

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN CINEMA

Session Two

Post-Classical Exploitation

Dr. Richard Nowell

Department of Film Studies and Audiovisual Culture

Masaryk University

Agenda

16:15 – 17:45

Screening:

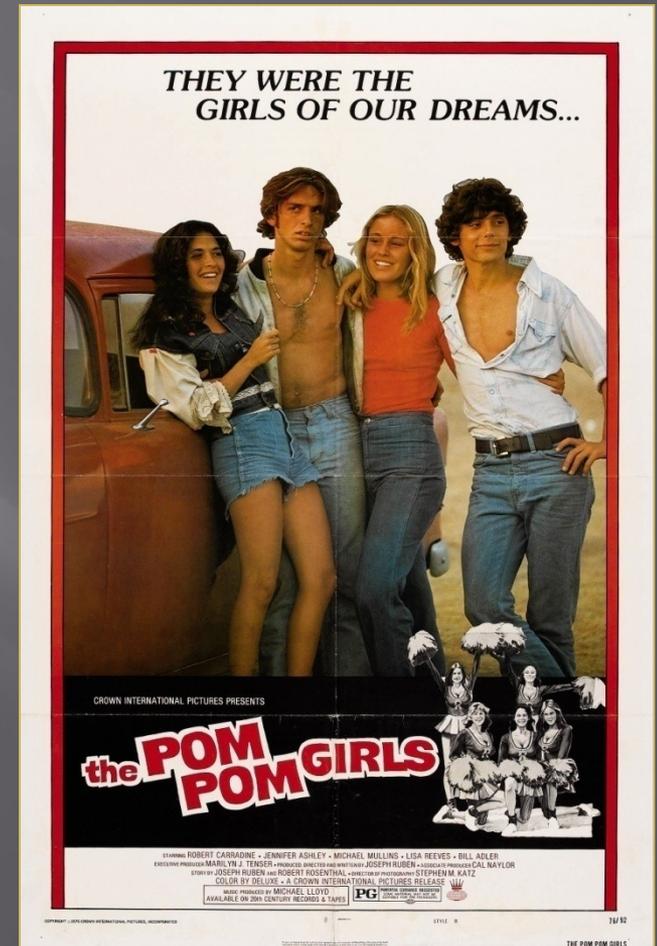
The Pom Pom Girls (1976)

17:45 – 18:00

Break

18:00 – 19:15

Post-Classical Exploitation



The Pom Pom Girls (1976)

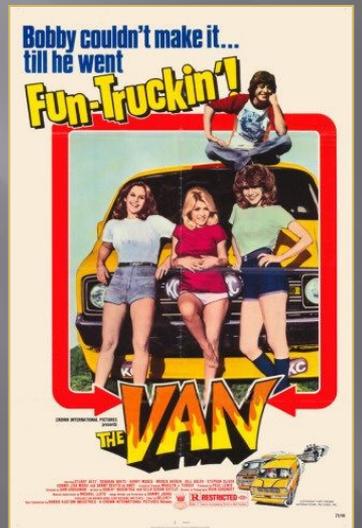
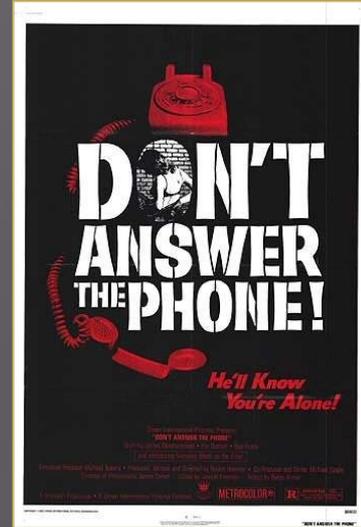
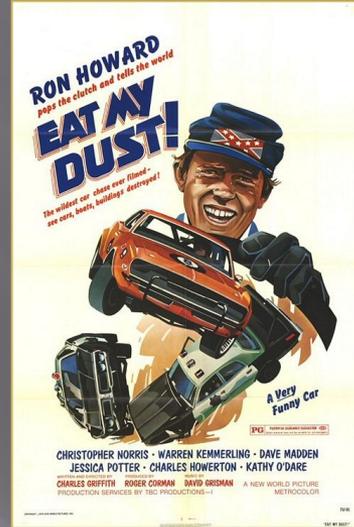
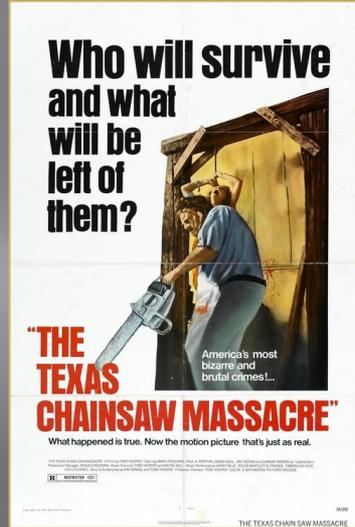
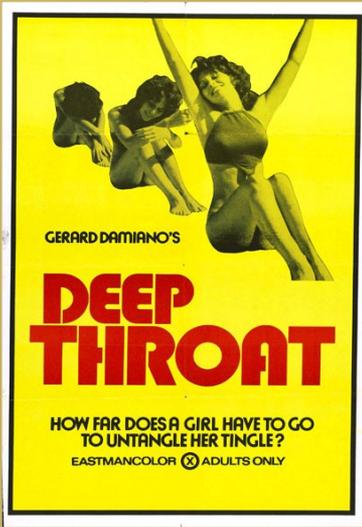
Do you find *The Pom Pom Girls* unusual in any way?

For whom do you think this was film intended?

What efforts were made to appeal to these people?

How might its conditions of distribution and exhibition have influenced the film's content?

Exploitation and Niche Markets



Focus

1970s independent exploitation in histories of American Cinema

Structure of the American independent sector in the pre-video-era

Key strategies, markets, and trends for exploitation independents

Reconsidering oppositions and distinctions drawn between Hollywood and exploitation Independents

Points of consideration

In contrast to the Hollywood Renaissance, has middle-class elitism marginalized serious consideration of exploitation cinema?

On the other hand, might one be wary of valorizing exploitation output as subversive by employing uncritical oppositional “cult” taste protocols?

Has gender and racial identity politics also posited an overly salacious picture of exploitation output by over-emphasizing or mischaracterizing genres like hardcore or blaxploitation?

Extremes of American Film History

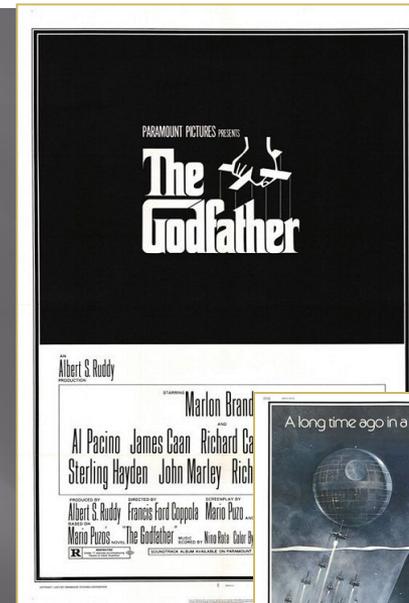
The Masterpiece Tradition:

Canons of “visionary” filmmakers and “brilliant” filmmaking practice

The Megahit Tradition:

Canons of high cost and high earning hits (and misses)

1. Obscures most conduct and output
2. Prioritizes demand over supply
3. Produces histories of the exceptional



In the context of American Cinema,
what does the term “independent”
suggest to you?

Independence and Independents

Independent Spirit: Content that is seen to differ from that of the imagined Hollywood mainstream

Hollywood's outsourced productions – i.e. most modern films

Institutional Independence:
Companies that do not belong to the MPAA



What does the term “exploitation film” or “exploitation cinema” mean to you?

Exploitation: A Cinema of “Un-prestige”

Eric Schaefer’s ideas on the Classical-era can be expanded:

Production: cheap, independent

Content: Un-prestigious/absent from Hollywood films

Marketing: focus on this content

Exhibition: Mainly restricted to down-market debuts



The Pre-video Exploitation Boom

Hollywood: An (almost) Closed Party

MPAA members have dominated American market

Financial clout undermines competition

Increasing production values prices competitors out of market

Gentrification of niche hits key strategy – forecloses independents' product lines by offering glossier versions

Wide releases/blitz marketing facilitate event pictures

A Door Always Ajar

Hollywood never controls market fully

MPAA ratings prevent truly extreme or salacious content

Corporate structures and abiding laws prevent cost cutting

Hollywood content “compromised” to secure large audience

Hollywood tends to neglect some niche markets

Opens up opportunity for independents

Types of Institutionally Independent Entrepreneur

Established Producer-distributors:

Private companies making and releasing several films regularly

Short-Lived Distributors:

Companies operating for a few years

Fly-by-night Distributors:

Release one or two films before disappearing

Outsiders:

Producers without distribution capacity

1970s Independent Exploitation Boom

Hollywood Recession

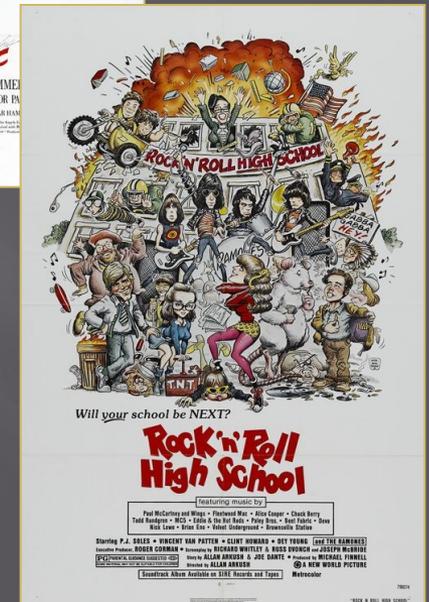
Reduction of Production

Film famine

Exhibitor short-fall

Promise of “pickups” (distributors buying completed films for set fee)

Leads to over-production



A Risky Business

Independents contribute most US releases – up to 70% excluding hardcore – dominate supply if not demand

Film is a glamorous business but a very risky investment

In 1970s, around 90% of American films lost money

Producers risk not securing a distributor – 50% of completed films were not released

Distributors cannot open films widely – therefore struggle

Character of the Exploitation Market

Hard to map the terrain due to fly-by-night outfits

Rush for gold involving some very shrewd entrepreneurs

Opportunistic due to capitalizing on Hollywood's oversights

Changing industrial structure as companies fold fast as they cannot absorb cost of unsuccessful films

Output dominated by short-lived fads due to flops and to Hollywood moving into independents' turf

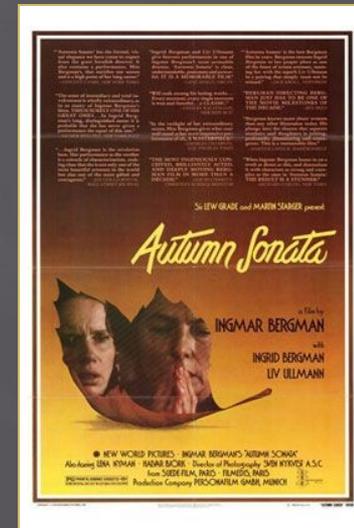
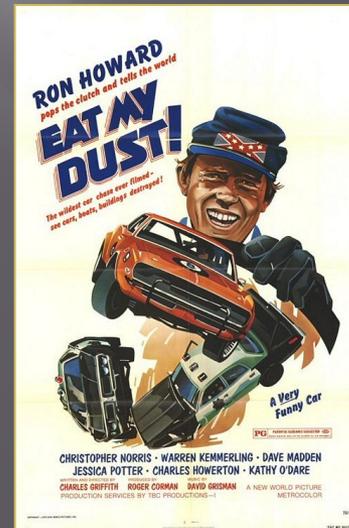
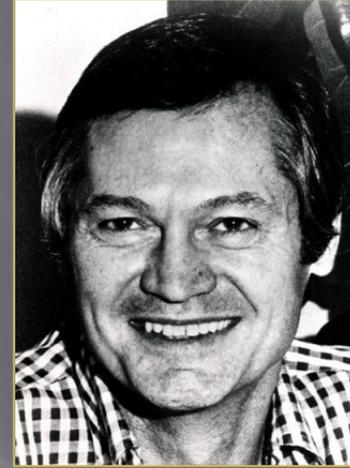
The Roger Corman Factor

Roger Corman/New World Pictures

1. Films differing from Hollywood
2. Distribution of imported Art Cinema
3. Training ground for future Hollywood talent

A world apart from Hollywood

Alibi for writers(?)



Leading Exploitation Independents

New World Pictures

American International Pictures (AIP)

Crown International Pictures

Dimension Pictures

Film Ventures International (FVI)

Artists Releasing Corporation (ARC)

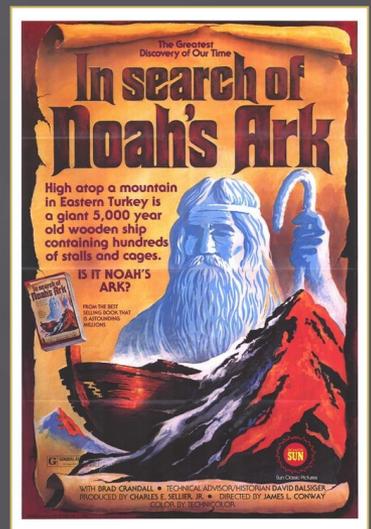
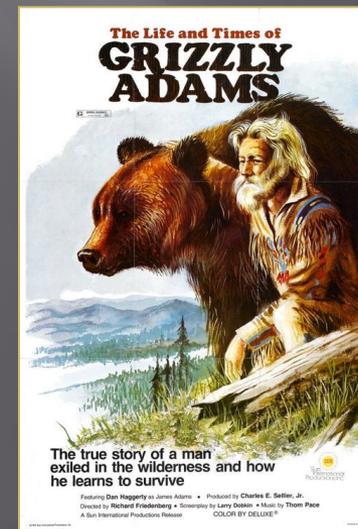
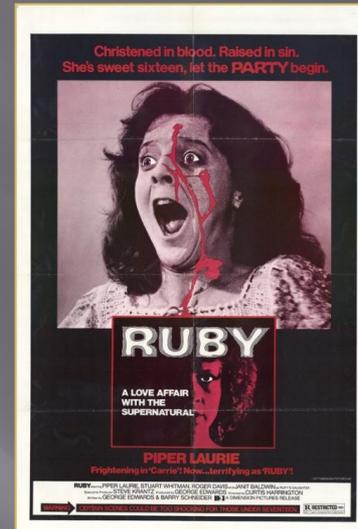
Sunn Classics

New Line Cinema

Bryanston Releasing

Questions

1. How does Lowry suggest Dimension Pictures tried to thrive in the shadow of Hollywood?
2. How does Wasser suggest Four-Wallers like Sunn Classics attempted to prosper?
3. Both companies' success was short-lived; why so?



Non-Hollywood Production and Distribution

Brief Poetics of Exploitation

Marketing Campaigns often precede production of film

No A-list stars or high production values

Discourse of art not relevant to target markets low in cultural capital

Emphasis placed on non-copyrighted elements like genre

Generation of emotional responses

Handling Exploitation

Avoiding negative word-of-mouth
damaging business

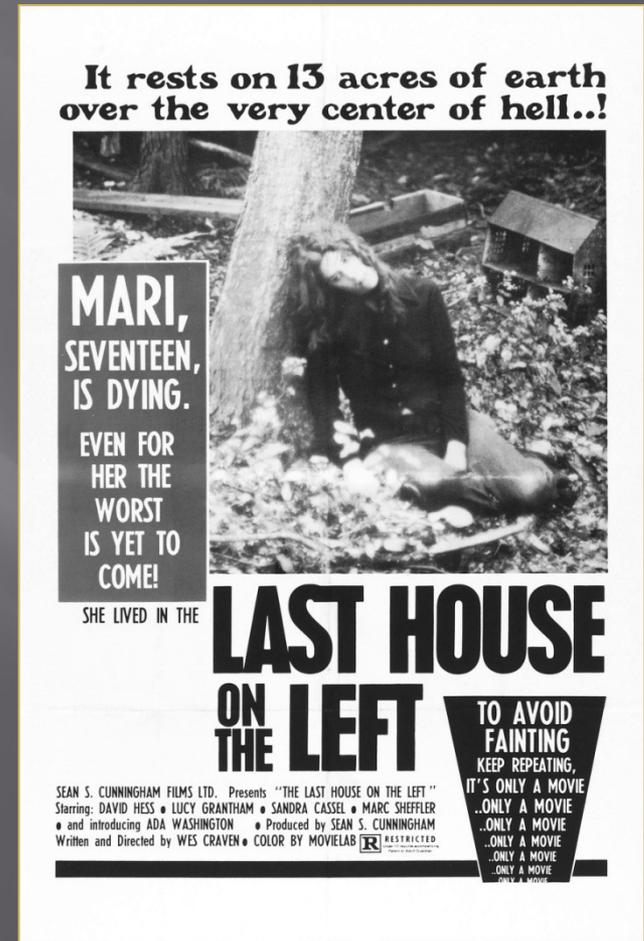
Regional saturation release

Emphasis on promotion

Short runs at theatres

Repackaged under new titles

Or sold to Hollywood companies!



Key Pre-video Exploitation Trends

Un-Hollywood I: Hardcore Pornography

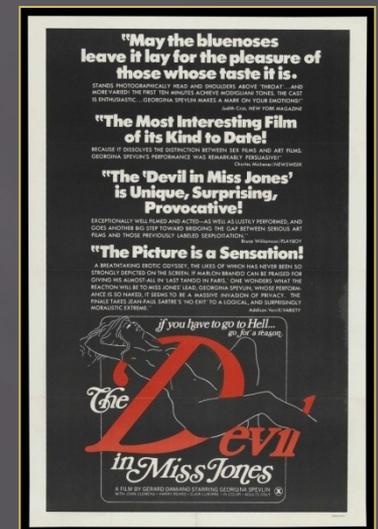
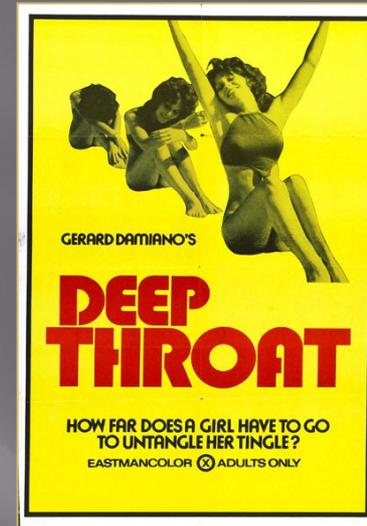
Despite Ratings system,
Hollywood eschews Hardcore

Legal Challenges permit hardcore

Deep Throat and *Devil in Miss Jones* blockbuster hits

Porno-chic becomes cultural fad

Nixon limits public visibility



“Un-Hollywood” II: Blaxploitation

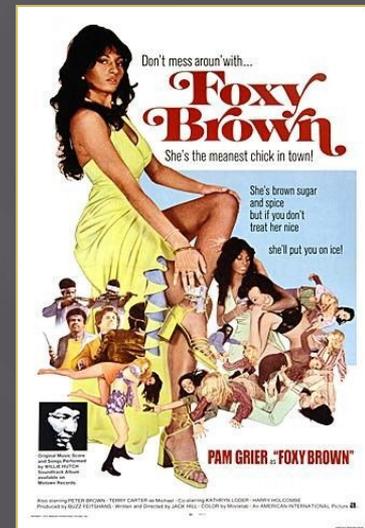
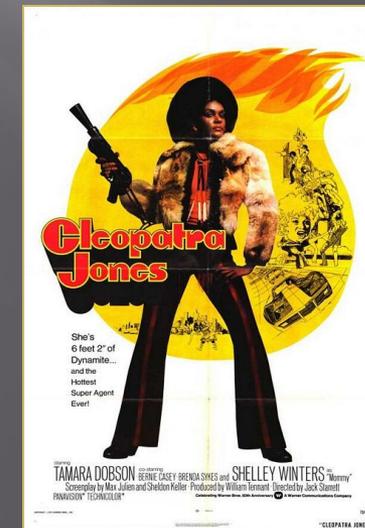
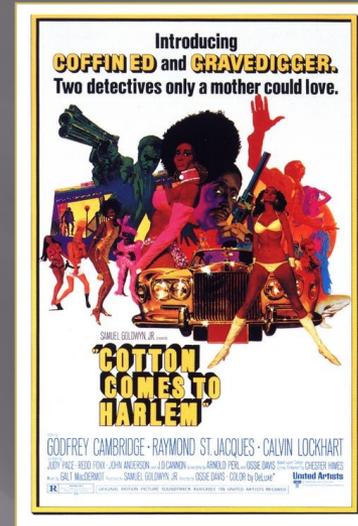
Cotton Comes to Harlem and *Shaft* highlights neglected black market

Cleopatra Jones indicates Hollywood interest in blaxploitation

Surge of independent black-centered genre films aimed at urban market

Sensation/socio-cultural critique

Blacks flock instead to blockbusters



“Un-Hollywood” III: Explicit Horror

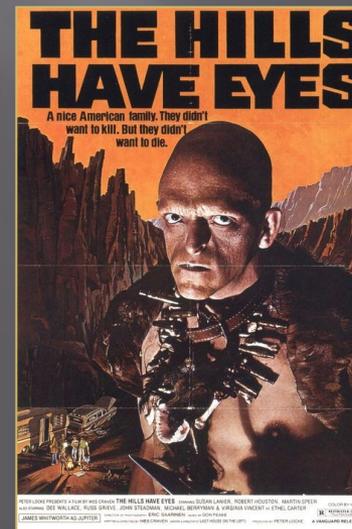
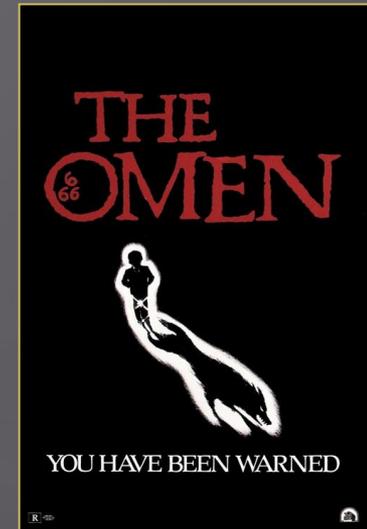
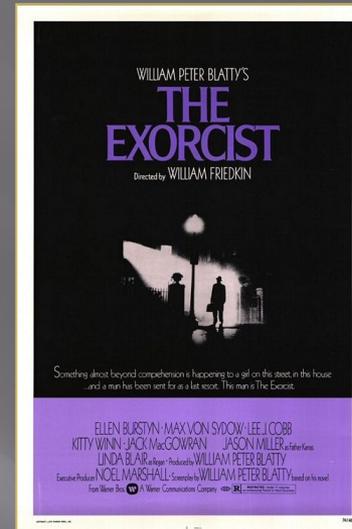
Ratings change facilitates unseen levels of Hollywood violence

The Exorcist (1973) is a megahit

The Omen (1976) also a big hit

Hollywood’s big budgets prevent profit despite solid ticket sales

Late-70s independent horror explosion



“Un-Hollywood IV”: Women-in-Danger Films

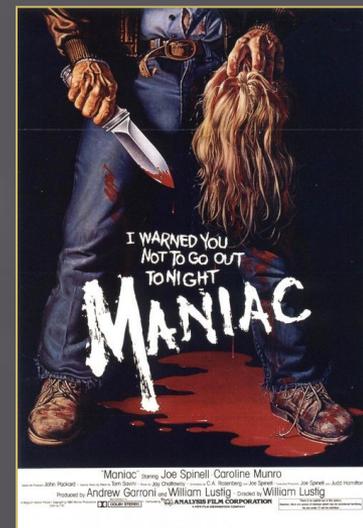
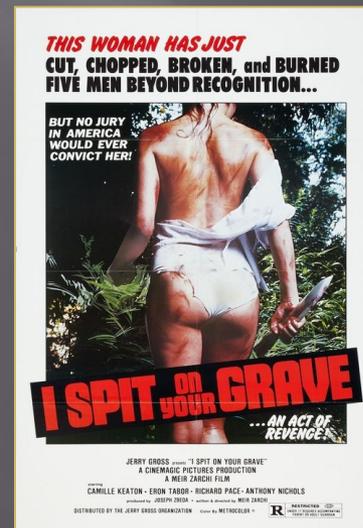
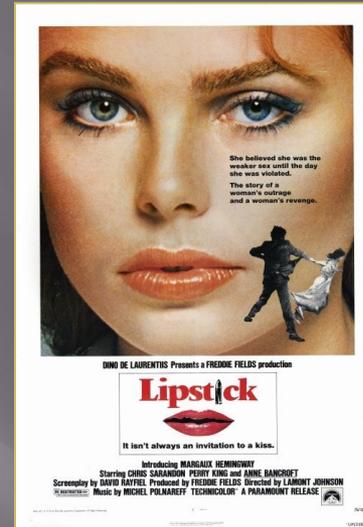
Hollywood films indicate promise

Lipstick (1975): Rape/Revenge

Eyes of Laura Mars (1978): maniac

1979-1980, production surge
generates huge public controversy

Then Hollywood takes over again!!!



Lipstick TV Spot:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pWrZ6ns7y-o>

Maniac Trailer:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8cUhPy6Uotc>

Less Sensational Exploitation Trends

The Pom Pom Girls (1976)

Do you find *The Pom Pom Girls* unusual in any way?

For whom do you think this was film intended?

What efforts were made to appeal to these people?

How might its conditions of distribution and exhibition have influenced the film's content?

Crown International Pictures: The Art of Crownsmanship

Under Pres. Marilyn Tenser

Target small town drive-ins

Make films appear female-friendly

Spotlight titillation, friendship,
romance, and mixed-sex high-jinx

Broken narration to make films
watchable for distracted audience



The Pom Pom Girls Trailer:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S_LfscC2WGc

Van Nuys Blvd. Trailer:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z3MOXwdkJp8&NR=1>

Youth Films: AKA Summer Films; Make-Out Movies

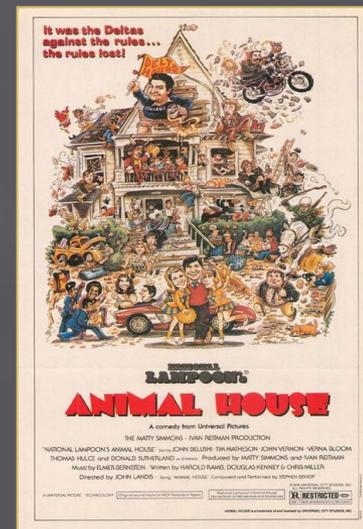
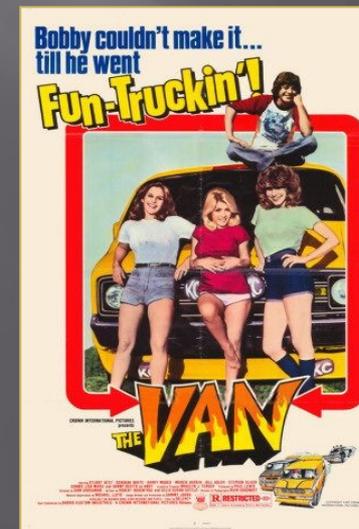
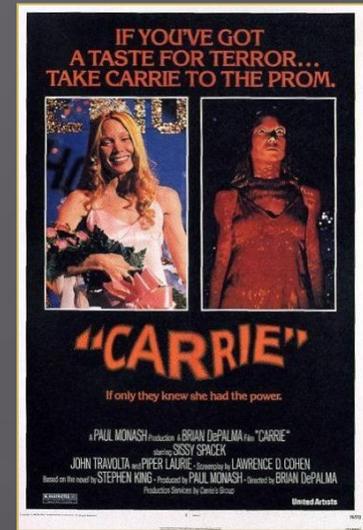
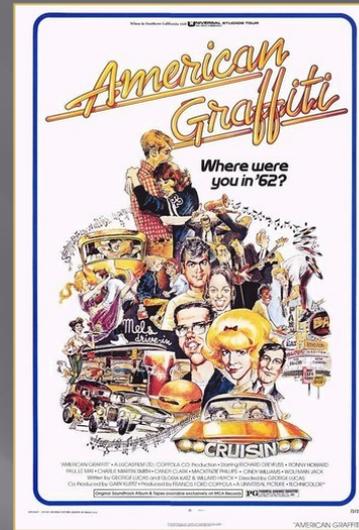
Over half US theatrical market;
but neglected between 1973-6

Hollywood does not capitalize on
American Graffiti in 1972

Crown enjoys drive-in hits

Carrie confirms potential

Hollywood gentrification ensues



The Impact of *The Pom Pom Girls*

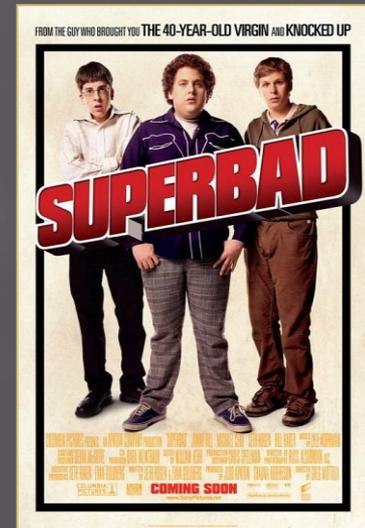
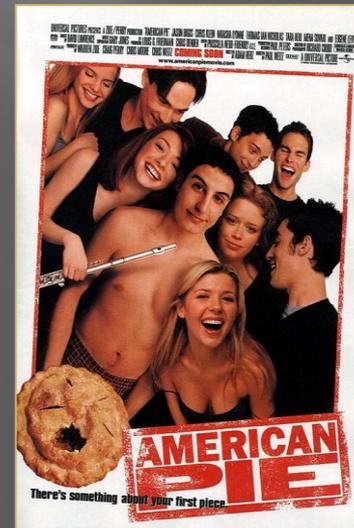
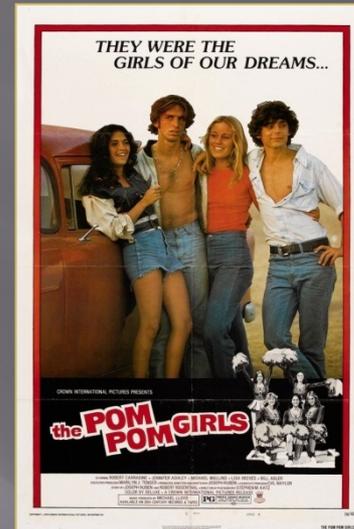
The Pom Pom Girls is youth-market hit

The Van replicates its success in 1977

Provokes Hollywood's most aggressive youth market operations

Generates animal comedy cycle

Template for Hollywood date-movie



Kidsploitation

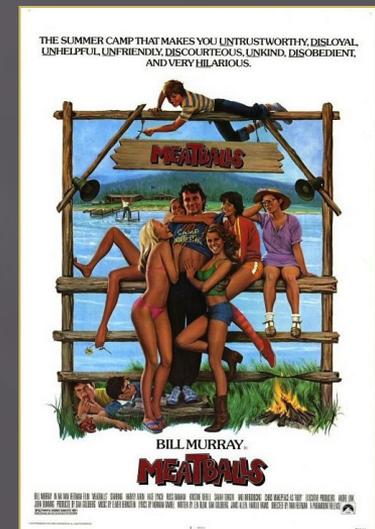
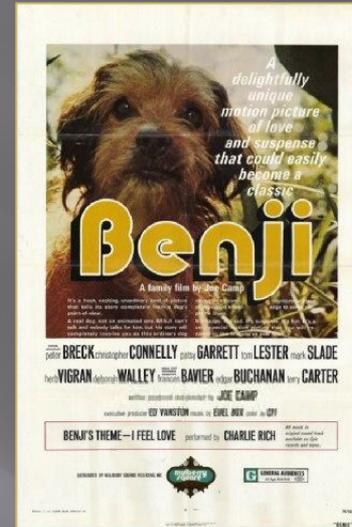
Major independent hit *Benji* (1974)
reveals children are underserved

Bad News Bears major Hollywood hit

Initiates small surge in kids films

Most fail as adolescents flock to
youth-market films

Occasional hits reignite production



Hicksploitation: “I’m a Racist not a Rapist”

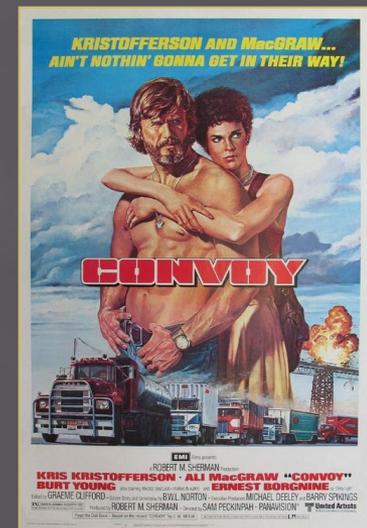
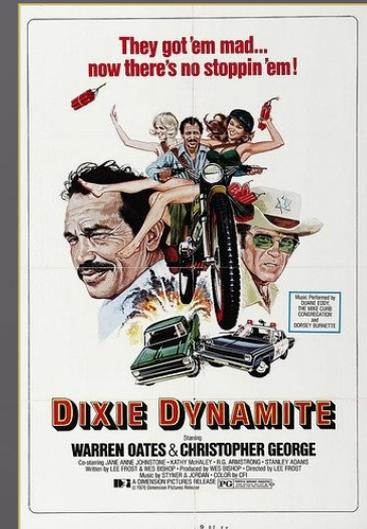
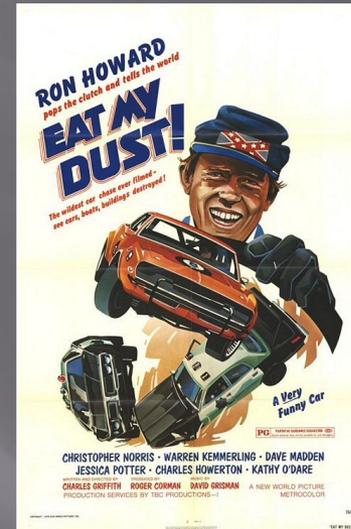
Cater to underserved southern market

Maximize attendance at southern-state all-year-round drive-ins

Use of southern settings and heroes

Valorize blue-collar masculinity

Gentrified by Hollywood: *Smokey and the Bandit* (1977) is megahit



Eat My Dust Trailer:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ldos-bzILXw>

Smokey and the Bandit Trailer:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UACtATtjEk>

Outsiders: Two Case Studies

Make films to sell to distributors for a set fee

Second guess what distributors deem commercially viable

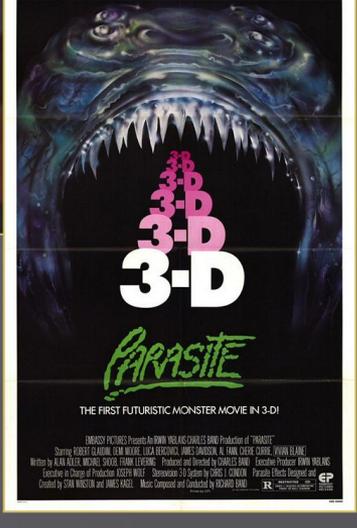
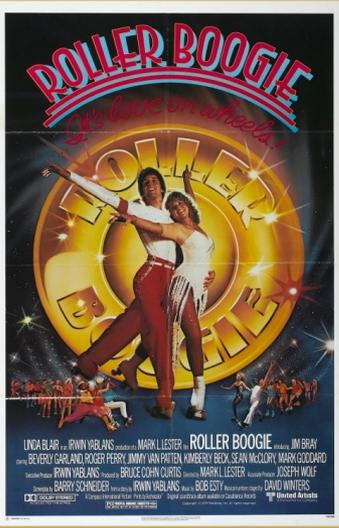
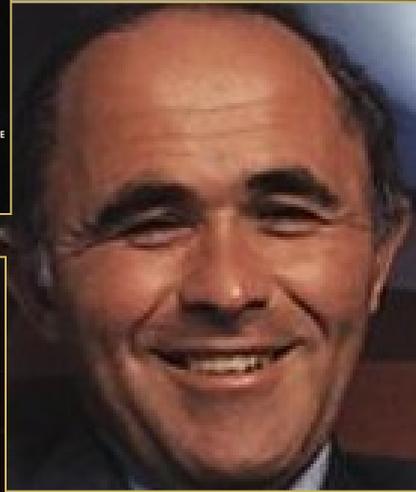
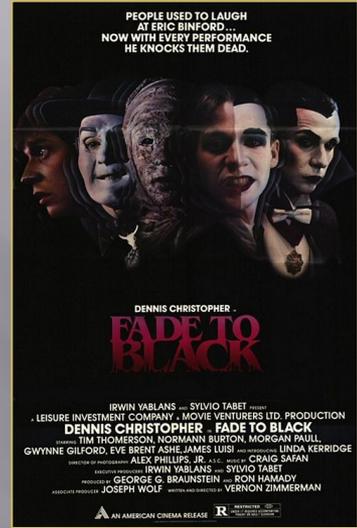
Usually avoided independents distributors due to unreliability

Usually targeted Hollywood distributors

Evoke recent hits more quickly and cheaply than Hollywood

Therefore making cheap imitations of Hollywood fare

Irwin Yablans: Mr Specialization - Merchant of Menace (and Roller Disco!)



Halloween (1978)

Backed by Syrian Money

Date-movie made to capitalize on *Carrie* and *Crown*-style hits

Distributed by producer after Hollywood turns it down

Released every *Halloween*

By 1982, became major hit



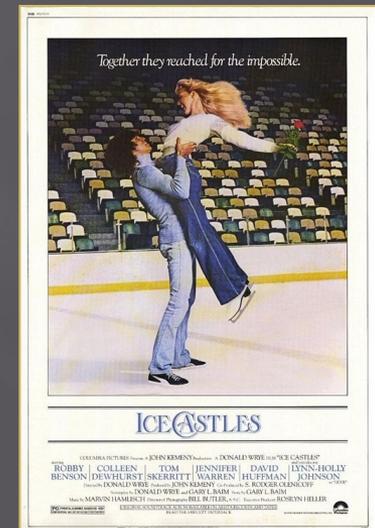
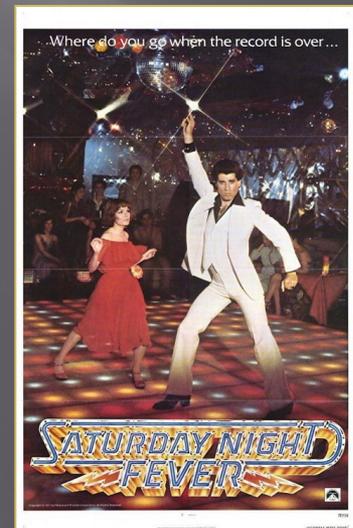
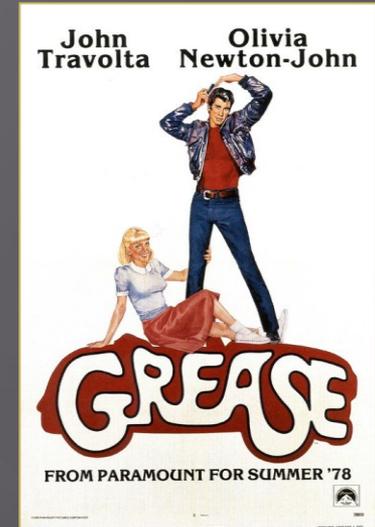
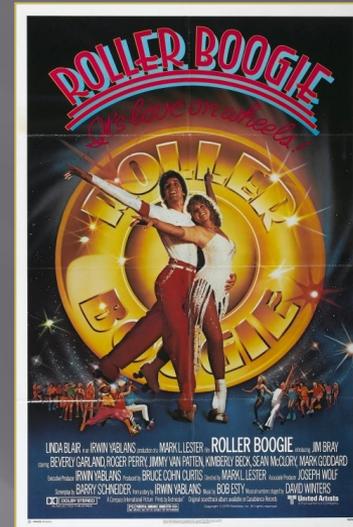
Roller Boogie (1979): Its Love on Wheels!

Made to capitalize on *Saturday Night Fever*, *Grease*, and *Ice Castles*

Money generated by pre-sales based on success of *Halloween*

Film made huge profit for Yablans before completion

Bombs leaving Hollywood distributor out of pocket



Roller Boogie Trailer:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7NRnIIQ9bnc>

Fulfilling the “Ambitions of Most Independent Filmmakers”

Has minor hits in early 70s

Fails with kids films

Bases *Friday the 13th* on several hits

Sells *Friday the 13th* to Paramount

Film is hit; Cunningham makes it to Hollywood and has financial security for his family for life!



Conclusions

In terms of content and conduct Hollywood and the exploitation sector are more heavily intertwined than often suggested

Exploitation ghettoizes low-cost low-brow entertainment – distancing Hollywood's own involvement in such output

Maintaining strict divisions obscures the institutionalization of exploitation practices in and outside of Hollywood

Outsiders dealings with Hollywood distributors truly complicate neat distinctions between what is or is not Hollywood product