

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN CINEMA

Session Four

Major Independents

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Masaryk University

Agenda

16:10 – 18:05

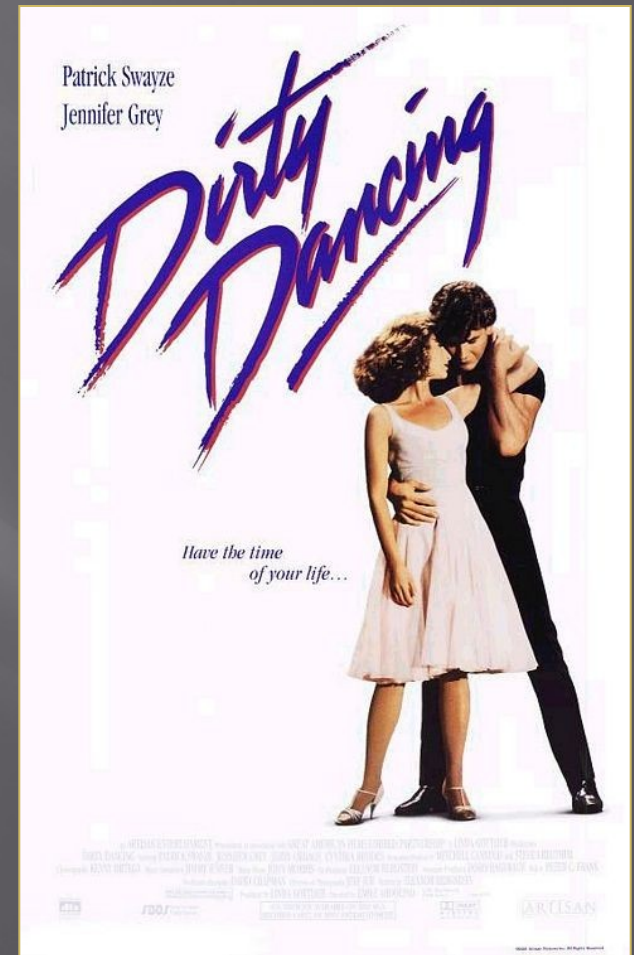
Dirty Dancing (1987)

18:05 – 18:10

Break

18:10 – 19:15

Mini-Majors & Major Independents



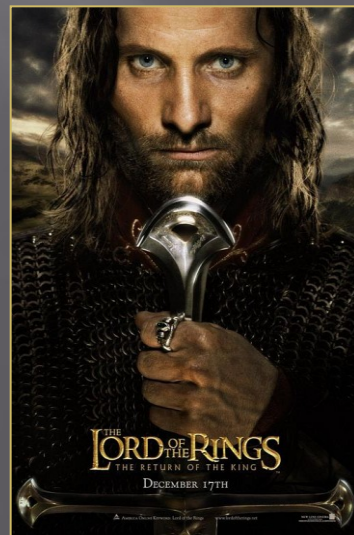
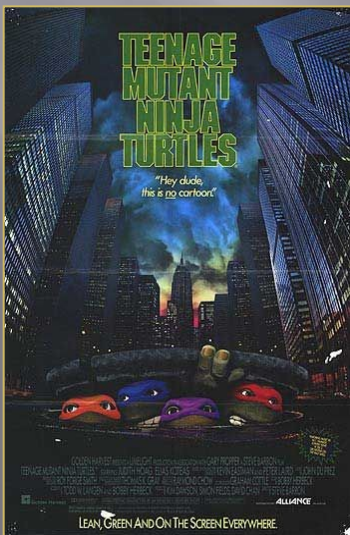
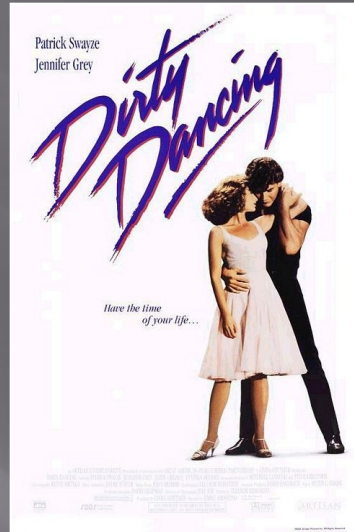
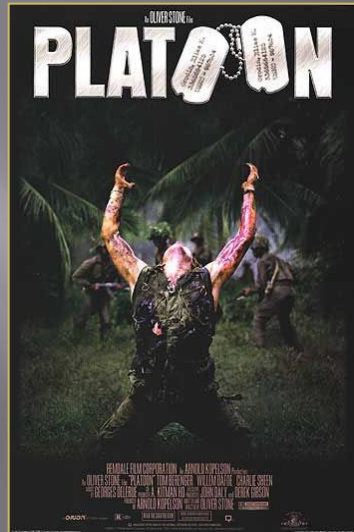
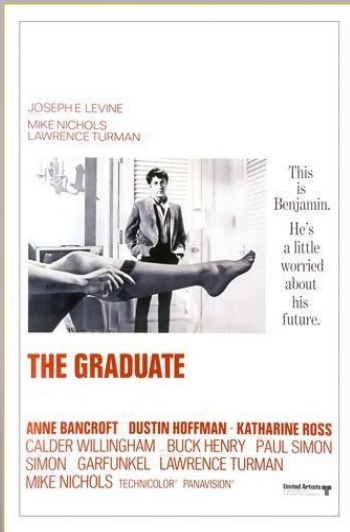
Screening Questions

To what extent does *Dirty Dancing* feel like a Hollywood movie?

In what ways does *Dirty Dancing* bear the hallmarks of so-called High Concept filmmaking?

In what ways does *Dirty Dancing* utilize elements associated with the Hollywood Renaissance?

Independent competitors to Hollywood have at best enjoyed fleeting success



Focus

Overview of Output of Major Independents

Independent High Concept

The extent to which major independents challenge distinctions between independents and Hollywood

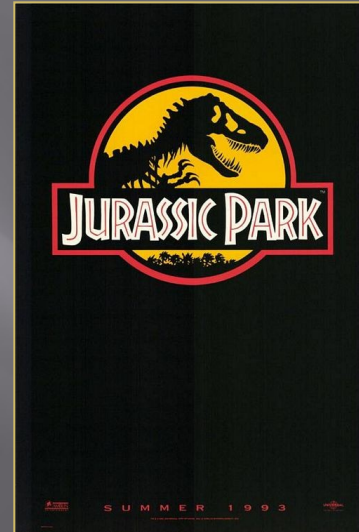
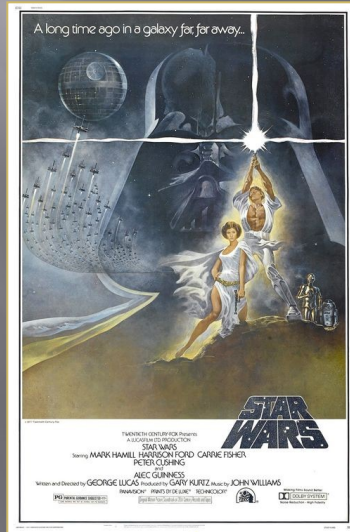
Principal Supra-Generic Categories of Contemporary American Cinema

Reflecting on the course thus far, what are the three broad categories into which contemporary American cinema tends to be organized?

What are their dominant characteristics?

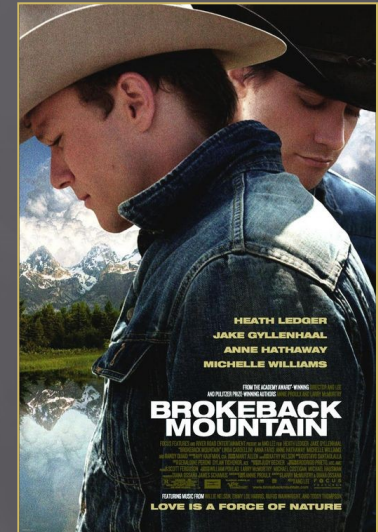
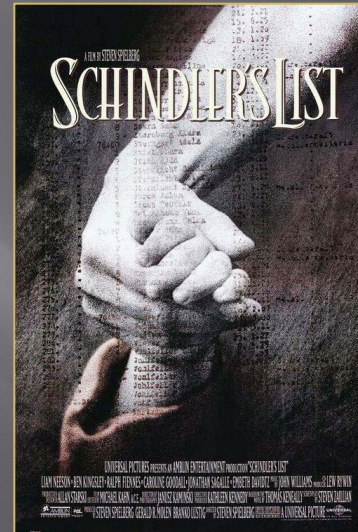
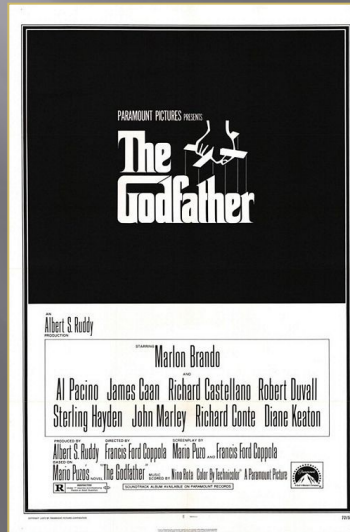
The “High Concept” Blockbuster

Corporate Hollywood
Mass Audience
Family-friendly
Big Budget
Spectacle-focused
Plot-driven
Thematically weak
Multi-media
Event status
Harmless Entertainment



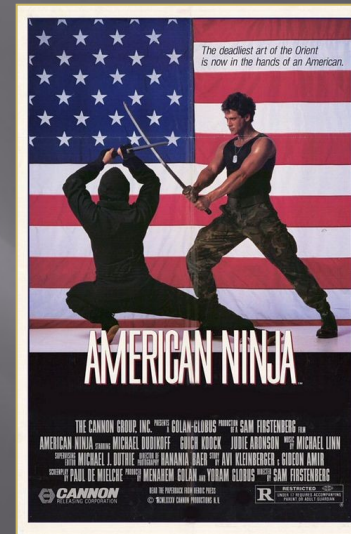
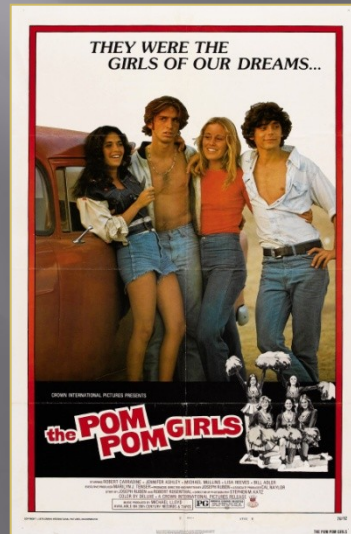
Quality/Prestige/Art Cinema

Visionary filmmakers
Sophisticated Audience
Adult-oriented
Moderately budgeted
Thematically rich
Visually challenging
Theatrically viewed
Pet-projects
Less well known
Intellectually stimulating



Exploitation Cinema

Entrepreneurial hacks
Low brow audience
Cheap
Visually sloppy
Thematically weak
Low rent exhibition
Get-rich quick
Obscure
Titillating/salacious



Mid-to-late 1980s – Early 1990s:

Witnessed the emergence of relatively powerful independent film companies



ORION®



NEW LINE CINEMA

MIRAMAX
F I L M S

What conditions led to a brief boom in non-Hollywood US commercial film making and distribution in the mid-to-late 1980s?

The New Grindhouse

Newly established delivery systems

New Revenue streams

Replace drive-ins/grind houses

Complement theatrical release



A Reshaped Media Landscape

Targeted by surviving 70s
exploitation companies

Lucrative until market
saturation in mid-80s

Demand for Content

Hollywood initially reluctant

Retailers want theatrical hits



Why did most of the new independent companies disappear quickly, and what helped some to survive a little bit longer?

The Perils of Independent High-Rolling

High-risk/high gain

Hollywood safety nets:

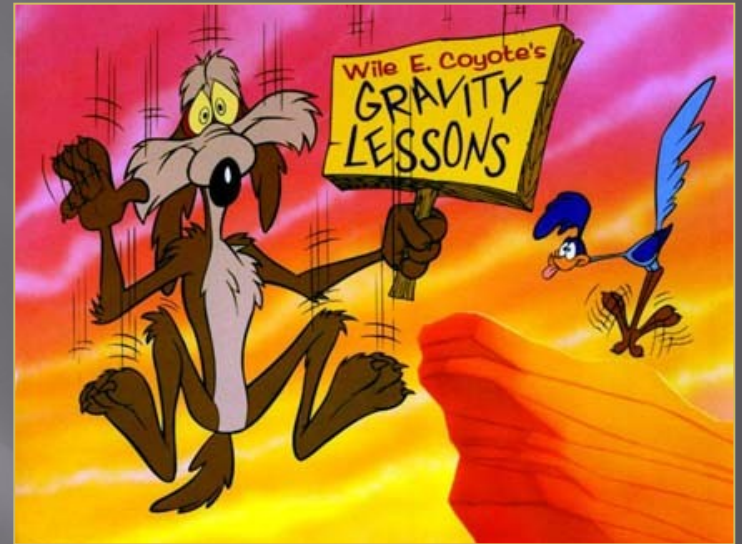
Back Catalogue (revenue stream)

Parent Company (Bailout)

Independents have neither!!

Need ongoing success to survive

Cannot absorb failure



Having read the work of both Perren and Wyatt, and from being part of global film culture, what impression do you have about Miramax?

Miramamax: An Emblematic Major Independent (?)

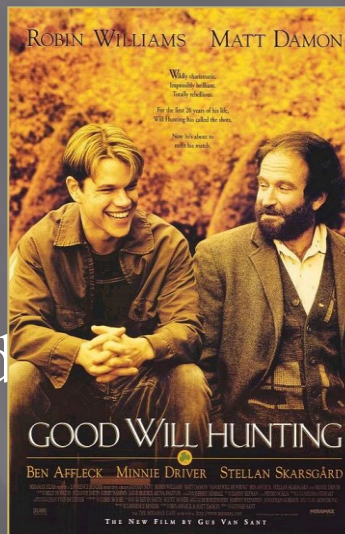
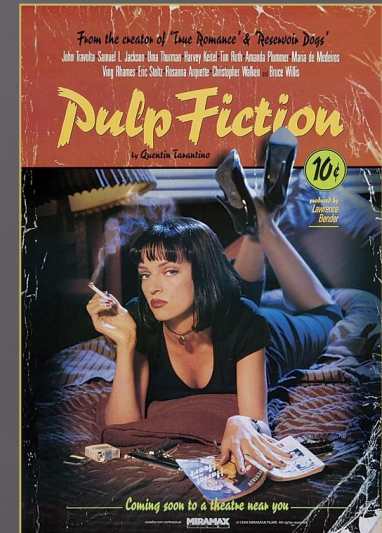
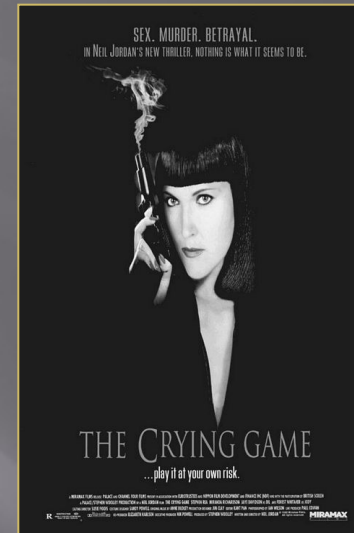
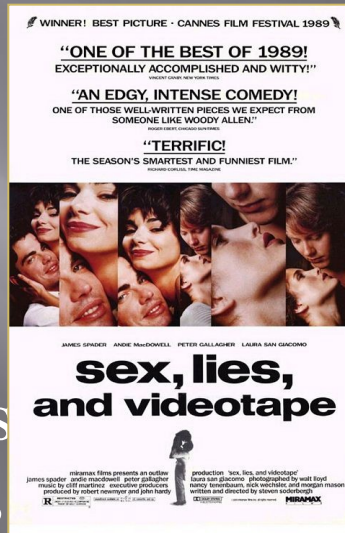
Focus on Art Cinema

Dimension ignored

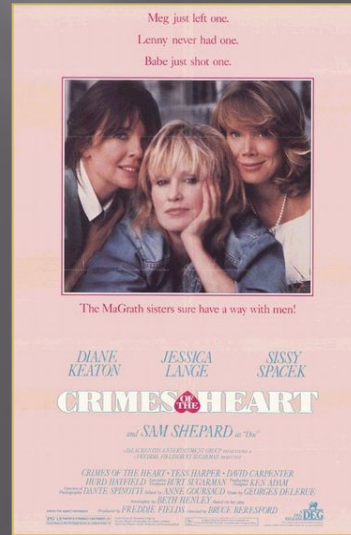
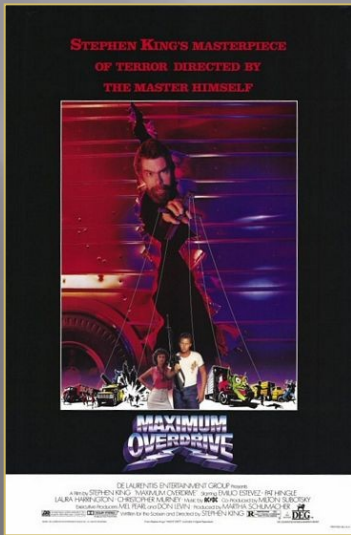
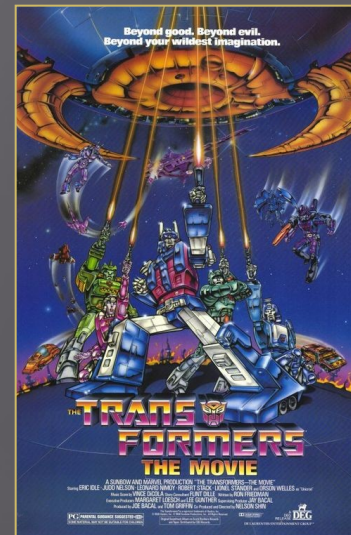
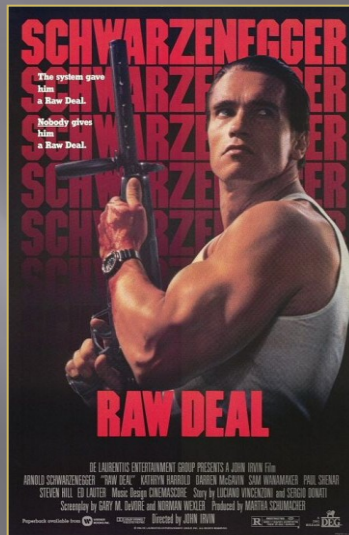
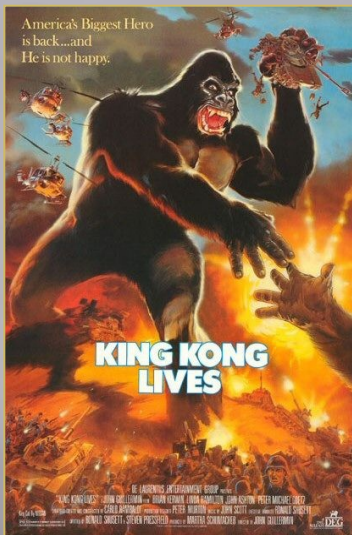
Over-emphasis of films
Art Cinema credentials

Reinforces distinctions
from Hollywood

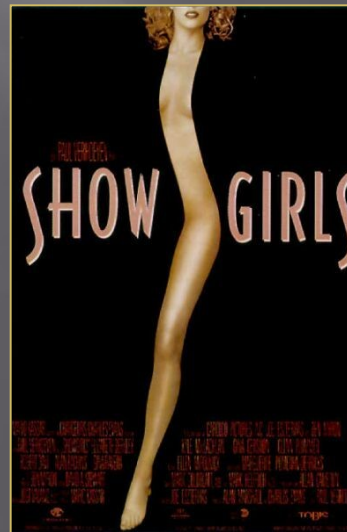
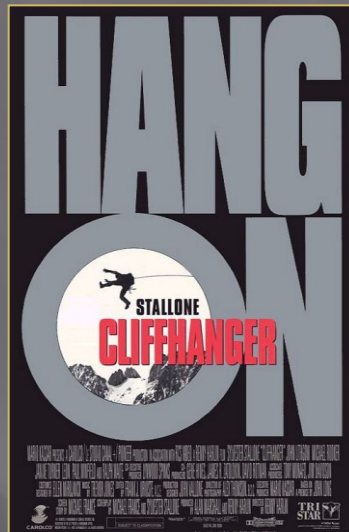
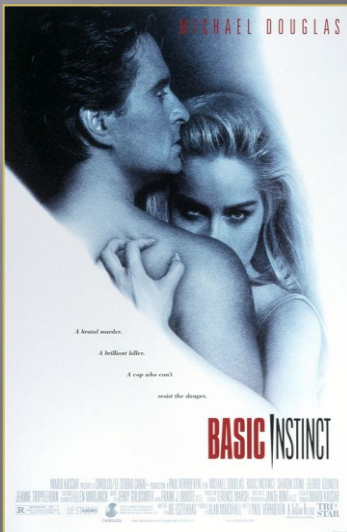
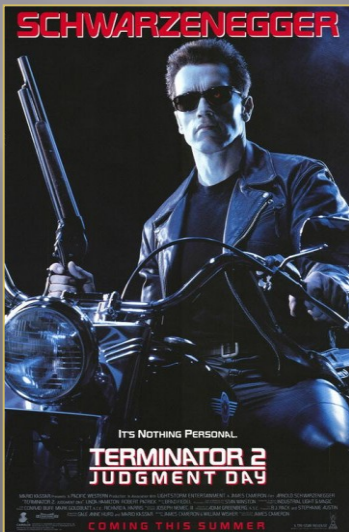
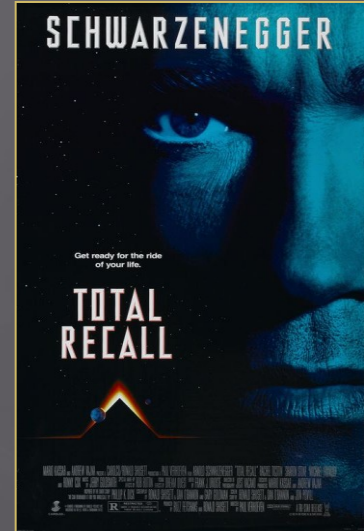
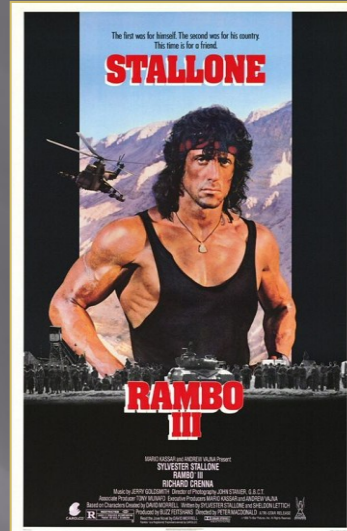
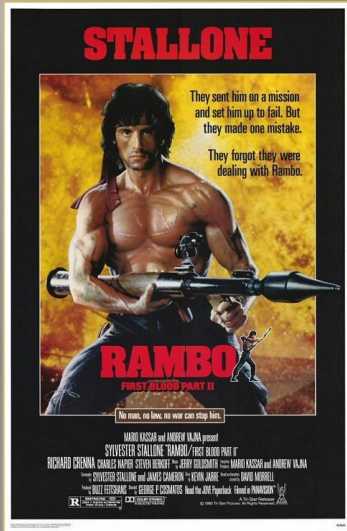
Obscures exchange and
interaction



DEG: High Profile/Low Returns (1986-8)



Carolco: The Ultimate Outsiders (1982-95)



Orion Pictures: The Heavyweight with a Glass Jaw (1982-95)

Established 1978 as Satellite producer for Warner Bros.

Goes solo in 1982, enjoying huge success, 1985-1987

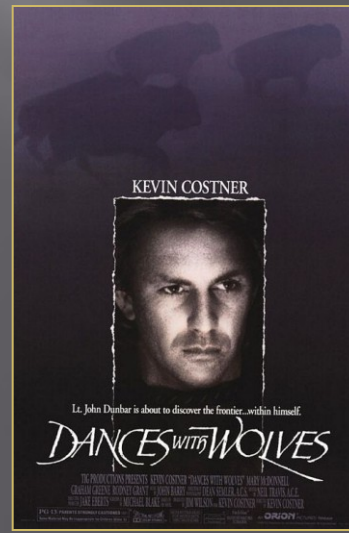
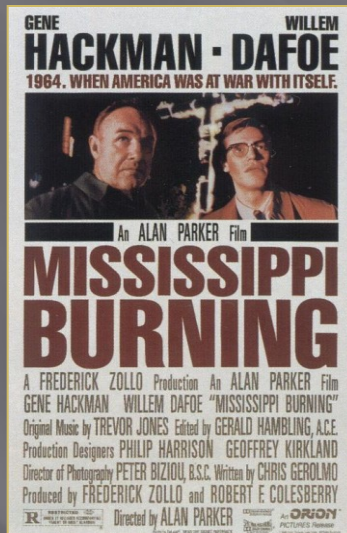
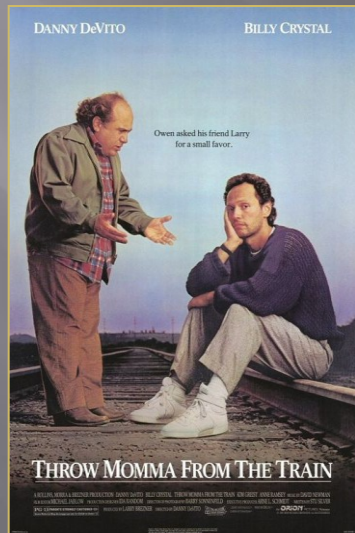
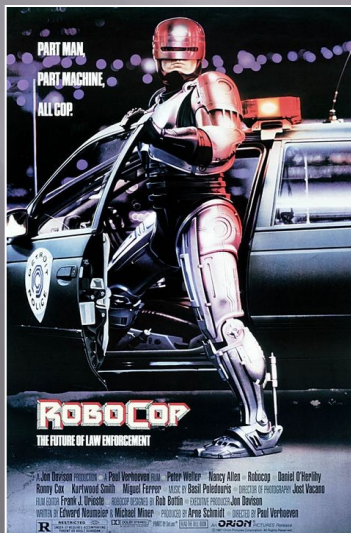
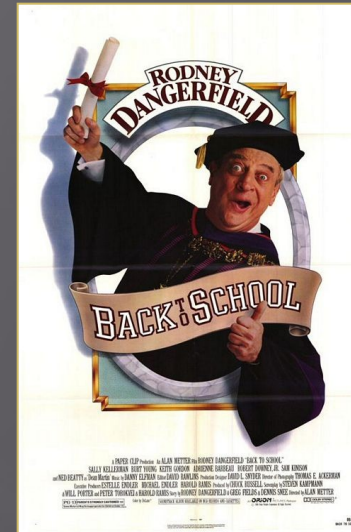
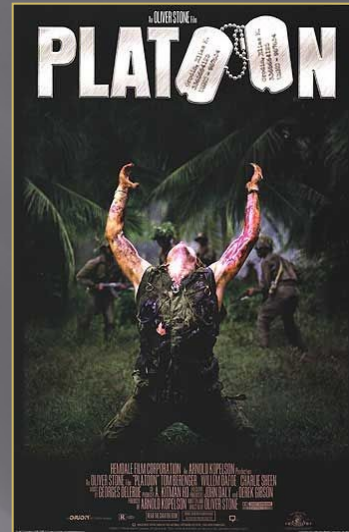
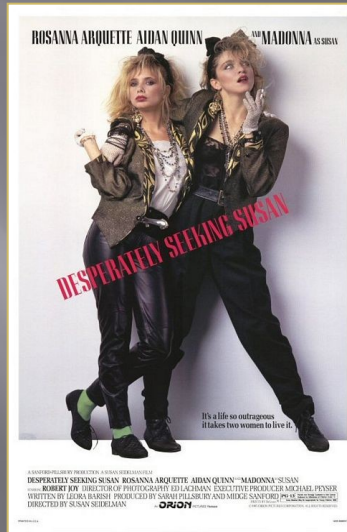
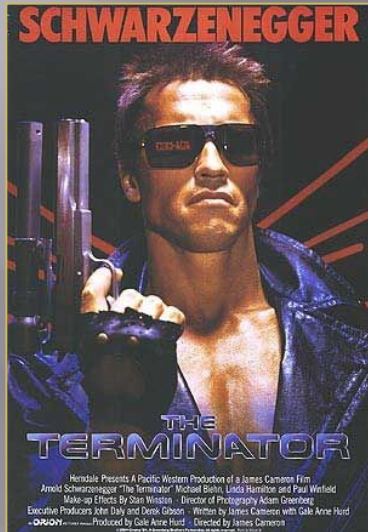
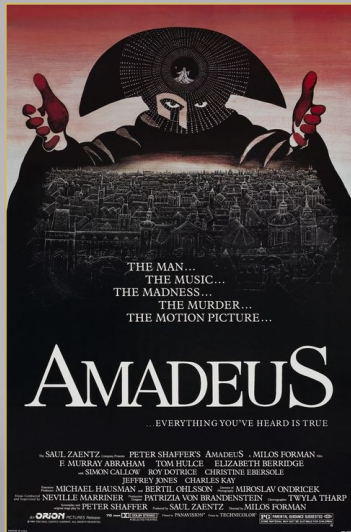
Encounters troubled times 1988-89 when films flop

Sells international rights to films to Sony

Hits cannot offset weak films and no international revenue

Downsizes hugely after 1992

Orion Pictures' Output

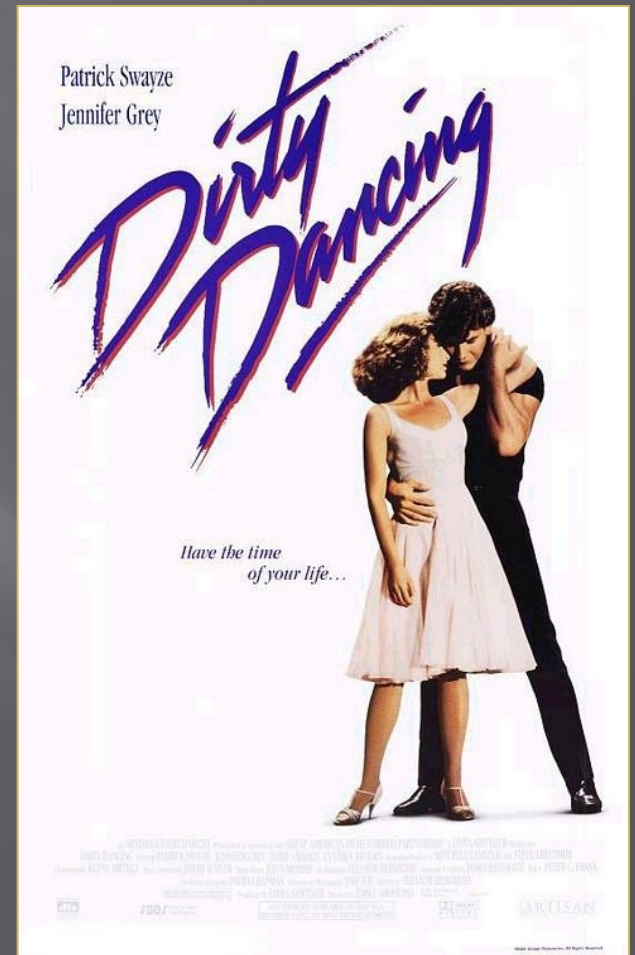


The Case of *Dirty Dancing*

To what extent does *Dirty Dancing* feel like a Hollywood movie?

In what ways does *Dirty Dancing* bear the hallmarks of so-called High Concept filmmaking?

In what ways does *Dirty Dancing* utilize elements associated with the Hollywood Renaissance?



High production values

Hollywood Genre model

(kind of) stars

Soundtrack

High-concept montages

Themes evoking renaissance



What other than its content would have helped to make *Dirty Dancing* appear to be a Hollywood film?



Dirty Dancing Opening Credit Sequence:

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

She's Like the Wind Montage Sequence:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mR6vJHJkJhU>

Patrick Swayze & Wendy Fraser, "She's Like the Wind", Video
Clip: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1U9p1WRfA9w>

Bill Medley and Jennifer Warnes, "(I had) the Time of my life",
video clip: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QUoDaCH1MJM>

The Case of *A Nightmare on Elm Street*

Does *A Nightmare on Elm Street 4: The Dream Master* feel like an independent film to you?



High Concepting *Elm Street*: 1987-89

Wide Openings

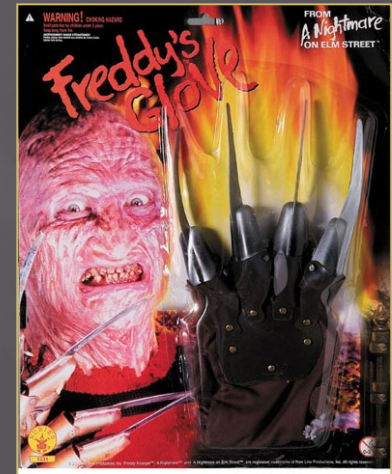
Merchandizing

Musical tie-ins

Cross media presence

Huge Publicity drive

Freddy Krueger as “Star”



A Nightmare on Elm Street 4: The Dream Master Clip:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gYJCd7UGhFI>

Vinnie Vincent Invasion, Love Kills

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CHSm-VohsNY>

MTV Special, September 1988, (7:40 – 8:50)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=21xj9MYS-FY>

Independent High Concept

Mid-1980s, seen as a cutting edge of Hollywood practice

Is really a cluster of trends scattered across films; Few if any Hollywood films exhibit all traits of high concept

Enables independents to frame films as Hollywood product

Earliest truly HC films emerge from the independent sector

Distances films from exploitation product

The Impact of *Elm Street*

Out High Concepted Hollywood

Set new high water mark

Emphasized potential of HC

Fulfillment of HC in Hollywood

Template for *Batman* (1989) and
Dick Tracy (1990)

Villains as marketing hooks



New Line Cinema: The House that Freddy Built

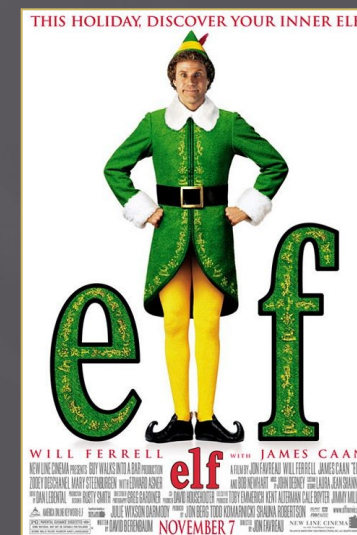
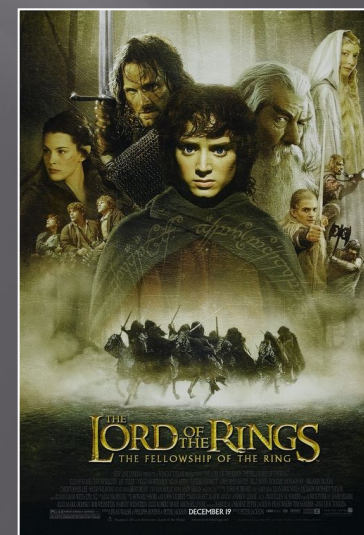
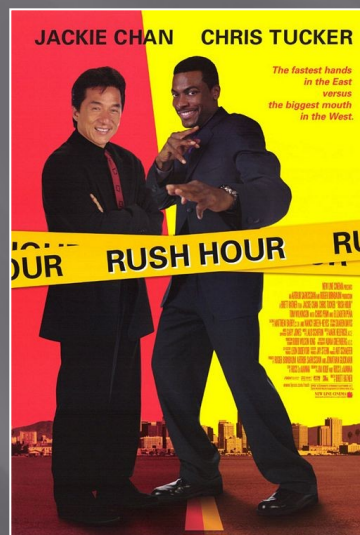
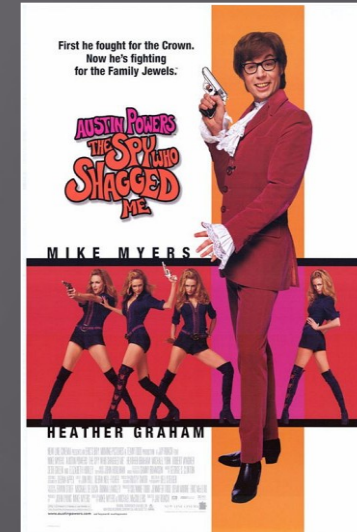
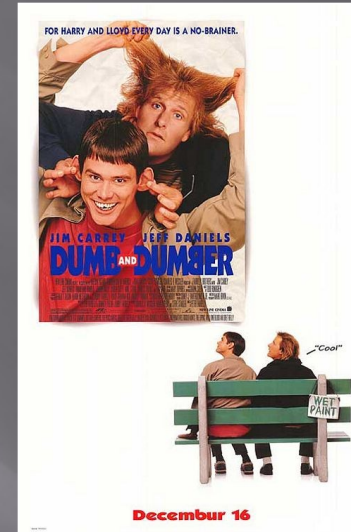
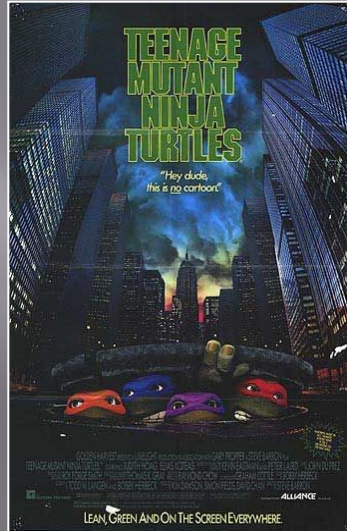
Progress in early 90s

1993: Time Warner

Star vehicles in mid-90s

Big Budget Franchises in late-90s

Blockbuster Franchise in 2000s



Key Points

Unlike exploitation independents, major independents sought to face off with Hollywood directly by releasing similar films

Whereas the makers and marketers of independent spirit films distanced their films from imagined mainstream, major independents often evoked exaggeratedly imagined mainstream

Despite enjoying some success, lack of parent company and back catalogue prevented major independents from absorbing commercial failure