The Evolution of the Term ‘New Hollywood’

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Abstract
After the collapse of the once dominant studio system in the 1950s, Hollywood executives were at a loss as to how to reassert the cinema atop the entertainment food chain. While ticket sales and box office takings were waning and the standard fare of epics and musicals failing to capture the imagination of the American public, the growing television industry was fast becoming Americas preferred source of entertainment. In their desperation to appeal to the youth market, the only market that seemed committed to going to the cinemas, the studios threw the doors open in the late 1960s to a new generation of filmmakers, mainly born in the 1930s, who had cut their teeth in television. This new group of filmmakers, influenced not only by their Hollywood predecessors but also by the experimental films being produced in Europe, revolutionised the American cinema with their gritty, often violent realism. They saw their films as legitimate forms of personal artistic expression, and a way of exploring issues surrounding American society. This quickly came to be known as the ‘New Hollywood’. Some scholars, however, prefer to see this late 1960s activity as a precursor to the ‘New Hollywood’ which, they argue, commenced in the early 1970s with the celebrated ‘movie brats’, the first generation of truly cineliterate directors who had studied at film schools.

In the late 1970s though the American film landscape would change again, with the unprecedented successes of Jaws (1975) and Star Wars (1977) ushering in a new era of blockbuster filmmaking. This led some scholars to redefine the meaning of the term ‘New Hollywood’ to align with this blockbuster movement, while others chose to use the term ‘New New Hollywood’. This paper explores the evolution of the term New Hollywood as film scholars, journalists and critics struggle to reach a consensus on what specifically was or is the ‘New Hollywood’.
The Evolution of the Term ‘New Hollywood’

In performing any analysis of the literature concerning the New Hollywood, it does not take one long to realise that all of the critics and scholars referring to the New Hollywood are not talking about the same thing. In fact, since the formal adoption of the term, critical debates about the New Hollywood have been characterised by a confusing array of shifting and often contradictory definitions of the term (Kramer, 1998: 305). Even Jon Lewis admits that there are “a lot of new Hollywoods” (Smith, 1998: 3). For some scholars New Hollywood is a general term which refers to all Hollywood films produced after the Second World War (Schatz, 1993: 285). For other scholars, new Hollywood is a flexible term which can be applied to whatever is the most current process of mode of film production in Hollywood. But for the majority of scholars, New Hollywood is a specific term which refers to a certain period in the history of American filmmaking. But even then there is not agreement on what period they are talking about. This paper shall explore the evolution of this term New Hollywood, why it has altered from its original definition, seeking to determine whether it is still a useful term within film studies.

The term ‘New Hollywood’ originally referred to a period of relative experimentation in Hollywood, also known as the Hollywood Renaissance, between the late 1960s and late 1970s (Smith, 1998: 10). A combination of factors including a generational shift among both filmmakers and Hollywood executives, a change in the primary film-going demographic, an overhaul of content regulation and a period of economic insecurity in Hollywood which resulted in a downscaling of production and the incorporation of most Hollywood studios into diverse entertainment conglomerates resulted in a significant change in Hollywood operations at a creative, executive and corporate level, enough so to justify the belief in critical and scholarly circles that what resulted was indeed a new Hollywood.

In the 1960s the Hollywood industry was in the middle of a recession. The economic boom experienced by the USA in the 1960s, which saw unemployment fall by 50 per cent between 1960 and 1969 as well as an average growth in GNP of 4.8 per cent throughout the decade (Shiel, 2006a: 30-33), had added to the film industry’s woes rather than eased them. It resulted in a mass migration to the suburbs, particularly among Hollywoods primary target demographic, the family. With shopping mall based multiplex still a couple of decades away a move out of the city effectively meant a move away from the cinema (King, 2002: 24-25). As a result of this, among other factors, audience numbers were in freefall. In 1946 90 million people visited the cinema in the USA every week. That number had dropped to 60 million by 1950, and 40 million by 1960. It would eventually fall as low as 17 million per week in the early 1970s (King, 2002: 24).

The demise of the studio system saw a fundamental change in the primary role of the major studios; from film producers to film financiers and distributors (Shiel, 2006b: 127). All film production in Hollywood was effectively independent, with studios financing on a film-by-film basis, known as the “package unit system”, whereby studios hired cast and crew as needed for individual productions, rather than to keep them on permanent staff. This system, however, resulted in the rise of the talent agent to a position of great influence, as it was the talent agencies that represented the actors and directors and thus held the resources needed to make movies happen (Russell, 2006: 46). This process, combined with the fact that televisions thirst for content had seen the entry of new companies such as CBS, ABC and National General into the field, resulted in aggressive bidding wars over talent and properties,
ultimately driving the cost of productions up to a level beyond that which could be supported by declining theatrical demand (Neale, 2006: 103-104).

With the theatrical market in decline and the cost of production on the raise, the major studios desperately needed to find other avenues to supplement their income. From the late 1950s the studios became more and more dependent on money raised from the sale of films from their back catalogue to television networks (Shiel, 2006a: 34-35). As the broadcasting of Hollywood features on television grew more popular, the average price the studios would charge the television networks rose steadily. In 1961 the rights to two showings of a feature cost an average of $150,000, but by 1968 this figure had risen to $800,000, with most networks scheduling Hollywood features every night of the week. Significantly more could be charged for prestige pictures like *Bridge on the River Kwai* (for which ABC paid Columbia $2 million) and *Cleopatra* (for which ABC paid Twentieth Century Fox $5 million) (Neale, 2006: 100). However, in 1968, without warning, the television networks suddenly stopped buying movies, having already purchased enough films for the next four seasons. This left the Hollywood studios without a very important source of income and oversupplied with product (bankers estimated that the industry was spending double what the theatrical market was capable of returning on production) and proved to be the final factor which turned an economic downturn into a full blown financial crisis. As a result, the major studios would go on the register combined corporate losses of $200 million in 1969 (Neale, 2006: 103-104).

Through all this the youth demographic remained fiercely loyal moviegoers. A survey commissioned by the MPAA in 1968 (conducted by Yankelovich and Associates) found that 48 percent of box-office admissions that year were from the 16-24 year old age group. The Yankelovich findings concluded with the statement that “being young and single is the overriding demographic pre-condition for being a frequent and enthusiastic moviegoer” (Cook, 2000: 67). When youth oriented films *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Graduate* (both 1967) and *Easy Rider* (1969) became hits, there grew an industry wide perception that appealing to this youth market would be the key to reviving the sagging box-office (Cook, 2000: 67-68). At a trade gathering, Twentieth Century Fox vice president for advertising and publicity Jonas Rosenfield summarised the position of the major studios in saying, “We are tied to the youthful market for the future, we have to keep up with the rhythm of young people” (Cook, 2000: 67).

The major studios main strategy towards achieving this goal was to open up the doors to a new generation of filmmakers, both directors and producers, who were either young or had a distinct counter-cultural appeal. The incumbent creative talent in Hollywood was ageing, as young Paramount executive Robert Evans noted when claiming: “The strongest period in Hollywood history was the 1930s, when most of the creative people were young. The trouble is that most of them are still around making movies” (Cook, 2000: 68). This policy saw the rise to prominence of directors like Robert Altman, Sam Peckinpah, Peter Bogdanovich and Francis Ford Coppola, as well as the famed film school generation of Martin Scorsese, Brian De Palma, George Lucas and Steven Spielberg.

However, it was not just at the creative level that personnel were changing in Hollywood in the 1960s. The late 1960s and early 1970s saw a turnover of studio executives just as influential in the foundation of the New Hollywood as the turnover of creative talent in the same period. The 1960s saw the commencement of a process of conglomeration which would
eventually incorporate all the major studios, starting in 1962 when Universal was bought up by Music Corporation of American (Cook, 2000: 71), and accelerating in the mid to late sixties. In 1966, Jack Warner, the last of the original Warner brothers who had founded the famous studio in 1918, sold his studio to Elliot Hyman’s television distribution company Seven Arts (Shiel, 2006a: 36). 1966 also saw Paramount’s sale to Gulf and Western, which would be followed shortly by the sale of United Artists to the Transamerica Corporation in 1967, and Kirk Kerkorian’s 1969 acquisition of MGM (Cook, 2000: 71). In fact, by the end of the 1960s every studio except Disney and Twentieth Century Fox had been bought up by larger corporate conglomerates (Williams and Hammond, 2006: 7-8). This drastic change at the executive and corporate level of Hollywood resulted in a greater degree of creative freedom for filmmakers. In the pre-conglomerate era, the on-screen product of any particular studio often served as a clear reflection of the tastes and passions of the production chief, who had the final say on what types of films their studios produced (Harris, 2008: 41). However, this generation of moguls were replaced by a group of executives, often put in place by their corporate parents, who saw themselves primarily as businessmen rather than filmmakers. This new group of executives was therefore more willing to acknowledge that the emerging generation of filmmakers had a more instinctive sense of what the audience, in particular the youth audience, wanted than they did (Lewis, 2008: 286).

Throughout the studio era the content of Hollywood films was controlled by the Production Code which stipulated that while films might be targeted at specific demographics, they were expected to be suitable for viewers of all ages (King, 2002: 29). The Code’s stipulation that ‘No picture shall be released which will lower the moral standards of those who see it’ resulted not only in restrictions on language, nudity and depictions of sex and violence, but also in restrictions of representations of immoral behaviour, such as extra-marital affairs, criticisms of religion and criminal behaviour (it was forbidden for a film to create sympathy for a criminal character) (Kramer, 2005: 47-48). Thus, scripts were submitted to the PCA for vetting before production, which allowed any inappropriate or controversial material to be cut from the film before unnecessary production costs were wasted on shooting it (Williams and Hammond, 2006: 5). However, in 1968, after the success of Who’s Afraid of Virginia Wolf? (1966) which had been permitted to push language boundaries by the PCA by agreeing to carry a ‘suggested for mature audiences’ warning on its advertising material, MPAA president Jack Valenti announced that the Production Code would be abolished in favour of a ratings system. The system comprised of four categories: G (for “General” audiences), M (suggested for “Mature” audiences, parental discretion advised), R (“Restricted,” no one under the age of sixteen admitted without a parent or guardian) and X (no one under sixteen admitted).

The abolishing of the Production Code in favour of a Ratings System revolutionised the on-screen product coming out of Hollywood by giving filmmakers the freedom to offer unapologetically adult content. It was no longer a case of whether a director could or could not shoot a scene a certain way, but rather that if the director chose to shoot a scene a certain way it would result in the film being given an R rather than an M rating (Lewis, 2008: 283). Either way it could still be released in mainstream cinemas. The new creative freedom given to directors as a result of the ratings system fostered exactly the kind of contemporary social relevance in Hollywood product that the youth market had been longing for (Shiel, 2006a: 35).
From this period of opportunity presented by an industry in turmoil arose what *Time* magazine declared in 1967 to be a renaissance of American filmmaking, a new art cinema (Harris, 2008: 369), characterised by aesthetically experimental, socially conscious auteur films. These films were popular with audiences as they engaged with socially relevant issues, and with the studios because they had a proven audience and their low production values kept budgets low which in turn meant that even modest box-office returns would equate to handy profits. Renaissance films such as *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), *M*A*S*H* (1970), *Little Big Man* (1970), *The Godfather* (1972), *Chinatown* (1974), *Nashville* (1975) and *Taxi Driver* (1976) would become the benchmark by which all contemporary American films are measured (King, 2004: 25). This was the first New Hollywood. New in terms of it being a new generation of filmmakers, new in its target audience and new in its experimental aesthetic style and socially relevant, counter-cultural content. There was plenty that was new about this Hollywood Renaissance period.

However, whether the term New Hollywood is appropriate for this Hollywood Renaissance period is debatable. While there was plenty that was new about the Hollywood Renaissance, the term New Hollywood also implies an industry-wide dominance, much in the fashion of the studio system, the old Hollywood that the new is meant to have replaced. While later manifestations of the New Hollywood may meet this criterion, the Hollywood Renaissance does not. The extent to which the Hollywood Renaissance dominated the Hollywood industry in the late 1960s and 1970s tends to be greatly exaggerated. While there is no denying that Renaissance films like *The Graduate*, *Midnight Cowboy* and *M*A*S*H* all made an impact at the box office, Renaissance historians are all too prone to drawing attention to the fact that old Hollywood films like *Paint Your Wagon* (1969) and *Hello, Dolly!* (1969) made substantial losses at the box office while ignoring the box office successes of other old Hollywood product, all of which were aimed at demographics other than the counter-cultural youth, including *Oliver!* (1968), *Fiddler on the Roof* (1973), *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (1970) and a string of hit Disney films including *The Love Bug* (1969), *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* (1971) and *Robin Hood* (1973) (Neale, 2006: 99-100).

Such industry dominance would have been impossible for the Hollywood Renaissance, the success of its films lay in their uniqueness. This was not helpful for the studios as they preferred films which contained a formula which could be reproduced to repeat success. This lack of proven formulas meant that more than ever there were no box office sure things for the studios to put their money behind. As *Time* magazine forewarned in 1967: “For every bold, experimental foray there were bound to be many ambitious failures or cold, calculated imitations” which would ultimately lack the X-factor which made the original a success (Kramer, 2005: 1). Thus, the films of the Hollywood Renaissance could never be that dependable commodity the industry required. Rather the Renaissance filmmakers had simply taken advantage of what was a brief window of opportunity afforded to them by a film industry destabilised by financial uncertainty (King, 2004: 20), opportunity that would diminish when the industry stumbled upon an alternative mode of filmmaking which promised that stability.

As noted previously, the Hollywood Renaissance can be seen as a movement made up of two generations of creative talent. The first generation was made up of men born in the 1930s who came into the film industry through either the theatre or the growing television industry. This generation included Robert Altman, Peter Bogdanovich, Dennis Hopper, Mike Nichols, Arthur Penn, William Friedkin, Bob Rafelson, Hal Ashby and Francis Ford Coppola.
(although despite his age, Coppola is often more associated with the second generation) among others, and featured prominently in the early Renaissance, from 1967 to the early 1970s. The second generation is made up of early baby boomers, born in the 1940s, who were the first to come into the industry from the countries new film schools (particularly from UCLA and NYU) and often served apprenticeships in the exploitation cinema of Roger Corman. This generation, known as ‘the film school generation’ or ‘the movie brats’, included Martin Scorsese, Brian De Palma, George Lucas, Paul Schrader, Terrence Mallick, John Milius and Steven Spielberg (although he never actually attended film school). They would dominate the later part of the Renaissance, rising to prominence in the early 1970s and remaining there through to the decline of the Renaissance towards the end of the decade (Biskind, 1998: 15).

It was this generational split that created confusion in the use of the term New Hollywood. Despite the fact this second generation was still very much a part of the same Renaissance movement, there were undeniable differences between the two generations that scholars needed to account for.

The biggest difference between the movie brats and the first generation of Hollywood Renaissance filmmakers was in their education. The movie brats were the first generation of filmmakers to benefit from a tertiary study of film. The study of film in American colleges was on the rise in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1967 there were approximately 1,500 film and television courses being offered by 200 universities in America. The next decade would see this number increase fivefold (Cook, 2000: 69). At these film schools students would not only learn the craft of filmmaking, but would also benefit from classes in film theory and film history (Lewis, 2008: 282). The result of this study was the most cine-literate generation of filmmakers yet seen in Hollywood, understanding the audio-visual language having been raised on film and trained in film, rather than seeking to adapt to the film industry from a background in the theatre, live television or even literature as had been the norm in the past (Christie and Thompson, 2003: 31).

The film school generation were a very ambitious group of filmmakers, as was most evident in the scale of their films in comparison to those of the early renaissance. The movie brats were in the business of making auteur blockbusters. Directors like Coppola believed that their “big films” could still be “personal films” (Gilbey, 2003: 3). While the movie brats started the 1970s as earnest young filmmakers, keen to be under budget and on schedule, because they were just so excited to have been given the opportunity to work within the system, by the end of the decade they had become major exploiters of the system (Biskind, 1998: 406). Thus, the latter half of the Hollywood Renaissance was characterised by more extravagant and grandiose personal projects like Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* (1979), Scorsese’s *New York, New York* (1977) and Michael Cimino’s *Heaven’s Gate* (1980) (Lewis, 1995: 47). By the mid to late 1970s, auteur films were of as grand a scale as any form of filmmaking in Hollywood.

As they rose in prominence, the film school generation began to see their role as greater than that of simply directors. They started to pursue other interests within the film industry, ultimately becoming leaders in the advancement of film production. A number of the movie brats took to producing, realising that the presence of their name could add credibility to a film and thus create opportunities for promising young filmmakers (Cowie, 1989: 128). In 1979, Coppola he purchased the old Hollywood General studio lot and opened up his own
studio, Zoetrope Studios, although unfortunately he was forced to sell the property only a few years later after suffering heavy losses on Zoetrope films. He was also a champion for the advancement of electronic cinema. Interviews with Coppola would often be filled with his fantasising of the day he could shoot his movies on “electronic memory” rather than film, or possibly even make films by “synthesising images on computers” (Chiu, 1979: 50-51). George Lucas, used the profits from *Star Wars* (1977), went on what he described as a “crusade” (Abbott, 1991: 169), to “expand and improve the filmmaker’s creative tools” (Vincenzi, 1990: 159). His effects house, Industrial Light and Magic (ILM), would become the industry leader in visual effects and Skywalker Sound and THX would have similar impacts on movie sound design and reproduction, resulting in Lucasfilm Ltd becoming the largest independent studio in the world (Cook, 2000: 141). This saw a number of the movie brats become very powerful and influential figures. This greater level of influence is one of the key factors which separated this generation from the early Renaissance filmmakers whose counter-culture, anti-establishment values kept them as industry outsiders.

Taking these differences into account, the scholarly literature began to reassess this term New Hollywood. Some scholars chose to reconfigure their current definition of the New Hollywood, centring it more on the film school generation (Kramer, 2005: 90) and in the process relegated the original Renaissance directors to the position of precursors to the main event. Others did not wish to undermine the importance of the original New Hollywood so either chose to see the film school generation as the second New Hollywood (King, 2004: 23), or to employ the rather confusing term ‘New New Hollywood’ (Kramer, 2005: 90). Whatever the choice, there was an acknowledgement that this second generation had taken a step forward from their predecessors. Their auteurist blockbusters dominated the industry in a way the smaller auteurist works of the early Renaissance had not been able to.

While a scholarly consensus no longer existed on the definition of the term New Hollywood, at least at this stage one could be reasonably certain it referred in some capacity to the art cinema renaissance of the 1960s and 1970s. The next development in the evolution of the New Hollywood, however, would see the rise in popularity of a totally contradictory use of the term.

From the 1970s onwards it became apparent to the major studios that the annual box office charts tended to be dominated by one or two films which clearly led over all releases. A studio’s income was not coming in equally from all of its releases. So studios became more willing to pour more money into films they believed had the potential to function as ‘tentpoles’: films which, through either their stand-alone popularity or their potential to spawn a franchise, would be capable of supporting the entire studio’s operation for a season or more, cancelling the losses made on lesser pictures (Hall, 2006: 171). As the 1970s progressed films once again started becoming greater and greater in scale and studios were spending more and more in chasing that elusive blockbuster. However, having learned the lessons of the financial crisis of the late 1960s, with higher budgets meaning more at stake on each release, the studios sought to reduce their risk by producing calculated, formulaic films known as high concept blockbusters.

High concept refers to a film with an intentionally straightforward narrative which can be easily communicated and comprehended, allowing it to be accurately summarised for widespread marketing campaigns (Wyatt, 1994: 8-10). As Richard Schickel points out, the ‘high’ in high concept is, therefore, a misnomer, given that by definition the central concept
must be so low that it can be sold on the basis of a single sentence (Wyatt, 1994: 13). As well as being simple, the central idea must also be marketable, both in terms of advertising and merchandising (Wyatt, 1994: 8).

This emphasis on simplicity and marketability resulted in a step back from the aesthetic and thematic innovations of the Hollywood Renaissance in favour of a return to more traditional production lines. In the 1980s we thus see a return to centrality of the role of star persona in filmmaking. Rather than actors being chosen on the basis of their appropriateness to certain roles, films were built specifically around the talents of a star like Michael J. Fox, John Travolta or, as a more recent example, Will Ferrell. The more successful high concept blockbusters also fall into clearly established genres, particularly action/adventure and science fiction as they allowed for greater exploration of emerging special effects technologies (Prince, 2000: 4). The emphasis on marketability meant that High Concept tended to be presold; based on a property which was already familiar in some form with a potential audience (King, 2002: 50). Largely, this comes either from being an adaptation of a successful novel, television series or comic book or from being a sequel to, or remake of an existing film. Sequelisation became much more common in Hollywood in the 1980s and also more blatant, with the widespread use of numerals in film titles, for example Rocky IV (Kramer, 2005: 93). Though recently, in what appears to be a reversal of the merchandising process, films have been adapted from presold properties including computer games, Pokémon: The First Movie (1999) and theme park rides, Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl (2003).

In addition to this calculated, formulaic approach to producing popular material, the dominance of high concept blockbusters has been assisted by changes made in the 1970s to both film distribution and advertising. Coppola’s The Godfather had taken only six months to overtake Gone With the Wind (1939) as the highest grossing film of all time, despite the fact that Gone With the Wind had taken 33 years and numerous re-releases to reach that position (Biskind, 1998: 163), largely due to Paramount’s decision to employ a ‘saturation release’, opening the film consecutively in 316 cinemas across the nation. Saturation booking was a technique traditionally reserved for inferior films as a means of maximising a films returns before negative word of mouth damaged its reputation. The Godfather’s example, however, showed the industry that it was an effective strategy for major releases, helping not only to achieve large returns, but to get them quickly (Biskind, 1998: 277). The influence a calculated marketing campaign could have on a film’s success was then exemplified by the central role Universal’s television advertising campaign had in Jaws (1975) sweeping aside The Godfather’s record $86 million haul by taking $129 million at the American box office. By the decade’s end Hollywood had experienced an historic shift whereby the cost of promoting a film actually began to exceed the cost of producing a film (Cook, 2000: 133). In the process, advertising replaced the film review as the primary prompter of interest in a film, thereby diminishing the negative effects a bad review would have on the box office fortunes of a film (Biskind, 1998: 278). The combination of saturation releasing and calculated advertising campaigns lead to a period of box-office success which saw milestones achieved and records broken with increasing speed and regularity.

High concept would become the fullest realisation of the synergies made available to the Hollywood studios through their conglomeration in the 1960s, most notably through its emphasis on merchandising. It was the Star Wars phenomenon which opened the eyes of the studios to the possibilities of merchandising. Star Wars record breaking box office takings
were exceeded by money made from sales of the soundtrack album, novelisations of the film script as well as a plethora of other stories from the Star Wars universe, action figures, t-shirts, bed spreads, confectionary and, later, a series of very successful computer games (Pirie, 1981: 53). This earning potential of merchandise resulted in a change in understanding of the role of the theatrical release. No longer was it the primary money maker for the film studios, rather it was the showcase which would promote the various ancillary products available on the market (King, 2002: 68-69).

The extent to which the high concept blockbuster has dominated the Hollywood industry over the last three decades would seemingly make it most qualified to be considered the New Hollywood. In that time it has proven to be the mode of filmmaking which has most successfully replaced the studio system as a foundation upon which Hollywood business can be built.

The auteur, experimental cinema of the first generation of the Hollywood Renaissance lost the mantle of being considered the New Hollywood to the auteur blockbusters of the movie brats because of their larger scale and hence greater box office potential. The industry’s preference for more reliable filmmaking then saw the auteur blockbusters of the movie brats succeeded by the high concept blockbuster. Each step in the evolution of this term New Hollywood has not been taken solely on the basis of something being newer, but rather because a new style or mode of filmmaking has arisen with greater potential to dominate and hence sustain the Hollywood industry. Each step, therefore, sees not only something newer, but something more deserving of being considered the New Hollywood.

Unfortunately, though, it is not simply enough to establish which of the New Hollywoods is the most deserving. Doing so will not create clarity of understanding in future writings as the term New Hollywood is already a term loaded with contradictions and confusions. Rather than continue to argue in favour of a specific meaning, it is preferential to allow the term New Hollywood to serve as a general term, referring to all Hollywood cinema after the Second World War or after the decline of the studio system, and use alternative terms such as Hollywood Renaissance or high concept when discussing more specific moments in the history of American film.

Bibliography


