

# The birth of the summer blockbuster

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## **When ‘Jaws’ scared audiences off the beach and into the cinema it changed Hollywood forever**

It was a bright spring day in 1970s Hollywood and a studio chief, walking down his executive corridor, overheard a conversation behind the office door of his vice-president for marketing.

“We’ve got all these blockbusters coming up over the next year,” the VP was saying.

“Some are blockbusters,” said the junior honcho closeted with him.

The studio chief lit up like a flashbulb. “Summer blockbusters!” (he thought he had heard). He had never encountered so novel an idea. One so brilliant, so counter-intuitive, so filled with – with potential money. He charged into the office, promoted Junior to Senior Executive Officer for Brainstorms, and everything else is history. (Except this story, which is industry folklore.)

## **How else to explain that at a certain point in the mid-1970s our filmgoing habits suddenly changed?**

Back then June, July and August were the movie industry’s low season. By day, everyone was on the beach; by night, eating, drinking, dancing and carrying on. Who wanted to go rectangle-eyed in the dark, watching movies? That was a winter thing. The only steady summer dollars came, in the US, from drive-in theatres, and even their postwar heyday was faltering by the 1970s, assailed by charges of seediness. Too little movie-watching in darkness-veiled parked cars, too much making out.

Today there are fewer drive-ins but summer multiplexes are filled with blockbusters, fantasy epics, top-dollar sequels. The money that comes into a studio one year goes out again the next, to its favourite sons, the filmmakers. Christopher Dark Knight Nolan is handed \$170m to make this year’s Inception. The makers of Toy Story 3 have a piggybank of \$190m.

This summer the likes of Shrek Forever After and Knight and Day (Tom Cruise/Cameron Diaz spy rom-com) are backed up by titles that promise fantastical screen jiggery-pokery – The Last Airbender and The Sorcerer’s Apprentice (Nicolas Cage vehicle, not Mickey Mouse version).

There is also our current, weird obsession with the 1980s, the mothering decade of machismo movies: The Expendables (hulk-crammed vehicle for Stallone, Schwarzenegger, Willis and Co); The A-Team; The Karate Kid.

Most of these movies share a set of assumptions. It is reasonable to expect the spectator to bring a body and two senses: sight, hearing. It is unreasonable to expect him to bring a brain. The movies must be big on action, glamour, stars, spectacle, novelty (though not too much of that), but light on cognitive demands. This is vacation time, after all.

The summer blockbuster was born on June 20 1975, when Jaws opened wide. The movie and its bestselling source novel by Peter Benchley, published the previous year, were ideal for summer customers, for all those human beach towels ready to be scared off the beaches. Jaws

producer David Brown admitted: “The release of the film was deliberately delayed till people were in the water off the summer beach resorts.”

The makers and the studio, Universal, sensed the occasion and opportunity. Three times the normal number of press and media interviews were given during the shooting of Jaws. At a Long Beach sneak preview, Universal moguls Lew Wasserman and Sidney Sheinberg tape-recorded the enthusiastic audience reaction and then launched an unprecedented \$700,000 worth of TV advertising on 211m homes. Add stunt publicity such as special Jaws ice-cream flavours – “finnilla”, “jawberry”, “sharkalate” – and no one was surprised that, after 11 weeks on screen, Jaws was the highest-earning film in North American history.

Jaws also gave audiences the ultimate thrill ride. Chased by a shark? You can’t get more adrenalinised than that. The audience lived the drama with the embattled characters played by Roy Scheider, Richard Dreyfuss and Robert Shaw. Spielberg would later match his Great White with all-but-man-eating Nazis in the Indiana Jones saga and dinosaurs in the Jurassic Park series. Jaws had given him the template for the perfect blockbuster. Create a colossal baddie (human or animal) and a colossal hero, or at least a colourfully beleaguered crew of would-be heroes, follow by natural law.

In the years after Jaws, the entire release calendar changed. What had been a novelty became a habit; especially when Star Wars, two years on from Jaws, repeated the magic. The smash-hit opening for George Lucas’s film in May 1977 turned a small-budget sci-fi sleeper into a wake-up call for the industry. The second and third Star Wars films opened at three-year intervals – The Empire Strikes Back in May 1980, Return of the Jedi in May 1983 – and the blockbusting movie franchise was born.

Every filmgoer climbed aboard the carousel. From Star Wars (1977) to Die Hard (1988) to Batman (1989) to Jurassic Park (1993), through one-offs such as Top Gun (1986) and Independence Day (1996) – a previously untapped summer audience was tapped senseless. Depending on when you boarded this carousel, you were a child of the shark age, the Skywalker age, the space age or the Digisaurus age. Semiologists and sociologists scratch their heads over why different ages respond to different story trends. Probable answer? Hollywood tells them to. Or technology says, “Now is the time” (as with photo-realistic dinosaurs).

Though some smash-hits stubbornly cling to winter openings (Titanic and Avatar were both Christmas season hits), the summer mainly sets the fashions and rings the tills. It has done so ever since studios realised the movie-going demographic was getting younger – there are more teenagers in America today than ever – and that school vacation time was a desert of idleness waiting to be made fertile.

In the process the term “blockbuster”, defined by size of revenue rather than size of budget, proved it wasn’t even restricted to the action-adventure, the epic, the big-budget fantasy. A comedy could be a blockbuster. It could win audiences even by making fun of the summer blockbuster.

In July 1980 a little film called Airplane! opened. Costing \$3m to make, it took \$83m, becoming one of the highest-flying comedies of all time. One of its three directors was Jerry Zucker. (The others were Zucker’s brother David and Jim Abrahams.)

“We took it round a lot of studios who turned it down. Finally Paramount liked it, though they tried to get other people to direct it,” says Zucker. The trio persevered. Having written it together,

they wanted to direct it together.

“The first studio preview at Paramount was a disaster,” he continues. “They pulled people in off the lot. No one laughed except for one guy who was hysterical throughout. Then we previewed it ourselves in college campuses and gave out free tickets. Word of mouth grew. And the trailer played really well.” (It featured a mini-spoof of Jaws, with the plane nosing through clouds to the ominous, oom-pah shark theme).

The summer “blockbuster” could be anything: that was clear, or is now. Who could have predicted some of the high-season hits that have entered Hollywood’s history book? A multi-instalment religious allegory for kids? (The Chronicles of Narnia.) A pirate adventure built around a star, Johnny Depp, who insists on delivering a camp impersonation of Rolling Stones guitarist Keith Richards? If a film crashes the record books, that is enough.

So \$200m is piled into Shrek Forever After or \$300m into Alice in Wonderland 3D, in the faith they will return \$500m and \$750m respectively. Two and a half times your investment, goes the Hollywood accounting wisdom, is black ink.

Another industry wisdom is that filmgoers want more of the same. So every summer brings a salvo of sequels. The titles resemble football results. This year’s, if simplified to names and numbers, would read: Sex and the City 2, Iron Man 2; Twilight 3, Shrek 4; Toy Story 3(D), Piranha 3(D).

Hollywood has become craftier with spin-offs. It no longer rubber-stamps rubber sharks swimming in diminishing circles of audience feeding frenzy, as with the infamous Jaws sequels. As Steven Spielberg (who directed none of the follow-ups) once told me: “In my hands Jaws 2, 3 and 4, if I had made them, still would have failed because of the improbability of a shark that large occurring thrice. The audience will only accept so much until it becomes hooley.”

Now pains are taken to immunise sequels against the ridiculous. Ingenious time-games, including prequels, or new injections of star power (Sean Connery coming in as Indiana Jones’s dad) freshen the formula. Yet repetition is still part of the charm. Whoever said, long ago, that movie theatres were the new cathedrals was right. Audiences like liturgies. They like trooping into large, umbrageous buildings where everyone delivers the same responses and seeks to experience the same raptures. They await the awesome, the unintelligible, the transcendent. Instead of God, it is dinosaurs, space monsters, vampires, digimaged swamp ogres. Whatever we cannot understand will make us strong.

But audiences want something different as well as the same, the same as well as different. Hollywood has to keep squaring the circle. If a movie surprises, or defies expectation, so much the better. Let it surprise again. Let novelty and ritual be served on the same plate. Next year Pirates of the Caribbean 4 will arrive, the first film ever to have auditioned its actresses with a “jigging” test to determine the silicone-free authenticity of their breasts. Men in Black 3 will arrive, slotted in for Memorial Day. The difference this time for the FBI-versus-extraterrestrials saga? Yes, 3D. The aliens will land in our laps.

A lot of water has passed under a lot of monster-hunting adventures since Jaws. Yet its legacy lives on. Steven Spielberg still works. And though two Jaws stars have died, Shaw and Scheider, to discover the third you need only check out this year’s Piranha 3D. There he is. Richard Dreyfuss. Still acting, still fishing. For the story of the summer blockbuster is the greatest true-life fisherman’s yarn of all, one that just gets longer and just gets bigger