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NIGHTFALL OF THE CINEMA

Three phenomena of current mainstream production: production of franchise films, production of remakes and tentpole movies are the current pillars of the profitability of global film production. Their preference significantly limits resources for independent, artistically ambitious film production. More original, less commercial or art films don´t have a fair chance in the new cinematic marketplaces. Audience behavior is changing. The number of visitors who are willing to go to the theater and pay more money for a single ticket than for a one-month subscription to a streaming service is declining. The film viewer thus settles irresistibly in front of the home tv screens and the culture of the cinema disappears.

Keywords: *Cinema, digital film, digital technologies, franchise movie, tentpole movie, remake, independent movie.*

Introduction

Over the last three decades, digital technologies in cinema have made an intensive impact on all phases of film production. Their gradual development and improvement were initially aimed mainly at post-production editing of previously traditionally shot material (on celluloid). The change was completed with the development of digital recording in a quality comparable to that of a film image. In this way, the medium of film changed its material nature and filmmakers lost the 'tangible' result of their work. However, they have gained a wealth of CGI technology, and the possibilities of film distribution have expanded. And it is these new techniques that have been perfected in the last ten years or so that have begun to fundamentally change the behaviour of the film viewer. Digital movies have entered networked clouds, and audiences have moved from the armchairs in movie theaters to the couches in their living rooms. This 'displacement' has had a profound effect on the behaviour of producers, the selection and development of themes and, as a result, again on audience expectations. In less than three decades, the paradigm of film has completely changed. As recently as 2000, almost 100% of mainstream Hollywood films were shot on film stock. By 2015, that number had dropped to roughly 22% - the rest was already being shot digitally. Similarly, as recently as 2005, almost 100% of films were projected from film stock. Just eight years later, film exhibition already accounted for less than 3% of the market. (Dixon 2019: 30) The year 2013 marked the literal end of film - digital projection was almost exclusively used, with the exception of art cinemas, museums and research institutions. This period also saw the collapse of the (only recently

discovered) physical media market for home use. Sales of DVDs, which in 2005 accounted for almost 100% of the home video market, fell by more than 80% in 2018 (Dixon 2019: 30).

The aim of our study is to elucidate the processes in mainstream American production, which, with its worldwide distribution, has serious implications for the behaviour and expectations of audiences in all countries. The proliferation of distribution channels for American productions raises the question of what the future holds for independent, artistically quality productions. To develop our study, we will use the methods of logical and content analysis, induction, and deduction.

Signs and symptoms of decay

Parallel to the processes mentioned above, the digitalization of production has also begun to manifest itself very strongly in changes in the creative practices of the world's largest producers, the American Big Six companies that top the charts in terms of volume and profits in film production. This dominance also stems from their leading position in the introduction of digital production and has had a major impact on the development of world cinema. We will briefly mention three phenomena of contemporary American mainstream production that have an impact on global film culture. The first - but not the most important - is the continuing and growing trend of adaptation. Adaptation is defined as "adaptation to environmental conditions and composition rewritten into a new form." (URL: https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/adaptation'.) Adapting stories from one medium to another has been around since people started writing them down. Every storyteller alters his or her story, every story is slightly modified to suit the storyteller and the audience. Even when a story is written down or otherwise recorded, it has to deal with subtle adjustments, a variety of versions, and the medium of recording itself. In the contemporary film environment, however, we encounter not only adaptation, but also mutation and convergence of genres, without evolution. R. Stam even links this to a kind of new life for texts, saying: *„If mutation is the means by which the evolutionary process proceeds, then we can also see film adaptations as "mutations" that help the source novel "survive" them“*. So, in addition to adapting to changing environments and tastes, the new medium adapts the text through its distinctive industrial demands, commercial pressures, censorship taboos, and aesthetic norms (Stam 2005: 3).

The current form of adaptations is the production of so-called

franchise films. (Merriam-Webster. A media *franchise* URL: http://dictionary.sensagent.com/ Film %20franchise/en-en/) They are part of a never-ending stream of adaptations of stories from other fields and media. As G. Smith stated: *"One of the primary sources of aesthetic innovation is adaptation from other media. (...) When a medium borrows an effect from other existing media, the borrowing medium often evolves and gains expressivity" (*Smith 1999: 32-53). With the help of new CGI technologies, the producers have succeeded in bringing to life characters and stories inspired by the drawings of comic book authors in a perfectly believable animated form. The reuse of story material, characters and worlds in franchises is the result of convergence in the media industry. It's why there are so many expensive productions nowadays, with different variations of popular comic book material. H. Jenkins explains that, *"in recent decades, the entertainment industry has moved into the world and narrative logic of franchises and trans media. This is an economic necessity given the way Hollywood conglomerates operate, where the same companies own many different media platforms"* (Henry Jenkins Interviewed at the 5D conference. '5D Presents: The Amazing 5th Dimension!'12.11.2009. 28-09-2011. 00:02:53 – 00:03:12.).

The reasons for the success of franchises have been explored by many theorists and they include several: T. Elsaesser sees them in the cross-connection of narrative material with other media (Elsaesser 2000: 28). M. Piccard defines audience interest as the result of a desire for repeated experiences, a kind of appetite for the same thing (Picard 2009: 298-299).

In the case of adaptations, when audiences are familiar with the quoted text and recognize the references in the film, it strengthens their relationship to both texts. Audiences can use their knowledge of the texts to distinguish themselves as individuals, as L. Hutcheon argues that *"the art of this pleasure (of adaptations) comes simply from repetition with variation, from the comfort of ritual coupled with the piquancy of surprise"* (Hutcheon 2006: 4). This strategy capitalizes on consumers' desire for stories they knew from childhood, that they liked, and therefore they logically and emotionally wanted to acquire more of the products that the franchise was currently offering them - both narratively and materially.

But what are the implications of this overproduction of comic book franchise films that occupy the majority of multiplexes? In addition to the portion of the audience that consumes this type of production, there is a large group of viewers whose feelings were aptly expressed by A. White in his article: *"How many more times can we tolerate digitally enhanced*

characters flying through the air with a spear or knife to destroy an adversary as Superheroes? How many super-dynamic shots of fantasy landscapes, 360-degree panoramas, and criminal and grotesque monsters entering our consciousness can we take before our heads spin and we realize that those millions of digital pixels no longer make sense?" (White, A. "Cinema Is About Humanity, Not Fireballs," *The New York Times* 13 June 2013 URL: https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2013/03/07/are-digital-effects-cgi-ruining-the-movies/cinema-is-about-humanity-not-fireballs).

Not everyone is thrilled with the digital grandeur of franchise films, which suffocates what A. Bazin and previous generations of theorists, critics, and filmmakers considered to be the essence of cinema: nature and the human face. It seems as if Hollywood's emphasis on digital effects is aimed at turning viewers into children rather than to aesthetically responsive spectators. Audiences are also becoming addicted to these films under the influence of the overwhelming marketing mediated by the internet and social media. Through spectacular visual effects experiences, they leave behind the reality that the film camera was able to convey. Audiences expecting more and more franchise films, more Star Wars, Guardians of the Galaxy, Avengers, Spider-Man and Superman, seem to be conveying a single message: entertain us, but don't ask us to think. Thus, the viewer experiences stereotypical story twists, ongoing superhero wars and victories, dramatic clichés and endings that only pave the way for more sequels. The film has stopped being thought-provoking, it wants us to turn off our minds and let ourselves be carried away by the "wow" aesthetic for a few hours. This is the 21st century mainstream cinema: images that don't really exist, serving stories that offer no help to our lives off-screen.

And the situation may be even worse: Superhero movies have grown to take themselves increasingly seriously, and studios are varying and canonizing ever more complex stories and subplots to suit them, in an effort to satisfy a voracious fan base for whom their stories are becoming mythology. The major players, Disney/Marvel Entertainment and Warner Bros.-DC Entertainment, have no reason to change their strategies. Marvel has grossed $18.5 billion to date and Warner Bros'-DC Entertainment nearly $5 billion (2019 figures), with more than 3/4 of revenue coming from distribution outside the US. (URL: https://www.cnbc.com/2019/04/05/warner-bros-dc-films-are-no-longer-trying-to-be-marvel.html Published 2019_04_05). That's why plans for superhero, tentpole movies, more sequels with new comic book heroes,

spinoffs and reboots are planned for the rest of the decade and even for the next one.

Another phenomenon that contributes to the schematization, insubstantiality and soullessness of the mainstream is the making and production of blockbusters - films whose budgets are extremely high, whose promotion consumes more resources than their actual making, and whose profits are supposed to make up for all the losses suffered by the producers. It is franchise films - and not only adaptations of comic book stories, but also James Bond stories - that fulfill the role of 'tentpole' films - Hollywood slang for films designed to attract audiences with stunning special effects and to 'cover' the producers' losses or accelerate their profits on a global scale. A very fresh example is the worldwide release of the latest Agent 007 film, *'No Time to Die'*, which after its world premiere (September 30th, 2021) earned $119 million in four days, with a current release in 54 countries (before the release in China) (Whitten, S.: 'No Time to Die' scores $119 million in international debut URL: https://www.cnbc.com/2021/10/03/no-time-to-die-scores-119-million-in-internatio nal-debut.html). For cinema owners, this will probably be a lifeline that will come in handy and probably save them from bankruptcy after the pandemic period. At least for now...

Success of such films has been partially attributed by filmmakers such as S. Spielberg and G. Lucas, who can be described as the main architects of the blockbuster phenomenon. Spielberg has said that the end of the superhero franchise is still not in sight, likening it to the western genre*: "We were there when the western died and there will come a time when the superhero movie will go the way of the western. (...) Right now, the superhero movie is alive and well. But the day will come when mythological stories will be replaced by some other genre that some young filmmaker is already thinking about and discovering for all of us"* (Coyle, Jake. "Full Movie Preview: Spielberg Plunges into the Cold War," *The Associated Press* 2 September 2015. URL: https://www.yahoo.com/news/fallmovie-preview-spielberg-plunges-cold-war-131839190.html?ref=gs). This reflection of Spielberg, however, seems to us rather too optimistic, because it is unlikely that in the current state of the commercial production boom, perhaps some creative force can change the direction of the whole industry.

The third phenomenon of the producer's one-sidedness aimed only at maximum profitability is the exploitation of already played themes. Here, however, it must be admitted that the motive that drives producers to remakes is not only declining sales. The revival of older, already played out themes that were once successful is usually motivated in different ways -

most often by casting currently popular actors or by transferring, updating the plot in new contemporary conditions. Even remakes have become a proven means of raising money. It must be said, however, that remakes are an innocent symptom of commercialization, so to speak, and among them can be found films that meet higher aesthetic and artistic criteria (*Little Woman,* 2019; *Silence,* 2016; *It,* 2017; *Cinderella,* 2015; *True Grit,* 2010; *Murder in the Orient Express,* 2017; *A Star Is Born,* 2018; etc.).

Where is it heading?

All three of these phenomena in contemporary pop cinema contribute to a trend that W.W. Wheeler has termed "synthetic cinema" and defines it as: film making motivated by profit alone, designed solely to make money, with no real art. In the early days of digital cinema, computer-generated effects already existed, but were used to some extent in fantasy, action and adventure films. But with the transition to digital cinema and the current scale of production of franchise (comic book) films, the temptation of limitless possibilities is irresistible to audiences (and producers) to the point where the film world is escaping from reality, taking the viewer out of reality - into the world of "synthetic cinematography" (Wheeler 2019: 16).

How do all these phenomena relate to the new distribution channels brought about by digital distribution? It is clear that all the big franchise, tentpole films are made with the main intention of presentation - screening on the big screen, in a cinema with perfect digital picture and sound. After all, it's the special effects budget, CGI imagery and multi-channel sound that most of the budget for these films is invested in. Although cinema attendance has been in long-term and worldwide decline, these most powerful calibers of producer's weapons are still profitable. Hence, we conclude that audiences are choosing to visit the cinema specifically in favour of blockbuster titles, and more artistically valuable films are losing audience interest. It is the declining number of these audiences that reduces absolute numbers, but this does not directly imply a reduction in the profitability of the big studio conglomerates. These losses are being replaced by the new distribution channels and markets that are opening up for them.

On the other side of this boom in franchises and transmedia convergence is the supply of independent filmmakers, a market that stands outside the mainstream and has always produced better quality, more or less profitable films. Independent producers have also been able to survive through independent cinema networks, DVD, Blu-ray, or VOD distribution. However, this distribution pillar has weakened a lot. Almost the entire space

has been filled by digital VOD distribution through streaming services. Of course, both DVD and CD are now obsolete formats. Physical media is being abandoned in favour of cloud streaming, again bringing the prospect of profit to studios and distributors. Once you've bought a DVD, you've owned it forever. Now, even if one 'buys' a film title digitally (VOD), it is stored in the cloud and is only accessible to them according to the agreement and terms set by the supplier, which may be subject to change. So where once the cinematic community supported each other, the ubiquity of the web has turned audiences into a legion of lonely moviegoers, each with their own laptop or mobile phone. This, figuratively speaking, closed the door to cinema and opened the way to the lonely consumerism of the mainstream. The current distribution system is clearly trending in favour of the most easily marketable and aesthetically trivial projects. The more thoughtful, artistic films are relegated to the depths of digital libraries, to the lists of "indie" films.

Technological change is only half of the discourse on distribution. Much more serious - and not much talked about - is that distribution form has become a driving force in determining what is produced. The most important factor in the making of a film today is whether the studios can sell it. In the last ten to fifteen years, the marketing and distribution departments of the studios have had a decisive voice in deciding what is produced, how many films are made, and how much is spent on a particular production. Marketing in all its forms has dominated the decision-making processes in film distribution and has a decisive influence on the kinds of films that the viewer will see. People vote with their wallets - they can buy a film online, watch it on TV or pay for a streaming service - and they don't have to go to the cinema at all. This has a huge impact on the creative professions, too. You can find a lot of commentary on this from creative professionals. S. Frank, a successful screenwriter and director, in his book Distribution Revolution, articulated a number of implications that have changed the situation among creative professionals: *"Proficient, experienced writers and directors don't have many options - their opportunities have diminished. There are many filmmakers who, despite their artistic ambitions, have accepted to work on a sequel or spinoff of a big-budget film. Screenwriters get the job of rewriting and adapting franchises rather than the opportunity to develop their own film. Instead of developing our own scripts, we rewrite foreign, old ideas that are guaranteed to be realized by a major studio. Writers shy away from films that have little hope of financing - even if they are talented and proven filmmakers"* (Curtin, Holt,

Sanson 2014: 168) Film studios don't want to take the risks of innovative films, and independent producers can't. The search is always for the same - a profitable film, no one is looking for artistic value. "Prequel" or "reinvention" have become watchwords. That's how the latest Spider-Man, Batman, Transformers movies were made. And major studios are engaging renowned directors to adapt even board games (R. Scott - Monopoly) or theme park stories for them.

The overall trend is that the worthier, imaginative and artistic films are nowadays not being made for cinema - but, surprisingly, for television. Good dramatic stories are now being made as TV series in the new production parameters of so-called high quality television. The kinds of dramas that the viewer is willing to respect, almost all take place on TV screens. Film production for cinemas has fallen into the grip of huge, spectacular 3D films that lack a compelling story and believable emotion. These are now offered by TV movies, which reach the viewer via streaming services, albeit in the form of series and their sequels. As these companies (Netflix, HBO, Amazon, Hulu and dozens of others) accumulate huge financial resources through regular subscriptions, they are able to deliver not only cinematic quality but also authorial quality.

Conclusion

Although in this paper we have discussed American mainstream production and the consequences of digital distribution, the result of these processes is similar in the US as in Slovakia. The proof is summarized in a short Facebook status by Slovak film publicist P. Konečný: *"Currently, worthy films are experiencing a total crisis of attendance in Slovak cinemas. A lot of young people don't plan to go to the cinemas to see art-house cinema at all anymore, and the middle and older generation has settled down to Netflix and soon to HBO Max, which is coming to Europe. (...) High-quality Slovak and foreign films often have an attendance of 200-500 spectators in cinemas outside festivals, and in our cinemas they struggle with the disinterest of the middle, but mainly the emerging generation. (...) I fear that the scissors of interest and taste are opening wide. We currently have the opportunity to see festival titles in club distribution, but it's quite possible that with zero audience interest, there will be fewer and fewer of them"* (URL: https://www.facebook.com/konecnypeter/posts/10223297493456831)

Our study reflects on the underlying factors influencing contemporary American mainstream production as it has evolved in the wake of digital

transformation. We argue that it is digital production and distribution that has contributed most to the changes in creative practices, changing themes, and dramaturgy that have dominated mainstream production. We believe that it is the improved production practices, the use of CGI technology, and especially the intense pressure on producers to maximize profits that have led American mainstream production to a significant thematic decline. The factors we have named in the study are actual concomitants of the transformation of the film medium today: the absolute dominance of commercial, franchise production has resulted in a narrowing of the space for more artistically valuable productions in cinema distribution. This has resulted in a gradual change in the audience's tastes, evaluation criteria and habits, especially among young audiences. A new segment - so-called HQ television (premium television) with production quality comparable to that of film, designed for new distribution channels, especially streaming services, provides an alternative space for creative professionals and the production of more valuable film productions. Paradoxically, this gives space to higher quality film productions on TV screens, which multiplies the outflow of viewers from cinemas. It is questionable whether and how these trends, also under the influence of other factors (global pandemic), will develop in the upcoming years.

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