

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN CINEMA

Session Three

The Blockbuster Era and High Concept

Dr. Richard Nowell

Department of Film Studies and Audiovisual Culture

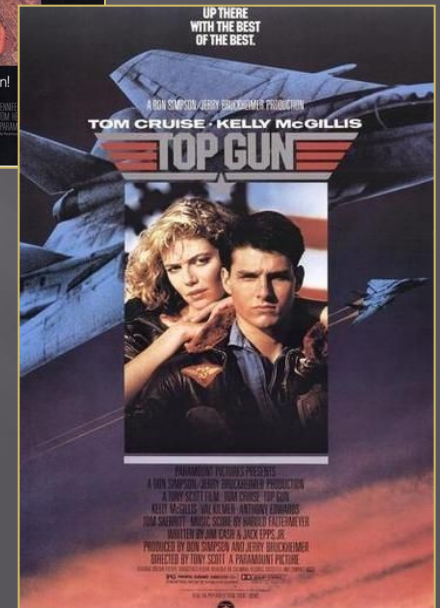
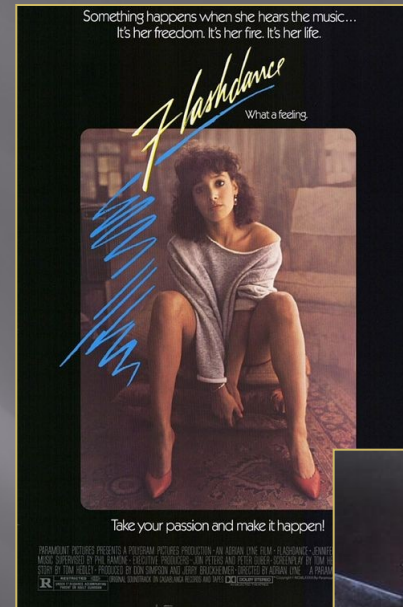
Masaryk University

Agenda

16:10 – 17:50
Top Gun (1986)

17:50–18:00
Break

18:00 – 19:15
Blockbuster Era & High
Concept



Focus

The Blockbuster Era as a distinct period in American cinema history

High concept as a coherent industrial/aesthetic strategy

The extent to which High Concept and Blockbuster filmmaking reflects the late 1970s and 1980s

The High Concept Challenge

Name FIVE films released by a Hollywood company before May 1989 that were promoted with both action figures and a pop video upon their original release.

Students that have succeeded to date: Zero

Questions

Summarize this film in 25 words or fewer.

In what sense might *Top Gun* be considered a High Concept film?

How has transferability to other media forms shaped the content and look of the film?

Is this film all that different from those we already viewed on the course?



Focus

The Blockbuster Era as a distinct period in American cinema history

High concept as a coherent industrial/aesthetic strategy

The extent to which High Concept and Blockbuster filmmaking reflects the late 1970s and 1980s

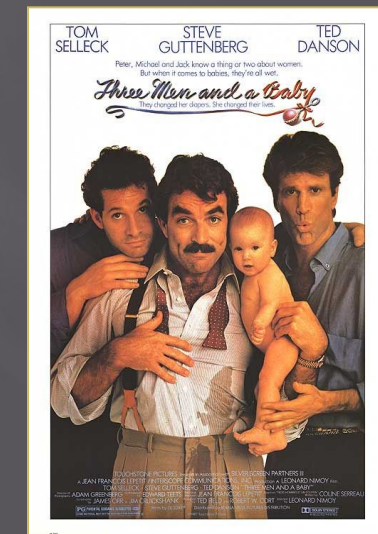
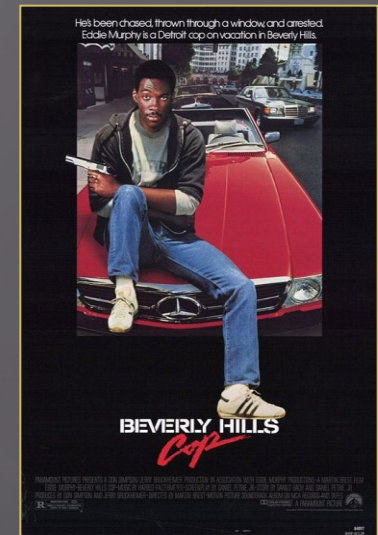
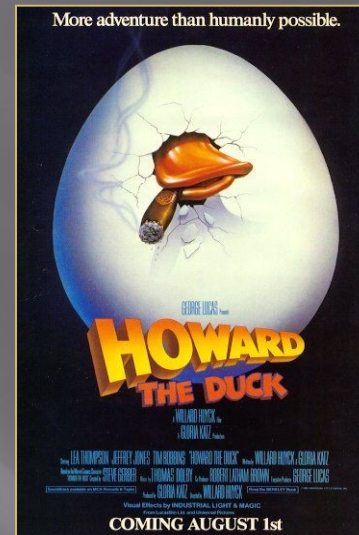
Blockbuster Taxonomy

Calculated Blockbuster:
Designed to be a high grossing film

Blockbuster Hit:
A very high grossing film

Calculated Blockbuster Hit
A film that achieves its backers' high commercial expectations

Sleeper: A surprise hit



How do both Schatz and Wyatt
portray late-1970s and 1980s
Hollywood?

The Blockbuster Era

Semi- distinct period in American film history: 1975–1989

“Blockbuster Era” often contrasted to “Hollywood Renaissance”:
Bygone golden age vs. low-point of capitalist cultural production.

Corporate power overwhelms creative filmmaking

Spawned Blockbuster Mentality: A megahit off-sets losses

Innovative creative personnel vs. faceless economic institutions

Middle-class Art Cinema vs. Mass audience blockbusters

What were the two major film “events” that are said to have initiated the blockbuster era?

The “Landmark Event”: *Jaws* (1975)

One of biggest US theatrical earners

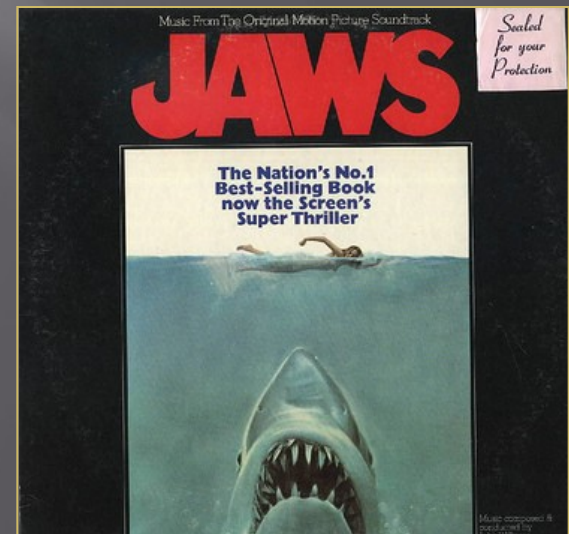
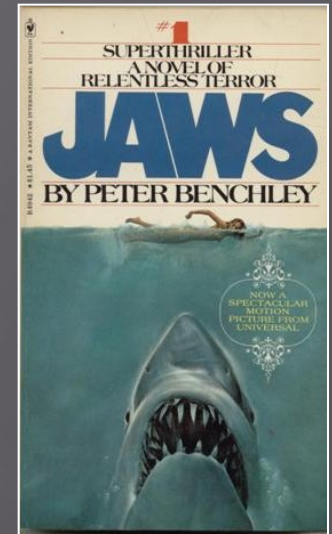
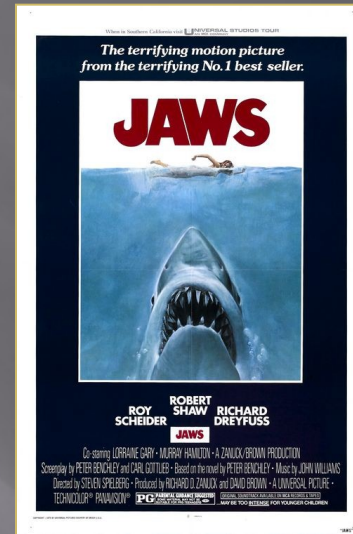
Spotlights potential of :

National saturation booking

Cross-media blitz-marketing

Merchandizing

Minimalistic, striking print advertizing



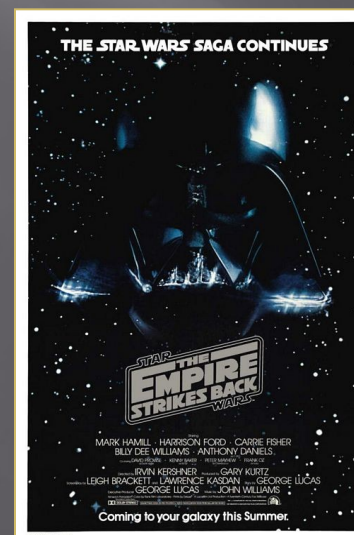
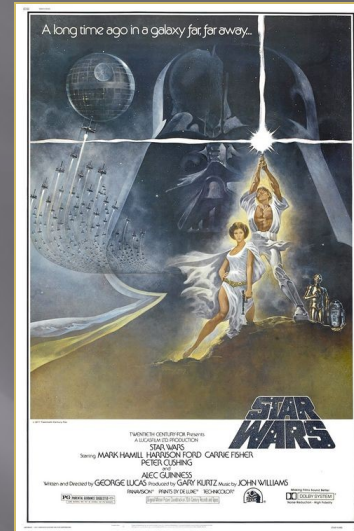
A Crystallizing Event: The *Star Wars* Trilogy (1977–1983)

Surpassed industry expectations
to out-gross *Jaws*

Huge merchandise sales
spotlight:

Huge revenue source (licensing)

Huge advertising exposure
(synergy)



What other films are spotlighted as the key releases of the Blockbuster Era?

The 1980s Megahit Canon

Lucas/Spielberg Canon

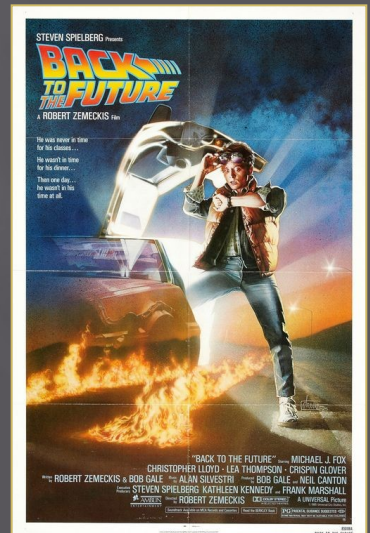
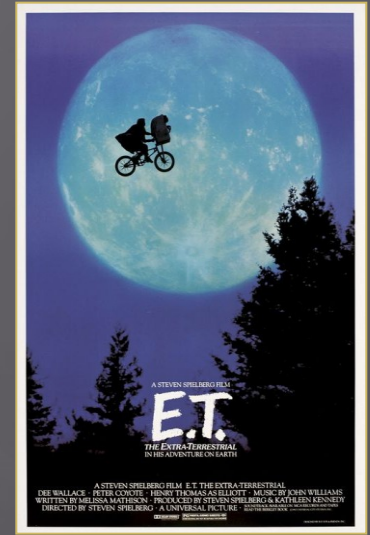
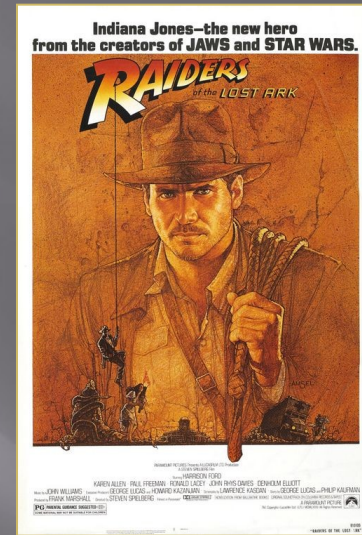
Big Budget Fantasy-adventures:

E.T. The Extra-terrestrial (1982)

Back to the Future (1985, 1989)

Indiana Jones (1981; 1984;
1989)

Ghost Busters (1984; 1989)



Do you think there are any problems with the ways the blockbuster era is generally portrayed?

Topicality trumping Actuality?

We need to consider the extent to which big-budget, big grossing films characterized this period

We need to consider how blockbuster-oriented was the Blockbuster Era in comparison to other periods.

We need to consider what else was made in the Blockbuster Era

We need to consider whether the commercially successful movies of the period were

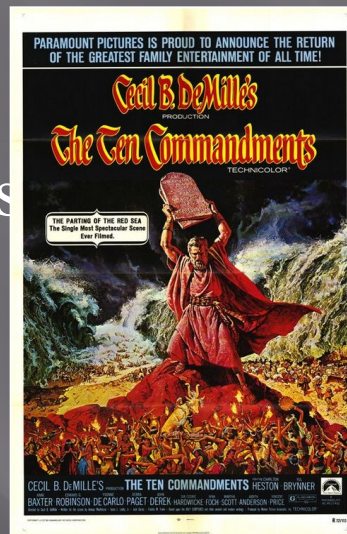
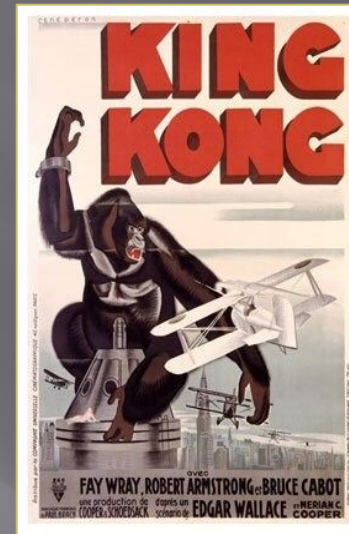
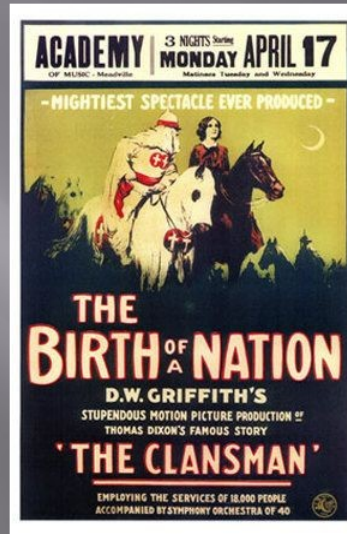
Relativizing the Blockbuster Era

Hollywood always handled costly films

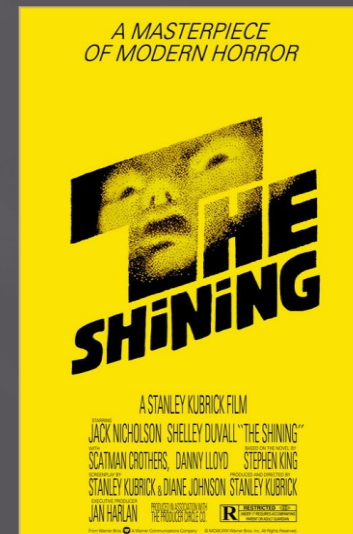
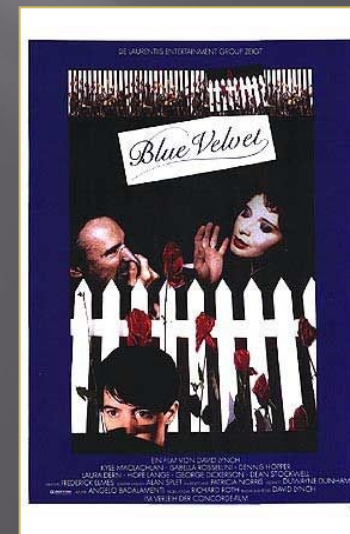
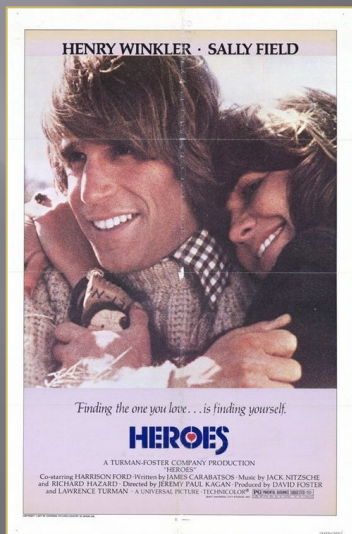
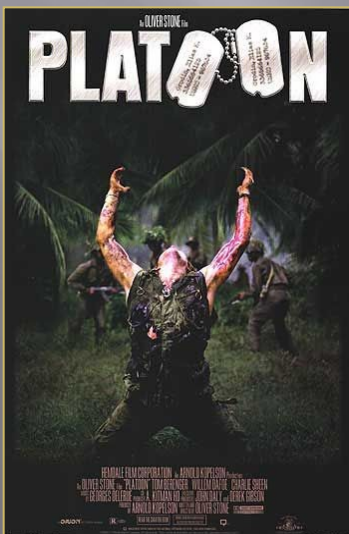
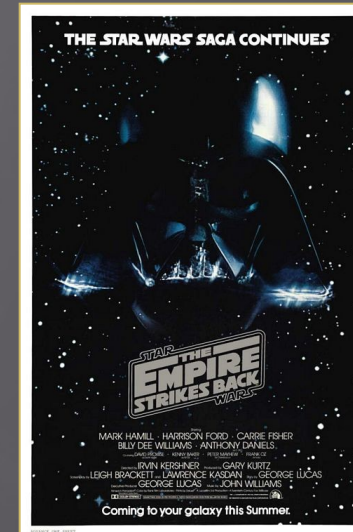
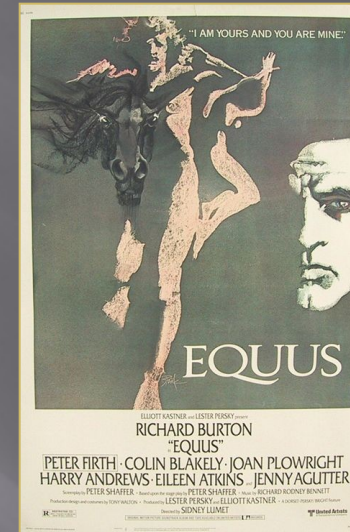
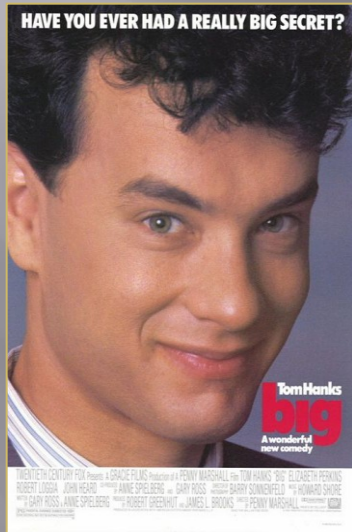
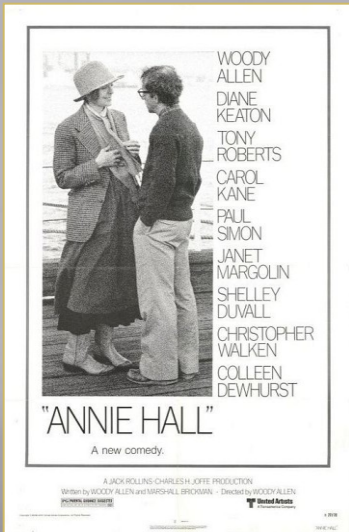
Many megahits were released before 1975

Sidesteps inflation and ticket price hikes to overstate success stories

Box office Gross is newsworthy



Hollywood's Repertoire: Genre Pics, Star Vehicles, Quality Cinema, Art Cinema



Blockbuster Era as Megahit Tradition

Commercial success replaces critical success of Hollywood Renaissance as organizing framework for historians

Film history therefore becomes a story of exceptional hits

Erects canons which marginalize the unremarkable

Innovation and difference overwrite continuation and repetition

All periods are characterized by calculated blockbusters and other types of film

Topicality trumping Actuality

The idea of a Blockbuster Era derives from linking discussion of film to prestigious socio-political discourse

It makes film topical by invoking a Reagan-era characterized by laissez faire economics and corporate culture

It also inflects film with a timely sense of modernization, nationalism, and power associated with the Reagan years

American film, and critics, are therefore topicalized ... Just like happened with the Hollywood Renaissance

How does Wyatt define High Concept?

What does he mean by “the look”, “the hook”, and “the book”?

High Concept: Well Packaged/Little Substance

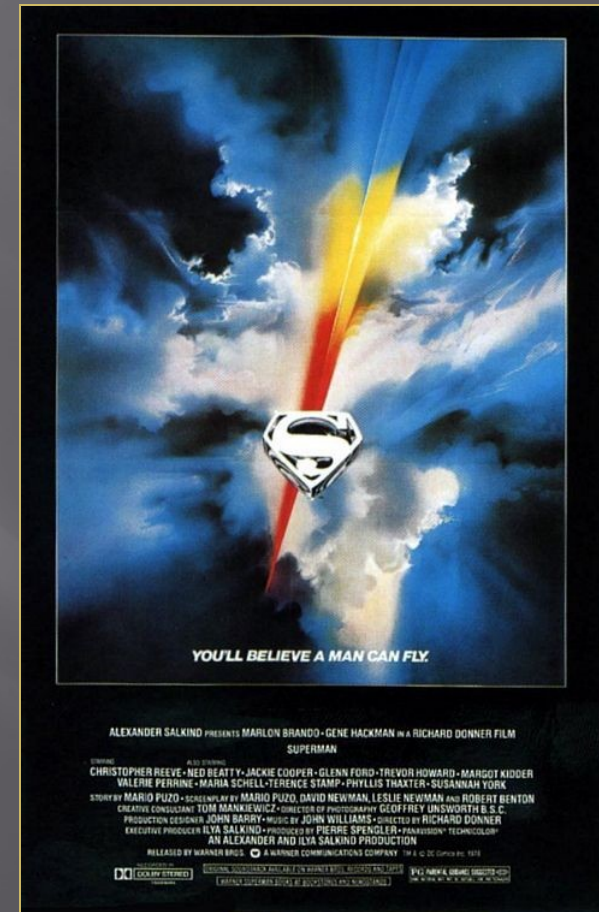
Economic/aesthetic strategy said to have dominated Hollywood thinking

Angled to youth and to families

Distillable, easily understood idea

Transferable to media and merchandise

Opened widely and promoted heavily to generate event status



The Look: Film Aesthetics/style – the Cocaine Aesthetic

Slick, striking, visuals

Up-tempo music-driven montages

Translate well to audio-visual marketing especially music videos

Fetish consumer goods and body

Exaggerate facial/bodily movements

But this was nothing new!



“Watching in slow-motion as you turn to me and say ... ‘take my breath away’”

Footloose (1984) warehouse scene:

[Http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nc8crnqKEns](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nc8crnqKEns)

Rocky IV (1985) No Easy Way Out Montage:

[Http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ANIOI_ERLRk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ANIOI_ERLRk)

Berlin, “Take My Breath Away” Video Clip:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K4a6ampIGao>

Madonna, “Papa Don’t Preach” Video Clip,

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RkxqxWgEEz4&ob=av2n>

The Hook: Marketability and Merchandizing Potential

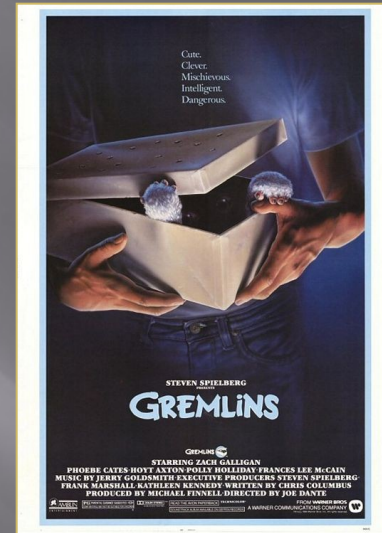
Easily marketable content

Especially content that could be licensed and used in other forms

When did this logic NOT shape Hollywood conduct and output?

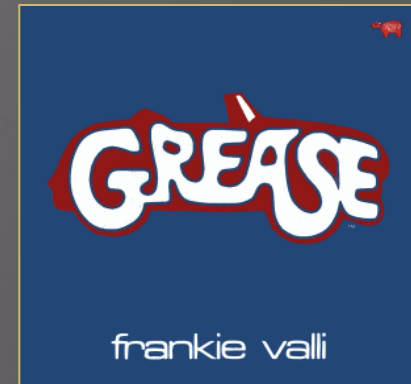
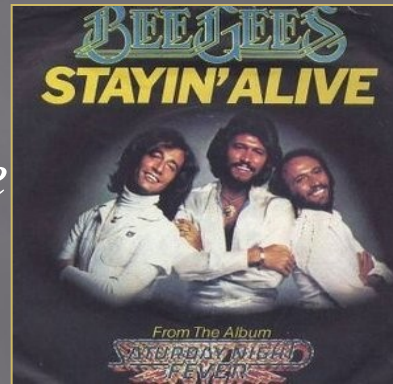
Think: Disney and Mickey Mouse

HC was sexy industry jargon for strong commercial potential



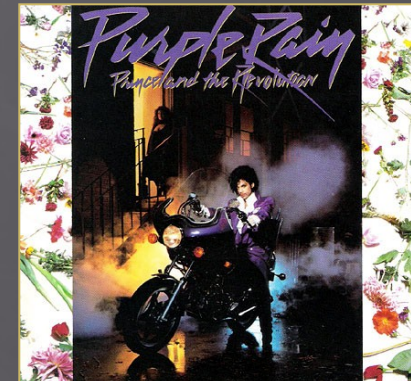
Pop Songs and Popular Cinema

Saturday Night Fever and *Grease*

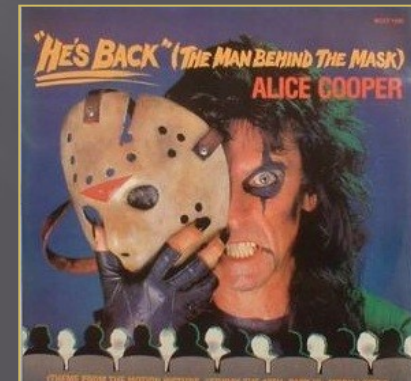
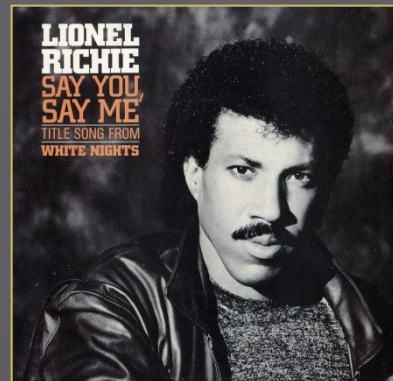


MTV provides key catalyst

Youth market hits inc.
Flashdance, *Footloose*, and
Purple Rain



Widespread by mid-1980s, inc.
quality cinema like *White Nights*



Hallmark of Hollywood-ness

Cheaper than buying an LP ... : Youth-oriented Cinema and Pop soundtracks

Saturday Night Fever (1977) Trailer:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bq4ZMKqWk80>

Valley Girl (1983) Trailer:

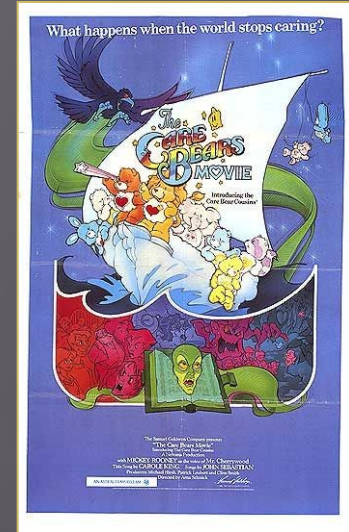
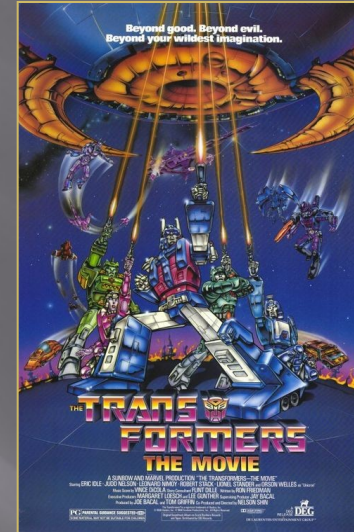
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NZaRznRmCqc>

Relativizing A Talismanic New Hollywood Merchandise: Toys

Mainly from Children's Cartoons
Transformers
Care Bears

Occasional R-rated Action Films
Commando
Rambo: First Blood Part II

Occasional Hollywood Hits:
E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial
Gremlins; *The Karate Kid*



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4i7r6peTN3I&feature=related>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aCpbTb3IbV4&feature=related>

The Book: Quickly Described Story

Film can be summed up succinctly.

What film cannot be summarized succinctly?

Does it not hinge on the speaker's skills?

Does it not always ignore content?

Does this process not assume naively that we all view films in the same way?



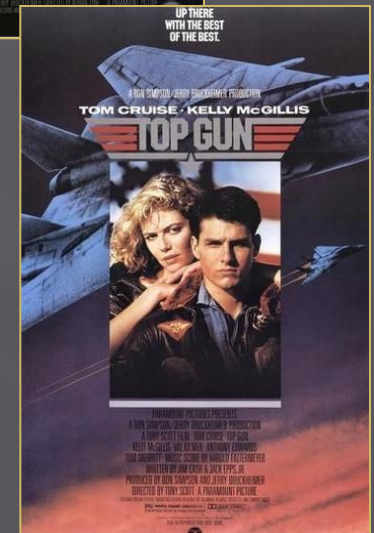
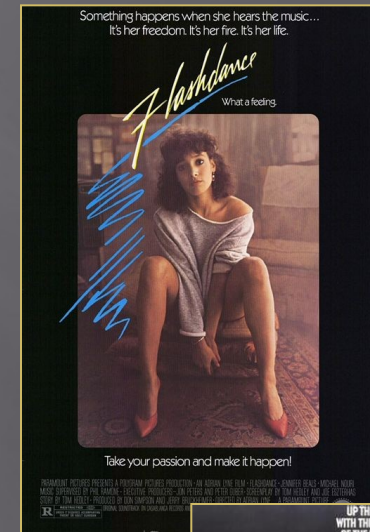
Questions

In what sense might *Flashdance* and *Top Gun* be considered High Concept films?

Can you summarize either film in 25 words or fewer?

How has transferability to other media forms shaped the content and look of these films?

Are these films profoundly different from those we already viewed on the course?



De-mythologizing High Concept

Wyatt recycles industry rhetoric (and fantasy)

High Concept reflects myriad assumed contemporaneous trends that were rarely employed in /around the same film

High Concept is therefore too narrow a term, and too broad a concept, to reflect the face of film content and handling

High Concept was seen as the essence of a new Hollywood

... and this situation would lead it to become a self-fulfilling prophecy, as we will see in the next session ...