



DEAR HOLLYWOOD: Great movies can make money, too.

by Mark Ramsey

THE PROBLEM WITH HOLLYWOOD CAN BE SUMMED UP IN ONE WORD: CATWOMAN.

It cost \$100 million to make plus an estimated \$35 million more to market. And for all that trouble it earned a measly \$40 million domestically.

An unfortunate studio miscalculation? Or a movie with “disaster” coded into its DNA from day one?

Consider another example: *Van Helsing*. Earning more than \$120 million in domestic grosses to date, it’s a stunning disappointment which cost an estimated \$160 million to produce and another \$50 million to market.

But does Hollywood care?

After all, plenty of money can be made internationally in order to turn that red ink black. And that doesn’t count the DVD sales and rental streams. It doesn’t count pay-per-view. Nor does it count the ancillary revenue from merchandising, video games, the Universal Studios Theme Park attraction, potential future spin-offs, and even Halloween costumes. In *Van Helsing*’s case, an animated prequel was on the store shelves even before the “original” film was in the theater!

Films like *Catwoman* and *Van Helsing* are less movies than monuments to “the deal,” orchestrated orgies of consumption on a vast, vertically integrated scale where you and I are puppets on Hollywood’s proverbial strings.

Whether we like the movie — whether it’s any good — is less important to the entertainment establishment than whether or not we can be sold on it.

Nothing would be wrong with all this if, in fact, these movies were worth seeing. But they are generally not. The movie review compilation site, Rotten Tomatoes (<http://www.rottentomatoes.com>), shows an abysmal 23% positive score on critical opinion for *Van Helsing* and a dismal 9% positive for *Catwoman*.

Granted, they call it show business, but there should be some show in all that business.

BIG MOVIES DON'T HAVE TO BE BAD MOVIES

Once upon a time, movies exploded onto the popular scene organically — because they were actually worthy. But today, big movies are engineered like factory widgets, each as bland as the next. How good they are is irrelevant. What matters is how well they're sold.

The label “popcorn movie” does not necessarily imply bad popcorn movie. It just implies bad popcorn.

Jaws is usually credited as the summer movie that launched all other summer movies. *Jaws* is also one of the greatest thrillers in the history of cinema. Other pop phenoms of our era like *Alien*, *Star Wars IV*, *Lord of the Rings*, and *Titanic* are likewise both critical and popular successes.

There are, in other words, plenty of good movies that are also popular and profitable. And there's no reason why there can't be more.

Jaws and *Star Wars IV* were both nominated for a Best Picture Oscar®, while *Titanic* and the final *Lord of the Rings* chapter actually won.

Haven't there always been big, mediocre movies? Sure there have. But I think there are more now than ever before.

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What's the biggest difference between good, profitable movies and bad, profitable ones: talent and effort.

And that's exactly what this manifesto is aimed at encouraging.

PICTURE A DIFFERENT KIND OF "MATRIX"

Movies are either good or bad, and people either want to see them or they don't.

"Want-to-see" is the key measure studios track week in and week out. It's the degree to which potential moviegoers are interested (or not) in the film.

Every week, researchers call moviegoers like you and me and ask a number of questions: What movies are you aware of and/or interested in? What's your first choice of all those opening this weekend? What have you seen already and how many times have you seen it?

"Want-to-see" is easy to stoke if the property has an audience built in and/or if anticipation has been developed through advance buzz. Hollywood likes properties where the "want-to-see" flames require a minimum of fanning because risk declines as anticipation rises.

For example, both *Catwoman* and *Van Helsing* had strong "want-to-see" scores.

In the diagram on the next page, you may or may not disagree with my take on the cinematic examples used, but even if you swap my examples out and insert your own, the relationships still hold true.



As this matrix on the previous page shows, there are four categories of films that can be roughly grouped as:

GOOD/WANT-TO-SEE: POP PHENOMS AND AWARD WINNERS.

These are the hits that in many cases become contemporary classics. They are popular and well-made. They make plenty of money.

The crowd-pleasers, the career-cappers, the legendary achievements, the award-winners, and the modern classics, money-makers all, belong in the upper right quadrant.

GOOD/DON'T WANT-TO-SEE: CULT GEMS AND AWARD WINNERS.

These are movies that are generally not popular successes, but they can end up winning big cult followings. Many are profitable because their production costs are so low and marketing costs are next to nil. Even if they are not profitable they are award-magnets. And if there's one consolation prize Hollywood is only too happy to accept in the place of cash, it's an Academy Award.®

These are the niche hits, the low-budget "art" films with weighty themes, developed characters, and engaging plots. They are good, but usually too complex for a mass audience. Sometimes they are simply poorly marketed.

BAD/WANT-TO-SEE: SNAKE-OIL CINEMA AND FLAWED FRANCHISES.

"There's a sucker born every minute," P.T. Barnum once said, and these are the movies which prove him right. They may be profitable but they are disposable and forgettable.

These are the lazy franchises: they are highly pre-sold and have a strong "want-to-see" score but Hollywood knows they're stinkers. Their goal is to get you into the theaters on opening weekend before the stench leaks out. These are the movies which coast on the fumes of their previous chapters or of the brands which spawn these franchises.

**BAD/DON'T
WANT-TO-SEE:
MONDO CRAPO
AND FACELESS
INDIES.**

These are generally two types of films: The big bets that fail miserably and the tiny little Indies not good or lucky enough to achieve cult status. In any event, this zone is where studio nightmares dwell.

Here you find the big-budget bombs and most Indie flicks.

Ask the folks at Toyota or GE or Sony and they'll tell you they care about quality. A lot. Why not take a page out of their manual? Why not make more money off more great movies? More movies in upper right quadrant.

THE STATISTICS

Every year, the Writers' Guild registers over 45,000 pieces of material. That includes scripts, treatments, synopses, outlines, and written ideas. And that doesn't count the tens of thousands more items registered with the U.S. Copyright office.

Of these, only a small fraction are ever optioned and a smaller fraction produced. Ultimately, only about 500 movies are released in any given year. And a great many of those are inside-Hollywood projects involving inside-Hollywood people: star vehicles, pet projects, sequels, and adaptations.

A cottage industry has sprung up around the dream that "you can be a successful screenwriter" to match the well-established industry thriving on the dream that "you can be a successful actor." Indeed sometimes lightning does strike at your feet, but be forewarned: There's not much lightning in LA. And what little there is is mostly spoken for.

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More often, it seems almost everyone in L.A. is a screenwriter–hyphenate: a personal trainer–screenwriter, a parking attendant–screenwriter, a pool–cleaner–screenwriter.

Competition is intense and, no matter what anyone on the inside says, good material does not float to the top. If, as some say, Hollywood always has its doors open to good content the sheer weight of competition would force only the best stuff through that narrow production pipeline and into every multiplex in your town.

But it doesn't happen that way.

WHAT SHOULD HOLLYWOOD DO?

If good stuff can't be force–fed into the system and the system doesn't discriminate naturally in favor of what's good, what should Hollywood do?

What Hollywood needs to do is realize the economic benefit of quality in combination with the economic benefit of being popular.

The fact is, the biggest money–making opportunity isn't simply for what's good. But it certainly isn't for what's bad. The biggest money–making opportunity is for what's both good and popular: both high quality and high want–to–see. The upper–right–hand quadrant.

Did you know that roughly half of all domestic revenues come from just the top 20 movies of the year? That's right. Only 20 movies make half of all the U.S. box–office.

This means every studio has tremendous incentive to generate as many of those top 20 as possible because they will drive the lion's share of the industry's revenue to their own doorstep.

And that means their incentive is to get there any way they can, by hook or by crook. This, more than anything else, explains why so much of what is foisted on us every year is so bad. Crook is easier than hook. Spot the crooks and hooks on this list:

TOP 20 MOVIES OF 2004

RANK	TITLE	STUDIO	TOTAL GROSS
1	Shrek 2	DW	\$439,823,837
2	Spider-Man 2	Sony	\$372,585,847
3	The Passion of the Christ	NM	\$370,274,604
4	Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban	WB	\$249,276,315
5	The Day After Tomorrow	Fox	\$186,729,775
6	The Bourne Supremacy	Universal	\$174,486,275
7	I, Robot	Fox	\$144,103,547
8	Troy	WB	\$133,378,256
9	Shark Tale	DW	\$126,274,000
10	50 First Dates	Sony	\$120,870,628
11	Van Helsing	Universal	\$120,177,084
12	Fahrenheit 9/11	Lions	\$119,114,517
13	DodgeBall: A True Underdog Story	Fox	\$114,306,965
14	The Village	BV	\$113,811,183
15	Collateral	DW	\$100,170,152
16	The Princess Diaries 2: Royal Engagement	BV	\$94,203,696
17	Starsky and Hutch	WB	\$88,237,754
18	Along Came Polly	Universal	\$88,097,164
19	Mean Girls	Paramount	\$86,050,784
20	Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy	DW	\$85,224,248

CAVEAT EMPTOR

A quick scan of this list will reveal plenty of stinkers. Is there anything wrong with this?

I think so. You see, no movie is sold as a stinker. All movies are sold as worthy and wonderful cinematic events. The studios know this is bunk. They know crap when they see it and they know it when they make it. And their biggest fear is that you will, too.

This is why Internet buzz so often terrifies them. This is why Harry Knowles and his Ain't It Cool News website (<http://www.aintitcoolnews.com>) is alternatively coddled, resented, and feared. When the online folks movie fans trust tell them the Emperor has no clothes, the jig is most definitely up.

The problem with stinkers isn't that there are so many — or even that they push the good movies that might have been out of the pipeline. The problem with stinkers is that they are sold to you and to me deceptively as entertainment worthy of our attention, our interest, and our hard-earned money.

We are, in essence, baited and switched. We are coerced. We are ripped off. We are robbed, disappointed, and deceived.

A BETTER WAY

Spider-Man 2 has two critical elements lacking in *Catwoman*: Sam Raimi and Alvin Sargent

Sam Raimi is a sensitive and demanding director who treats the audience with as much respect as his films.

Alvin Sargent is the writer of *Spider-Man 2*, as well as *Unfaithful* and modern classics like

Ordinary People and *Paper Moon*. His is a strong pedigree. And to the Hollywood establishment, which seems to believe that a writer's ability to connect with today's movie audience ends when he hits 40, let it be known that Sargent is almost 75!

In addition, another writer credited with the story on *Spider-Man 2* is Michael Chabon, a comic-book fan and a Pulitzer Prize-winner.

THE LESSON: TALENT BEGETS QUALITY.

DEAR HOLLYWOOD: FIVE WAYS TO MAKE BETTER MONEymAKERS

Creating a great blockbuster, a better moneymaker, requires talent and effort. Hollywood, here are five ways you can make this happen now:

1. CARE ABOUT THE STORY

Good movies don't get made by accident. Nor do exploitive ripoffs get made by anything other than design.

Sam Raimi could have made *Spider-Man 2* as bad as *Catwoman* if he had wanted to. Bryan Singer could have made *X2* as bad as *The Day After Tomorrow* if that had been his goal. They didn't because they cared about quality. They cared about the story, the characters, the plotting, the archetypes, and the universal themes which every viewer can relate to.

Good entertainment makes the world a better place. I really believe that. Bad entertainment — like anything and everything else done poorly — sickens us all. If you can lift us up, why wouldn't you want to?

“With great power comes great responsibility,” a good writer once wrote and a super-hero once said. Use yours.

2. CARE ABOUT WRITING

Talent of all sorts is scarce and good writing talent is in particularly short supply because everyone in LA is hawking a screenplay, thus everyone thinks they can write. How do you hire talent when it’s so hard to recognize?

The surest method is to look for a strong track record. Where quality has been, it’s likely to return again. The top names in screenwriting have earned their honors. Hire these people for the “want-to-see” projects and turn these projects from “bad” to “good.”

Furthermore, it’s inconceivable that much of what is written outside Hollywood isn’t superior to whatever is about to spew out of the laptops of name brands like Rolland Emmerich or Stephen Sommers. Open up to more ideas from outside the 310 area code. The movie audience needs this fresh air.

3. CARE ABOUT HOW GOOD THE DIRECTOR IS, NOT HOW SELF-INDULGENT HE OR SHE IS

“Realizing a vision” has become a clichéd expression of artistic excess — witness the flame-outs of the two *Matrix* sequels or of Joel Schumacher’s execrable *Batman & Robin*. Filmmakers who fall in love with their own visions have fallen out of love with the story and its characters. The director is chief steward of the story and the film will rise or fall on its story and its characters — not whether or not the pictures are pretty.

Any director who can't figure this out should return to his likely place of origin: Madison Avenue.

And he won't have final cut there, either.

4. LET A THOUSAND FLOWERS BLOOM

Buzz is both worshipped and feared in Hollywood boardrooms because stinkers stink and sink faster in a buzz-filled world. A bad stench keeps paying customers away. But in a world where quality counts, the only thing you have to fear is stench itself.

In a quality-oriented world, word-of-mouth is Hollywood's friend. The more, the better. Wherever "want-to-see" and "good movie" are both high, sow the seeds of buzz and let a thousand — or 100 million — flowers bloom.

5. EASY ON THE CGI

Movies nowadays are one part substance and one part experience. But for the great films it's always — always — the substance, the story and the characters, that make a lasting impression. It is never the CGI — even in all-CGI animated films.

As a cinematic tool CGI is peerless, but it's a tool only, not a substitute for plot, story, character, or feeling. Regardless of its quality or its novelty, it is the cart that doesn't belong before the horse.

ENDNOTES

- 1 <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=catwoman.htm>
- 2 <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=vanhelsing.htm>
- 3 http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/van_helsing/
- 4 <http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/catwoman/>
- 5 <http://www.afi.com/tvevents/100years/thrills.aspx>
- 6 Source: *The Writers' Guild West* <http://www.wga.org>
- 7 <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/yearly/>
- 8 As of October 2004 <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/yearly/chart/?yr=2004&p=.htm>

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Ramsey is the creator and writer of MovieJuice.com, the movie satire site called “cheerfully smartass” by Roger Ebert, who named it “one of the top 20 movie sites online.”

Ramsey has appeared on E!, VH1, MSNBC, and CNN, where he brings along his uniquely irreverent brand of movie reviews. Ramsey has also participated in pilot programming for the soon-to-launch cable network MovieWatch.

He is a board member of the Broadcast Film Critics Association, the nation’s largest film critics group, whose annual awards will be televised this January on the WB and are known as the most accurate predictors of Oscar winners. Visit his homepage at <http://www.moviejuice.com>

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
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