehicles for some of Hollywood's greatest female stars and most famous female characters: Julie Andrews and Elizabeth Taylor, Maria, Mary Poppins, Cleopatra, Scarlett O'Hara, Snow White and Lara. Most importantly, these films usually are love stories. In sharp contrast the megahits of the period since 1977 tend to be science fiction, fantasy, action and comedy, and none of them is a vehicle for a major female movie star. Furthermore, while several of these hits have a romantic component, it rarely serves as the main storyline (the rare exceptions include *Ghost* (Jerry Zucker, 1990) and *Aladdin* (Ron Clements and John Musker, 1992). Since the unprecedented success of *Titanic*, there does appear to be a minor revival of romance in Hollywood's megahits, most notably in *Shrek*, *Spider-Man* (Sam Raimi, 2002) and *Star Wars: Episode II – Attack of the Clones* (George Lucas, 2002). James Cameron explicitly stated that he partially modelled *Titanic* on the epic love stories of the pre-1967 period: 'I'd been looking for an opportunity to do an epic romance in the traditional vein of *Gone With the Wind* and *Doctor Zhivago*, where you're telling an intimate story on a very big canvas' (quoted in Anon. 1997: 16; see also Krämer 1998c). Similarly, in 1990 *Ghost* had been received by the press as an old-fashioned weepie of the kind that once was central to Hollywood's output, but was felt to be exceedingly rare in the 1980s and 1990s (Krämer 1999: 101–3). Thus, what marks the period since 1977 is not only the extraordinary success of numerous family-friendly films made primarily by Lucas, Spielberg and Disney, but also the rarity of highly successful love stories and vehicles for female stars.

What is more, since both love stories and female stars are often understood to appeal specifically to female moviegoers (and audience surveys tend to confirm this), the preferences of the female audience appear to be underrepresented (Krämer 1999). Indeed, women have gone more rarely to the cinema than men since the late 1960s. In the year before *Titanic*, for example, only 27 per cent of all females over 11 were frequent moviegoers (at least once a month) as compared to 30 per cent of the males, and 31 per cent were occasional moviegoers as compared to 33 per cent of the males. Conversely, 29 per cent of females never went to the cinema and 12 per cent went infrequently as compared to 27 per cent non-attenders and 10 per cent infrequent moviegoers amongst males (Moser 1998: 18). To put it differently: In 1996, out of every 100 American females over 11, 41 attended only once or not at all. Amongst males this figure was 37. Probably due to the impact of *Titanic*, the share of infrequent cinemagoers and non-attenders amongst women went down to 39 per cent in 1998 (while for men the figure went up to 39 per cent), yet this was only a temporary change: in 2001 the respective percentages for females and males were 43 and 39 (MPAA 2002: 13).

These may seem to be only minor differences, yet they must be seen in the light of the decades before 1967, when women did go to the cinema as often as men, and in some phases even more often, and when the general industry opinion was that the cinema's primary target audience were women (especially mothers who would bring their husbands and children along). Today, however, Hollywood assumes that women are more likely to go along with the choices of their children and husbands, rather than the other way round. These observations raise the question whether Hollywood could better serve the large sections of the American population which currently are somewhat reluctant to go to the cinema – including not only women, but also, for example, older people – and thus encourage them to attend more often. In this way, the study of box-office hits and audience statistics can have a critical dimension – although in this instance the criticism relates primarily to the industry's commercial operations and audience address, rather than to questions of filmic ideology (which is not to say that there is no connection between the two).

Conclusion

What, finally, are the values and worldview promoted in Hollywood's megahits? One answer to this question is provided by the playful way in which these films reflect on their own status as cinematic entertainment. Let us take another look at the films considered at the start of this essay. *Star Wars* ends, as we have already seen, with the projection of Luke's father and mentors making up for his previous loss. And Luke's story also starts that way: it is the projection of a brief scene in which Princess Leia asks for Obi-Wan Kenobi's help that inspires Luke to revive his dream of great adventures, and it is the stories Obi-Wan tells him later on that – together with the death of his aunt and uncle – convince him to translate that dream into reality. Similarly, *Titanic* starts with Brock Lovett acting both as an adventurer and as a cynical amateur videomaker, and proceeds to introduce a superior storyteller in Rose, whose heartfelt tale of love and loss has a tremendous impact on Lovett – to the point where he forgets the diamond he was looking for altogether. Lives

are transformed, then, by stories and projections, and emotional resolutions are achieved this way both for the characters on the screen and, it is implied, for the people in the auditorium.

Star Wars, *Titanic* and most of the other superhits since 1977, then, tell a similar story, and in the process reflect on their own status as cinematic entertainment. Loved ones (family members or lovers) have been, or are being lost, and this loss influences the protagonists' outlook on the world; their wishes and anxieties gradually – or occasionally very abruptly – take shape in their reality, often magically so; they achieve an emotional resolution in the end, sometimes a spiritual reunion with those they have lost, yet rarely a reunion in the here and now; however, an alternative, closely-knit social network has been established, typically going beyond the sphere of family and romance. And always the power of cinema itself to bring fantastic scenes to life, to translate an individual's wishes and anxieties, dreams and nightmares into a shared reality, to make up – albeit only temporarily and imaginarily – for all our losses, to provide us with a stronger sense of communal bonds, is being foregrounded and celebrated. The films thus present a very optimistic vision of the impact of cinema on people's lives, which, it has to be said, is not shared by most critics of contemporary Hollywood. I do think, however, that this vision deserves serious consideration.

Appendix 1: Top Grossing Movies in North America, 1977–97

This list is based on *Variety* (1999: 64–6) and lists revenues from both the US and Canada. Figures were compiled at the end of 1998 and include revenues from *Titanic*'s extended run in that year. They also include revenues from re-releases (most notably for the *Star Wars* trilogy). The figures are not adjusted for inflation. (Figures not adjusted for inflation.)

1 *Titanic* (1997), $601m
2 *Star Wars* (1982), $461m
3 *E.T.* (1982), $400m
4 *Jurassic Park* (1993), $357m
5 *Forrest Gump* (1994), $330m
6 *The Lion King* (1994), $313m
7 *Return of the Jedi* (1983), $309m
8 *Independence Day* (1996), $306m
9 *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), $290m
10 *Home Alone* (1990), $286m
11 *Batman* (1989), $251m
12 *Men in Black* (1997), $251m
13 *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), $242m
14 *Twister* (1996), $242m
15 *Ghostbusters* (1984), $239m
16 *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984), $235m
17 *The Lost World* (1997), $229m
18 *Mrs Doubtfire* (1993), $219m
19 *Ghost* (1990), $217m
20 *Aladdin* (1992), $217m
21 *Back to the Future* (1985), $208m
22 *Terminator 2* (1991), $205m

23 *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989), $197m
24 *Toy Story* (1995), $192m
25 *Dances with Wolves* (1990), $184m

Appendix 2: Top Grossing Movies in North America, 1967–76

This list is again based on *Variety* (1999: 64–6). *The Jungle Book* (1967, $142m) and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975, 139m) generated the bulk of their revenues in re-releases after 1976 and were therefore excluded from this list. (Figures not adjusted for inflation.)

1 *Jaws* (1975), $260m
2 *The Exorcist* (1973), $165m
3 *The Sting* (1973), $156m
4 *The Godfather* (1972), $135m
5 *Blazing Saddles* (1974), $120m
6 *Rocky* (1976), $117m
7 *The Towering Inferno* (1974), $116m
8 *American Graffiti* (1973), $115m
9 *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), $112m
10 *Love Story* (1970), $106m

Appendix 3: Top Grossing Movies in North America, 1998–2002

Based on 'The Top Grossing Movies of All Time at the USA Box Office', Internet Movie Database, http://www.imdb.com/charts/usatopmovies, accessed 23 September 2003. Figures include the revenues generated in 2003 for 2002 releases. (Figures not adjusted for inflation.)

1 *Star Wars: Episode 1 - The Phantom Menace* (1999), $431m
2 *Spider-Man* (2002), $404m
3 *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (2002), $340m
4 *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (2001), $318m
5 *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), $313m
6 *Star Wars: Episode 2 - Attack of the Clones* (2002), $311m
7 *The Sixth Sense* (1999), $294m
8 *Shrek* (2001), $268m
9 *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (2002), $262m
10 *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* (2000), $260m

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Impact of Changes in Filmgoing Behaviour on the Structure and Practises of Hollywood between 1945 and 1946[1]

John Sedgwick

Audiences across the globe now consume films through a variety of media, but in the years immediately following the end of the Second World War consumption was confined to cinemas alone.[2] At that time US audiences, when counted by ticket admissions, were at an all-time high with an annual count of four and a half billion (33 visits per capita), dwarfing those attracted by other paid-for leisure activities.[3] After 1946 admissions fell continuously to a low point of 820 million in 1972, followed by a gentle recovery. During this period the mode of film consumption diversified from the cinema alone to home viewing on television sets, through the TV networks at first, and then video, cable and more recently satellite. Computer screens now constitute a third medium. Remarkably, during these changes, as before them, Hollywood has continued to dominate the global market for film.

The American market for film entertainment was, and remains, by far the most important source of theatrical revenue for film producers, contributing approximately half total worldwide sales in 1965. Unlike today, when approximately 70 per cent of film revenue is derived from non-theatrical sources, rental income from the box office was almost the sole source of revenue for production companies during the period under investigation (see Vogel 2001: 58–63). Indeed, rental agreements with the television networks did not start to make a significant contribution to the costs of film production until the widespread diffusion of colour television during the late 1960s and early 1970s (Izod 1988: 166–70). Before this Hollywood's earnings from television came not so much from its library of vintage films locked away in studio vaults as from its production of contemporary made-for-TV films and celebrity shows (Gomery 1996: 407–8).

However, this strategic response to declining audience numbers was not unproblematic for the major studios. Extending their product portfolio to made-for-TV programmes and films did not lessen the problem of how to compete effec-